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SELF

‘Why Are You So Into This?’ Life before and after *Heated Rivalry* fan fiction.

By Jen Ortiz, The Cut's deputy editor.
Photograph By Tonje Thilesen

SEPT. 28, 2026

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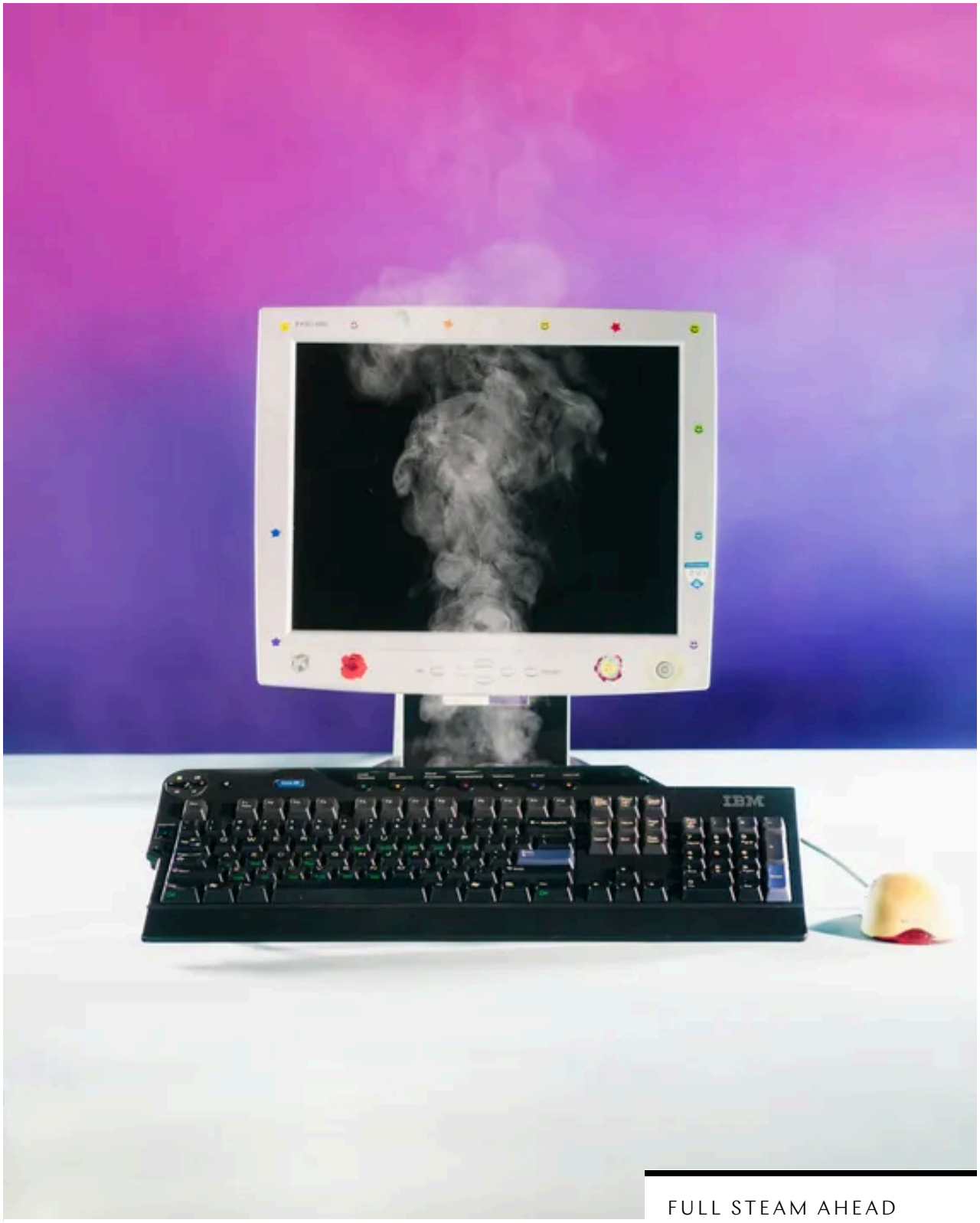


Photo: Tonje Thilesen

FULL STEAM AHEAD

Spicy stories have never been hotter. Here’s why — plus, five new ones.

Fourteen million, give or take. That's roughly how many words of *Heated Rivalry* fan fiction I've read so far this year. If a novel clocks in at an average of 70,000 words, then I've read the equivalent of 200. That's like getting through Robert Caro's entire Lyndon B. Johnson series, then rereading it a dozenish times, all before the Halloween candy has even gone on sale.

Except it's not like that at all. Obviously. In Caro's books, is there a version of Lyndon B. Johnson who has the ability to turn himself into a dog so he can cuddle his downtrodden neighbor as the two of them fall in love? Or a veteran porn star who, instead of getting *All About Eve*'d by a young cocky camboy, lives happily and hornily ever after with him? The other versions of Shane Hollander and Ilya Rozanov I've read fall for each other (and, often, fall into bed, in exquisite and extreme detail) include: as neighbors in an apartment building; as *Love Island* contestants; as a *Bachelor* producer and the Bachelor himself; as the guy working the late-night shift at a 7-Eleven and a rich Russian mob boss; as a bounty hunter and a guy with a price on his head in the Wild Wild West; as a yoga teacher and his student; as best-selling authors; as a restaurant's head chef and pastry chef; as one guy looking for a roommate and another responding to his Facebook Marketplace listing; as college roommates, rival fraternity brothers, and professor and student. I haven't yet read the one where Shane is a kitten and Ilya adopts him, but it's on my TBR list.

And then, of course, there are the many more I've read that star regular Shane and Ilya, as author Rachel Reid created them: rival NHL pros too tortured by hockey's homophobia, generational trauma, and their intense schedules to recognize they're soul mates until they can't ignore it anymore. Sometimes these fanfics take place after the last installment of Reid's *Game Changers* series, *The Long Game,* and sometimes before it. Sometimes they're set during that life-altering (theirs, but also mine) summer that makes up the last chapter of Reid's book *Heated Rivalry* and the season-one finale of Jacob Tierney's television adaptation. Or during their first year long-distance as Ilya wrapped up his last year in Boston. Or during snapshots of their situationship B.C. (before cottage). And sometimes the timeline is entirely made up. It doesn't matter much to me where or when or who they are — as long as some version of Shane and Ilya are involved, I will read it because I can't help myself. Because I need it like I need coffee in the morning.

For nearly nine months now, I have read fan fiction *every single day*. Before falling asleep each night and as soon as I wake up every morning. Sometimes in the middle of the night — though not if I can help it. During the three-minute walk from the office to the Just Salad across the street to pick up lunch, then while eating my slop bowl at my desk. I've read while sitting shotgun (even though it makes me carsick), while walking my dogs, and while at the hospital waiting for my dad to get an emergency endoscopy.

After watching the first two episodes of *Heated Rivalry* on HBO Max in December, I basically became a walking *Mean Girls* quote: "I was a woman possessed. I could hear people getting bored with me. But I couldn't stop. It just kept coming up like word vomit." I'd read and then reread *Heated*

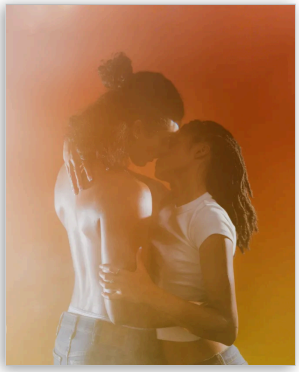
Rivalry and *The Long Game*, Reid’s two Shane-and-Ilya-centric books in the *Game Changers* series, and eventually ordered and burned through most of the rest of the series. (I’ll get to *Tough Guy* before the second season airs.) I read the bonus scenes on Reid’s website; I watched the “Big Ole Freak” TikTok edit, among others; I ordered a “Boston Raiders” T-shirt from the show’s official Canada-based merch shop, despite the tariffs and shipping fees making it cost almost twice as much; I listened to the show’s stars, Hudson Williams and Connor Storrie, narrate fairy smut in *Ember & Ice* enough times to forget to cancel my Quinn subscription before the next month’s charge … but *still. It couldn’t go on like this forever, right?*

Around New Year’s, I’d assured my partner, much to his relief, that I would eventually get over it. I’d be less obsessed; I’d talk about something, anything, else. I hadn’t been this possessed by something since I was a tween with ’N Sync posters plastered all over my bedroom walls, begging my mom to buy me yet another issue of *Tiger Beat* every time we went grocery shopping. And even then, I don’t know if my love for J.C. Chasez could’ve gotten me to download Threads.

IN THIS SERIES

Full Steam Ahead

A week of spicy stories.



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The app was where other Loons — as the fandom calls itself, named after the howling red-eyed birds that freak Ilya out and *not* short for *lunatics,* but, well, if it walks like a Loon and screeches like a Loon — were posting about how obsessed they were too. Links to *Heated Rivalry* fan fiction published on AO3 (shorthand, I learned, for the fan-fiction website Archive of Our Own) were being passed around like tequila shots at spring break, promising to go down easy and give my brain the same fuzzy, transportive feeling. At first, I resisted. *How could I, an adult, read fan fiction?* I’m supposed to be reading “real” “books.”

But it was exactly the escape hatch I needed. I was burned out from juggling two jobs, working at The Cut by day and teaching a graduate course on pop-culture journalism by night, spending weekends grading and doing class prep. It didn’t help that my partner and I were also navigating long-distance for the first time in our 13-year relationship: He was spending the academic year working at a university that was about a six-hour flight and an additional two-hour drive away from our place in Brooklyn. It drove me crazy every time he went on about how much he “enjoyed working out of his office” while I had to frantically race from mine to feed and walk our dogs. I felt irritable, on edge, exhausted all the time … unless I was reading Shane and Ilya yearning for and loving and fucking each other, over and over again.

So I kept reading. At first, I didn’t tell anyone because I was embarrassed that I had developed such an all-consuming compulsion. I had a “ridiculous hobby for nerds,” as my partner recently, lovingly put it. (He watches grown men play video games on YouTube, so give me a break.) Then the more time went on, the more I began to worry that my fixation couldn’t possibly be healthy. I’d fallen down a rabbit hole with no way to climb back out — not that I was trying to, anyway. Reading fanfic became a way for me to hide from my exhaustion and frustration and resentment, which felt delicious. That it was also a distraction, something that kept me from seeing movies or doing morning pages or just, generally, dealing with the important life stuff, felt less so. Still, this much *good* couldn’t be bad, right?

It’s cliché among fans of the series to say that *Heated Rivalry* rewired our brains. But seriously, what the hell did these boys do to us? There’s something about the way they love each other — the desperation they feel, the way they can anticipate each other’s needs, their ability to see and fill each other’s cracks (pun not intended, but hell, that too) — that we fell in love with in a way that borders on *are you okay*? The fantasy of their love story is so much better than the horrors of real life — of course we don’t want to leave the cottage.

“It’s very all-consuming and in a lot of ways not healthy,” one such fan named Elizabeth, 39, tells me. “I’m sure it has cost me sleep. It has cost me billable hours.” When she thinks back on it now, she says, she remembers life before she knew who Shane and Ilya were, when she believed that “being a really intense fan of anything is weird.” She just couldn’t relate to fandom obsessives. A few weeks later, *Heated Rivalry* began streaming on HBO Max. “And now I’m like, ‘I swear I had a personality before I got into *Heated Rivalry*.’”

Look around on Threads and TikTok and Reddit and in the WhatsApp group chats of strangers who exchanged numbers over social media after bonding over their mutual Loondom, and you’ll see the same disbelief:

@ .sahnaz.

it’s not just me, right? 😭 serious honesty moment
yall I think I might be stuck this way forever
#heatedrivalry #hollanov

♬ original sound - ☆stark.pro☆

@dajialaine

♬ original sound - DAJLOAF

@prettyonpaper0

Some things should stay off Teams. #heatedrivalry #millenialhumor #aO3

♬ original sound - Chlo ❤️

As one redditor on r/heatedrivalryfanfics put it, “Can we talk about the fanfic addiction for a moment? I feel like I am addicted to Shane and Ilya at this point. The amount of fics I read so far and still yearn for more every day. I look for anything related to the characters on social media, endlessly scrolling … I have a very demanding job with high responsibilities, and I am sleeping 4-5 hours a day, and I look exhausted all the time. People think I am depressed but I don’t tell them that the real reason is I am reading fics till the wee hours of everyday …”

There are plenty of theories online about what makes fan fiction so compulsive: It’s the dopamine rush; it’s because we all have ADHD and are seeking constant stimulation; it’s because we’re burned out and need comforting. But also, to echo the infamous words spoken in room 1410: There’s just “too much, too good.” As Kristina Busse, a fan-fiction scholar, notes in an essay published this month for the journal *Transformative Works and Cultures*: In the five months after *Heated Rivalry*’s season-one finale aired, there were about 225 new fan works posted to AO3 a day. It’s hard not to feel like Augustus Gloop at a candy buffet. “As a literary scholar,” Busse tells me over a video call, “I’m sometimes like, *Should I be reading some literary fiction?*”

If only we had the time. “I’m reading constantly,” Sydney, 38, tells me. “While making dinner, while the kids are in the bath, while I’m waiting to pick them up from school. It’s just a constant scroll.” For Beaurey, from Melbourne, Australia, it began in the week between episodes two and three airing: “I was like, *I can feel the fan-fiction urge coming back*,” she says. “*I’m a 13-year-old girl again*.” (She’s 35.) One woman, who lives in Shillong, India, and goes by @rk_millennialauntie on Threads, had 84 tabs of fanfics open on her phone when we spoke. A friend recently gifted her a book, she says. “Then they kept calling me, like, ‘Have you read the book?’ And I said, ‘I’m so sorry, I’m not reading currently. I’m not feeling up to read.’” How is she supposed to tell them she’s reading one to two books’ worth of fanfic per day?

“Have you read the one where Ilya is a garbage truck and Shane is a garbage can?” she asked me at one point during our conversation. “I’ll send you the link if I find it again.” (Please!)

Last year, Christine tells me, she read 60 books. This year, other than the *Game Changers* books, the 41-year-old from Bethesda, Maryland, has read only fan fiction. Joanna, 40, also hasn’t read anything that isn’t *Heated Rivalry* fanfic. “I’ve been supposed to read *Yesteryear* for a book club for six months,” she says. “And we have an office book club, and I go and I have nothing to say.” Instead, she maintains a 110-page (and counting) Google doc that tracks and rates the fics she’s read. Her criteria include premise, POV structure, emotional resonance, sex scenes, and quality of prose. Don’t tell her boss, but since Geanina, 31, works from her home in Bucharest, Romania, she set up her work laptop next to her personal computer, which is always open to Archive of Our Own, in order to read fan fiction between emails. And sometimes Emily will read on her commute to work, “but it’s kind of like, *Oh my God. I’m so horny on the C train*.”

It isn’t that we’re all addicted to word porn — or, at least, *just* word porn. “That’s out there, and it’s great,” Emma, 25, says. “But there are also fics that are like *literature*.” As in, multi-chapter, thousands-of-words-long *epics*. The stereotype that romantic fan fiction is almost universally smutty seems silly once you’ve read fics about Shane and Ilya having the flu, about them being childhood pen pals, and about them celebrating the birthday of Saint Irina Rozanova. Have you heard about the story in which Shane becomes friends with a giant Pacific octopus, à la *Remarkably Bright Creatures*? It’s so tender that I feel bad for being a pescatarian.“In my top five at the moment, I think three of them have barely any smut,” John, 33, says. “I could read a whole thing without smut because I just like watching those two boys fall in love over and over and over again.”

“It’s the pleasure of repetition,” Busse tells me. “You want the same characters, you want the same worlds, the same tropes, but you want a slightly different story. You want it phrased differently.” It’s like watching a comfort show, Raelene, 37, says. “I want to know that, no matter what, some things stay the same as far as the characters and who they are, and that they’re going to end up together at the end.” Piper, 38, compares reading fan fiction to Marvel fans reading comic books. Fics “explore more of their conflict in many different ways,” she says. “And I want to explore every multiverse.” And as Geanina puts it, “It’s so nice that, in any universe, Ilya Rozanov and Shane Hollander are finding each other and are down bad for each other.”

When there is sex — often really hot, intense, how-is-everyone-still-walking sex — it’s usually a vehicle for storytelling. “Sex is a language,” Emma says. It’s how these characters communicate when they can’t figure it out with words. “They develop their feelings for each other through sex but also through not *just* sex — it’s what they’re feeling during those scenes,” Joanna says. “They’re feeling feelings for each other *through* that experience.”

Plenty has already been written about why readers — and especially women — so enjoy reading and seeing and thinking about two fictional men getting it on. “I’m like, to myself, *You don’t have a prostate. Why are you so into this?*” Elizabeth says. “Part of me wants to say, ‘I wonder if I’m just some

weird sex fiend now,’ which sounds silly and embarrassing or I don’t even know.” But it’s not just that they happen to be two (beefy, hockey-playing) guys. Because these characters, as Reid wrote them, feel so fully realized, it’s easy to suspend disbelief and allow yourself to be swept up in their chemistry.

“They are very human,” Naomi, 51, says of Shane and Ilya. “They miscommunicate, they misunderstand each other, they hurt each other.” That makes the stakes of everything — the angst, the yearning, the (again) really hot sex — feel that much higher and compulsively readable. “It’s actually a good, very compelling romantic pairing,” Emily agrees, “because if these people existed they *would* fight. They *would* have kind of a nuanced relationship where they’re so attracted to each other that they can’t stand to not be touching each other if they’re in the same room, but also they’re like, ‘There’s this stuff about you that I’ll never understand. Your fucking smoothies. Your need to fold your clothes.’ And that feels very real to me — that’s what real relationships are like, fighting and making up.”

Not that we want things to ultimately be *too real*. “There’s a sort of wish fulfillment,” Beaurey says. “It’s the fantasy of someone who will choose you and keep coming back to you even when there are all these obstacles and barriers.” It’s why, she tells me, fan fiction is healing. It provides a safe place to rest. That’s certainly the case for Naomi. “It’s brain candy for me. It’s literally like I’m feeding my brain happiness, and I just need that where I am right now,” she explains. “I have breast cancer. I had breast cancer in 2016, and then it came back in 2023, and now it’s metastatic and that’s it. I’m going to have it for the rest of my life. And so, my everyday life … it’s not easy. This has literally become a place where I can go and forget that. It’s my dopamine source.”

And there are much worse ways to get those feel-good hormones. When I told Busse I was having a hard time explaining my compulsive relationship with fan fiction, she replied, “The thing that I think you’re worrying about is, *How addictive is this thing? How much am I actually enjoying it? How much do I need in order to get that same kick?* I hear that concern. I don’t have an answer to it, but I’m a firm believer that we all have neuroses, and we just need to find the best way to have an arena in which to be least harmful with them.”

In the spring, a nice telehealth psychiatrist prescribed me Lexapro, and then Wellbutrin, to ease the feelings of burnout and help me focus better. Then my partner moved back, and we moved together for his new job. I wondered if any of this would be the thing to break my fanfic spell. Maybe I wouldn’t need this coping mechanism. But surprisingly (or not), I’ve found myself no less compelled to keep reading. If anything, I’m enjoying it even more now that I don’t feel like I’m treading water in a wave pool.

I’d been worried that by leaning on this “addiction” to skirt around momentary extremes, the mundane would — or already had — become painfully duller in comparison. That playing pretend was so fun I couldn’t possibly get the same thrills out of real life. Also, would I *ever* read a book

again? (The answer is yes, and I’m almost done with another, thank you very much.) But as life went from feeling impossible to manageable, I realized I still had the energy and appetite for things outside of Shane and Ilya’s many love stories — and that those stories now felt more like a treat, something to indulge in because I wanted to, not because I had to.

I still worry that it’s taking away *some* time and motivation from doing other things I’d also enjoy. (That book I’m almost done with? I’ve been reading it since July.) Or that my eyes might melt out of my skull from staring at my phone screen so much. But the more I’ve thought about it, the more I’ve talked about it with people for this essay, the less guilt and shame I feel. We all deserve a little fun, whatever way you can get it, especially if it’s not hurting anyone. Then again, addicts do tend to rationalize their addictions. Admitting you have a problem is the first step. But I don’t ever want that problem to ever go away.

PRODUCTION CREDITS

Photographs by **Tonje Thilesen**
Photo Assistant **Laetitia Tamko**
Set Design by **Germán Rojas**

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THE LATEST



POWER | 24 MINS AGO

What It Feels Like at Cornell Right Now

As a professor at the Ivy League school, Kate Manne has known many, many victims. There’s a palpable feeling on campus, she writes, that this is big.

By Kate Manne

HEALTH SCARES | 1:47 P.M.

Megan Thee Stallion Thought She Was Having a Stroke on Broadway

The rapper said she had been performing in *Moulin Rouge!* while “a little bit mentally not okay.”



SEX | 12:29 P.M.

Domino Kirke Didn’t Make Penn Badgley Stop Doing Sex Scenes, Okay?

She says he did it for “his own mental-health reasons.”





CAREER | 12:00 P.M.

‘I Think My Employee Is Being Financially Abused’

You have a duty to protect your staff — and you have a security gap you need to address.

By Alison Green

STREET STYLE | 11:05 A.M.

The Best Street Style From Milan Fashion Week

See our favorite looks from outside this season’s shows.



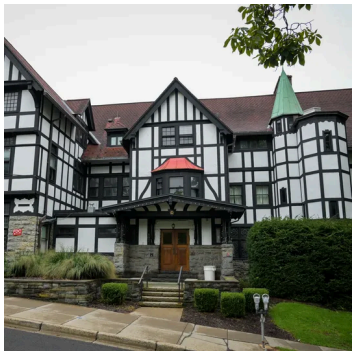


MILAN FASHION WEEK | 10:50 A.M.

Louise Trotter Lightens Up

The Milan collections vibrated with color, yet a single Bottega Veneta look had the freshest colors around.

By Cathy Horyn



POWER | 10:28 A.M.

How Student Journalists Broke the ‘Cornell Seven’ Case “Our coverage was absolutely completely raw from the lawsuit and nothing was concealed. At a minimum, that’s what we can do as the student newspaper.”

By Andrea González-Ramírez

CELEBRITY | 9:43 A.M.

Zahara Jolie Has Legally Dropped Brad Pitt’s Name A court approved the 21-year-old’s petition to use only her mother’s last name.





CULTURE | 8:00 A.M.

‘Someone’s Five Is Someone Else’s One’ Decoding spicy romance’s popular — and divisive — chile-pepper scale.

By Angelina Mazza



FICTION | 8:00 A.M.

The Woman Confused by Her Hot Situationship Romance author Tessa Bailey writes today’s Spice Diary.

By Tessa Bailey



THE MEN'S STYLE ISSUE | 7:00 A.M.

Wisdom Kaye Doesn’t Know How Much He Spends on Clothes “Too much. It’s kind of my whole life.”

By Samuel Hine



THE MEN'S STYLE ISSUE | 7:00 A.M.

Marcus Allen and the Downtown Sarong Society The designer has scenesters cosplaying as Montauk surfers. Will everyone else copy the look?

By Samuel Hine



PARENTING | 7:00 A.M.

The New Dads Who Cheat For some men, becoming a father can bring on an identity crisis that leads them to blow up their lives. What the hell are they thinking?

By Jason Diamond

ASTROLOGY | 5:00 A.M.

Your Daily Horoscope by Madame Clairevoyant: September 29, 2026 Focus on the present, not the future, under today’s Taurus moon.



CULTURE | YESTERDAY AT 9:02 P.M.

Lena Dunham Has a Spreadsheet for Her Vintage Baby Clothes What, you don’t?



CELEBRITY BABIES | YESTERDAY AT 8:05 P.M.

Barbara Palvin and Dylan Sprouse Had Their Baby! The world has another Virgo to contend with.



CULTURE | YESTERDAY AT 6:33 P.M.

Teresa Giudice Asks for ‘Compassion’ for Milania In an Instagram Story, the *Real Housewives* star explained that her daughter is trying to process her grief.



CULTURE | YESTERDAY AT 5:14 P.M.

Tomi Adeyemi Will ‘Never’ Adapt Another Novel She’s still shaken by the “biblical” nightmare of turning *Children of Blood and Bone* into a movie.



NEW GIGS | YESTERDAY AT 2:27 P.M.

The CFDA’s New Interim CEO Is a *Vogue* Alum Two weeks after Steven Kolb resigned for restraining PETA protesters, brand strategist Hildy Kuryk is stepping in.



NEPO BABIES | YESTERDAY AT 1:46 P.M.

Gabourey Sidibe Isn’t Sure Her Daughter Should Act “I want her to know that there are other jobs in the world.”



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