

D A N E S E
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SCENES FROM THE
LIFE OF ROZ CHAST

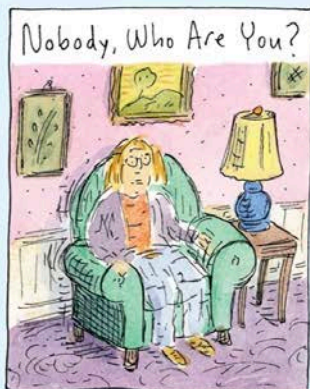
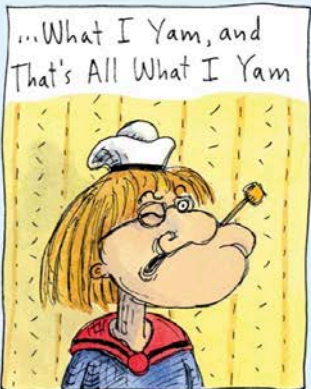
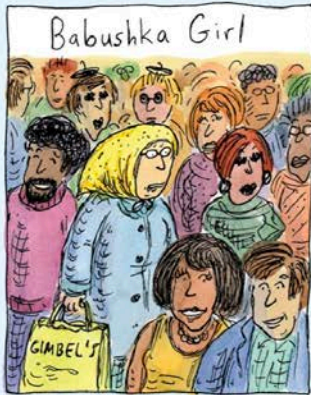
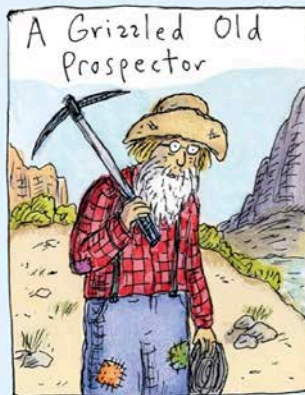
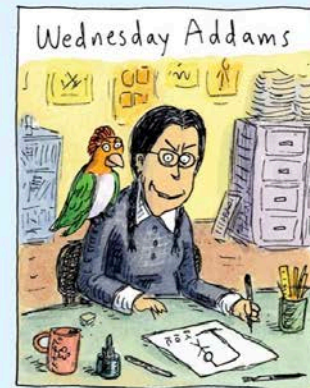
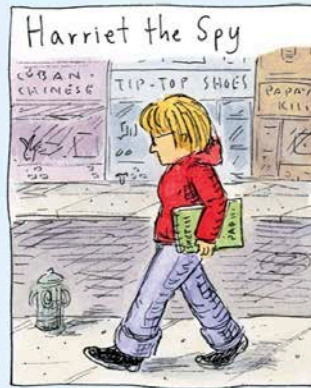
In the past four decades, the cartoonist has created a universe of spidery lines and nervous spaces, turning anxious truth-telling into an authoritative art.

By Adam Gopnik
December 23, 2019

Certain comic artists carry an aura that makes everything around them look like their work. In the company of Saul Steinberg, a simple Italian restaurant on Sullivan Street could feel as gravely melancholy and precisely ordered as one of his drawings, while a day spent with Bruce McCall has a hallucinatory atmosphere in which everything in Manhattan seems to have been transplanted from a midsize Canadian city in the nineteen-fifties—to the point that he seems able to find parking spaces at will, as if carrying them in his Torontonion pocket. So when the cartoonist and graphic storyteller Roz Chast invites a friend to dinner near her West Side pied-à-terre, where she escapes from her staid, greener Connecticut life, the Turkish restaurant she chooses inevitably turns out to be the most purely Chastian locale in New York: even on a Friday night, the tables seem filled with disconsolate, anxious outsiders, and the waiters wear shirts blazoned with the restaurant's name. ("Why would we need to know its name?" she wonders. "We're already inside.") One would not be surprised to see a melancholy, off-kilter fez on the manager. The distinctive Chast-mosphere—of wistfully rundown circumstances with an undertow of Dada-inflected absurdity—pervades the room. "This place always makes me *nervous*," she says in greeting, and one understands at once that, in her vocabulary, nervous is good, or at least interesting.

Roz Chast has been a cartoonist at *The New Yorker* for about four decades. In that time, she has done what few comic artists do. She has created a universe that stands at sharp angles from the one we know, being both distinctly hers and recognizably ours. Where Charles Addams, her first hero, created a world of mansard-roofed houses and ghoulish folks to fill them, hers is the world of the receding New York middle class: scuffed-up apartments, grimy walls, round-shouldered men perched on ratty armchairs and frizzy-haired women in old-fashioned skirts—no Chast skirt has ever risen above the knee—

I AM...



R. Chast

marked by a shared stigmata of anxiety above their eyes. The style in which they are drawn is as deliberately threadbare (“clunky” is Chast’s own word for it) as the scenes themselves, a thing of quick, broken lines, spidery lettering, and much uneasy blank space. Both style and subject matter can be seen as an ongoing projection onto adult life of the even more straitened Flatbush world where Chast grew up, in a four-room apartment. She was raised by schoolteacher parents, who were notable for the truly awe-

inspiring extent of their phobias—traits that she richly bodied forth in her hugely successful 2014 graphic memoir, “Can’t We Talk About Something More Pleasant?” She has long signed her work as R. Chast (“not in honor of R. Crumb but not not in honor of him, either”); her never-used full name, Rosalind, was, she explains, a forlorn gift from her parents upon her birth, in 1954, taken from Shakespeare’s incandescent heroine in “As You Like It.”

The paradox is that, although she has created this imagery of limits and losers, the grownup life she has made for herself is luxuriously filled with friends, family, and obligations. Having led a life adjacent to hers over the past four decades, I’ve been a frequent witness to and occasional participant in the joyful intensity of her enthusiasms, which range from klezmer music to smart birds—parrots and parakeets. She shares the latter passion with my wife and my daughter, and has joined them in tea parties for the avian set. (The women drink the tea, and the birds do the talking.)

In intimate exchanges, Chast reveals herself as more tough-minded and self-confident than her deliberately dithery social surface suggests. “I’m going to go home and review this conversation and find every horribly embarrassing thing I’ve said for the past hour and feel mortified about it,” she says over the Turkish meal, not coyly but frankly, as one who has been living with her own neuroses long enough that, as with pet birds, all their mannerisms are well known to her. But, though her work thematizes her apprehension and anxiety, she is, in not so slowly dawning fact, a woman of considerable authority, and unstinting appetites.

This truth—of weight beneath apparent whimsy—extends even to her appearance. The first impulse in describing Roz Chast is to say that she looks exactly like a Roz Chast character: short blond hair, glasses, strong nose, high shoulders. Subsequent investigations transform her into a rather more Nora Ephron-ish figure; few New Yorkers are more gaily, affirmatively opinionated. (“My biggest mistake as a mother? Overselling ‘The Magic Mountain’ to my teen-agers.”) It would not be Chast-like if her ambitions ran in a straight line to her accomplishments—her subjects tend to be wry, worried observers of their own feats—and, in fact, they don’t. Her fluent, hyperconscious vibe is more like that of a novelist than a comedian. Told casually that she has a novelist’s sensibility, she asks, warily, what that might be. “Truth-telling and story above all else,” a friend explains. She accedes enthusiastically, in abruptly bitten-off words. “Oh. Yeah. Absolutely. *That.*”

Many artists and writers describe their arrival at *The New Yorker* as an event—Updike called it the “ecstatic breakthrough” of his professional life. Given the contradictions layered in her work and her character, it’s not surprising to learn that, as Chast admits bracingly, the magazine was not her first choice.

During that straitened childhood (“I’ve never seen anyone in life look as unhappy as Roz does in *all* of her childhood pictures,” a good friend says), she found respite through drawing. “I’m living in this four-room apartment in Brooklyn, a crummy part of Brooklyn—not a dangerous part of Brooklyn, just a *crummy* part of Brooklyn—and I just did not understand why I was there,” she says. “Throughout my childhood, I couldn’t *wait* to grow up. I wanted to be a grownup. Being a child was just not working

for me. I didn't understand little kids. 'Let's play! Let's hit each other!' *Why do you want to do that?* Don't you want to stay indoors where it's safe, and read and draw?

"Drawing was a kind of escape from life. It was also something I could do without having to go out. In a small apartment, you have a pen or a pencil and you're done." She adds, "You don't need to go out and buy a bunch of stuff, a whole ton of hockey equipment," speaking ruefully, as the outdoorsy Connecticut mother she has become. She and her husband, the writer Bill Franzen, married in 1984, and have two children.

"My mother didn't let me read comics growing up. She thought comics were totally low rent, for morons. Superheroes, cartoons, animation—didn't matter. I had to go to a friend's house to look at comic books." She points to two sources as essential to turning her love of drawing into her vocation as a cartoonist. One was Addams's work (from this magazine), which she first encountered as a child, in the nineteen-sixties. " 'Black Maria,' 'The Groaning Board,' 'Monster Rally,' 'Drawn & Quartered,' " she says, rapturously reciting titles of Addams collections. "These are books that I discovered at the browsing library at Cornell. My parents used to go to Ithaca in the summer—they lived in student quarters and it was cheap. There were other Brooklyn schoolteachers, mostly Jewish, mostly without children. When my parents took me, they let me hang out."

At an angle to Addams's sly morbidities were the broad lines and clear colors of *Mad* magazine, its issues illicitly possessed. "They were so funny and so irreverent, and, it has been pointed out, one of the first institutions that made fun of American culture. I loved it. It made sense to me, because I would watch these shows, these commercials that were entirely stupid, but I didn't know how quite to voice it. It made me laugh so hard—'Cheese & Sandbag Coffee'! For some reason, that killed me. I liked Don Martin. I liked the fake ads and, of course, Al Jaffee. I even liked Dave Berg, and I know it's not cool to like Dave Berg. They were sort of clunky, but there was something funny about the way he drew expressions. They were very appealing."

Leaving home at sixteen ("as fast as I could"), she spent two years at Kirkland College, in upstate New York, and then four years at the Rhode Island School of Design, in Providence. "No one encouraged me to be a cartoonist," she recalls. "I showed my work and they just said, 'I didn't know you were this unhappy.'" Then she returned to New York City, where she took her drawings around to various outlets, selling work to *Christopher Street*, the classy gay men's mag, and *National Lampoon*, among others, and eventually found herself at *The New Yorker* offices, on West Forty-Third Street.

"My dream was to be a working cartoonist for the *Village Voice*," she says. "Because that was Jules Feiffer, Mark Alan Stamaty, Stan Mack. There was something very idiosyncratic, very New York, about them, all social comment and not a gag panel. And the *New Yorker* cartoon was a gag panel. I liked that, but I had no interest in *doing* that. I didn't see myself as part of that. I submitted because I thought, Why not? I was working for the *Voice* and for the *Lampoon*, and I thought I should try *The New Yorker*. It's cartoons—same deal.

"I think it was a Wednesday—I called up and found their drop-off day, and I left my portfolio. And that's pretty much what I've been doing ever since. I was absolutely

flabbergasted and terrified when I found out I had sold something.” She went to pick up her portfolio the following week, and the receptionist gave her a note she struggled to decipher. It read “*please see me. lee.*” It was from Lee Lorenz, then *The New Yorker’s* art editor. “I remember walking down the hallway in a little bit of a daze, thinking, This is extremely peculiar,” Chast says. “It was where they had a map of Manhattan, hung sideways. You made a right into Lee’s office, so I went in to see him and he pulled out a cartoon, and he said, ‘We want to buy this! Are you excited?’ ‘Yeah, I am,’ I said. I thought I might be dreaming. A little bit out of body. I noticed that the lights were very like my elementary school. I liked that it’s not exactly shabby but nothing trying to impress you. Places that are trying to impress me always scare me. They don’t impress me, but they scare me. He told me that Shawn”—William Shawn, the magazine’s longtime editor—“really liked my work. And I had no *idea* who Shawn was! I assumed it was a first name, someone named Sean, like Sean Connery, who somehow was allowed to like your work. I nodded. ‘That sounds good.’ I did meet him later, and he doffed his hat and I doffed mine, and I wondered why I was doing this.

“That first cartoon was called ‘Little Things.’ Lee told me, years later, that some of the older cartoonists were very bothered by it, and asked if Lee owed my family money.” The cartoon was a simple grid of made-up objects—the chent, the spak, the redge, the kellat—laid out against pure white space, with the only visual excitement coming from the lettering settled in the center of the drawing. Chast was one of the first cartoonists not only to always come up with her own ideas but to use her own lettering to explain her points. *The New Yorker’s* standard italicized gag captions were seldom printed beneath her drawings.

“Of all the cartoons I submitted, it might have been the most personal, the kind of thing that makes me laugh,” Chast says. “That wasn’t how the older generation felt. The barbarians weren’t at the gates—they were *through* the gates.”

Cartoonists at *The New Yorker* have always fallen into two basic categories—the Stylish Satirists and the Klutzy Konfessionalists. The two traditions flow, respectively, from Peter Arno and James Thurber, with Arno, in the nineteen-twenties, already picking up details of social life and delivering them in supremely elegant stenography, inventing such virtuosic icons as the drunk whose eyes form a simple X of inebriation, and the nude chorine caught in six neatly curved lines. Thurber, arriving shortly after Arno, was hardly able to draw at all, except in his gingerbread-man style, but he could travel deep within his own mind and put funny hats on his nightmares: you see the bedrock of his private-poetic style in the guilty-looking hippopotamus (“What have you done with Dr. Millmoss?”) or the bewhiskered, flipped creature at a couple’s headboard (“All right, have it your way—you heard a seal bark!”). There have been many sharp-eyed observers of manners and mannerisms in the magazine’s history: Bob Mankoff’s “No, Thursday’s out. How about never—is never good for you?” encapsulated social rituals in the nineties as much as Ed Koren’s blimp-coated women, fuzz-faced professors, and playground denizens did in the seventies, or Arno’s “Well, back to the old drawing board” did in the forties. George Booth and William Steig, by contrast, lived decade after decade only in their heads, which they allowed us, occasionally, to visit.

Chast's work has always been aggressively in the Klutzy Konfessional vein, even when, in the early years, it was only indirectly autobiographical. The assertion of personal style in cartooning is, for her, all cartooning is. "I'm not interested in whether or not this guy can make a cat with googly eyes," she says. "I want to be in a world: you're in Koren world, you're in Booth world, you're in Addams world. *That's* what gets me." To be sure, the awkwardness of her hand is willed in a way that Thurber's was not, as she demonstrates with heartbreaking, freely drawn portraits of her mother on her deathbed in "Can't We Talk About Something More Pleasant?" But the confessional nature of her work lies in the individual range of obsessions and images it draws upon.

A key to understanding Chast is to see that her people live in a very specific place: a kind of timeless Upper West Side of the mind, already in the process of "cute-ification," yes, but still filled with secondhand bookstores and vaguely disquieting discount palaces. In Chast's hands, the neighborhood features a Little Vermont section, with its House of Cheddar, and a Central Park Country Fair ("Come see brawny Akitas pull many times their weight in Sunday papers!"), while its apartment dwellers are not above a little radiator cookery: "Potato: 3 weeks, 5 days." This is not entirely a joke; there was a period in the late seventies when, living in a stoveless apartment on West Seventy-Third Street, Chast cooked on a hot plate that was not much hotter than a radiator. "You'd drop the pasta in, and it would take ten minutes for the water to start to boil again," she confides cheerily.

But perhaps the secret of her work—the source of its buoyancy—is that the Chast world is far from a wasteland; it's actually an achieved paradise of cozy rooms and eccentric habits, which, when she discovered it, in the early seventies, was to her infinitely preferable to her truly confining background in Flatbush. "I *hated* going back to see sad buildings in Brooklyn," she says. "I had zero nostalgia for it. I loved living on West Seventy-Third Street." The underlying jauntiness of this appreciation is what puts Chast's people in a soberly smiling mood as they compare cut-rate drugstores, and what puts them in high chef's hats even as they cook on those radiators. She knows this world down to the ground and below; one of her most cherished cover drawings, from 1990, showed the layers beneath a Manhattan street, including the water mains and steam pipes (Chastian steam pipes, huffing and puffing in squat unison), and still deeper zones for alligators and lost cat toys.

In a living room across the park, Chast is playing a turquoise ukulele. Alongside her is her close friend and frequent collaborator Patricia Marx, a *New Yorker* staff writer, who is strumming a matching uke. In the past two years, an extraordinary amount of Chast's time has been spent as half of this duo, called Ukelear Meltdown. They run through a set list that includes "Two Middle-Aged Ladies" and the blues classic "Loft of the Rising Rent."

Despite the improbable musical means—twinned ukuleles and far from professional voices, attempting the illusion of harmony by singing in simple unison but slightly off-register, like a badly printed mimeograph from an ancient elementary school—the duo has played sold-out engagements in such unlikely high-rent venues as Guild Hall, in East Hampton, and Café Carlyle, in New York. The larger Ukelear Meltdown project is the work of the three women currently in this living room, which, as it happens, is my

own, with Chast and Marx joined by my wife, Martha Parker, who is the producer and director of a short-form comedy series about the band.

“Patty is the one who first got the ukulele,” Chast explains. “She went to a wedding, and the people who were organizing the wedding organized a procession of people playing instruments. She chose the uke because it’s basically one step up from the triangle. It’s a cigar box with four rubber bands on it. She told me it was so much fun I had to get one of my own. I got the same turquoise uke, and she was right: it was so much fun. It’s basic chords—it’s really easy. You know the C, the F, and G, and you want to throw in a D if you’re fancy. And you can play just about anything. You won’t be playing it *great*, but you can play it. And, of course, the color, turquoise—I do believe it adds to the sound, on some level.”

Ukelear Meltdown has an ornate invented backstory, offered in performance, in which the duo was roughly as important in the nineteen-sixties as, say, the Lovin’ Spoonful, and has been making spasmodic comebacks ever since. “We basically started making up these stories to make each other laugh: ‘Remember when we were at Woodstock?’ ” Chast says. “We kept adding to this made-up story. It morphed into Ukelear Meltdown. Patty rewrites the lyrics of songs that are in the public domain. Turquoise and public domain are the two key aesthetic concepts of our band.

“Playing Café Carlyle was like a dream. It was my first time in this famous place, and I’m talent! The audience was amazingly receptive. They got the joke, and it really didn’t last long. One thing about ukulele comedy is that shorter is better. You don’t want to outstay your welcome.” She goes back to the uke, looking as serious as Daniel Barenboim at the piano.

These past three or four years have been a kind of Indian summer for Chast, with blossomings of newly confident work of all kinds: live performances, both antic and more resolute than anything before, and several books—including her downright sprightly and uplifting tale of the city, “Going Into Town: A Love Letter to New York”—that are more broadly accessible than her earlier collections of *New Yorker* cartoons. This new public energy was sparked, her friends believe, by the success of her memoir-in-cartoons, “Can’t We Talk About Something More Pleasant?”

“I would not say my cartoons are autobio,” Chast observes, “but my life is always reflected in them.” Yet “Can’t We Talk,” which won prizes and sat on top of the best-seller lists, is personal in a more specific way, being an account of her parents’ last years. In comic-book form, it is an unsparing study of the claustrophobic terrors of getting old; any middle-aged person who reads it will find his eyes darting around his own environment, checking for signs of the relentlessly incremental household grime that Chast spies creeping in with age. But the book also conveys a compassionate and reflective view of the child, even the grown child, who is helpless in the face of parental fadeout. It inspects, in depth, the personalities of her weak, worried, but benevolent father and her hard-edged, peasant-tough mother, with Chast herself caught in a permanent meta-cycle of well-meant gestures, torn between compassion and exasperation, having to be kind when you just want to be gone.

From a compositional point of view, the book is amazing in the variety of formats it employs: when photographic evidence is necessary to capture the sheer clutter of her parents' long-occupied apartment, we get photographs. When single-panel emphasis is essential, we get magnificent single panels—among them an audacious and painful drawing of a blue baby, her older sister, who lived for only a day. And then, in the last, shattering pages, Chast offers those quiet, detailed drawings of a formidable parent's final moments.

Chast gives credit to the graphic storytellers who came before her, along with her, and after her. “With that book, like everybody else, I just ... dove into it,” she says. “I was so *fatootsed* by the whole thing, my shrink said, ‘What about chapters?’ And I was”—she electrifies her face. “Unless you’re a better hack than me, every project has its own rules and its own complexities. Only by making a million mistakes and taking a million false turns could I get there. I couldn’t have done that book without the example of Art Spiegelman and that whole generation of graphic novelists,” she says, citing Marjane Satrapi, the author of “*Persepolis*,” as another important influence.

But, unlike some artists, she doesn’t see much difference between the classic cartoon and the graphic novel or memoir. “I think making jokes is *always* a way of being subversive without being directly confrontational,” she says. “When someone’s being a jerk or a bully or an asshole, I don’t really have the courage to go up to that person and say, ‘You’re a bully and an asshole!’ He could knock my block off! I’ve never done that. It’s my *fantasy* to do that. I got yelled at not that long ago, by some French woman at Uniqlo, because I was looking at some sweaters and I messed up the pile. And she wasn’t even one of the people who worked there. It was, like, they were already messed up—a clearance thing? And I was looking through for my size, and this woman came up and yelled at me. I wish I could have said something back to her that was really quick and devastating—her head would have exploded. So I came home and I drew it and felt better. She was a horrible person, and I hope she gets gout. Or a goiter. A permanent goiter. Inoperable. There must be some Yiddish curse: ‘May you run around with a goiter!’”

Although the Ukelear Meltdown project began as offhand whimsy, it has, if not exactly deepened, then broadened in meaning. In one scene from the comedy series, Chast, in character, confesses to her fictional son that her long-standing claim about having had a platinum record back in the sixties was a lie. She plays it with gravity and tenderness.

“We have to practice the whole lamb cycle,” Chast now says to Marx, in the living room. The “lamb cycle” involves the songs “Mary Had a Comfort Lamb” and the restaurant plaint “Blah-Blah, Waitstaff.” Looking down gravely at the lyric sheets, they begin to sing, sort of.

On a Sunday in October, the Chast-Franzen household in Connecticut is getting ready for Halloween. Bill Franzen has been creating an annual Halloween display for the past quarter century, and its arrival each year has become a major event in Ridgefield, as well as in the family’s life. Chast is driving through their leafy little town for lunch at her favorite Greek diner, the one corner of the Upper West Side in the state.

From behind the wheel, she emphasizes her late arrival to driving. “The subway is how God intended people to get around. You get on the train and you transfer at Fifty-ninth Street. That I like. And driving I don’t. I don’t like *deer*. I don’t like deer jumping out at you. You go to dinner with someone and have two glasses of wine in the city, you get on the subway, you don’t think, Now I’m going to have to deal with *deer*.” Yet, very much in the Chast spirit, when you are her passenger, she drives skillfully and speedily down rain-slicked Connecticut roads.

Franzen and Chast met when he was a young office worker at *The New Yorker*. “Bill was an interoffice messenger and I was in on a Wednesday, and he was so nice and he showed me some funny postcards—clowns waterskiing in a pyramid, it was so bananas—and then I had to go and I met him a few days later, and we started dating. 1980. It’s really nuts, isn’t it? We got married in 1984. When we were kids. That’s how I refer to us around our own kids: ‘When we were running around in New York.’”

Franzen’s family hails from the Midwest; he was raised in Minnesota with a family farm in Iowa, a background that Chast viewed with wonder and alarm. (Close observers of her work in the nineteen-eighties will recall the sudden appearance of drawings set in central Iowa, “a fantastic place to park.”) Her husband’s rural roots still baffle her. “I only recently learned what an ox was—a castrated bull. It is! Didn’t you think it was a whole other species? I did. There are all these different sorts of beasts of burden. Donkey and mule are strange. Cow and the various permutations of cow and ox and bull gets into a whole thing. Oh, and then there’s *steer!* Don’t throw steer into this mix, because then I’m going to have to, like, never leave New York.”

Franzen is himself a humorist of great gifts; his story collection “Hearing from Wayne,” particularly “37 Years,” is still taught in classes on comic writing. But, for the past twenty-five years, he has devoted himself chiefly to raising a family, and preparing the Halloween spectacle. (Many young people who grew up in central Connecticut remember driving long distances to stand in line to see it on Halloween night.) “And the weird thing is that he works on it for weeks, but he keeps it up for just eight hours,” Chast says.

The excitement of the approaching display has penetrated even Dimitri’s Diner, where the manager demands instantly to know how Franzen’s work is going. (Like a star soprano, Franzen threatens every year to retire from the display, and never does.) A little later, after grilled cheese, Chast takes the visitor on a tour of the staging area. “Santa’s workshop,” she calls it. One might expect inflatable witches or grinning jack-o’-lanterns; in fact, the Franzen-Chast holiday display is much spookier and more original, like a particularly grim series of Cornell boxes. It features hundreds of ancient baby dolls—specially selected for their strange, “uncanny valley” grimaces and grins—positioned menacingly in a hospital-ward setting, and brightly, morbidly lit. To add to the creepiness, Franzen hangs skeletons along the street. “The whole street closes down, and thousands of people come around,” Chast explains. “Bill is in his element.”

Although she pined for Manhattan in her early Connecticut years, Chast heartily affirms that it was a great place to raise her children. The relation of parents and children, she now thinks in maturity, is a central theme of her work. The composition and publication of “Can’t We Talk” happened to overlap with her younger child’s coming out as trans. It

was an event that Chast treated with what her friends describe as unperturbed equanimity. “Pete’s the same person,” Chast says, of her child. “I think in some ways I was very lucky. We always had a good relationship—I hope! It sounds like a joke, but I mean it: if my child had become a Republican? A Trump voter? *That* would have been hard to fully accept—seriously!

“It’s been interesting. It’s not the only thing about him, and it’s not even among the most important. Everybody should get to define themselves as they feel. It’s hard enough to figure out who you are, and what drives you, without having somebody tell you, ‘You know what you’re feeling? It’s really invalid!’”

Touring the grounds of Franzen’s Halloween display, one senses in Chast a slightly baffled unease, familiar to all married people contemplating their spouse’s singular obsession. Back inside the cozy, handsome house, one finds at last the essential Chast, the Roz rosebud, in the form of two fine and carefully kept collections of books. One, in a bedroom upstairs, is made up of three hundred volumes by *New Yorker* cartoonists, going all the way back to the earliest strata. “I’ve admired Mary Petty forever,” she says, as she shares an ancient book by that early, inimitable cartoonist. She has vintage Steig, early Helen Hokinson, and, of course, all of Charles Addams.

She holds an equally impressive collection of contemporary graphic novelists and alternative artists, including a near-full run of the works of Derf Backderf, whose study of a young serial killer, “My Friend Dahmer,” was adapted into a movie. (Chast likes the book so much she buys it for friends.) One realizes that what this collection illustrates is, to use a phrase she would hate, Chast’s historical role: to reconcile the sophisticated, specific-minded humor of *The New Yorker* with the gawky, confessional truth-telling and boundary-crossing of graphic forms. Her work belongs to both styles. She’s a Klutzy Konfessionalist with an ever-longer-breathed narrative drive, propelling toward unexpected horizons and subjects. Her next book, she says, will be about dreams, a subject that has always fascinated her: “I’m interested in how dreams are both ridiculous and serious, at the same time.”

Walking home one night after dinner at a West Side Chinese restaurant, a couple of friends look back to see Chast at work with her smartphone, taking pictures of something on the darkened sidewalk. She often casts her eyes down, but this is less modesty than attunement to the street life beneath her feet.

“Bill would say that this has a lot to do with the fact that I grew up in Brooklyn at a time when New York was a little rougher,” she says, contemplating her own sidewalk contemplations. “My parents trained me to never look at people directly. Never look anyone in the eye!” She laughs. “I think I got kind of good at being warily aware of my surroundings. They taught me to look at everyone as if I was looking at something else. So, I look away, but carefully. The idea of being in headphones and in my own world—that’s not in my world. I like being aware of what’s around you.”

Drawing closer, one sees that what she is inspecting is . . . a fire hydrant. This in itself is not so unusual. Fire hydrants and standpipes occupy a special, warm place in the Chast imagination. (“I think they’re very anthropomorphic. I think of them as the flora and fauna of New York—flora more than fauna. They’re sort of where hedges would be. The

standpipes are like hedges, and the hydrants are like city grass.”) She has spotted what is evident to her eye, but what anyone else would have walked right by: the upright “masculine” shape of the hydrant has somehow cast an entirely “feminine” shape on the sidewalk—a shape that looks like a prehistoric fertility figure, a Venus of Willendorf.

“I have to *do* something with this,” she whispers. She has, once again, Chast-ized the world around her, finding an image of startling sexual complementaries—or is it dubious gender battle?—on an Upper West Side street. A confrontation of male and female, mediated by a New York fire hydrant, that would have gone unseen had she not seen it. It is, one realizes, a dream image in her sense, at once absurd and significant. Later, she posts it on her Instagram account, with a simple caption: “Tonight: male hydrant with female shadow.”

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