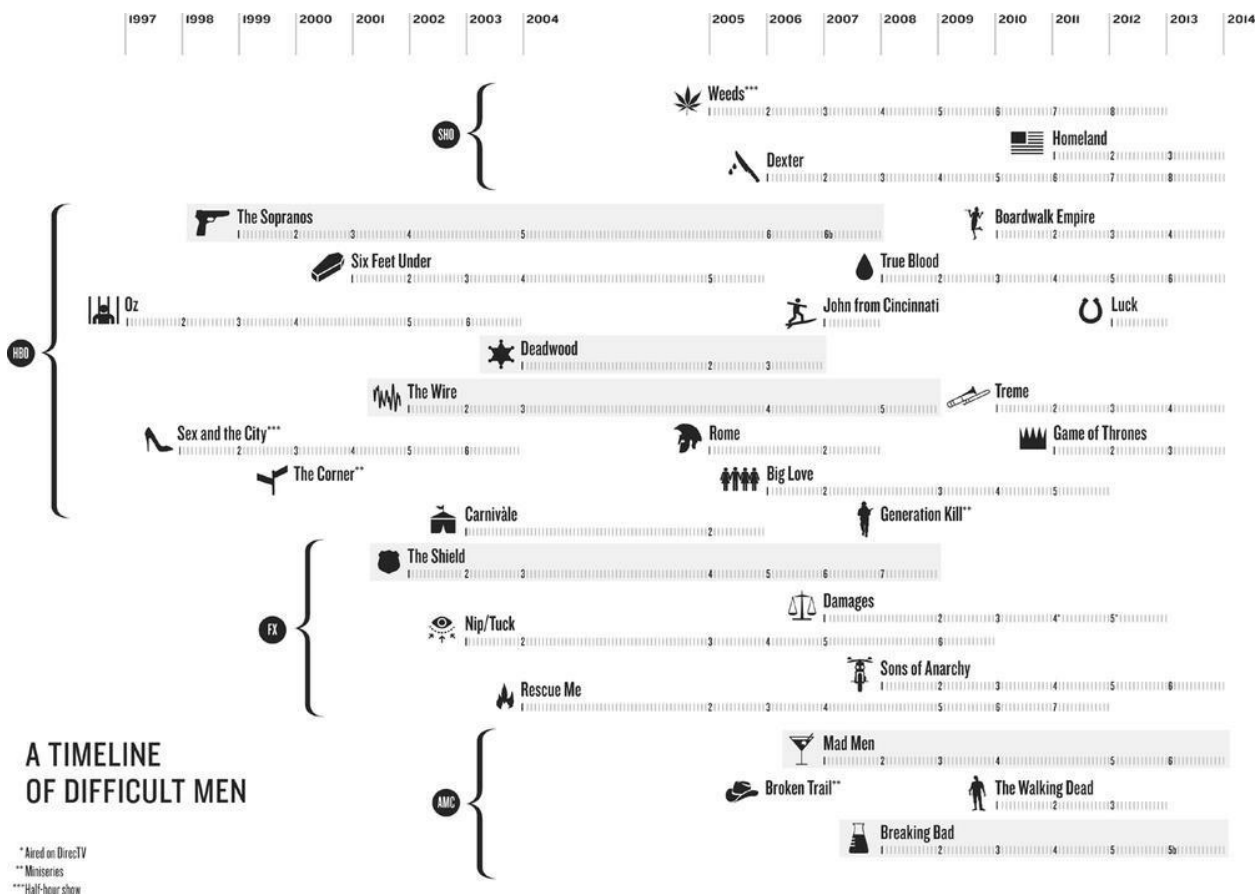


DIFFICULT MEN



SPOILER ALERT:

IN THE FOLLOWING PAGES, I DISCUSS A GREAT MANY
PLOT POINTS OF A GREAT MANY TV SHOWS.

Prologue

You think it's easy being the boss?

TONY SOPRANO

One cold winter's evening in January 2002, Tony Soprano went missing and a small portion of the universe ground to a halt.

It did not come completely out of the blue. Ever since *The Sopranos* had debuted in 1999, turning Tony—anxiety-prone dad, New Jersey mobster, suburban seeker of meaning—into a millennial pop culture icon, the character's frustration, volatility, and anger had often been indistinguishable from those qualities of James Gandolfini, the actor who brought them to life. The role was a punishing one, requiring not only vast amounts of nightly memorization and long days under hot lights, but also a daily descent into Tony's psyche—at the best of times a worrisome place to dwell; at the worst, ugly, violent, and sociopathic.

Some actors—notably Edie Falco, who played Tony's wife, Carmela Soprano—are capable of plumbing such depths without getting in over their heads. Blessed with a near photographic memory, Falco could show up for work, memorize her lines, play the most emotionally devastating of scenes, and then return happily to her trailer to join her regular companion, Marley, a gentle yellow Lab mix.

Not so Gandolfini, for whom playing Tony Soprano would always require to some extent *being* Tony Soprano. Crew members grew accustomed to hearing grunts and curses coming from his trailer as he worked up to the emotional pitch of a scene by, say, destroying a boom box radio. An intelligent and intuitive actor, Gandolfini understood this dynamic and sometimes used it to his advantage; the heavy bathrobe that became Tony's signature, transforming him into a kind of domesticated bear, was murder under the lights in midsummer, but Gandolfini insisted on wearing it between takes. Other times, though, simulated misery became indistinguishable from the real thing—on set and off. In papers related to a divorce filing at the end of 2002, Gandolfini's wife described increasingly serious issues with drugs

and alcohol, as well as arguments during which the actor would repeatedly punch himself in the face out of frustration. To anybody who had witnessed the actor's self-directed rage as he struggled to remember lines in front of the camera—he would berate himself in disgust, curse, smack the back of his own head—it was a plausible scenario.

It did not help that the naturally shy Gandolfini was suddenly one of the most recognizable men in America—especially in New York and New Jersey, where the show filmed and where the sight of him walking down the street with, say, a cigar was guaranteed to seed confusion in those already inclined to shout the names of fictional characters at real human beings. Unlike Falco, who could slip off Carmela's French-tipped nails, throw on a baseball cap, and disappear in a crowd, Gandolfini—six feet tall, upward of 250 pounds—had no place to hide.

All of which had long since taken its toll by the winter of 2002. Gandolfini's sudden refusals to work had become a semiregular occurrence. His fits were passive-aggressive: he would claim to be sick, refuse to leave his TriBeCa apartment, or simply not show up. The next day, inevitably, he would feel so wretched about his behavior and the massive logistic disruptions it had caused—akin to turning an aircraft carrier on a dime—that he would treat cast and crew to extravagant gifts. “All of a sudden there'd be a sushi chef at lunch,” one crew member remembered. “Or we'd all get massages.” It had come to be understood by all involved as part of the price of doing business, the trade-off for getting the remarkably intense, fully inhabited Tony Soprano that Gandolfini offered.

So when the actor failed to show up for a six p.m. call at Westchester County Airport to shoot the final appearance of the character Furio Giunta, a night shoot involving a helicopter, few panicked. “It was an annoyance, but it wasn't cause for concern,” said Terence Winter, the writer-producer on set that night. “You know, ‘It's just money.’ I mean, it was *a ton* of money—we shut down a fucking airport. Nobody was particularly sad to go home at nine thirty on a Friday night.”

Over the next twelve hours, it would become clear that this time was different. This time, Gandolfini was just *gone*.

The operation that came to a halt that evening was a massive one. *The Sopranos* had spread out to occupy most of two floors of Silvercup Studios, a steel-and-brick onetime bread factory at the foot of the Queensboro Bridge in Long Island City, Queens. Downstairs, the production filmed on four of

Silvercup's huge stages, including the ominously named Stage X, on which sat an endlessly reconfigurable, almost life-size model of the Soprano family's New Jersey McMansion. The famous view of the family's backyard—brick patio and swimming pool, practically synonymous with suburban ennui—lay rolled up on an enormous translucent polyurethane curtain that could be wheeled behind the ersatz kitchen windows and backlit when needed.

A small army, in excess of two hundred people, was employed in fabricating such details, which added up to as rich and fleshed out a universe as had ever existed on TV: carpenters, electricians, painters, seamstresses, drivers, accountants, cameramen, location scouts, caterers, writers, makeup artists, audio engineers, prop masters, set dressers, scenic designers, production assistants of every stripe. Out in Los Angeles, a whole other team of postproduction crew—editors, mixers, color correctionists, music supervisors—was stationed. Dailies were shuttled back and forth between the coasts under a fake company name—Big Box Productions—to foil spies anxious to spoil feverishly anticipated plot points. What had started three years earlier as an oddball, what-do-we-have-to-lose experiment for a network still best known for rerunning Hollywood movies had become a huge bureaucratic institution.

More than that, to be at Silvercup at that moment was to stand at the center of a television revolution. Although the change had its roots in a wave of quality network TV begun two decades before, it had started in earnest five years earlier, when the pay subscription network HBO began turning its attention to producing original, hour-long dramas. By the start of 2002, with Gandolfini at large, the medium had been transformed.

Soon the dial would begin to fill with Tony Sopranos. Within three months, a bald, stocky, flawed, but charismatic boss—this time of a band of rogue cops instead of mafiosi—would make his first appearance, on FX's *The Shield*. Mere months after that, on *The Wire*, viewers would be introduced to a collection of Baltimore citizens that included an alcoholic, narcissistic police officer, a ruthless drug lord, and a gay, homicidal stickup boy. HBO had already followed the success of *The Sopranos* with *Six Feet Under*, a series about a family-run funeral home filled with characters that were perhaps less sociopathic than these other cable denizens but could be equally unlikable. In the wings lurked such creatures as *Deadwood*'s Al Swearengen, as cretinous a character as would ever appear on television,

much less in the role of protagonist, and *Rescue Me*'s Tommy Gavin, an alcoholic, self-destructive firefighter grappling poorly with the ghosts of 9/11. Andrew Schneider, who wrote for *The Sopranos* in its final season, had cut his teeth writing for TV's version of *The Incredible Hulk*, in which each episode, by rule, featured at least two instances of mild-mannered, regretful David Banner "hulking out" and morphing into a giant, senseless green id. This would turn out to be good preparation for writing a serialized cable drama twenty years later.

These were characters whom, conventional wisdom had once insisted, Americans would never allow into their living rooms: unhappy, morally compromised, complicated, deeply human. They played a seductive game with the viewer, daring them to emotionally invest in, even root for, even love, a gamut of criminals whose offenses would come to include everything from adultery and polygamy (*Mad Men* and *Big Love*) to vampirism and serial murder (*True Blood* and *Dexter*). From the time Tony Soprano waded into his pool to welcome his flock of wayward ducks, it had been clear that viewers were willing to be seduced.

They were so, in part, because these were also men in recognizable struggle. They belonged to a species you might call Man Beset or Man Harried—badgered and bothered and thwarted by the modern world. If there was a signature prop of the era, it was the cell phone, always ringing, rarely at an opportune time and even more rarely with good news. Tony Soprano's jaunty ring tone still provokes a visceral response in anyone who watched the show. When the period prohibited the literal use of cell phone technology, you could see it nonetheless—in the German butler trailing an old-fashioned phone after the gangster boss in *Boardwalk Empire*, or in the poor lackeys charged with delivering news to Al Swearengen, these unfortunate human proxies often bearing the consequences of the same violent wishes Tony seemed to direct to his ever-bleating phone.

Female characters, too, although most often relegated to supporting roles, were beneficiaries of the new rules of TV: suddenly allowed lives beyond merely being either obstacles or facilitators to the male hero's progress. Instead, they were free to be venal, ruthless, misguided, and sometimes even heroic human beings in their own right—the housewife weighing her creature comforts against the crimes she knows her husband commits to provide them, in *The Sopranos* and *Breaking Bad*; the prostitute insisting on her dignity by becoming a pimp herself, in *Deadwood*; the secretary from Bay Ridge

battling her way through the testosterone-fueled battlefield of advertising in the 1960s, in *Mad Men*.

In keeping with their protagonists, this new generation of shows would feature stories far more ambiguous and complicated than anything that television, always concerned with pleasing the widest possible audience and group of advertisers, had ever seen. They would be narratively ruthless: brooking no quarter for which might be the audience's favorite characters, offering little in the way of catharsis or the easy resolution in which television had traditionally traded.

It would no longer be safe to assume that everything on your favorite television show would turn out all right—or even that the worst wouldn't happen. The sudden death of regular characters, once unthinkable, became such a trope that it launched a kind of morbid parlor game, speculating on who would be next to go. I remember watching, sometime toward the end of the decade, an episode of *Dexter*—a show that took the antihero principle to an all but absurd length by featuring a serial killer as its protagonist—in which a poor victim had been strapped to a gurney, sedated, and ritually amputated limb by limb. The thing a viewer feared most, the image that could make one's stomach crawl up his or her rib cage, was that the victim would wake up, realize his plight, and start screaming. Ten years earlier, I would have felt protected from such a sight by the rules and conventions of television; it simply would not happen, because it *could not* happen. It was a sickening, utterly thrilling sensation to realize that there was no longer any such protection.

Not only were these new kinds of stories, they were being told with a new kind of formal structure. That cable shows had shorter seasons than those on traditional network television—twelve or thirteen episodes compared with twenty-two—was only the beginning, though by no means unimportant. Thirteen episodes meant more time and care devoted to the writing of each. It meant tighter, more focused serial stories. It meant less financial risk on the part of the network, which translated to more creative risk on-screen.

The result was a storytelling architecture you could picture as a colonnade—each episode a brick with its own solid, satisfying shape, but also part of a season-long arc that, in turn, would stand linked to other seasons to form a coherent, freestanding work of art. (The traditional networks, meanwhile, were rediscovering their love of the exact opposite—procedural franchises such as *CSI* and *Law & Order*, which featured stand-alone episodes that

could be easily rearranged and sold into syndication.) The new structure allowed huge creative freedom: to develop characters over long stretches of time, to tell stories over the course of fifty hours or more, the equivalent of countless movies.

Indeed, TV has always been reflexively compared with film, but this form of ongoing, open-ended storytelling was, as an oft-used comparison had it, closer to another explosion of high art in a vulgar pop medium: the Victorian serialized novel. That revolution also had been facilitated by upheavals in how stories were created, produced, distributed, and consumed: higher literacy, cheaper printing methods, the rise of a consumer class. Like the new TV, the best of the serials—by Dickens, Trollope, George Eliot—created suspense through expansive characterization rather than mere cliff-hangers. And like it, too, the new literary form invested in the writer both enormous power (since he or she alone could deliver the coal to keep the narrative train running) and enormous pressure: “In writing, or rather publishing periodically, the author has no time to be idle; he must always be lively, pathetic, amusing, or instructive; his pen must never flag—his imagination never tire,” wrote one contemporary critic in the *London Morning Herald*. Or as Dickens put it, in journals and letters to friends: “I MUST write!”

The result, according to one scholar writing of Dickens’s *The Pickwick Papers*, the first hugely successful serial, certainly sounds familiar: “At a single stroke ... something permanent and novel-like was created out of something ephemeral and episodic.” Moreover, like the Victorian serialists, the creators of this new television found that the inherent features of their form—a vast canvas, intertwining story lines, twists and turns and backtracks in characters’ progress—happened to be singularly equipped not only to fulfill commercial demands, but also to address the big issues of a decadent empire: violence, sexuality, addiction, family, class. These issues became the defining tropes of cable drama. And just like the Victorian writers, TV’s auteurs embraced the irony of critiquing a society overwhelmed by industrial consumerism by using precisely that society’s most industrialized, consumerist media invention. In many ways, this was TV *about* what TV had wrought.

Certainly this was the view of the only man on the fourth floor of Silvercup Studios more crucial to *The Sopranos*’ success than its missing star. For all of the show’s accomplishments, its creator and executive producer, David Chase, was at best ambivalent about his career in television, at worst as

tormented as Gandolfini. Chase had grown up worshipping Film with a capital “F.” His heroes were the auteurs of the European New Wave and the 1970s American filmmakers inspired by them. These men were mavericks, artists who sacrificed the easy path to realize their vision on-screen. Television was for sellouts and hacks.

Yet any of the directors Chase idolized would have killed for a fraction of the godlike powers over an ever-expanding universe that he exercised from his office overlooking the Queensboro’s off-ramp. Every decision—from story direction to casting to the color of seemingly insignificant characters’ shirts—passed through that office. In the halls of Silvercup, his name and its power were so often invoked, usually in whispers, that he came to seem like an unseen, all-knowing deity.

This, too, was part and parcel of the wave washing over television: the ascendancy of the all-powerful writer-showrunner. It had long been a truism that “in TV, the writer is king,” accustomed to power and influence unheard of in the director-dominated film industry. Now, that power would be wedded to the creative freedom that the new rules of TV afforded. And the men who seized that role—again, they were almost all men: Chase, David Simon, Alan Ball, David Milch, Shawn Ryan and, later, Matthew Weiner, Vince Gilligan, and others—would prove to be characters almost as vivid as the fictional men anchoring their shows.

It was not an especially heroic-looking bunch—not a barrel-chested Balzac or Mailer-like wrestler of words among them. Generally speaking, they conformed to the unwritten television rule that the more power you have, the more aggressively terribly you dress. A similar working-class ethic—part affectation, part genuine (it is, after all, a business dominated by teamsters)—combined with a fatalistic sense of any show’s provisional life span, prevailed in showrunners’ offices. Some of the most powerful men in television worked in digs that would draw a labor grievance from assistant editors at lesser Condé Nast magazines.

And being writers, they were not necessarily men to whom you would have automatically thought it prudent to hand near total control of a multimillion-dollar corporate operation. Indeed, this story is in many respects one of writers asked to act in very unwriterly ways: to become collaborators, managers, businessmen, celebrities in their own right, all in exchange for the opportunity to take advantage of a unique historical moment.

If that occasionally led to behavior that was imperious, idiosyncratic,

domineering, or just plain strange, it could perhaps be understood. “The thing you’ve got to remember is there’s a lot of pressure to deal with when you’re running one of these shows,” said Henry Bromell, a longtime TV writer and sometime showrunner himself. “You’d probably be better off with a Harvard jock CEO-type guy. But that’s not what you got. You got writers. So they react to pressure the way most people do; they internalize it or they subvert it. They lash out.”

Or as another television veteran put it, “This isn’t like publishing some lunatic’s novel or letting him direct a movie. This is handing a lunatic a division of General Motors.”

What all the showrunners shared—and shared with the directors whom Chase held in such esteem—was the seemingly limitless ambition of men given the chance to make art in a once vilified commercial medium. And since the Hollywood film industry had long been in a competitive deep-sea dive toward the lowest common denominator, chumming the multiplexes with overblown action “events” and Oscar-hopeful trash, Alan Ball, the showrunner of *Six Feet Under*, was entirely justified in his response to hearing Chase’s stubborn assertion that he should have spent *The Sopranos* years making films.

“Really?” said Ball. “Go ask him, ‘Which films?’”

What all this added up to was a new Golden Age—by most counts the third in television’s short lifetime, the first being the flowering of creation during the earliest days of the medium, the second a brief period of unusual network excellence during the 1980s. This isn’t bad for a medium with a reputation somewhere beneath comic strips and just above religious pamphlets.

It might be more precise to call it “the First Wave of the Third Golden Age,” since whether the age is indeed over remains an open question. At the time of this publication, two of the six or seven major shows on which it focuses were still in production; all the major players were still actively working. Several of the conditions that sparked the revolution—primarily a proliferation of channels (both broadcast and Internet), all with a fierce hunger for content—were still in place. At the same time, there can be no replicating the creative fecundity that comes with a genuine business and technological upheaval—from people not knowing what the hell to do and thus being willing to try anything. That is what distinguished the generation of cable drama that lasted roughly from 1999 through 2013.

I was able to enjoy most of the Third Golden Age as a lay viewer. I have

never been a television critic or someone inclined toward rabid fandom. I remember taking a VHS advance copy of *The Sopranos* out of the free bin at the magazine where I was working in the late 1990s. I watched about half before dismissing it as a carbon copy of a Harold Ramis film being advertised at the same time: *Analyze This*, starring Robert De Niro and Billy Crystal as a mobster and his shrink. In retrospect, the knee-jerk comparison (in favor of *Analyze This*) was based solely on the fact that one was a film and the other merely TV.

Then, in 2007, I was hired by HBO to write an official behind-the-scenes companion to *The Sopranos*, then preparing for the second half of its final season. By that point, I'd long since recanted and become a fan of the show, which, with or without my endorsement, had been accepted by the outside world as a canonical accomplishment in the history of television. A representative from the Smithsonian Institution visited the set one day when I was there, to discuss which iconic props they might seize after the final wrap.

I hung around—on set, around the makeup trailers, in meetings—chatting with everyone from actors to parking supervisors. (A singular exception was Gandolfini, who did not acknowledge my presence for weeks and sat for a half-hour interview only on my very last day in the building.) I found myself entranced by the world into which I'd parachuted. It was, first of all, exciting to suddenly be at the white-hot center of the pop culture universe, to have intoxicating access to rooms into which the rest of the world feverishly wanted to peer.

More than that fascinated me, though: I have spent my working life in magazines—a place, like television, in which the demands of art and commerce are in constant, sometimes tense, negotiation. In that wider war, this was a battlefield on which art had seized the upper hand. After eight years, there was plenty of fatigue among the show's staff and crew, along with the complaining you'd find in any huge organization, but there was also a universal understanding that everyone from writers to set designers to sound editors was being allowed to do perhaps the best work of their professional lives. The satisfaction was palpable and heightened only by a truth that *Breaking Bad* showrunner Vince Gilligan later confirmed for me: "The worst TV show you've ever seen was miserably hard to make." It was entirely possible, even likely, to have a long, highly successful career in television without ever working on a show one felt truly proud of; here, at least for a brief time, the product was undeniably worthy of the talent and

effort.

I left the world of *The Sopranos* convinced that something new and important was going on. The feeling deepened as I continued to watch David Simon's *The Wire*, HBO's other masterpiece, and a new show from one of the writers of *The Sopranos*, Matthew Weiner's *Mad Men*. The ambition and achievement of these shows went beyond the simple notion of "television getting good." The open-ended, twelve- or thirteen-episode serialized drama was maturing into its own, distinct art form. What's more, it had become the signature American art form of the first decade of the twenty-first century, the equivalent of what the films of Scorsese, Altman, Coppola, and others had been to the 1970s or the novels of Updike, Roth, and Mailer had been to the 1960s. This is a book about how and why it happened.

Attempting to keep up with the flow of great and good programs to come out of the Third Golden Age often felt like trying to get one's arms around a rushing torrent of water. For the purposes of this book, I needed to set parameters: The shows on which I concentrate are all an hour long and appear in short seasons of between ten and thirteen episodes. All are categorized as "dramatic" (though I can't think of any that don't incorporate a strong dose of humor). All appear on cable, as opposed to traditional network TV.

More subtly, all employ an open-ended, ongoing mode of storytelling that distinguishes them from either of their closest precedents: the largely episodic "quality" network dramas of the 1980s and early 1990s (*Hill Street Blues*, *thirtysomething*, *St. Elsewhere*, and so on) and the closed-ended high-production-value miniseries of the BBC.

These rules eliminate, at least from a starring role, not only a handful of noteworthy network shows of the same period (*Friday Night Lights* foremost among them), but also several fine cable shows that are very much the product of the TV revolution but are essentially structured as season-long mysteries that are solved, or at least put temporarily to bed, at the end of each cycle, rather than remaining deliriously, riskily unresolved. I'm thinking in particular of the early seasons of *Dexter* and of *Damages*, shows I'm sad not to spend more time on.

It also more or less segregates a parallel generation of half-hour-long comedies that did nearly as much to define the era and the networks on which they appeared. At least one of these, *Sex and the City*, helped to pave the way for the revolution by establishing HBO as a destination for distinctive

original programming. Many would, like their dramatic counterparts, push the definition of what had previously been thought possible on the medium—even if those boundaries had, by the nature of comedy, been easier to push. (*Married ... with Children*'s Al Bundy pioneered awful fathering on network TV long before Tony Soprano made it a staple of cable.) These shows—*Curb Your Enthusiasm*, *It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia*, and *Louie*, to name a few—shared many of the themes of the dramas, including that of the deeply flawed, usually male protagonist; but on the whole, they did not partake of the formal innovations of the dramas on which I focus. Moreover, comedy was the one area in which the traditional networks actually kept some sort of pace with cable, albeit sometimes seemingly against their will, with smart, multilayered, and provocative shows like *The Office*, *Arrested Development*, *Community*, and *30 Rock*.

Another kind of half-hour program emerged during this time, and that was the cable show (not necessarily a sitcom) that centered on women rather than men. It was comic itself, this chauvinism of the clock: a male suburbanite turned drug dealer was worth sixty minutes (*Breaking Bad*), while his female counterpart (*Weeds*) warranted thirty. Only with the advent of *Damages* did a female-centric show break through this new glass ceiling.

This is only one reason for a plain fact: Though a handful of women play hugely influential roles in this narrative—as writers, actors, producers, and executives—there aren't enough of them. Not only were the most important shows of the era run by men, they were also largely *about* manhood—in particular the contours of male power and the infinite varieties of male combat.

Why that was had something to do with a cultural landscape still awash in postfeminist dislocation and confusion about exactly what being a man meant. It may also have had something to do with the swaggering zeitgeist of the decade. Under George W. Bush, matters of politics had a way of becoming referenda on the nation's masculinity: were we a nation of men (decisive, single-minded, unafraid to use force and to dominate) or girls (deliberative, empathetic, given to compromise)?

Or the answer could be much simpler. Peter Liguori—the executive who developed the first wave of FX programming and, later, *House M.D.*, a Fox network show that mimicked the kinds of heroes suddenly successful on cable—was candid enough to look inward. He had turned forty in 2000. “At one point,” he said, “I was looking at the body of shows I was associated with

and I realized, ‘Oh, my God, Vic Mackey: forty-year-old guy, flawed. Screwed up. The two guys from *Nip/Tuck*, same descriptor. *Rescue Me*, same thing. Dr. House, same thing.’ It was like I was looking at Sybil.”

In other words, middle-aged men predominated because middle-aged men had the power to create them. And certainly the autocratic power of the showrunner-auteur scratches a peculiarly masculine itch. The auteur theory, Pauline Kael wrote in one of her attacks on that orthodoxy, “is an attempt by adult males to justify staying inside the small range of experience of their boyhood and adolescence—that period when masculinity looked so great and important ...”

Or as Barbara Hall, herself a showrunner, said of her male counterparts: “Big money, big toys, and a kind of warfare. What’s not to like?”

Truthfully, I’d hoped to avoid the cliché “Golden Age,” redolent as it is of fusty “Greatest Generation” nostalgia for the playhouse dramas and vaudeville comedies that dominated the medium’s earliest years. (There was plenty of garbage on television in 1950 and would undoubtedly have been much more had there been twenty-four hours and five hundred channels to fill.) However, no other term adequately expresses the sense of bounty, the constant, pleasurable surprise, that being a TV watcher during this period entailed. The shows came one after the other, with startlingly consistent quality: first HBO’s astonishing run, with *Oz*, *The Sopranos*, *Six Feet Under*, *The Wire*, and *Deadwood*; and then the migration to other pay channels and basic cable, with *The Shield*, *Rescue Me*, *Damages*, *Dexter*, *Mad Men*, *Breaking Bad*, and more. Even if not all of these were to your liking, none could be dismissed as anything but new and challenging in the television universe. Sunday night, when the majority aired, became something akin to a national, communal holiday.

And the revolution in what we watched was inseparable from a revolution in *how* we watched. DVDs were barely in use when *The Sopranos* debuted. By the time it ended, not only had DVDs represented a significant extra revenue stream for HBO, but—along with TiVo and other digital video recorders, online streaming, on-demand cable, Netflix, file sharing, YouTube, Hulu, and more—they had introduced a new mode of television viewing. Now you could watch an entire series in two or three multihour, compulsive orgies of consumption—marathon sessions during which you might try to break away, only to have the opening credits work their Pavlovian magic, driving you forward into yet another hour. Or for those who resisted the

binge method and watched in real time, there was its opposite: the unusual sensation of actual suspense, delayed pleasure, in a world of instant gratification.

About those credits—or, to use the industry term that better hints at their epic quality, those “main titles”: These were no minimalist flashes of music and graphics. (Think *Seinfeld*’s rippling bass line.) Nor were they the melancholic credit sequences of the 1970s and 1980s (*Taxi*, *The Rockford Files*, *WKRP in Cincinnati*, *Welcome Back, Kotter*) that promised more depth than their shows ever delivered. They were expansive little movies in their own right, guides to the vocabulary and palette of the show to come.

Here, as in so much else, *The Sopranos* set the template. Arriving in an era of *Friends* frolicking dumbly in a fountain, it began with a characteristic David Chase joke—Good news: There’s a light at the end of the tunnel. Bad news: It’s New Jersey!—and went on to present, in Tony’s drive home, nothing less than a minute-and-a-half-long representation of Italian American progress in New Jersey: from the working-class apartments of Newark’s old North Ward, up Bloomfield Avenue into starter homes in the Oranges, Glen Ridge, Verona, and finally to the Promised Land of the Caldwells. By the time Tony crankily slammed the car door in his driveway, it was clear that he was not a character who would be there for you when the rain started to fall, or any other time, for that matter.

As for the TVs themselves, perhaps every new generation of televisual technology sounds like science fiction when it’s introduced, but, good God: liquid crystals, 3D plasma, Blu-ray. This is the stuff of dreams. The sets themselves became objects of beauty, downright sensual delights to watch. And TV’s directors and cinematographers, suddenly freed from the restrictions imposed by the old grainy square box—establishing shot, close-up, close-up, establishing shot, close-up, close-up, camera always on whoever was speaking, everything flooded with light—seized on the possibilities. Now they could work with shadows and darkness; hypnotic depth of field; beautiful, endless wide shots; handheld pyrotechnics—the entire toolbox once seen only on the big screen. While shooting the pilot of *Breaking Bad* in Albuquerque, New Mexico, cinematographer John Toll gave a bewildered local Circuit City employee an outraged lecture on the correct picture settings for the flat-screens in his showroom. “Do you realize how long I spend lighting these things?” he said. The “small screen” had gone big, only without the indignities of modern moviegoing: extortionary prices, cell-

phone-chatting strangers, and, in an ironic switch, relentless advertisements.

All of this conspired to create a remarkable new intimacy between show and viewer. Even the most inveterate gorgers on season-long blocks of a show might find him- or herself slowing down as the number of remaining episodes dwindled, hesitant to say good-bye, a victim of something very much like separation anxiety. After all, by that point he would have spent at least as much sustained time with those fictional characters as with his own friends or family.

With the simultaneous rise of the Internet, a new breed of fan-cum-critic was born. Once, a TV critic might review the pilot episode of a new series and then never revisit it. Now, just as TV evolved into a true serial form—making it necessary to watch an entire season, or even multiple seasons, before assessing the work as a whole—it became paradoxically common to review each and every episode as soon as it aired or even, via live blogging and live tweeting, in real time. It became common to watch TV with a so-called second screen, a smartphone or tablet, open and at the ready. Deep into the night and the wee hours of Monday morning, the keyboards would click, turning out heroic rafts of prose, parsing each nuance, pouncing on each inconsistency, speculating on what might come next. After one episode of the FX comedy *Louie*, one fancritic tellingly tweeted: “Let’s have a sleepover right now only instead of going to each other’s houses we just sit here and tweetconverse about #Louie till sunrise.”

The most diehard, or smitten, took to the strange practice of “recapping”—which became the dominant way of talking about these shows on the Internet. Recaps were precise, moment-by-moment retellings of an episode just aired. They may have been an opportunity for editorializing and snarkiness, but they also smacked of ritual reenactment—not unlike a young writer fastidiously typing out a favorite short story, word for word, in an attempt to commune with its author.

Through all this, an unusual bond was formed, not only between viewer and show, but between viewer and *network*. A new drama on HBO or AMC was deemed all but automatically worthy of the recap treatment and of hopeful goodwill—a level of brand loyalty and affection never granted, say, CBS or Paramount Pictures.

If it had once been axiomatic that audiences might tolerate difficult characters at the safe remove of the movie theater, but not in their own bedrooms, it turned out that the result was nothing less than a kind of

overwhelming, seismic love. Is it any wonder James Gandolfini might have felt just the tiniest bit of pressure?

Understandable or not, Gandolfini's absence was becoming increasingly worrisome at Silvercup. The production team had already performed all the acrobatics it could—switching the schedule around to shoot those few scenes that could be done without its star. The whole operation had been nervously treading water for days; many began to expect the worst. Terence Winter, driving into work, heard a newscaster report, “Sad news from Hollywood today ...,” and his heart stopped. “It was some drummer for a band,” Winter said. “But I thought, ‘Holy shit! He’s dead.’” Sooner or later, the press, hungry for *The Sopranos* gossip at the best of times, would get hold of the story, and the upper echelon of producers at Silvercup and at HBO began to prepare a damage control strategy.

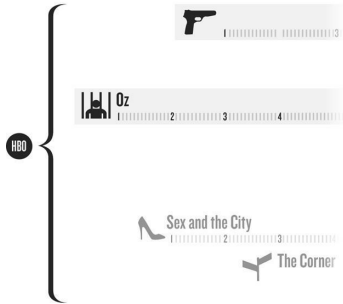
Then, on day four, the main number in the show's production office rang. It was Gandolfini calling, from a beauty salon in Brooklyn. To the surprise of the owner, the actor had wandered in off the street, with no money and no identification, asking to use the phone. He called the only number he could remember, and he asked the production assistant who answered to put someone on who could send a car to take him home.

The Sopranos would go on. And so would the world it had created.

PART I

Previously On

1996 1997 1998 1999 2000 2001



1996-2001

One

In This Maligned Medium

In the beginning, there was the Vast Wasteland. And it was bad.

Already this is easy to forget: that for the overwhelming majority of its existence, the idea that television was an artistic dead zone would have been self-evident. The very term *quality television*, used by academics to denote anything that rose above the level of brain-dead muck, betrayed the very lowest of expectations. But to understand just how revolutionary the notion of *good* television was—and how voraciously those who had a chance to make it on cable between the late 1990s and the early 2010s attacked the opportunity—it's useful to revisit the utter depths in the public's perception from which the medium had to rise. And it's worth looking at a prior generation of producers and writers who were given a brief window in which they, too, could do good work and wound up paving the way, in many cases directly, for the Third Golden Age.

There had, of course, been the so-called *First* Golden Age, that brief, early period in the 1950s of televised Shakespeare and opera and brilliant, original anthologized drama. But in retrospect, that was just a technology finding its legs. In those early days, quality was a default, born of technological limitation (clunky, immovable cameras and limited recording capability made broadcasting live theater a natural starting place) and low stakes: in 1950, a television set cost several weeks' worth of an average salary and could be found in only a fraction of generally affluent, well-educated homes. Television was, of all things—if only for the briefest moment—an elitist technology.

By 1954, however, 56 percent of American households had TV sets. And from the moment TV became a mass medium, it was a reviled medium. Federal Communications Commission chairman Newton Minow coined the phrase *vast wasteland* in a 1961 speech to the National Association of Broadcasters, but policy types were hardly the only ones with disdain for TV.

Perhaps intuiting its power, other artists took every opportunity possible to slag the new medium. In the same way that novelists thank God for short-story writers, short-story writers thank God for poets, poets for more experimental poets—all for making their own career choices seem like models of sober-minded life management—TV might have been invented by moviemakers for the express purpose of allowing them to point to any commercial art form more degraded than their own.

Most striking, though, is the degree to which TV's own practitioners have joined in the hate fest. No other medium contains such a matter-of-fact strain of self-loathing. HBO, indisputably a television network, made its bones declaring it was "not TV."

The criticism, furthermore, has always transcended mere snobbery and included something more primitive and superstitious—as though these boxes of pulsing light and sound had dropped out of the sky into our pristine forest clearing. The exposure to artificial light, it's been said, inhibits cognitive development; the flickering images replicate hypnotism. Television has been accused of being addictive, corrupting, responsible for driving otherwise perfect, well-behaved children to violence and depravity.

Which is to say that TV's crimes have never been merely aesthetic, but also moral, even metaphysical. The set, with its sinister, alien antennae, its ubiquity, became the very symbol of American vacuity and anomie, pouring an unstoppable sludge of false reassurance and pernicious advertising into suburban homes. At best, it was the "glass teat" dispensing anesthesia to the conformist masses; at worst, it was a sinister conspiracy of the capitalist Mind Control Machine, designed to keep us fat, sleepy, and spending. The rhetoric could become nothing short of apocalyptic: Ray Bradbury branded TV "that insidious beast, that Medusa which freezes a billion people to stone every night, staring fixedly, that Siren which called and sang and promised so much and gave, after all, so little." E. B. White prophesied, "We shall stand or fall by television—of that I am quite sure," while, rounding out this unlikely troika, Frank Zappa sang (from the point of view of TV itself):

*You will obey me while I lead you
And eat the garbage that I feed you
Until the day that we don't need you
Don't go for help ... no one will heed you
Your mind is totally controlled*

*It has been stuffed into my mold
And you will do as you are told
Until the rights to you are sold*

Of course, such awestruck hate could only have its source in a kind of love. Orson Welles, as good a man as any to address the nexus of commerce and art, might have had the last word: “I hate television. I hate it as much as peanuts. But I can’t stop eating peanuts.”

Or as Steven Bochco said: “It’s always been fashionable to say at cocktail parties, ‘I never watch TV.’ That’s nonsense. *Everybody* watches TV.”

*

The existential fear and loathing of television may have reached its apex with the 1978 publication of a volume titled *Four Arguments for the Elimination of Television*, written by an ex-advertising executive by the apparently real name of Jerry Mander. Mander described his career at a high-powered San Francisco firm, “commuting coast to coast weekly, taking five-day vacations in Tahiti, eating *only* in French restaurants, jetting to Europe for a few days’ skiing.” This Master of the Universe idyll was interrupted by a scales-falling-from-his-eyes moment in 1968, experienced while sailing through the Dalmatian Straits, amid craggy cliffs and azure seas: “Leaning on the deck rail, it struck me that there was a film between me and all of that. I could ‘see’ the spectacular views. I knew they were spectacular. But the experience stopped at my eyes. I couldn’t let it inside me. I felt nothing. Something had gone wrong with me.” That something, he came to believe, was the same something that afflicted the rest of the modern world: television.

Having awoken from the machine’s hypnotic spell, Mander urged the rest of us to follow suit, laying out his indictment in such chapters as “War to Control the Unity Machine” and “How Television Dims the Mind” and “How We Turn into Our Images.” In one chapter he listed thirty-three “Inherent Biases of Television.” Among them: “War is better television than peace.” “Lust is better television than satisfaction.” “The one is easier than the many.” “The singular is more understandable than the eclectic.” “Any facts work better than any poetry.” “Superficiality is easier than depth.”

“This cannot be changed. The bias is inherent in the technology,” Mander asserted with the absolute confidence of a zealot. The notion of television

redeeming itself was “as absurd as speaking of the reform of a technology such as guns.”

As it happens, almost simultaneous with the publication of *Four Arguments for the Elimination of Television*, an event took place that would begin to challenge Mander’s ironclad assumptions. In early 1978, Steven Bochco went to work for Grant Tinker.

*

The veteran TV writer and showrunner Henry Bromell once sketched a family history of quality TV. After starting at the bottom with *The Sopranos*, *The Wire*, and *Mad Men* and a handful of other recent shows, he quickly moved upward, along a spreading spiderweb of connections that filled the page. At the top, alone, he wrote one name in capital letters: Grant Tinker.

Four decades after he left an executive position at 20th Century Fox Television to form MTM Enterprises—named for his second wife, Mary Tyler Moore, and created to produce her eponymous sitcom—Tinker remains that rare, if not unique, creature: a television executive revered by television writers. If you know anything about the species, you may be able to guess that writers loved Tinker because Tinker believed in the importance of writers.

This has by no means ever been a given in Hollywood. Certainly not in the movie business, which had long granted power and prestige to directors while regarding writers as, at best, regrettably necessary inconveniences: in the immortal words of Jack Warner, “schmucks with Underwoods.” From the beginning, the ongoing nature of television programming—the medium’s merciless hunger for a constant flow of new material—made writers a more valuable commodity than they had ever been. Still, by and large, producers remained in charge of TV through the sixties and seventies, with writers either working freelance or saddled with the peculiarly diminished title of “story editor.”*

There’s a condition, common among executives and other TV “suits,” that involves the secret conviction that—if only they were less damnably good at making money and more willing to spend their time mooning about, wearing rags, and making up stories—they could write and create at least as well as any of their writers.

“Mike Post [the prolific TV-theme composer] used to say, ‘Everybody is

an expert on two things: their jobs and music.’ The same is true of television,” said Stephen J. Cannell, one of the most successful writer-producers of the seventies and eighties. “Why? Because we’ve all watched so damned much of it. It’s like saying, ‘I fly first class all the time. I think I could land this thing.’”

Crucially, Tinker appears to have been immune to this particular disease. By the time he started MTM in 1969, he’d already spent two decades working for NBC, Radio Free Europe, Universal, Fox, and the ad agencies McCann Erickson and Benton & Bowles. Along the way, he’d developed a faith in creative talent that could easily pass for common sense. “From my earliest days around and about television,” he wrote in his memoir, *Tinker in Television*, “it’s been clear to me that good shows could only be made by good writers.”

He became known as an indefatigable advocate for his writers and a tireless defender of their work against meddlesome networks. Both John Falsey and Joshua Brand—who would create *St. Elsewhere* at MTM—remember sitting in Tinker’s office, listening to one side of a phone conversation with NBC Entertainment president Brandon Tartikoff, who was apparently unhappy with the ratings performance of a particular show. “But is it *good*, Brandon?” Tinker said over and over. “Is it *good*?”

Of course Tinker, for all his genuine appreciation for and support of writers, wasn’t running a nonprofit artists collective. He believed that his approach was not only good for art, but good for business. This was the era of “Fin-Syn,” the Financial Interest and Syndication Rules, enacted in 1970, that among other things prohibited the big three TV networks from producing and owning their own programming. Until their repeal in the 1990s, the Fin-Syn Rules bestowed enormous power and profit on independent producers, who maintained ownership over their programs and syndication rights. Not only would happy writers produce profitable programs, Tinker believed, they would also attract a steady stream of *more* good writers. He proposed a show business axiom—“The best creative people love to work with other best creative people”—and described the ensuing “magnet effect” that made recruiting talent surprisingly easy.

In this, Tinker’s studio provided a blueprint for what HBO would become in the late 1990s and early 2000s. MTM’s offices in Studio City became the place writers wanted to be—not necessarily because it was where they’d get the most money, but because they’d have the freedom to do good work. Said

Tinker's son Mark, who began his own career as a director and producer at MTM, "It was *the* gig in town."

*

Several dramas to come out of MTM had direct bearing on the generation of TV to follow. The studio's second drama, *The White Shadow*, about a white ex-NBA player coaching at an inner-city high school, turned out to be one of those strange intersections in television history at which a disproportionate amount of talent ends up working on a show that doesn't necessarily reflect that talent. By the nature of the business, people working on good TV shows almost always got there by working on bad—or at least less good—ones; at one point, the list of past credits assembled in the writers' room of *The Sopranos* included *The Incredible Hulk*, *The New Adventures of Flipper*, and *Xena: Warrior Princess*. "All TV credit sheets look terrible," said HBO Entertainment president Sue Naegle.

No show or producer, however, would have the impact of the studio's fourth dramatic series, *Hill Street Blues*—in terms of both what was on the screen and how it got there.

Steven Bochco was thirty-four when Tinker hired him, a veteran of the Universal Television script mill, where he had specialized in churning out scripts for cop shows but had failed to break through with a real hit. Bochco arrived at MTM with no small amount of self-confidence but little interest in doing another police series—even less so when his first effort for the studio, *Paris*, starring James Earl Jones as a detective, flopped after a single season on CBS.

Nevertheless, even at MTM the customer had some power, and what the customer—in this case NBC president Fred Silverman—had set his mind to in early 1980 was a police drama. Silverman dispatched Brandon Tartikoff to pitch the idea to Bochco and Michael Kozoll, a fellow Universal alum, at a meeting at La Scala in Beverly Hills. The pair were reluctant. "It was late in the cycle and they were desperate. So we had some real negotiating leverage," Bochco remembers. He and Kozoll agreed to write a police pilot if Tartikoff would grant them autonomy. And Tartikoff, on behalf of NBC, agreed.

What he and Kozoll delivered, ten days later, was nearly the Platonic ideal of a form that would define quality television well into the Third Golden

Age: the Trojan horse. That is, a show that by nominally fulfilling a network's (or viewer's) commercial demands allowed its creators the freedom to sneakily achieve something far richer.

In this case, NBC got its police show but also something quite different. The pilot, then called *Hill Street Station*, in many ways owed more to MTM sitcoms than to the cop genre. It portrayed the workplace as surrogate family. It married comedy and drama. Its multiple, character-driven story lines took on social and political issues. (The unglamorous look of its station house was inspired by another sitcom: *Barney Miller*.) Meanwhile, the show's visual style—gritty and hyperrealistic, with a restless camera and overlapping sound track—showed the marks of the decade of new American filmmaking that had just passed.

Even now, the first moments of the *Hill Street* pilot, which aired January 15, 1981, feel shockingly modern. As would be the convention for much of its run, the show opened as the cops of Hill Street station, located in an unnamed city that resembled New York, gathered for morning roll call. The handheld camera roved over a vast assemblage of characters, with no conventional cues as to which deserved more of the viewer's attention than the others. It was an unkempt, sleepy-eyed group, black and white, male and female. The muddy din of dialogue could have been lifted from a Robert Altman film. Finally, the duty sergeant, played by Michael Conrad, calls the gathering to order with a rundown of the previous night's news and today's advisories. The mood see-saws giddily from hoots (over a drag queen purse snatcher) to grave silence (news of two gang killings and probable reprisals). Finally, Conrad announces a new dictate from district command, barring the carrying of "bizarre and unauthorized weapons by the officers of this precinct." With much grumbling, the cops shuffle forward to surrender their arsenal—switchblades, clubs, nunchucks, and guns of every possible variety—until it becomes a sight gag worthy of the Marx Brothers.

"Okay, let's roll," says Conrad, setting up the show's most famous recurring line: "Hey, let's be careful out there." Whereupon the cops matter-of-factly collect their weapons and begin their day.

Little in the scene would seem out of place on an episode of *The Wire* or *The Shield*. Likewise the rest of the episode, which includes the *Mad Men*-like coy reveal of the police captain's ongoing affair with the public defender and the possibly fatal shooting of two cops who, until that moment, have appeared to be around primarily for comic relief.

Unsurprisingly, NBC was perturbed. An internal memo from May 1980 provided a neat accounting of their concerns. It cited focus group testing: “The most prevalent audience reaction indicated that the program was depressing, violent and confusing....” “Too much was crammed into this story....” “The main characters were perceived as being not capable and having flawed personalities. Professionally, they were never completely successful in doing their jobs and personally their lives were in a mess....” “Audiences found the ending unsatisfying. There are too many loose ends....”

In other words, it was an entirely unwitting blueprint not only for what made *Hill Street Blues* such a historic program, but for all the shows that make up the Third Golden Age.

*

Bochco was never shy about invoking his autonomy, often threatening to walk rather than follow a network note. That the creation of a television show is largely a state of outright scorched-earth warfare with the very people paying for said creation was an item of faith for Bochco, and he pursued it with the zest of Sun Tzu.

“I probably did come off as an arrogant asshole,” he said. “But you *had* to be. We were bucking a system. And the reason I slept fine at night, despite having all these terrible wars and knowing how resentful they must have been, was that it was in the show’s best interest and, ultimately, the network’s best interest. I always felt that part of my job was protecting them from themselves.”

That position wasn’t the only legacy Bochco left for the next generation of showrunners. He and his team wound up producing thirty-eight hour-long episodes in *Hill Street*’s first year and a half. That breakneck pace might have been common for shows with contained episodes, but this show’s sprawling canvas demanded the invention of new systems.

Traditionally, TV dramas had been either written by a small group of producer-writers or farmed out to a network of freelancers. The idea of a writers’ room was mostly a comedy phenomenon. *Hill Street*’s ongoing story lines necessitated an institutional memory, so Bochco assembled a full-time staff that included Jeffrey Lewis, Michael Wagner, and, for season three, an old Yale roommate of Lewis’s, David Milch. (Kozoll left the show after its

second season.) Together, steeped in the world of the show, they became responsible for a sprawling saga.

Since he was spending so much time with the writers, Bochco deputized an executive producer whose job it was to oversee shooting on set and all other production issues, leaving him free to concentrate on scripts. And since no director popping in to direct a single episode could be expected to know the full backstory, or what might be important three or four or more episodes down the line, he instituted what would later come to be known as “tone meetings.” These are conferences at which the writers, director, and production staff all come together to pore over the complexities of each script in fastidious detail. The meetings are also, implicitly, displays of obeisance on the part of the rest of the production staff to the writer. Bit by bit, Bochco was institutionalizing the role of the autocratic writer-showrunner.

*

It wasn’t just Tinker’s support or the quality of *Hill Street*’s writing that made this possible. For starters, NBC was in terrible shape. The network had but one show in the Nielsen ratings top ten (the seventh season of *Little House on the Prairie*, tied for ninth place) and was the object of much ridicule for a prime-time lineup that included both *B.J. and the Bear*, about a trucker and his chimpanzee, and its spin-off, *The Misadventures of Sheriff Lobo*. Fred Silverman had a hopeless man’s incentive to run in the opposite direction and take a risk. In this case, that meant sticking with *Hill Street Blues* even after it debuted to dismal ratings. “If NBC had been flush,” said Bochco, “I don’t think we would have seen the light of day.”

The television business was also changing. By 1980, nearly a fifth of American homes were hooked up to cable TV, a growing portion of those paying even more for premium stations such as the newly born HBO. Cable not only cannibalized network viewers’ time and attention, it trained them to seek out different kinds of programming on different parts of the dial—sports on ESPN, news on CNN, and so on. Television was becoming a kind of food court—made up of many kiosks selling individual cuisines—rather than a one-size-fits-all cafeteria pumping out a slurry of least objectionable grub. “Quality,” it seemed, could be another niche.

Meanwhile, the explosive rise of VCRs—from 1.1 percent of TV households in 1980 to 20 percent in 1985—encouraged viewers to accept

more serialized stories, since they could now catch up at their leisure. It also began the process of importing film, and the expectation of filmic production values, onto the blocky screen in the living room. And it sliced the number of viewers any one show could expect ever thinner.

As a result, the numbers that had defined success in a three-network world were being drastically reduced downward; a show could succeed with many fewer eyeballs. More important, networks were becoming ever more sophisticated at measuring the *quality* of those eyeballs rather than simply their quantity. Instead of aiming to attract one-third of all viewers (which was becoming increasingly impossible in any event), networks now targeted specific demographics—rich, young, educated, male, and so on. The fragmentation of the American audience had begun. And, as it would again twenty years later, that meant good things for quality TV.

*

To be young, talented, and well compensated at MTM in those years was a beautiful thing. It became even more so when Bruce Paltrow began producing *St. Elsewhere*, which transplanted much of the *Hill Street* formula to a Boston teaching hospital. The show's offices were one floor below *Hill Street*'s. "There was great excitement," said Milch. "It was as if everyone felt as if he or she had been caught doing something wrong."

"We were just a group of guys, all in our mid- to late thirties, and suddenly, because of the power Grant had given us, we were changing the business. We were *becoming* the business," Bochco said. "It was very, very thrilling. To suddenly have the sense that you could be proud of what you were doing, that you could begin to use the word *art*. We began to tentatively say, 'We're artists.' In this maligned medium."

Across Hollywood and New York, TV writers stood up and took notice. As important, so did those in MFA programs, theater workshops, journalism programs, and elsewhere. "Look at what else was on the air that season," said Andrew Schneider, who was a producer on the *The Incredible Hulk* at the time. "Go watch an episode of *Simon & Simon*. We were toiling along on shows like that, and then *Hill Street* came out and said, 'This is possible.' I remember coming to work the day after the pilot aired and everybody was like, 'We're going to get to do stuff like this!'"

And yet, the window that MTM had thrown open would remain so only

briefly. Grant Tinker would leave the studio in 1981 to become head of NBC. Bochco was fired from his own show by MTM's new regime, for chronic cost overruns. He'd continue his career with *LA Law*, *NYPD Blue*, and a host of variously successful shows at 20th Century Fox Television. The regulations and incentives of Fin-Syn would be eroded in the early 1990s and finally abolished in 1995, drastically sliding power away from independent producers and toward the networks while at the same time spurring the proliferation of new, smaller networks like the WB and UPN. Cable would march inexorably forward, along with video games, the Internet, and more, exploding the audience into ever smaller fragments. Network TV, on the whole, would remain a dismal landscape. Indeed, the networks would run in the other direction from the new writer monarchy the first moment they had the chance, seizing instead on programming that dispensed with writers altogether in favor of "reality."

Yet before long, strikingly similar circumstances would conspire to continue what Tinker and his writers had started: new, disruptive technology, an anxious, shifting industry, a network with little to lose, and men who had labored long and hard in the Wasteland, sniffing the air hungrily for the chance to call themselves "artists."

* The term *producer* used throughout this book is a devilish one, meaning different things in different contexts: *The Sopranos*, for instance, had five credited "executive producers" for its final episodes: Chase, as creator and head writer; Brad Grey, as one of the original developers; Ilene Landress, who was in charge of budgets, scheduling, and all other physical, nonwriting matters; and then Terence Winter and Matthew Weiner as the most senior writers, also responsible for overseeing production on episodes they wrote. In addition, there were seven other "producers," ranging from associate to co-executive, with duties as varied as writing episodes, overseeing postproduction, and acting as Landress's assistant. To further confound matters, the Writers Guild mandates specific "producer" credits for its writers, tied to their pay level and seniority. Here, anyway, I mean a more old-fashioned definition of executive, noncreative types.

Which Films?

David Chase never liked *Hill Street Blues*. Or *St. Elsewhere*. The rest of the world may have been thinking that television was rising from the muck, but not him. “I thought it was getting worse,” he said. “It was just more cops and doctors.”

But then, David Chase liked almost nothing about television—not even the paychecks, each one of which reminded him that he was a sellout, too weak and compromised, he imagined, to follow the path of the renegade filmmakers he’d come of age idolizing. If ever a man who spent his entire career in television could claim intellectual, emotional kinship with Jerry Mander and his campaign to eliminate the medium itself, Chase was that man.

“Look, I do not care about television. I don’t care about where television is going or anything else about it,” he said three years after the finale of *The Sopranos* became one of the signal cultural events of the decade. “I’m a man who wanted to make movies. Period.” Even the title *showrunner* annoyed him: “It sounds like some kind of Jet-Ski,” he said.

In a generally triumphant story, this is one of the small tragedies: that the Reluctant Moses of the Third Golden Age, the man who, by example, opened the door for so many writers, directors, actors, and producers to work in television gloriously free of shame, was unable himself to enter the Promised Land.

*

Gloom, pessimism, anxiety, paranoia, grudge holding, misanthropy—such were the highlights of most David Chase stories, including those he told about himself. Which is why it was so flummoxing to hear his own self-assessment, so difficult to tell whether he was being coy, oblivious, or simply

pugnacious in yet another iteration.

“Maybe I come off as a depressed, morose guy,” he said, complaining about a 2007 *Vanity Fair* cover profile that quoted a constellation of colleagues and acquaintances on his negativity. Despite calling *The Sopranos* “one of the masterpieces of American popular culture, on a par with the first two *Godfathers*, *Mean Streets*, and *GoodFellas* ... or even European epics such as Luchino Visconti’s *The Leopard*,” the piece continued to irk Chase. “Maybe people find me that negative. I just don’t see it,” he said. “Because the truth is, in my experience, when I’m in a room, I hear a lot of laughter.”

As a child, he dreamed of nuclear apocalypse under the suburban stars of Passaic and Morris and Essex counties. Perhaps this was reasonable for someone born August 22, 1945, sixteen days after Hiroshima, a charter baby boomer. He was the only child of second-generation Italians—family name DeCesare—who had more or less made the journey he would later replicate in *The Sopranos*’ opening credits. His father, Henry, owned a store, Wright Hardware, in Verona. His mother, Norma, well, you’ve met her: insecure, passive-aggressive, fearful, domineering. As embodied by the actress Nancy Marchand, she would become one of the more idiosyncratically terrifying and funny characters to ever appear in American living rooms: Livia Soprano.

Norma was one of ten daughters of an Italian leftist who, family lore had it, once jumped out a window at a Eugene Debs rally when the cops busted in. Henry came from a line of Italian religious reformists called the Waldensians. The Chases were secular Protestants in the land of Catholics. Having escaped Newark, they had WASPy ambitions. They played tennis and golf, vacationed in the Poconos. The wiseguys and *guidos* from down Bloomfield Avenue were referred to around the dinner table as *cafoni*—peasants. “My mother aspired to a kind of genteel life, I think,” says Chase. “Although her home life was not genteel at all.”

Norma, who had left high school after her freshman year, had the almost absurdist job of proofreading the New Jersey Bell phone book. She ruled the house by threat of filibuster: you did what she wanted because it was easier than hearing her complain. “The tyranny of the weak,” Chase called it. This played into Henry’s sense of thwarted ambition. He radiated frustration in a way that would later find expression in Tony Soprano.

“He was a disappointed man. A frustrated man,” Chase said. “He would make her out to be the heavy. If something couldn’t happen, for whatever reason, he would blame it on her: ‘Look what I have to deal with.’ But he

was the one who had picked her. He got what he wanted.”

It was a cramped, suffocating home, with both parents intimately involved in their only child’s comings and goings. Chase suffered adolescent bouts of anxiety and depression that a generation later would likely have been identified as clinical. Outside, he and his friends engaged in the kind of petty vandalism that makes obedient sons feel rebellious: knocking over mailboxes, breaking into the local country club and throwing furniture into the pool. “It was a time when you could just run wild,” he said. “Outside the home, it was really an idyllic American boyhood.” Chase developed a fierce love of rock and roll and took up the drums. And he began learning the trick of alchemizing family psychodrama into mordant humor. Long before Livia came to life in America’s living rooms, stories about Norma would entertain a generation of procrastinating writers’ rooms.

Senior year, he fell in love with Denise Kelly, whose reserved French Irish family was everything the Chases were not. Still, for college Chase fled to Wake Forest in Winston-Salem, North Carolina. He was an ROTC student and thought seriously about the prospect of staying in the army after graduation—the brewing conflict in faraway Vietnam perhaps seeming preferable to a return to the Chase household.

Northern Jersey to Winston-Salem constituted about as large a cultural leap as it was possible to make in 1964 America. “There were cross burnings still going on in North Carolina. You had to go to chapel twice a week, and if it was before a big football game, they’d play ‘Dixie’ and everybody had to stand,” Chase said. “It was awful. Really terrible. Not only were you not allowed to drink on campus, you weren’t allowed to dance or play cards.”

There was, however, against all odds, a Friday night European film series, part of the great flowering of film appreciation on campuses and in downtowns across the country. “I wasn’t hip enough to know that I was seeing new film techniques in a film like *Breathless*,” Chase said. “But it sure *seemed* different. Godard said all you need to make a movie is a girl and a gun. I certainly got that part of it. I was into it.”

In particular, he fell for Fellini—starting with the director’s contribution to *Boccaccio ’70*, a lurid anthology of shorts inspired by the Renaissance poet. Fellini’s segment featured a woman afflicted by visions of saints. “It was my first glimpse of Italy,” Chase remembered. “I thought, ‘This is the kind of nonsense that goes on in my house. The melodrama and the self-pity and the obsessiveness and the craziness: This is my DNA.’”

Soon he began dabbling in photography, taking still pictures of 8½ and Stanley Kubrick films on his television. After two years, he transferred to NYU to be closer to Denise and to immerse himself in Greenwich Village's film scene. As they would for scores of others, the art films of that period presented Chase with a new creative model. Leaving a screening of Roman Polanski's *Cul-de-Sac* in 1966, he had a revelation. "Before, I thought films just arrived from the factory, like they were Chevys or Fords. Leaving that theater, I remember thinking, 'These films are personal, they're made by a person.' It crystallized for me that it was something one could do."

After college, Chase and Denise married and the couple headed west, ending up at Stanford University, where Chase took film classes. There, Chase became close friends with a fellow student and teaching assistant, John Patterson. He was dashing: ruddy, bearded, an ex-navigator for the Strategic Air Command that had spent twenty-four-hour shifts airborne during the Cuban missile crisis. On the surface, Patterson, who would go on to be the most prolific director of *The Sopranos'* early seasons, couldn't have been more different from Chase, who had left Norma behind, but not her legacies of fearfulness and depression. But the men bonded over film and drugs and rock and roll. On one memorable night, the Chases and Patterson and his girlfriend dropped acid and headed into San Francisco to see *2001: A Space Odyssey*. "It was the best time of my life," Chase recalled. Unfortunately, he made the mistake of trying to go back to the well—tripping once again for a Palo Alto screening of Fellini's *Satyricon*, a disturbing grotesquerie under even the most sober of circumstances. The trip turned bad.

"I was sitting in the theater thinking, 'I don't feel so good ... I feel pretty bad. I wish I was dead. I'm going to die,'" he remembered. At some point, he began to believe that the Zodiac serial killer, then at large in the Bay Area, was out to get him. "The more I thought about it, the more my brain waves would attract his attention. So I needed to stop thinking about it, which of course made me think about it more," he said. "It was a long twelve hours."

That passage, from joy to despair, became characteristic of Chase's work, in which characters—Tony tripping on mescaline in the Nevada desert, Carmela Soprano musing on the "cold stones" of Paris, Paulie "Walnuts" Gualtieri seeing the Virgin Mary in the back of the Bada Bing! strip club—are constantly glimpsing various kinds of transcendence, only to feel them slip away.

"I would always go like that, in a circle: 'Oh, this is so cool, this is

amazing, this is really threatening, oh God, oh God ...,” said Chase. “Experiences like that trip showed me the pattern very concisely: ‘This is the way you are. You get all excited, and then *too* excited, and then you start to worry and go into this slew of despond until something else distracts you and you go back up.’”

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After Stanford, the Chases relocated to Los Angeles. The city entranced David. “L.A. was kind of cool then. It was all happening: *Easy Rider*, the Byrds, Jim Morrison—even though I was never a big Morrison fan. There was a whole bohemian thing, a lot of drugs around. And I loved all the old studios, the Raymond Chandler aspects of them at night, the fog. I was crazy about that shit,” he said. “It was weird, but I liked it.”

Chase set out to become a screenwriter, laboring over film scripts while Denise worked. Throughout the next twenty years, he would always have at least one screenplay going. They would come to varying states of near success before collapsing. One, titled *Fly Me*, was about stewardesses. Another, *Female Suspects*, written in 1981, concerned a sociologist in New Jersey who gets caught up in the lives of the violent women she is studying. That script flirted with getting produced for ten years and was even briefly revived at Sony Pictures, following the debut of *The Sopranos*. “Now, it would probably be on the Black List,” Chase said, referring to the yearly index of “best unproduced scripts” that began being compiled in 2005. Time after time, however, his film dreams ended in frustration. He said, “The word was, I was ‘too dark.’”

Back in L.A., his career was prematurely stalled. He and Patterson took the Directors Guild trainee exam; Patterson passed, but Chase didn’t. He picked up odd jobs such as assistant director on soft-core porn films and stayed home, smoking a lot of pot and working on scripts. Then came a break: Toward the end of film school, Chase and a friend had written a spec script for Roy Huggins, a television producer most famous for creating the western *Maverick*, starring James Garner. “It was terrible. Just some Godardian half-assed gangster thing,” he said. But it was good enough that Huggins gave him a freelance script assignment for a new show about lawyers he was producing at Universal. Chase figured he’d made it: “I joined the guild, I got paid \$2,300, which I couldn’t believe, and I was in the

industry.”

In fact, it was the last paid writing he'd do for two years. Given his lack of union-aided employment, he was indignant when the Writers Guild ordered him to the picket lines during its 1973 strike. It proved fortuitous. Marching dutifully outside the main gate of Paramount Studios, Chase was introduced to Paul Playdon, a writer and story editor with a reputation as a kind of storytelling wunderkind for his work on *Mission: Impossible*. The two hit it off, and Playdon gave Chase his first staff writing positions—first on the back-nine episodes of a show called *The Magician*, starring future Hulk Bill Bixby, and then on *Kolchak: The Night Stalker*, an influential proto-*X-Files* featuring Darren McGavin as a Chicago newspaper reporter who seemed to constantly stumble upon stories of the supernatural.

Thus began David Chase's long, unfortunate slide upward into success. *Kolchak* was produced at Universal Studios, which at the time was churning out some seventeen hours of prime-time television per week. To be on the lot was as close to experiencing the heyday of the Hollywood studio system as television production ever got. “The commissary was filled. You'd see extras walking around dressed like Martians. There was a huge costume department. A giant wood shop that made all the sets. It was really like 1942,” Chase recalled.

The show was a crash education in TV storytelling, both on the page and on set. Such incidentals as plot had never been of much interest to Chase before. “‘Story’ was cheap Hollywood crap,” said the Fellini fan. “For me it was all about dialogue and character.” That began to change under Playdon's tutelage, as they pumped out script after script, often less than twelve hours ahead of that episode's shooting schedule. Chase discovered he had not only a gift for driving a story forward in television's familiar four- or five-act structure (separated by commercial breaks), but also a taste for the process of bringing those stories to life on-screen, detail by arduous detail.

“I remember my first production meeting, at Paramount, on *The Magician*. All the department heads were going through the script: ‘Okay: The police uniform. Long-sleeve or short-sleeve? Let's see, it's October, so short-sleeve.’ So you settle that and then you go on. This was fascinating to me,” Chase said.

As important, he was being trained in TV's eternal, intimate dance between story (which is to say, creativity) and time (which is to say, money). “Like, you have a scene in a funeral home, but the locations person says you

can't afford to shoot a funeral home. So you need to change it to an exterior, where you see people leaving and getting into their cars. It was real fundamentals. Paul Playdon taught me all that. And then later, of course, Stephen Cannell."

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Nobody (or at least no boy) growing up between the late 1970s and early 1990s could fail to know the prodigious body of work Stephen J. Cannell produced throughout that era—a collection of character-based, humor-laced, action-packed shows that included *Riptide*, *The Greatest American Hero*, *Wiseguy*, *21 Jump Street*, *The Commish*, *Baretta*, *Hunter*, *Hardcastle and McCormick*, and more. (TV has always had a taste for last names as titles, particularly if the names are fortuitously punny and evocative.) As far as popular success went, there was, above all others, *The A-Team*, a perfectly calibrated piece of Reagan-era juvenile junk featuring a team of vigilante ex-Special Forces soldiers back from Vietnam and intervening on behalf of the little guy, preferably one running a wood mill, trucking company, or other suitably blue-collar operation.

What's more surprising is that the same boys, who would have been of an age not accustomed to considering, much less caring, how their entertainment was made, would probably also know *who* Cannell was—even if they knew no other television producer or even that such a thing existed. This was thanks largely to Cannell's signature "bumper," a snippet of video that ran after the credits of each of his shows. It depicted the man himself, bearded, impressively coiffed, and usually puffing on a pipe, at his typewriter at the final moments of finishing a script. He would pound out a final few characters—no doubt a last-minute plot twist or crucial piece of character nuance—and then confidently rip the page from its carriage and fling it across the room, whereupon it morphed into animation, fluttered onto the top of a manuscript, and settled into a royal, curved "C."

It was a classic piece of narcissism, to be sure; the video logo was periodically updated, and each iteration made sure to include more conspicuously displayed awards in the writer's office. But it was also something more important: Regardless of what you thought of the quality of Cannell's output (and it ranged wildly from awful to underappreciated), he was making a claim of television auteurship. What's more, though he was a

savvy, in some ways revolutionary, businessman, making a fortune by essentially starting his own studio and thus owning all his shows, Cannell's bumper specifically insisted on his role, first and foremost, as a *writer*.

As he told an interviewer in 2004: "Somewhere in the early part of the eighties, I was starting to be referred to as a 'television mogul.' And I just kind of hated that. Because to me a mogul was a guy in a green suit who tried to score actresses. I kept saying, 'I'm not a mogul, I'm a writer. I write every day for five hours. If that doesn't make me a writer, what does?'"

Neither that figure nor Cannell's pride in it, heightened by the fact that he had grown up dyslexic, ever wavered—though in later years he applied it to the writing of mystery novels rather than TV shows. Lunching at the Beverly Hilton several months before he would die of melanoma, at the age of sixty-nine, he was magnificent: bull-chested, hair swept back, wearing a thin, ribbed black turtleneck tucked into the tightest of tan pants and a corduroy jacket. He ordered tuna on white and used an entire room-service mini-jar of extra mayonnaise.

And though he could justly claim credit for kicking off the careers of such stars as Johnny Depp, Kevin Spacey, Jeff Goldblum, Michael Chiklis, and many others, he seemed most proud of hiring David Chase as a staff writer for *The Rockford Files*.

Years later, Chase described what he learned writing for *Rockford*, which ran from 1974 to 1980, was later revived as a series of occasional TV movies, and stands as Cannell's most accomplished creation. "Cannell taught me that your hero can do a lot of bad things, he can make all kinds of mistakes, can be lazy and look like a fool, as long as he's the smartest guy in the room and he's good at his job. That's what we ask of our heroes." Jim Rockford, in other words, was an early shade of Tony Soprano.

Played by James Garner, Rockford was a semi-deadbeat private eye who lived in a beachside trailer in Malibu. He had an astonishing collection of plaid jackets that he wore with equally astonishing aplomb. He didn't like guns, or to work very much, and beyond a grudging sense of decency, he embraced no lofty cause of justice. "With Rockford it was always about '\$200 a day, plus expenses,' that's all," Chase said, giving the PI's oft-mentioned terms of employment.

If *The A-Team's* cigar-chomping, leeringly macho colonel John "Hannibal" Smith was the perfect incarnation of 1980s triumphalism, Rockford was equally in tune with his times, a post-Watergate, post-Vietnam

wiseass, the closest that TV could get to Elliott Gould's shambling, scruffy take on Philip Marlowe in Robert Altman's 1973 version of *The Long Goodbye*. The show was underscored with just a whiff of melancholy, an intimation of resignation and loneliness discernible in the harmonica break of Mike Post's theme music, if you were inclined to hear it.

Even allowing for retrospective clairvoyance, it's hard not to see Chase's fingerprints all over "The Oracle Wore a Cashmere Suit," his first credited episode of *Rockford*. This is less true in the main action—a characteristically convoluted double murder into which Rockford is reluctantly drawn—than in the details stuffed in around the edges: the rock-and-roll references, the malapropisms, the happy coincidence of Rockford making an appearance, shuffling, Tony-like, out to the beach in his bathrobe. The "oracle" of the episode's title is a celebrity psychic with the Sopranoesque name Roman Clementi, whom Chase seems to have taken gleeful pleasure in writing as an oily, unrepentant charlatan. Clementi has precisely the blend of qualities most likely to draw out the sharpest point of Chase's pen: vanity, fatuity, pretension, physical cowardice. To see the psychic flinch from a drug dealer who hits him in the face is to immediately flash on Assemblyman Ronald Zellman cowering as Tony Soprano beats him with a belt for the crime of falling in love with the mobster's old mistress.

An even clearer indication of Chase's creative temperament came with *Off the Minnesota Strip*, which aired in May 1980 on the *ABC Monday Night Movie*. It is hard to imagine a film of its bleak tenor appearing in a modern movie theater, much less on prime-time network TV, interrupted by sunny ads for detergent. It was the story of Michele, nicknamed Micki and played by Mare Winningham. Micki is a teenage runaway who returns home to suburban Minnesota after spending time as a prostitute in New York. Again, premonitions of *The Sopranos* abound: Micki's mom is harsh and remote, her father an impotent milquetoast. Micki herself is no reformed angel with a heart of gold: she's a narcissist, a sexual manipulator, and a pain in the ass. There is a brutal scene in which the dad, played by Hal Holbrook, is forced to sit and listen to a frank account of his daughter's sexual exploits. (There is also wicked wit: "Anyway, I guess it feels good to hit the old bed again," Holbrook says by way of good night.) "Just My Imagination" and other rock-and-roll hits are on the sound track.

Above all, *Minnesota Strip* showcases Chase's gift for granting complicated psychologies to characters who are themselves incapable of

examining, much less expressing, what's going on in their heads. This is the primary distinction between Chase and two fellow showrunners whose work he loathed: David Milch and Aaron Sorkin, both given to investing all of their characters with an eloquence suspiciously close to that of their creators. (Chase never understood how somebody could like both *The Sopranos* and, say, *The West Wing*. "It's like when I was in high school: if you liked the Supremes, you couldn't like the Marvelettes. If you liked Dylan, you couldn't like Donovan." He left little doubt as to which show was which.)

Off the Minnesota Strip ends as untidily as can be, with Micki and a boyfriend lighting out for the Sunset Strip and stopping just short, the question of what they're looking for and whether they'll get it left dangling and unanswered. In *The New York Times*, John J. O'Connor called it "the champion downer of the year."

"In the end, *Off the Minnesota Strip* is little more than a homily on the futility of it all," O'Connor wrote. "For Michele, for her parents, presumably for the rest of us, the message seems to be 'turn off the set and start slashing your wrists.'"

Nearly thirty years later, after a similarly ambiguous ending, *The Sopranos* fans would be debating whether the message of that series amounted to the same thing.

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Chase won his first writing Emmy for the script of *Off the Minnesota Strip*. To his consternation, it made him that much more sought after by television companies. Of the many development deals he was offered by studios such as Warner Brothers, he chose to spend two years with an obscure company called Comworld Pictures.

"I thought, 'These cocksuckers will never get anything on the air and I'll be able to do nothing and write my movies.' Which is what I did," he said.

The convoluted strategies didn't end there: Chase dreamed of selling a TV idea that was good enough to get a pilot made but not so good that it would ever go to series. That way, he reasoned, he could ask the studio, having already invested in an hour-long pilot, to cut its losses by putting up a relatively small amount to finish the story as a stand-alone movie. One idea he pursued on his deal at Universal seemed perfect. It was the story of a dissolving marriage, set in the present but told heavily through flashbacks to

happier times in the 1960s. “I thought, ‘Most pilots don’t get bought, so I’ll shoot this, cut it together, and I’ll be in the movie business.’”

Not for the last time, Chase’s plan backfired. CBS, enchanted by the success of two ABC shows about baby boomers, *thirtysomething* and *The Wonder Years*, picked up Chase’s series, now called *Almost Grown*. Chase called his agent, who naturally expected that his client would be elated. “I said, ‘Listen, you’ve got to get me out of this.’ He said, ‘What are you talking about?’ I told him, ‘I want to kill myself! I don’t want to do a series.’”

Almost Grown debuted in November 1988. The central couple was played by Eve Gordon and Tim Daly, who would later appear in a recurring guest role on *The Sopranos*. On the writing staff was Robin Green, a former magazine writer and alum of the Iowa Writers’ Workshop, whose career, along with that of her future husband, Mitchell Burgess, would be intimately entwined with Chase’s for the next two decades.

“I don’t know how he managed to get it on the air,” said Henry Bromell. “It was a show about failure. And that’s not a surprise, something you realize in season five: it *starts* with a marriage having failed. Only David would have written that show.”

Though well reviewed by critics, *Almost Grown* proved too grim, and with a little help from CBS’s decision to air it opposite *Monday Night Football*, the show was canceled after only eight episodes had been broadcast. Chase was left with his worst opinions of TV confirmed and the growing conviction—given the lack of positive response to any of his feature screenplays—that he’d made a fatal karmic error.

“I began to think that I was not going to succeed in movies because I wasn’t sacrificing enough. I wasn’t willing to quit, to get off that nipple, the weekly salary, the nice house in Santa Monica. I wasn’t willing to do the artistic thing, cut myself off and live the freelance life,” he said.

The outside world, meanwhile, saw someone with a growing reputation for outsize but wasted potential, a kind of human version of a Black List script: the most talented failure in television. When John Falsey called to enlist Chase as a writer for a new show set in the South during the civil rights movement, Falsey recalled, “The truth is, I don’t think anybody else wanted him.”

Three

A Great Notion

The industrial coal country of eastern Pennsylvania is an unlikely place to find the seed of an electronic media revolution, much less a cultural one. Yet in this story it provides two.

The first came in 1948, when an enterprising appliance salesman in Mahanoy City, a town nestled in the picturesque but receptionless hills one hundred miles outside of Philadelphia, planted an antenna atop a nearby mountain, ran a literal cable into town, and began offering a new service. He charged \$100 for installation and \$2 per year thenceforth for the privilege of watching TV without the vagaries of wireless transmission.

The second occurred twenty-four years later, on November 8, 1972, and a mere forty miles away, in Wilkes-Barre. That was when, despite weather problems that forced a technician to stand on top of a roof, physically holding a microwave-receiving dish in place, HBO debuted to a tiny group of subscribers.

The idea for premium cable had been dreamed up by Charles Dolan, who had recently sold a large chunk of his Manhattan cable company, Sterling Communications, to Time Life Inc. and was casting about for a way to make it profitable. The answer—dreamed up, according to company lore, on a family vacation aboard the *Queen Elizabeth II*—was a subscription service focused on sports and movies. He called it “the Green Channel.” The name was quickly replaced with a placeholder: Home Box Office.

From the time of that first broadcast—of the film *Sometimes a Great Notion*, based on the Ken Kesey novel—much of both the problems and the promise that would drive HBO for the next four decades was already in place. The primary question, of course, was how to make people pay for something they either already paid for or, worse, got for free. In 1972, the answer was relatively easy: In those pre-VCR days, there were few options to see Hollywood movies outside of the theater, or even *in* the theater, since

cinemas had yet to catch up with demographics by shifting from urban downtowns to suburban multiplexes. (The TV writer and essayist Rob Long has argued persuasively that this, as much as any particular upswell of artistic sensibility, was responsible for the New Cinema of the early 1970s and, once the suburbs got screens, its death at the hands of blockbusters such as *Jaws* and *Star Wars*.)

Live sports broadcasts, largely controlled by local networks and afflicted by blackouts, were an equally rare commodity in 1972. In its first decade, a significant chunk of HBO's programming included out-of-market NHL, NBA, and New York Yankees games, in addition to boxing, which would remain an important franchise for years to come. Any honest HBO executive past or present would also allow that two other programming elements made possible by its premium status did as much as anything else to distinguish the network's identity: breasts and curse words.

The mix worked. By 1981, HBO was carried on one thousand local cable systems across the country and boasted some four million subscribers. (Dolan had quickly departed the company and would go on to create Cablevision, which owned Madison Square Garden, the New York Knicks and Rangers, Radio City Music Hall, and AMC Networks.) In the ensuing decade, under the stewardship of Jerry Levin and Michael Fuchs, who took over as chairman and CEO in 1984, that number would grow fivefold. At the same time, certain fundamental problems marked those years, chief among them the difficulty of finding enough content to fill the 168 hours per week that a full-time network demanded. HBO's constant repetition of its stable of movies became a well-known joke. ("Show me a Home Box Office patron, and I'll show you someone who has seen *The Great Santini* fifteen times," Jack Curry wrote in the *Daily News*.) The more subscribers felt they had seen all HBO had to offer, the more vulnerable the network was to the scourge of pay TV: so-called *churning*, in which consumers repeatedly pick up and then drop cable services.

The all-consuming thirst for content also made HBO, for as long as it was primarily a movie station, dangerously dependent on Hollywood studios. These had started out dubious of the network and grown increasingly hostile. In 1980, it took a federal antitrust case to prevent 20th Century Fox, Universal, Columbia, and Paramount from banding together to start their own pay network, called Premiere, as a direct challenge. With the rise of VCRs and competition from networks like Showtime and The Movie Channel, all

strategic roads began to lead toward the same destination: original programming.

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Movie and TV production wasn't totally alien to HBO. In 1982, the network had joined with CBS and Columbia Studios to form Tri-Star Pictures, which produced such films as *The Natural* and *Birdy*. (HBO left the partnership in 1987.) In 1986, the first *Comic Relief* concert was aired, a fundraiser that would eventually have eleven installments. The network also had varying degrees of success with sketch comedy (*Kids in the Hall*, *Not Necessarily the News*), miniseries (Robert Altman's *Tanner '88*), and oddball children's programming like Jim Henson's *Fraggle Rock*. Meanwhile, as the nineties dawned, its documentary division, under the direction of Sheila Nevins, began developing a strong reputation with films ranging from Emmy-winning investigations such as *Real Sports with Bryant Gumbel* to the titillations of *Real Sex* and *Taxicab Confessions*.

For the most part, though, the network had declined to challenge the networks with ongoing scripted series. There were a few exceptions: *1st & Ten* was a football sitcom costarring O. J. Simpson. *Arli\$\$* chronicled the adventures of a big-time sports agent. To the extent that these shows drew on HBO's nascent brand, they were primarily the easiest, and crudest, expressions of what it could do and most networks couldn't. Nearly every episode of the sitcom *Dream On*, from David Crane and Marta Kauff man, who would later birth *Friends*, featured at least one sex scene so outrageously gratuitous that it almost felt like an inside joke on the nature of pay TV.

Which is not to say that self-reflexive irony, if indeed there was any on *Dream On*, did anything to diminish the appeal to teenage boys, especially in those pre-Internet days. In that way, an otherwise forgettable show intimated a canny strategy that continued to work for HBO long after it moved on to more upmarket fare. Rare is the episode of any HBO show that doesn't take advantage of the opportunity to remind you that "adult entertainment" means more than sophisticated storytelling. And if one watched *The Sopranos* more for the Bada Bing! and the blood than for the existential musings, well, who was to know? Any more than it could be proven that you weren't reading *Playboy* for the articles.

The most important premonition of what HBO would soon become came

in 1992, with the debut of *The Larry Sanders Show*. Just as *The Sopranos* would be nearly as funny as it was dramatic, *The Larry Sanders Show* was a half-hour comedy as cruelly dark as anything TV had seen before. A behind-the-scenes look at the making of a late-night talk show, it starred Garry Shandling as Larry, the neurotic, narcissistic host. If Shandling and his supporting cast, including Rip Torn and Jeffrey Tambor, weren't exactly playing mobsters or murderers, they were a good deal less likable than any characters you could find on network TV—much less on a sitcom. That went equally for the celebrities who soon lined up to play exaggerated, usually ugly versions of themselves. To appear on *Larry Sanders* was to show yourself as not only a good sport, but savvy enough to lampoon Hollywood while participating in it. And the audience was flattered by its knowing inclusion in that world, the same way it later felt intimately connected to the jargon of Baltimore homicide cops on *The Wire* or the economics of running a funeral home on *Six Feet Under*. The pleasure came less from the putative glimpse into how a late-night talk show worked than from imagining how one could convince Michael Bolton to appear as himself in an episode in which he was described as “a pair of lungs with a dick.”

In raw numbers, not all that many people watched. “I used to get the numbers every week, and *Def Comedy Jam*”—the African American comedy showcase that debuted the same year—“had like four times the ratings of *Larry Sanders*,” said Kevin Reilly, then the head of television at Brillstein-Grey, the influential management company that produced both shows and would later develop *The Sopranos*. But volume of viewers really didn't matter. Buzz did: among critics, among loyal, chattering viewers on the coasts, and among other Hollywood creatives.

“*The Larry Sanders Show* manifestly revealed to everyone that you could do something totally original, get noticed for it, and that it could have a cultural impact,” said Richard Plepler, who later became HBO's CEO. “And I believe that that show opened up the imagination of a lot of creative people who said, ‘You know what, you go over there, you can do some interesting stuff.’”

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By most normal standards, David Chase was doing interesting stuff himself in the early 1990s—working for a pair of young writer-producers who would

likely have found themselves working on cable had they started ten years later. Josh Brand and John Falsey had been barely thirty when they created *St. Elsewhere* for MTM. They departed the show soon after its debut, thanks to an ugly struggle for control between Brand and executive producer Bruce Paltrow. At Universal, they had created a miniseries called *A Year in the Life* for NBC, which was then picked up for one critically acclaimed season. They then struck improbable gold, or at least fairy dust, with an eight-episode summer replacement called *Northern Exposure*, about a neurotic New York doctor stranded in an eccentric Alaskan town. With its blend of comedy, soap opera, and a kind of hip, literary sensibility (Falsey and several of the writers he recruited had studied fiction at the University of Iowa), the show was an immediate hit with critics.

“They were very conscious of wanting to do something that was not like television,” staffer Barbara Hall remembered. “There were constant references to short-story writers and playwrights, not TV episodes.” Robin Green, also a writer for the show, was sent home the first week with a collection of John Updike stories to study. Surprisingly, the show was also a ratings hit, which bought Brand and Falsey something approaching a free pass on whatever they wanted to do next.

“Back then, before HBO and cable were players, the networks would set aside an hour or two a week for a show that wasn’t going to be a ratings winner but that they could be proud of,” said Falsey. “With *Northern*, Josh and I had reached that niche.”

What they filled it with was *I’ll Fly Away*. Set in the late 1950s and early 1960s, the show centered around Sam Waterston as a southern district attorney navigating the moral and legal displacements of the civil rights movement, and on Regina Taylor as his African American maid, Lilly, caught in the same currents. Brand said the show’s inspiration was a scene in *To Kill a Mockingbird*, in which Atticus Finch asks his black housekeeper to stay at his house while he attends to business: “I thought, ‘Gee, wouldn’t it be interesting to see it from her point of view.’”

Brand had admired *Almost Grown*, so when James Garner sang David Chase’s praises one day over lunch at the Hotel Bel-Air, he and Falsey brought him in for a meeting.

“He was David,” Brand said. “You know, not the most cheery person you can meet. When he left, we looked at each other and one of us said, ‘He’s an odd duck, man. But he’s a really talented writer.’ So we hired him. Frankly,

we didn't give a shit about his personality.”

Henry Bromell and Hall rounded out the small writing staff, though Chase emerged as the star. “I remember we each went off to write our first scripts and then passed them around,” said Bromell. “Mine was pretty good. I remember reading Barbara’s and thinking it was really good. But David’s ... David’s was like Chekhov.”

In “The Hat,” which became the second episode of *I’ll Fly Away*’s first season, Lilly retrieves and fixes a cowboy hat that her young white charge, John Morgan, has lost out a car window. Before she can return it, though, Lilly’s daughter falls in love with the hat, forcing Lilly to pry it away from her to give it back. In the final scene, as Chase wrote it, John Morgan cavalierly discards the hat again.

“It said everything,” said Bromell. “About the two families. About money. About power. About how Lilly couldn’t say ‘Fuck you’ to her boss. I said, ‘David, that’s really good. In any medium.’ And he said, ‘Eh. I don’t know.’”

Brand said, “If you came to see David in his office, he’d kind of look at you like you were trying to pick his pocket. You’d say, ‘David, it’s nothing! I’m just trying to have a conversation!’ He’d be, ‘What? What?’ Just very suspicious. But I really liked him. I thought he was funny, because he was so intense.” Brand paused and smiled. “Though, you know, I always thought Richard Nixon was hysterically funny, too.”

Chase was proud of his work on *I’ll Fly Away*, but that hardly meant he was happy. His battles with enemies both internal and external continued—the latter camp represented largely by the powers at NBC, on which the series aired. Network commercials for the show featured Louis Armstrong singing “What a Wonderful World.” The spots drove Chase crazy.

“If I’d had a gun, I would’ve killed somebody,” he said, as worked up about it in 2010 as he was in 1992. “What fucking wonderful world? Ku Klux Klan, Mississippi civil rights workers being murdered, housewives from Detroit being gunned down in their car, black kids being lynched? They were trying to sell a series about human pain as a cute story about some cute little boy and his nanny. And it fucking made me want to puke.”

Hall remembered Chase bringing a woman in the network’s standards and practices office to tears over the number of times the word *nigger* would be allowed in an episode. (“What kind of person does your job?” he asked her over and over.) Another time, a young staffer gushed about how important their work was. “It’s not TV, it’s art,” she said. Chase fixed her with his

hooded eyes: “You’re here for two things: selling Buicks and making Americans feel cozy. That’s your job.”

Some of Chase’s worst opprobrium was reserved for the show being produced right across the hall. “The people who worked on *Northern Exposure* thought they were curing cancer and reinventing drama,” he said. “The premise of the show, as I found out later, was that it was a, quote, ‘nonjudgmental universe.’ Huh? That’s something I couldn’t understand. To me it was so precious, so self-congratulatory. It strained so hard for its whimsy. We’d go to the Emmys every year and they’d get these awards and we’d get nothing. It wasn’t that we really wanted the Emmys, but that show was being celebrated to the hilt and I felt it was a fraud at its core.”

By the end of 1993, Chase had taken over *Northern Exposure* as showrunner.

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That bizarre turn of events had been immediately precipitated by the cancellation of *I’ll Fly Away* after just two seasons. PBS subsequently rebroadcast the series, along with a ninety-minute coda, *I’ll Fly Away: Then and Now*—an early intimation of how alternatives to the traditional networks might be better suited for serious storytelling.

After their meteoric rise, Brand and Falsey’s partnership was faltering. Brand had stayed in day-to-day control of *Northern Exposure* while Falsey concentrated mainly on *I’ll Fly Away*. While both shows were on the air, Falsey had pushed Brand to start yet another, *Going to Extremes*, a somewhat transparent copy of *Northern Exposure*’s fish-out-of-water formula, this time about med students on a tropical island. Falsey’s dream was to be the first producer with three shows nominated for an Emmy in the same category, but shortly after the show launched, in September 1992, he began to fall apart. Soon, he would withdraw completely into a decades-long battle with alcoholism, during which he and Brand had no contact for nearly twenty years. Brand, burned out by his partner’s life dramas as well as increasing conflicts with *Northern Exposure* star Rob Morrow over his contract, decided to leave the show after its fourth season.

Universal handed the reins to Chase along with husband-and-wife writing partners Andrew Schneider and Diane Frolov. Predictably, given Chase’s feelings and the odd three-headed showrunner structure, things didn’t go

well. *Northern Exposure* left the air two seasons later.

“The studio asked me, ‘Who can run this thing? David?’ I said, ‘Well, I’m sure he *could*. He’s a great writer. But I don’t see David having any affinity for this stuff whatsoever,’” said Brand. “Only he would have the answer to why he said yes.”

Indeed, Chase did. “I did it for the money,” he said. “The only time I ever did that.”

*

Meanwhile, at HBO there had been a changing of the guard. Michael Fuchs had been fired and Jeff Bewkes, previously the CFO and president, became CEO. With his ascendancy came that of his head of programming, an executive who would have as much influence over the Third Golden Age as any writer or producer: Chris Albrecht.

In the early 1990s, the comedy troupe the State performed a sketch on MTV called “Doug & Dad.” Michael Showalter played Doug, a teenager intent on rebellion despite being afflicted with a cool father. (Sample dialogue: “I’m Doug. And I’m not going to stop having sex in the parking lot behind the supermarket just ’cause you said that I can do it in my own bed!”) Similarly, the showrunners of the Third Golden Age ritually railed and fumed against the destructive influence of network “suits” in a way that suggested mere habit or a kind of Kabuki ritual, since they generally enjoyed the most simpatico talent-executive relationships in the history of the medium. Albrecht, himself as big a personality as the artists he empowered, would eventually prove to have serious problems and idiosyncrasies of his own. But he, along with his right-hand woman, Carolyn Strauss, set the template for the generation’s enlightened executives.

The Queens-born Albrecht had started as an aspiring comic. He quickly ended up employing them instead. In 1975, he became manager and eventually part owner of the Improv, New York’s premier comedy club, where he developed a reputation as a smart spotter of talent and a hard partyer with the likes of Robin Williams. Albrecht’s comedy pedigree, like that of Bernie Brillstein of Brillstein-Grey, seems important to his eventual role in the TV revolution. If there is any true, pure auteur art form, rising and falling entirely on the voice of one performer alone onstage, it’s stand-up. The value of those voices could not have been lost on anyone spending night

after night in a comedy club, nor could the recognition of how the new, genuine, and unexpected could affect a crowd.

“The way I learned it in the clubs,” said Albrecht, “was that the highest form of stand-up was someone who had a point of view. Having a point of view was a necessary element of original voices.”

In 1980, Albrecht became an agent at International Creative Management (ICM), representing Billy Crystal, Jim Carrey, Whoopi Goldberg, and Eddie Murphy, among others. In 1985, he joined HBO as the West Coast senior vice president for original programming.

At that time, HBO’s center of gravity was still very much its New York City headquarters—and it would remain so as long as Fuchs, a volcanic figure in his own right (*Esquire* once dubbed him “the most potent, feared and hated man in Hollywood”), was in power. “I think there was an ingrained suspicion from a lot of the New York folks to the people in L.A.: ‘Those *Hollywood* people,’” said Albrecht, who spent the first half of the 1990s developing projects that HBO produced for other outlets, Ray Romano’s sitcom *Everybody Loves Raymond* the most successful among them.

It was frustrating, too, to those in the network’s fledgling original series department, which Albrecht oversaw. “You were always struggling to make the case that this was the way to keep subscribers,” said Susie Fitzgerald, who worked there at the time. “In order to eke out money, we were saying, ‘We need continuing characters for the audience to fall in love with, so when they move or something, they don’t just disconnect.’”

Bewkes, who took over from Fuchs in 1995, was a different kind of manager, more willing to delegate and more committed to the idea that HBO’s future lay in original series. Crucially, satellite TV had been revolutionized by the introduction of light, easily mountable Ku-band receivers, which did away with the requirement for giant dishes seemingly more appropriate for searching the heavens for alien life. Through services like DirecTV and the Dish Network, this provided a new stream of revenue for Bewkes to play with. To the consternation of some in New York, the balance of power began to shift west toward Albrecht.

Strauss, too, had started at HBO in the mid-1980s, as a temp, and cut her teeth producing comedy specials. In style and temperament, she was Albrecht’s polar opposite: shy to the point of seeming aloof, concerned with the kinds of details in a script or pitch that Albrecht found boring, herself allergic to his brand of charismatic glad-handing. Yet the two were equally

sure of what they believed constituted the HBO brand.

“I’m not the kind of guy who’s going to sit down and write four pages of notes,” said Albrecht. “I’m going to say, ‘Big picture: Here’s what I thought.’ So Carolyn and I had skills that fit well together. The great thing is that we didn’t necessarily agree on everything, but we always saw the same thing. I never looked at a show and went, ‘That’s red,’ and have Carolyn go, ‘No, that’s orange.’”

Ironically, given the increasing power of the California office, the first two successful series of the Albrecht/Strauss regime were about as New York as it was possible to get. First came *Oz*. Set behind the walls of an open-floor prison and shot entirely indoors, the show had the feel of eighties downtown experimental theater, down to a dreadlocked, wheelchair-bound Nuyorican-style poet in fingerless gloves acting as chorus. The cast—stocked with actors who would populate later HBO shows—functioned like such a theater company, often decamping from the one-floor soundstage over the Chelsea Market on Manhattan’s West Side to La Nonna, a West Village restaurant of which showrunner Tom Fontana was part owner.

“Tom is from Buffalo, but he likes to think he grew up in Little Italy,” said Seth Gilliam, who played an unstable corrections officer for seventeen episodes of *Oz* and later Sergeant Ellis Carver on *The Wire*. “He curses profusely. More than anything, he likes to make fun of you and invite you to make fun of him.”

Fontana had a policy of helping out his cash-strapped cast members with drinks and food at the restaurant, sometimes to the consternation of his chef and partner. He also supported his actors’ outside theater ventures, but instead of going to see them, he would make donations to the theater company. It was, he said, “worth \$1,000 not to have to see a play.”

Oz ran for six seasons, well into the *The Sopranos* era, and it’s hard to imagine that *The Sopranos* could have existed without it. Aggressively artsy, filled with shocking violence, homoerotic sex, and a charismatic main character who happened also to be a gay, neo-Nazi psychopath, it expanded the definition of HBO’s brand in crucial ways.

It remained, though, to prove that original series could create widespread buzz—and increased subscribers. That task fell to Strauss and Albrecht’s next show, *Sex and the City*, which premiered June 6, 1998. For women (and plenty of men) across the country, the show, based on Candace Bushnell’s frank columns for the *New York Observer*, which had themselves been turned

into a book, was an aspirational fairy tale about friendship and glamour in New York. It might as well have been a tourism campaign for a post-Rudolph Giuliani, de-ethnicized Gotham awash in money. Its characters were types as familiar as those in *The Golden Girls*: the Slut, the Prude, the Career Woman, the Heroine. But they talked more explicitly, certainly about their bodies, but also about their desires and discontents outside the bedroom, than women on TV ever had before.

As it had been at MTM a generation prior, it was an exciting time to be at HBO. To be there was to feel suffused with a sense of mission, being outside the Hollywood mainstream (“in the ivory tower,” as Fitzgerald put it) and, increasingly, having an impact on it.

“We took our jobs seriously, but we didn’t take *ourselves* too seriously. We didn’t put a lot of pressure on ourselves, because we hadn’t had some measure of success to hold ourselves up against,” Albrecht said. “I say to Jeff, ‘Hey, here’s this thing. What do you think about this?’ He’d go, ‘Looks pretty good, can you make it?’”

Strauss said, “It was loose. It was fun. We were still very much in the shadows. The fear doesn’t creep in until you start winning Emmys.”

All of which is to say that landing at HBO no longer seemed completely insane when Lloyd Braun, a former lawyer turned manager and executive at Brillstein-Grey, caught up with David Chase at the company’s elevator bank and asked, “Have you ever thought about doing *The Godfather* for TV?”

Four

Should We Do This? Can We Do This?

Every great TV show tells its whole story in its pilot. Often in just one line. Think of *The Wire*, in which a young black man explains why his group of friends would repeatedly let a serial (now dead) thief named Snot Boogie enter their crap game. “You got to,” the boy said, in a line borrowed from a real-life Baltimore homicide detective’s tale. “It’s America, man.”

Or *Mad Men*, in which Don Draper and a potential conquest have this exchange:

Don: The reason you haven’t felt [love] is because it doesn’t exist. What you call “love” was invented by guys like me to sell nylons.... You’re born alone and you die alone, and this world just drops a bunch of rules on top of you to make you forget those facts. But I never forget. I’m living like there’s no tomorrow, because there isn’t one.

Rachel: I don’t think I realized it until this moment, but it must be hard being a man, too.

Or, shorter and sweeter, *Six Feet Under*: “No one escapes.”

Or *The Shield*, shorter and not at all sweet: “Good cop and bad cop left for the day. I’m a different kind of cop.”

A pilot is a strange beast. It must accomplish several things simultaneously. Foremost, of course, it must pack enough entertainment punch in its own right to convince, first, network executives that an entire season is worth making and, later, viewers that they should keep watching. At the same time, it must acquit itself of a hefty amount of scene-setting business—essentially calling a world into being—without becoming bogged down in exposition. (Given only a half hour to accomplish this, sitcom pilots

have notoriously erred on the side of too much “sit,” not enough “com.”)

The pilot for an ongoing serialized drama has yet another imperative. Through some combination of deliberate craft and something less easily defined, it must imply a future often not yet imagined even by its creators. Almost alone among the narrative arts, these shows are composed with no ending—indeed, with the hope that it will stay that way indefinitely. And, of course, there is no ability on the part of the author to go back and adjust once the story begins rolling. It is a unique and uniquely terrifying trapeze act, in which the creator goes swinging out into a narrative abyss, with the conviction that the story will continue to come. The leap of faith continues throughout the process; often, once a season gets rolling and the writers’ room, inevitably, falls behind, scripts are written, shot, and broadcast before the events of two or three episodes hence are even set in stone. Again, the serialized novel is the closest analogue, and Dickens didn’t have an army of bloggers and recappers waiting to pounce when a character suddenly disappeared or changed names midstory.

Nor did he face the added task of investing an executive with enough faith to spend millions of shareholder dollars, employ hundreds of people, put his or her reputation on the line, and essentially open a corporate division based on an hour of story.

For all these reasons, a good pilot must engage in what’s known in network jargon as “universe building.” “You have to lay in enough DNA,” said James Manos Jr., a *Sopranos* veteran who went on to write the pilot for *Dexter*. “You have to give it legs so you can say, ‘Wow, I can see where that character may go over the next five years. I understand what that wink means, what that one line means.’ You’re not figuring out what’s going to happen in episode 309, but you’re putting enough in the Petri dish so that character can *be* there in 309.”

By the same measure, every pilot that doesn’t either get made or get carried to series—which is to say, the vast, vast majority of them—is like a universe blinking out, along with its entire potential future. Occasionally, that world can miraculously spring back to life, at a different network or after a shift in regime. But in a business ruled by fear of risk and the eagerness to find easy reasons to say “no”—not to mention the mortal terror of seeing something you passed on succeed elsewhere—dead universes tend to stay dead.

For a writer with a good reputation and a handful of awards—as David

Chase was by the 1990s—writing failed pilots is a viable career path, even an upwardly mobile one. But even to someone who purports to disdain TV and shrinks from success in it, all those dead and discarded universes start to weigh on the mind. Since *Almost Grown* and his stints with Brand and Falsey, Chase had moved from one lucrative development deal to the next, without getting his own show on the air.

“He’d come into my office, very pale, sit on my couch, and say, ‘I’ve got nothing,’” said Susie Fitzgerald, then in development at Brillstein-Grey, where Chase had signed a two-year deal in 1995. “I’d say, ‘Well, come on! Let’s talk about some ideas.’”

One abortive effort from those years was an idea about a Miami Mob wife, to be played by Marg Helgenberger, who enters the witness protection program and moves back to New Jersey. It featured a character named Big Pussy—a fact that could scarcely have helped its chances at CBS.

Another potential gig was unintentionally funny: ABC briefly considered handing Chase the reins of the sitcom *The Wonder Years*, hoping to add a little edge to the show’s gauzy nostalgic glow as its main character, Kevin, matured into high school age. In what must surely be considered one of the great lost scripts of history (or a *Saturday Night Live* sketch), Chase brought his usual sensibility to a trial run, having Kevin discover *The Catcher in the Rye* and start smoking cigarettes, drinking coffee, and conversing with the shade of Holden Caulfield. The powers that be quickly decided that perhaps they didn’t need quite so much edge.

All of this, said Kevin Reilly, then of Brillstein-Grey, had the effect of hardening, rather than softening, Chase’s resistance to outside interference. “You could say to him, ‘I love everything you’ve done here. But you know how the character, at the end, lets the bad guy get away? And he’s really depressed? Can we just get the sense that he’s going to continue tirelessly, that he’s not going to give up? Even if the bad guy gets away?’ And David would say, ‘No. I just can’t see it that way.’ And sometimes you’d say, ‘Can we just move this comma over here?’ And he’d say, ‘I thought about it and I just can’t do it.’”

Rejections, like punches, eventually start to hurt whether you respect the person giving them or not. “Some creative people are very volatile: up today, down tomorrow. David was down today, *more* down tomorrow,” Reilly said. “After CBS passed on that Helgenberger thing, he called me at home probably every Sunday. He wanted to know why. ‘But why? Why? Why?’ I

was like, ‘David, I don’t know. It was a year ago. Let it go.’”

“I had done five, six, seven of these things and I started to think, ‘What the fuck?’” Chase said. “They always raved about the writing, but, ‘It’s too dark.’ ‘Oh, it’s too complicated.’ Every time, I’d think, ‘Thank God I don’t have to do that fucking series.’ But after a while, you get ... dejected.”

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Driving home after that brief meeting with Lloyd Braun at the Brillstein-Grey elevators in 1995, Chase quickly dismissed the notion of a TV *The Godfather*. But an idea began turning over in his head. The world of the Mafia certainly interested him; as a child, he had watched countless late-night movie re-airings of such James Cagney movies as *The Public Enemy* and *Angels with Dirty Faces*. Later, he’d been fascinated by the New Jersey *cafoni* from which his family had worked so hard to distinguish itself. New Jersey itself—its layers of trash and aspiration, its voices—had always acted as a kind of muse for Chase, even when he was writing about, say, the lost girl of *Off the Minnesota Strip*. “I could never really get the fucking thing until I imagined her back in Caldwell, New Jersey,” he said. “Then I felt more secure.”

Francis Ford Coppola and Martin Scorsese, his heroes of America’s New Cinema, had long since claimed the gritty world of organized crime as a subject worthy of high art. “The pantheon,” as Chase described *The Godfather*, *Mean Streets*, *GoodFellas*, and others, had posited the Mob as the quintessential American story, a way to talk about both the aspirations and the rot at the nation’s core.

Meanwhile, a legion of colleagues and friends had by now been treated to his mordant, hilarious stories about growing up with Norma. He’d been exploring the same material on and off with a series of therapists since his mid-thirties, when a family trip to Rome finally made him seek help. Alone for the day, he had been sitting in a café on the Piazza della Rotonda, across from the Pantheon, drinking a glass of champagne.

“I found myself thinking, ‘What is it with this city? It’s just thousands of years of death. The center of Western civilization and there’s this feeling of death, violence, decay.’ It just made me feel horrible. Then I thought to myself, ‘Here you are, you have a healthy child, you have a happy marriage, you’re sitting in front of the Pantheon, holding a glass of fucking champagne,

and you're thinking this way. You need help.'" Recently, he had worked with a talented, patient female analyst named Lorraine Kauffman, who became the model for Jennifer Melfi.

Perhaps most important, Norma had died in 1992, freeing her son to tell his stories to a wider audience. As he drove west from Brillstein-Grey's Beverly Hills office toward home in Santa Monica, he recalled a conversation he had had with Robin Green, in which she'd encouraged him to write about his mother. He had gone home and jotted a short note in a computer file he called "Themes File": "Mafia Mother and Son—The father dies. Junior is in charge. His only rival is his mom. The old victim becomes the ballbuster/killer she always was. She must kill him or vice versa. (Or maybe he should put her in a nursing home.)"

At the time, he had imagined the project as a comedy. But now, turning it over in his head, he began to see deeper possibilities.

"Really early on, David started talking thematically, about America," said Kevin Reilly. "I remember a very early conversation in which he said, 'Look at what's going on in this country. This used to be a place where people would join a company and they knew the company would take care of them forever. Now, nobody's taken care of. And marriage is the same thing: You go to work and everybody's selling you out and you get home and your wife's busting your balls.'"

Thus the line in *The Sopranos* pilot that foretold so much staring into the cultural and spiritual void that was to come: "Lately I'm getting the feeling that I came in at the end. The best is over."

If the pilot was a culmination of David Chase's career and life experience, it started out acting just like a regular, doomed pilot. Chase and his agents went first with a pitch to CBS. President and chief executive Leslie Moonves, perhaps vying for the Executive Cliché of the Year Award, said he loved the idea but asked whether Tommy Soprano, as he was then known, had to be in therapy.

Next up was Fox, then still enjoying the role of insurgent network based on the strength of unconventional programs such as *The Simpsons* and *Married ... with Children*. Bob Greenblatt, who then headed prime-time programming at the network, bought Chase's pitch in the rooms, making a \$300,000 commitment for a pilot script. Chase was excited but characteristically pessimistic.

"As I started to write, I began to think, 'How is this going to work?' You

know, with the language: ‘Fuck this’ and ‘Fucking that.’ I thought it was probably going to be a case of diverging expectations, that both me and the network were going to wind up hugely disappointed,” he said.

“Strangely, I’d say the challenges of the show working on broadcast TV had more to do with narrative than with language,” said Reilly. “Granted, you wouldn’t have had as authentic an experience if you couldn’t say ‘Fuck you.’ But the real problem was the story.” As in the eventual pilot for HBO, this involved Tony’s friend Artie Bucco, who is worried about the fate of his restaurant, Vesuvio. In impeccable Mob logic, Tony’s solution is to blow the place up. “What he doesn’t realize is that he’s ruining his friend’s dream. And at the end, he’s sort of adrift,” said Reilly. “That’s not a network story.”

Neither man was wrong. After many weeks of silence, word came that Fox would pass. Years later, at the height of his success, Chase delighted bitterly in naming the executive who had neglected to call and deliver the news; he would relate a chance meeting at a Television Critics Association event at which the poor fellow (who surely suffered more than his share of sleepless nights) came up to him to say, “Well, it all worked out for the best!”

The pilot now made the rounds—to NBC, to ABC, back to CBS. Everywhere, the answer was no. The universe of Dr. Melfi and Paulie Walnuts and Vesuvio and the Bada Bing! seemed destined to vanish in the usual atrophic way. Tired and dispirited, with his contract at Brillstein-Grey a few days from its expiration, Chase was preparing to sign yet another development deal, at Fox, that would include running *Millennium*, a spin-off of Chris Carter’s *The X-Files*. That’s when Braun called. “Listen,” he said. “We sent the script over to HBO. There’ve been some changes over there and they may have some needs in this department.”

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The Sopranos couldn’t have arrived at HBO at a more propitious time, but Albrecht and team weren’t completely immune to the same worries that afflicted the networks. “Could we have a show with a criminal as a protagonist? It seems like a quaint little argument now, but at the time it was huge,” said Carolyn Strauss. “I remember sitting in a room with Jeff [Bewkes] and Chris and hashing through it: ‘Should we do this? We should do this! *Can* we do this?’”

Another sticking point was Chase’s desire to direct the pilot. Albrecht was

set against the idea. Chase had directed the *Almost Grown* pilot, two episodes of *I'll Fly Away*, and a *Rockford Files* TV movie, but he was hardly an experienced hand. Plus, on principle, Albrecht was hesitant to give one person so much control. Brad Grey called and asked that the HBO chief meet with Chase to hear him out: "That way, you'll say no but he'll at least feel like he got heard." Chase came in and put on a virtuoso performance.

"He talked about his vision: about how New Jersey was a character, the tone of it all. He was able to talk about it as a visual execution, not just a written execution," Albrecht said. "By the time he was finished talking, I thought, 'Wow. I might find somebody who's a "better director" than David, but I'll never find somebody who's a better director of *this*.'"

On the same day that Chase was required to make a final decision on his Fox deal by two p.m., he was summoned to a meeting at HBO at noon. Albrecht gave him the green light. And the search for the Man Who Would Be Tony began.

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Chase's first, quixotic choice was a non-actor: As a good New Jerseyan, he of course knew Steven Van Zandt from Van Zandt's long-standing role as guitarist in Bruce Springsteen's E Street Band. Early in the band's career, in addition to what would become his trademark head scarves, the musician would occasionally wear a porkpie hat that Chase always thought made him look like an old-fashioned mobster. "He looked like a Jersey guy," he said.

"We had that gangster kind of Jersey thing going on," Van Zandt agreed. "Like the Rat Pack translated through some bizarre rock 'n' roll prism. Bruce was like Sinatra. I was like the fun Dean Martin character. And Clarence was Sammy Davis on steroids."

In 1996, Van Zandt had long since left the gang. He'd mostly stopped touring with Springsteen and given up his own solo career. In fact, he had given up almost everything beyond walking his dog around the West Village, where he lived, and passing his days in a state of nonproductive, though not entirely unpleasant, lassitude. "I did nothing. I literally walked my dog for seven years. I did not work. I just was sort of meditating and reflecting on my crazy world and my life and how I got to the point where I'd gotten to," he said.

One obsession did remain: advocating for the inclusion of the blue-eyed

soul band the Rascals, pride of Garfield, New Jersey, in the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame. When that effort finally succeeded, Van Zandt was tapped to make the induction speech. And so it was that Chase, in bed one night and flipping through channels, suddenly saw that gangster face pop up on his TV screen.

It quickly became apparent that it was not the face of Tony Soprano. HBO was not prepared to bank its evolution on a musician with zero acting experience, no matter what he looked like in what kind of hat. The most serious candidate early in the process was Michael Rispoli, who would eventually take the smaller role of Jackie Aprile. As a consolation, Chase asked Van Zandt if he wanted to play any other role. Despite a nagging conscience about taking a job from a real actor, Van Zandt mentioned a treatment he'd once written for a film about a onetime hit man turned club owner. The main character's name was Silvio Dante.

But before the birth of *The Sopranos*' Silvio—he of the immaculate pompadour and chartreuse suits—Van Zandt did fly out to Los Angeles to do a screen test for Tony, alongside Rispoli and one other candidate. Leaving his audition, he passed this third actor in the waiting room and recognized him as a character actor he'd seen in the films *True Romance* and *Get Shorty*. “I didn't know his name, but I thought, ‘That guy's great. He's got a kind of greatness about him. *He's* the one who should get the part,’” he said.

James Gandolfini was another Jersey boy, an alumnus of Park Ridge High School and Rutgers University. He had as little experience playing leading men as Van Zandt did. And he was far more unknown. Large, balding, and older looking than his thirty-five years, he was nobody's idea of a conventional movie star—though many women would come to find him startlingly sexy (not, in most cases, without some degree of internal conflict). What he brought with him was an almost instantaneous facility for inhabiting and deepening the role of Tony. His charisma, his petulance, his capacity for violence, his vulnerability—all of it bubbled and seethed beneath the surface as Gandolfini read at the audition.

“I felt this gut thing, that it was him, but David took some convincing. He loved Stevie Van Zandt,” said Fitzgerald, who became Gandolfini's fiercest advocate. Gandolfini met with Chase in Los Angeles for three hours one Friday, and Fitzgerald called excitedly Saturday morning. “Is it him?” she asked breathlessly. “He said, ‘I don't know....’ ‘No, seriously, is it him?’ ‘He's a pain in the ass on set.’ ‘I don't care about that,’” said Fitzgerald. “‘Is

it him?””

Chase came around, but he now faced Albrecht's worries about such an unusual leading man. "Rispoli had done a fantastic job, and his was a much more accessible Tony," Albrecht said. "David said, 'Look, in the real world it would be Jimmy.' And it was like, 'Yeah, you're right.' It wasn't a long conversation." (Gandolfini, for his part, understood the reservations: "This was an incredible leap of faith. I mean, it wasn't four pretty women in Manhattan [as in *Sex and the City*]. This was a bunch of fat guys from Jersey.")

The rest of the cast fell eclectically into place. With an unknown in the lead, Lorraine Bracco, as Tony's therapist, Jennifer Melfi, was the closest thing to a star; she and others would often say later that she had originally been called to play Carmela Soprano, but that casting was never likely, if only because it would have too closely aped her role in *GoodFellas*. From that movie, too, came an intense downtown New York theater actor and screenwriter, Michael Imperioli, to play Christopher Moltisanti. "He was already in the pantheon," Chase explained. John Ventimiglia read for nearly every male role in the script before landing the part of Artie Bucco.

For Paulie "Walnuts" Gualtieri, the team uncovered a rare and rough gem: Tony Sirico had played mobsters previously, notably for Woody Allen and James Toback, and he lent the cast a frisson of mobster street cred, having served time himself for some long-ago offense. As Paulie, his performance bordered on the savant; it was difficult to tell where the actor ended and the character began. As his germaphobic, immaculately dressed character might have done, Sirico insisted on preparing his own hair each day, often rising at three a.m. at his home in Bay Ridge, Brooklyn, to coif before reporting for an early shoot. Wherever he went, a fog of Drakkar Noir cologne followed, lingering for days in the clothing of female staffers whom he never missed an opportunity to embrace.

The most difficult role to fill proved to be Carmela. Days before shooting was scheduled to start, the part remained empty. Here, *Oz*, which would provide a pool of talent for many future shows of the Third Golden Age, made its first contribution. Edie Falco had spent three seasons playing single mother and prison guard Diane Whittlesey on that show, about as far from a suburban Mob housewife as it's possible to get. Nevertheless, she said, "Maybe it's because I'm part Italian, or grew up on Long Island, but I read the part and thought, 'I know exactly who this woman is. I can feel her

already.” After watching Falco reading two scenes—one in which Carmela tells Tony he’s going to hell as he enters an MRI machine and one in which Tony admits he’s started taking Prozac—the producers agreed, and Diane Whittlesey was sent on permanent “vacation.”

The Sopranos pilot filmed in New Jersey over two weeks in the summer of 1997. Within days, Chase received powerful confirmation that casting Gandolfini had been the right move. He was directing a scene in which Christopher is complaining to Tony about not receiving enough credit for a job. As written, Tony gives him a quick slap, but instead, “Jim fucking went *nuts*—picked him up and grabbed him by the neck and just about throttled him.” Chase had to catch his breath. “I thought, ‘Wow. Right! That’s exactly right!’” Already, the strange alchemical process by which a character who has resided inside one person’s head comes to life outside it had begun. Tony would never again be Chase’s alone.

Chase returned to California for postproduction, and cast and crew dispersed. Before leaving, Falco remembered, Chase told them, “You’ve been great. It’s been lots of fun. Unfortunately, nobody is ever going to watch this.”

Secretly, as it had upon completing *Almost Grown*, a part of Chase hoped the pilot would fail. If HBO declined to bring the show to series, he reasoned, the network might be willing to cut their losses by giving him an additional \$750,000 to finish the story as a feature film. Even in the midst of filming, he would ask producer Ilene Landress if she thought HBO would prefer to release it that way. “Actually, no,” Landress told him. “They’re a *television network*. They’re in the business of putting things on TV.”

The finished pilot was submitted to HBO at the end of October. The Brillstein-Grey team arranged a screening for Albrecht. “The lights came up, and Chris, I’m not exaggerating, just sat there, with his head in his hands, rubbing his eyes. It felt like an eternity,” said Reilly. “I think that on some level he was just trying to get his bearings. Just trying to screw his courage to the sticking place to say, ‘Okay. I guess we’re doing this kind of thing now.’”

Finally, Albrecht lifted his head and said, slowly, “It’s really good.”

Still, HBO, which had until December 20 to deliver a verdict, stalled on giving the official green light. One month passed. Chase was proud enough of the finished product to pay for his own screening for friends and family, catered with pasta and sausage and peppers. The response from those who’d spent their lives in TV was at once overwhelmingly positive and reflexively

pessimistic.

“I just remember feeling, ‘I cannot believe I’m looking at this. This is the greatest thing I’ve ever seen. If it fails, it won’t be the fault of the project,’” said Barbara Hall, Chase’s friend and former colleague on *I’ll Fly Away*.

“It was the first time I thought, ‘Okay. Really good shit doesn’t get picked up,’” said Mitchell Burgess.

Three more weeks ticked by. HBO was silent. Chase fretted. “David,” recalled Fitzgerald, deadpan, “is not a good waiter.”

Finally, on the next to last day, the call came. Chase’s feelings were mixed, as usual. “I thought, ‘Here we go. It’s going to be a tremendous amount of work.’” At the same time, he had the conviction of a condemned man given one more chance: “I didn’t give a fuck about failing. I had nothing to lose. Once I had the go-ahead, I thought, ‘You know what? We’re just going to go for it.’”

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Chase knew the main arc of the first season, where it began and where it ended, from Tony’s initial panic attacks to his dawning realization that his mother tried to have him killed. That story would have constituted the feature he’d once dreamed of making. Now, though, he had to figure out how to get from point A to point B while filling twelve additional hours of television. That meant bringing in other writers.

No other art form—certainly none that putatively bears the imprint of an auteur—is created as collaboratively as the television drama. True, the Fellinis and Altmans of the world relied on the talent and creativity of dozens of other artists—from actors to lighting designers to hairdressers. What they didn’t do was sit down in a room filled with other directors and solicit their input. Yet the very same essential truth about television that elevates the writer to Master of the Universe—the medium’s voracious appetite for ever more content, ever more quickly—guarantees that he or she cannot do it alone.

Each showrunner must bend and shape this necessity to serve his or her own method, and there are as many subtle variations of writers’ rooms as there are rooms themselves. The only near-absolute is that there will be a quantity and flow of food reminiscent of a cruise ship, as though writing were an athletic feat demanding a constant infusion of calories. (Or, to be cynical,

as though writers are so craven and easily manipulated that mere food will keep them loyal and docile. To which it can only be noted that every writer brags about the food in the writers' room. Every single one of them.)

In most rooms, there is a conference table around which the writers gather. In the center will be a pile of snacks and takeout menus, as well as pads, pens, and other implements of creativity. Along the walls, there will be spaces to organize and visualize ideas—usually either whiteboards or bulletin boards covered with index cards. Depending on where in the process the room is, one might contain random ideas, bits of dialogue, stray themes. Another may have the evolving outline of a particular episode, a vertical stack of numbered scenes, or “beats.” Along the longest wall, there will likely be a grid divided into twelve or thirteen vertical columns, representing the number of episodes. Running horizontally will be the names of characters and what happens to them in each episode, thus allowing the writers to see each story arc at a single glance. If there's a signature tool of the Third Golden Age, the whiteboard is it.

In one seat around the table, there will be a younger person, the writers' assistant, feverishly transcribing the proceedings into a laptop. He or she will be the only one apparently engaged in what most of the world identifies as “work.” Indeed, a functional writers' room must embrace, at least in its early stages, the creative ferment of procrastination, as its members get to know one another, trade stories, and mull over the themes and narrative threads of the show at hand. Most successful showrunners encourage such bullshit sessions. Eventually, the business of the room will turn to actually “breaking” story—that is, creating an outline of specific beats. As the show progresses, the writer assigned to a specific episode will take these often incredibly specific outlines and disappear for a week or two, to write. Later still, there will be rotating absences as writer-producers supervise the shooting of their scripts on set or location.

The ultimate goal, even if it's unstated, is something that goes well beyond some version of screenwriting by committee: a kind of creative communion. Said David Milch, “The best situation of all is to come clean in the writers' room and discover, through your encounter with your fellow writers, the nature and rhythms of the story that you're trying to tell.”

But between reality and that lofty goal lie any number of quotidian pitfalls: writers who talk too much, writers who don't talk at all, yes-men, naysayers, egos run amok. In other words, precisely as complicated and

intense a set of conditions as one might imagine results from taking a group of artists—each the smartest and funniest in his or her class, each having gotten into the business with the dream of producing his or her own work, most neurotic to one degree or another, and all feeling the pressure of competition—and putting them in a room together for eight hours a day, mostly to face rejection and all in service of another person’s vision.

“That’s the job. You’re there to serve the Creator,” said James Manos, who also wrote for Shawn Ryan’s *The Shield*. “It’s a difficult position because someone like David or Shawn hires you because you have your own, strong voice and then, as soon as you get there, you have to start writing in *their* voice.”

Matthew Weiner admitted to being driven crazy by the idea that nobody outside the inner circle of *The Sopranos* would ever know the good writing he did while on the show. But, he said, “I could never live not expressing the fact that I was working *for* David, in David’s brain, with David’s characters, trying to please David, not operating a Matt Weiner franchise of the *Sopranos* show.”

The best analogy might be a draftsman charged with designing one small element—a sconce, say—of an architect’s grand cathedral. He may find satisfying ways to express himself, might even get some career-advancing recognition from hard-core sconce aficionados, but ultimately it’s all about illuminating the Master’s work. That gives the showrunner, who of course knows his own vision better than anybody, immense powers of rejection and benediction. The ultimate dream is to find writers who bring something absolutely new into the universe he’s created, who give him exactly what he wants but could never have dreamed of himself. “That’s when you get this stupid look on your face,” Milch said.

Or as Weiner put it, “It’s like falling in love.”

It should come as no surprise, then, that writers’ rooms are somewhat intense workplaces. (It hardly seems accidental that “the room” is a term also used in analysis and in Alcoholics Anonymous.) They are hotbeds of emotional turmoil and transference.

“I’ve never been in a writers’ room where the writers didn’t end up psychologically picking apart the showrunner, down to the finest grain,” said Chris Provenzano, a writer for *Mad Men* and other shows. “Writers are already interested in motivations and psyches. They’ve all been in therapy. They’re all messed up and trying to fill some hole. So when the showrunner

invariably does something that doesn't square or that they don't like, they start saying, 'He must be at war with his ex-wife. It's got to be something like that.' You become involved in this slow but inexorable dismantling of the person's psyche because that's the brain in charge of all the other brains and you're the appendages of this superorganism."

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David Chase, devotee of the film auteurs, had predictably complicated feelings about writers' rooms. Early in his career, he had worked at *The Rockford Files* with a staff of just three who would get together and brainstorm stories, letting a tape recorder capture sudden inspiration. Later, grappling with the more complex storytelling of *Almost Grown* and *Northern Exposure*, he'd headed larger rooms. And he'd come to terms with their necessity for generating stories.

"Story construction is the hardest part of the process. It's very difficult not to do things that everybody in America has already seen a thousand times. So, you go in there and you say, 'What do we want to make happen?'"

That, he said, is the fun part, along with the gossip, the eating, the discussing current events, the bullshitting. It's when it came time for what he called the "professional" part of the job that he was more dubious.

"Other people have good ideas. And they're hard to come by. But in another sense, they're a dime a dozen," he said. "Turning an idea into an *episode*—that's the grunt work. The organization can rest for a day or so, secure in the notion that we've got an idea. But eventually the showrunner's the one who has to look at his watch and say, 'How do we fill up forty-two minutes?' We can all sit around and decide we want to make a Louis XIV table, but eventually somebody has to do the carving."

What happens next, he says, is a private epiphany, experienced in public.

Invariably what would happen is I would get up, go off by myself, and they would continue talking. There was a couch and I would lie on that couch and just put my story hat on. And this is not a natural thing for me. I don't like math. I don't like puzzles. At all. Story work to me is that: it's figuring out this puzzle. But I would go on that couch by myself and they'd all be talking. And then I would just sort of like suddenly—this idea, that idea—all of a sudden you get a run. It's like

music. I'd see where the peaks and valleys are: "This goes like this, like that, like *this*." And I would get up and go to the board and *bam bam bam*. "And then and then and then." It's very impressionistic. You're running really fast. Sometimes, *boom*: It's done. You have fourteen scenes. I don't know how it works, but it would happen.

To what extent such breakthroughs are facilitated by being surrounded by other writers, or happen in spite of them, appears to be an open mystery even to Chase himself.

"My experience is that the showrunner really has to just do it," he said.

Yet if he had all the time in the world to write every word of every episode of a series? "I would hire a staff. I'd get lonely."

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Chase began building *The Sopranos* writers' room by looking to old colleagues. Robin Green and Mitchell Burgess had met at the University of Iowa. Green, who had written for *Rolling Stone* in its San Francisco salad days, was at the Writers' Workshop; Burgess, a tall, deep-voiced native Iowan, had just come out of a stint in the army and was a student in her undergraduate writing class. Eventually, Green landed at Brand and Falsey's *A Year in the Life* and then worked for Chase on *Almost Grown*.

The two bonded over their equally problematic mothers. "We would laugh so hard, we'd cry," Green said. Chase was intrigued by Green's single (albeit tenuous) connection to the world of organized crime: as a teenager growing up in Providence, Rhode Island, she'd double-dated with a son of crime boss Raymond Patriarca.

After *Almost Grown*, both writers returned to the Brand-Falsey camp: Chase to *I'll Fly Away* and Green to *Northern Exposure*. Burgess joined Green as a writing partner, and the two would go on to write nearly a quarter of the show's 110 episodes, including many during Chase's two-year tenure.

David and Denise Chase were creatures of gustatory habit, claiming a restaurant they liked and then returning over and over. In Santa Monica, their spot was an Italian restaurant called Drago, where they often anchored dinner parties. Green and Burgess remained regular attendees after *Northern Exposure* ended, and they followed the progress of *The Sopranos* pilot, which Chase had given them to read when it was still at Fox. If this thing goes, he

asked them, will you come write for me? The answer was an enthusiastic yes. In the meantime, they suffered through staff positions in the writers' room of *Party of Five*, which is where they were just a few days before Christmas, breaking yet another story of teen drama, when an assistant came in to say they were wanted on the phone: a Mr. Tommy Soprano was calling.

The Sopranos' writers began meeting in a rented portion of Oliver Stone's production offices in Santa Monica. Chase assembled packages of material on Mob life for his writers to read. Dan Castleman, a Manhattan assistant district attorney who would remain with the show as a consultant throughout its run, came in to talk about his organized crime prosecutions. Another visitor was a former made man, now in the witness protection program, who showed off scars from long-ago bullet wounds and shared his expertise on such matters as how best to break a person's arm and the Mafia's relative views on penetrating stewardesses with broomsticks (pro) and performing cunnilingus (con).

Also in the room was Manos, a chain-smoking semi-agoraphobe who had helped pen an HBO movie called *The Positively True Adventures of the Alleged Texas Cheerleader-Murdering Mom*; two young writers, Mark Saraceni and Jason Cahill; and a colorful chatterbox named Frank Renzulli, the closest thing to an actual wiseguy that *The Sopranos* writing team ever had.

Renzulli, a big man with a Brillo goatee, was the son of first-generation immigrants from Sicily and Naples. He had grown up in the Maverick housing projects on Boston's East Side, in underworld terms a stronghold of the Patriarca crime family. Renzulli's parents were not themselves connected, but their feelings spanned the range of Italian American response to the Mafia. His father looked down on mobsters, though Renzulli suspected that, ironically, his paternal grandfather had migrated to upstate New York during Prohibition for reasons connected to bootlegging. His mother, meanwhile, had grown up in the neighborhood. "One of the wiseguys once told me, 'Thank God your mother wasn't born a man. We'd all be in trouble,'" Renzulli said. "She would have been the happiest woman in the world if I'd become a wiseguy."

She half got her wish. By the time he was nine years old, Renzulli had started hanging out around the local social club. He would run errands for the older guys with shiny Cadillacs and thick bankrolls and entertain them with his precocious antics.

“You’re a poor kid in the inner city, and life looks hopeless. People are telling you it’s hopeless. Then you see a guy pull up in a fucking Mercedes. Fucking air-conditioned, smelling good, looking good. And he’s got his own little social club. They got air-conditioning in there. They got food in there, all this stuff. And one of them says, ‘C’mere, you little prick. What’s your name? Do me a favor, go to this store, get me this, this, and this.’ And then it builds from there.”

If that induction sounds as though it could have been ripped from a screenplay, it’s worth remembering one of *The Sopranos*’ more trenchant insights: that Mob life and pop culture’s portrayal of it have been locked in such a long cycle of reference, echo, and imitation that it’s often hard to tell which came first.

By his teens, Renzulli had become a fine pool player, an astute observer of Mob mores, and a peripheral, though increasingly involved, participant in the world of petty crime and occasional violence. By his early twenties, he began to think it was time to get out.

“I had an epiphany one night: Everything was either feast or famine. One night I’d have a couple thousand dollars in my pocket, the next I’m looking to borrow money for cigarettes.” Going straight wouldn’t be easy, especially given the disdain he’d developed for the straight world. “I needed to exorcise those demons that said, ‘You’re a sucker if you work a legitimate job.’ I was always at risk of losing my regular job the minute somebody told me what to do. I was always at risk of saying, ‘Go fuck yourself.’”

He headed for New York, to study acting and playwriting. For two years, he worked odd carpentry jobs and lived in the Sixty-third Street YMCA. Eventually, he found work as a doorman in a Hell’s Kitchen building filled with the same breed of wiseguys he’d left behind. By now, though, the call of show business was stronger than that of criminality. He landed his first speaking role in Woody Allen’s *Broadway Danny Rose*.

In 1987, he went west to Los Angeles in search of more parts. After a few years, he turned to writing. “There’s only so many goombahs you can play,” he said. By the time he came to Chase’s attention, he’d co-created a short-lived show called *The Great Defender*, which starred Michael Rispoli as a blue-collar lawyer; developed one failed pilot set in East Boston that featured future *Shield* star Michael Chiklis; and worked on another with David E. Kelley, for whom he also played a recurring role as a pimp on *The Practice*.

Chase met with him at a coffee shop in Santa Monica, and both men left

wary. “I’d read the pilot, and I couldn’t figure out what the point of view was. I mean, Why is he writing this?” Renzulli remembered. He had the feeling Chase didn’t like him. “I irritated him,” he said. “I think he called David Kelley to ask if I always talked so much.”

Chase, for his part, reported back to Green and Burgess: “This guy’s got the real marinara,” meaning Mob knowledge, “but he’s crazy as hell.”

Still, the two saw eye to eye on at least one important matter, one that would secure Renzulli’s participation in building the *Sopranos* universe. “Every wiseguy I saw played on TV made me want to scream,” Renzulli said. “He [David] told me, ‘It’s not bad acting, it’s bad *writing*. Those shows are written poorly. We’re not going to do that.’”

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The first several episodes came together in the office in Santa Monica. Green would write each beat on an index card and tape them together in long strips. After four episodes were written, the crew—minus Renzulli, who, with three children and another on the way, remained in California—packed up to move to New York and begin production. Chase left no question about his ambition. “David was after big fish,” Burgess said. “He wanted this to be as good as *The Godfather*. As good as *GoodFellas*.” Over dinner at a Japanese restaurant, Chase told Burgess and Green, “This is it for me. If this doesn’t work, I’m out of the business.”

Meanwhile, back in New Jersey, producers and location scouts had been fanning out across the Garden State, looking for the building blocks of *The Sopranos*’ physical universe. The North Caldwell house that had been the family’s home in the pilot was reconstructed at Silvercup Studios (it would become ever more expensive to get permission to shoot the handful of necessary exterior scenes at the real house each season). The Bada Bing! remained a strip club called Satin Dolls in Lodi. An empty storefront in a Scottish Irish neighborhood in Kearny became the semipermanent site of the fictional Satriale’s Pork Store, as well as production storage.

Because HBO had no real prime-time schedule and nobody was waiting on the show’s debut, Chase and team had the luxury of filming, editing, and finalizing all thirteen episodes long before a single one aired. At the conclusion of shooting, in November, Chase was his usual self. “Jim, Edie, all of us were like, ‘This was fun. It was an interesting challenge. We enjoyed

ourselves.’ Which of course meant that we weren’t going to be able to continue, because TV is never about enjoying yourself.”

As the January premiere approached, there were positive rumblings from critics and a handful of private screenings, but nobody knew what to expect. “We were really living in a bubble: It was a pilot that had been passed on. Cast with unknowns and shooting in New Jersey. For HBO. Who was paying attention?” Fitzgerald said.

On January 10, while a snowstorm rolled up the East Coast, *The Sopranos* made its debut.

And then, as one cast member would later put it, “all hell broke loose.”