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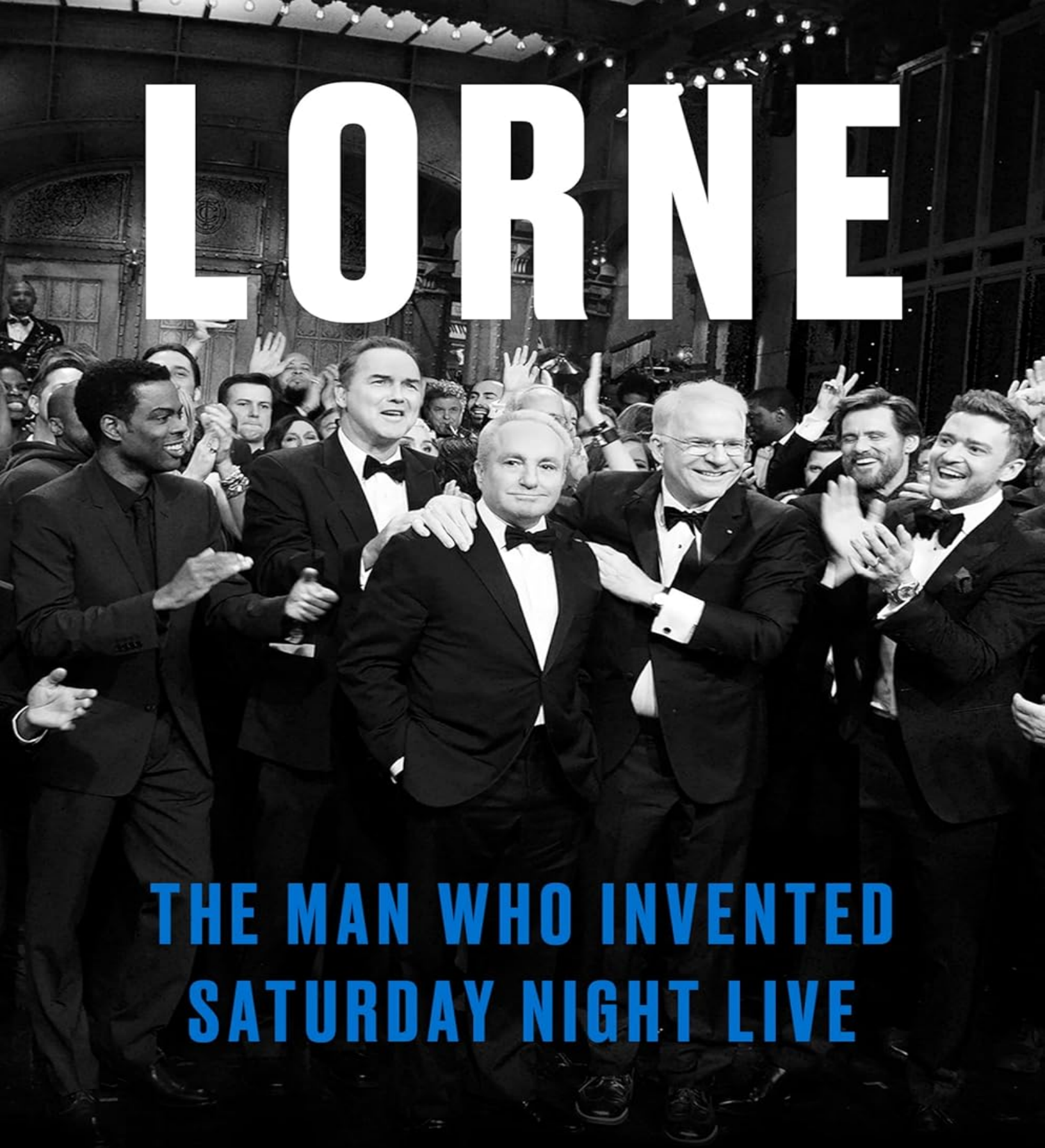

THE MAN WHO INVENTED SATURDAY NIGHT LIVE

SUSAN MORRISON

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FOR NANCY AND HELEN HANDELMAN

AND IN MEMORY OF LILLIAN ROSS

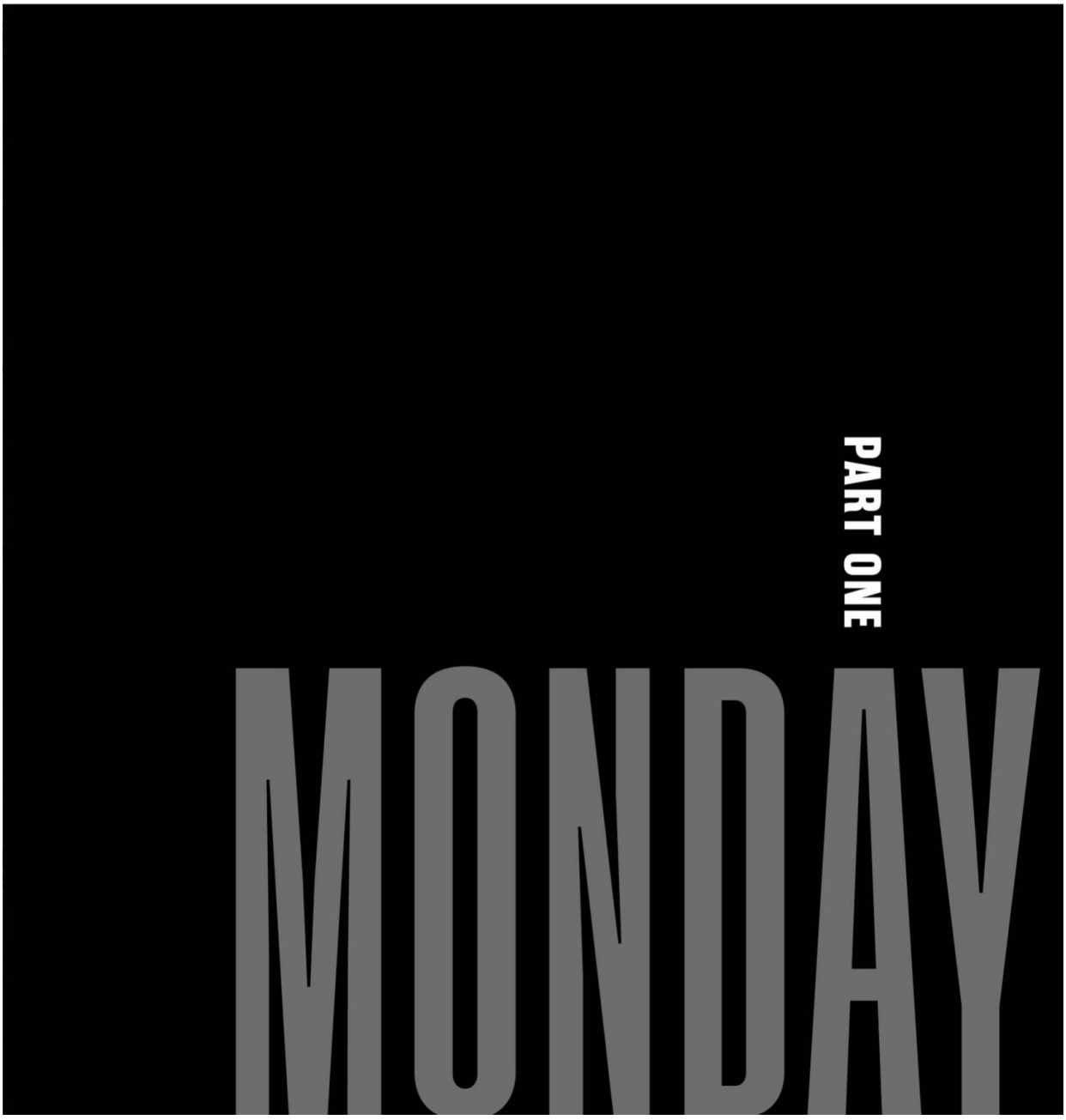
THAT'S SHOWBIZ. IT'S NOT A GOOD TIME UNLESS SOMEONE GETS HURT.

—TOM DAVIS

PROLOGUE

Every week at *Saturday Night Live* is just like every other week. Every week is the same because it's always intense, fueled by insanely hard work, full of triumphs and failures and backstage explosions, and because it's built around a guest host—Jennifer Lopez or Lizzo or Elon Musk—who often has no idea what they are doing. It has been Lorne Michaels's job for the last fifty years to make it seem as if they do, and to corral the egos and the talents on his staff into getting the show on the air, live. Since he created the show, in 1975, he has periodically tweaked and fine-tuned it, paying attention to how the cultural winds are drifting. But the formula has essentially remained the same. Michaels compares it to a Snickers bar: viewers expect a certain amount of peanuts, a certain amount of caramel, and a certain amount of chocolate. ("There's a comfort level," he says.) The show has good years and bad years, like the New York Yankees, or the Dow, and the audience has come to feel something like ownership of it. Just about every person who has ever watched SNL believes that its funniest years were the ones when they were in high school. Michaels likes to say that everyone in the entertainment business has two jobs: their actual job and figuring out how to fix SNL. (When J. D. Salinger died, in 2010, letters surfaced in which even he griped about what was wrong with the show.)

The show's cast members and writers have speculated for years about the secret behind Michaels's extraordinary tenure. "It's him and Hitchcock," John Mulaney says. "No one else has had this kind of longevity." Half of them believe that Michaels has repeatedly been able to remake the show for a new audience because he's a once-in-a-lifetime talent, a producer nonpareil. The other half wonders whether Michaels, gnomic and almost comically elusive, is a blank screen onto which they've all projected a lifetime of hopes and fears and dark jokes; whether he, like the cramped stages in SNL's Studio 8H, is just a backdrop for the ever-shifting brilliance of the country's best comic minds.


PART ONE
MONDAY

Lorne Michaels's week started off with a tea party and a death threat. The death threat wasn't aimed at him, but at Jimmy Fallon, the host of *The Tonight Show,* which Michaels executive produces. The tea party was in honor of his friend the playwright Tom Stoppard. After that, in his office on the seventeenth floor of 30 Rockefeller Plaza, he would preside over the first meeting for that week's episode of *Saturday Night Live*.

"I was just at a lovely tea at the Lotos Club, for Tom Stoppard," Michaels said, standing in his office, addressing a handful of his senior producers and writers, who had gathered for a preliminary meeting to troubleshoot the coming week and take a moment to check in. "It was very civilized—in contrast to *this*." He swiveled his head around to indicate present company, and gave a mild smirk. It was 5:45 on Monday, October 29, 2018, and in fifteen minutes the weekly Writers Meeting, the official kickoff to every episode of SNL, would start. (Monday, Michaels likes to say, is "a day of redemption," a fresh start after spending Sunday brooding over Saturday night's mistakes. On his tombstone, he says, will be the word UNEVEN.) Jonah Hill, the week's guest host, would soon be greeted by the show's twenty-seven writers and sixteen cast members, who would all squeeze into Lorne's office (everyone in the business refers to him by his first name, like Madonna, or Fidel) to pitch ideas for sketches. The goal is to make the host feel supported, like one of the gang. "At that point, you're more worried about them bolting than anything else," Michaels told me. The following six days would be punishing, physically and mentally, and would culminate in a live broadcast on Saturday night at 11:30, done with no net, before a worldwide audience of six million. Tina Fey, who worked on the show for a decade, says, "You don't say yes to that hosting job if you're not up for trying something insane." Over the years, performers have compared the experience of doing SNL to jumping out of an airplane (Fey), serving in the marine corps (Jan Hooks), and being in a "comedy emergency room" (Amy Poehler). One of Michaels's most-repeated lines is "We don't go on because we're ready, we go on because it's eleven-thirty."

The tea party for Stoppard earlier that day, held at one of the city's more elegant private clubs, was the kind of café-society affair, with a highbrow sheen, that Michaels enjoys. A phrase he uses often is "the high end of smart," and he likes to say, "If I'm the smartest person in the room, I'm in the wrong room." The cucumber sandwiches and champagne with such guests as Tina Brown and Rupert Murdoch had been a reprieve from a savage couple of weeks. Just hours before the party, he'd huddled at 30 Rock with FBI agents, who had paid a visit to Jimmy Fallon's *Tonight Show* offices on the sixth floor because Fallon's name turned up on a list of targets of a Florida man arrested for mailing pipe bombs to a dozen people who had been critical of President Donald Trump. On top of the death threat, Fallon was being attacked for having performed in blackface on SNL decades earlier; Michaels advised him not to engage—doing so would only feed the internet trolls. Michaels had been blasted in the press, too: Taran Killam, a former cast member who used to play Donald Trump, had recently complained on a podcast that Michaels always insisted that he make Trump "likable," and the story wouldn't go away. (One of Michaels's core comedy tenets is that every impersonation should contain a speck of humanity or charm, to make the character relatable. Playing a character "from hate," he'll say, isn't funny; he often quotes Elaine May: "When in doubt, seduce.")

"I just want to go over where we are this week," Michaels, in a dress shirt and tie, said to the small group in his office, fifteen minutes before the Writers Meeting began. (This regular confab is known as the Topical Meeting.) "We're doing a show two days before the midterm elections." President Trump had been crisscrossing the country, holding rallies to whip up his base against the predicted "blue wave" of Democratic candidates. Since Trump's election, SNL had been on a high, getting the best ratings in years and winning eighteen Emmys (the show has collected 103 in its fifty-year history). Alec Baldwin had become an unofficial cast member, regularly undergoing hours in the hair and makeup department in order to portray Trump as a lip-scrunching, slit-eyed scowl of aggrieved petulance. The impression was popular—people were stopping Baldwin on the street to

thank him—and it provoked the president to spew unhinged Twitter rants, to the delight of everyone at SNL.

Viewers always expect politics in the show, but the news cycle was moving so quickly that it was impossible to say what stories would feel relevant by Saturday night. “Unless somebody has a foolproof idea now,” Michaels said. “Trump is just going to keep going whirlwind.”

Colin Jost, one of the show’s two head writers and an anchor of the Weekend Update segment, wondered aloud whether Barack Obama had been out campaigning for Democrats.

“He was in Georgia with Stacey Abrams,” Michaels said. “Will”—Ferrell—“was there too, knocking on doors.”

A producer asked whether Alec Baldwin would be available. Michaels said that Baldwin had called to say that he would be sitting this show out. “He was in touch with the FBI too,” Michaels said, referring to the pipe-bomber’s target list. He chuckled and added, “These are dangerous times.”

Michaels stands about five foot eight, but his posture and nonchalant confidence belie his actual height. His eyes are close-set and dark, with a glitter of mockery. Crinkles sprout from the corners. The attitude he projects is perhaps best captured by a phrase that A. J. Liebling used to describe a wine: “warm but dry, like an enthusiasm held under restraint.” (His friend Paul McCartney says, “He always reminded me of Jack Benny.”) His smile, when he summons one, is a straight line that bisects his face like a slash. His hair is silvery and frequently barbered; it frames his face in a brushy fringe, like a hedgehog, or a senator. A gleaming white asterisk—his Order of Canada rosette—is usually in his lapel; and on his right hand is a bulky gold signet ring, set with a square red stone engraved with Sufi characters, which he bought in the 1970s at a junk shop in Santa Monica. He has had replicas made for his wife and three grown children. “It was an old imam’s sealing ring,” he told me. “The guy I bought it from told me the inscription means ‘With the luck of Ishmael.’ And Ishmael had no luck whatsoever. So it’s a joke, a Sufi joke. You could open with this in Persia.”

Michaels has four chief deputies, each of whom embodies a different facet of his personality. Erik Kenward, a calm *Harvard Lampoon* alum with a neatly trimmed beard, has worked at the show since 2001 and has absorbed the boss's unflappable steadiness, with a tinge of the long-suffering. Colin Jost, who was also a *Harvard Lampoon* editor, is, like Michaels, demonstrably well-read and au courant about politics. He is married to Scarlett Johansson, which lends him a Hollywood shimmer that Michaels appreciates. Erin Doyle, whose family owned pubs in Philadelphia, rose through the ranks after starting as an intern and became one of Michaels's assistants. She has a palpable warmth and, like Michaels, a knack for dealing with high-strung famous people; she also produces shows for his production company, Broadway Video. Steve Higgins moonlights as Jimmy Fallon's announcer, egging on Fallon's boyish tendencies. He grew up in Des Moines, and had an early cable show with his brother in which they chain-smoked in a kitchen and watched comedy clips. He is a booster of silliness, a quality that Michaels considers essential to the show; and he is a reliable errand man when Michaels, known to avoid confrontation, has bad news to deliver.

In the Topical Meeting in Michaels's office, Doyle mentioned that Jim Downey had called with an idea for the cold open, the newsy sketch that starts every show and ends with a performer looking into the camera and shouting, "Live, from New York, it's Saturday Night!" Downey is a revered figure in these offices, a former head writer who was hired right out of Harvard in the show's second season, and stayed for thirty-three years. He has been responsible for many of SNL's most memorable political sketches. (The word "strategery," deployed by Will Ferrell's George W. Bush, was a Downey creation.) Downey and Michaels have always viewed the show's mandate as speaking truth to power, whoever that power might be. But in the age of Trump, many SNL staffers were finding that holding powerful liberals accountable was tough to stomach.

Doyle said, "Downey's idea was Chuck Schumer and Nancy Pelosi giving a press conference, and the point is that they're bummed out that no pipe

bombs were mailed to *them*." Everyone laughed. But the bomber was last week's story—it would feel old by Saturday.

Michaels told the group that he planned to ask the cast to stay behind after the Writers Meeting. "I want to go through their various complaints," he said. Two of his star cast members were in revolt, and he planned to tap his patriarchal side to smooth things over. ("I think all comedy shows—this sounds a bit pretentious, but I am a bit pretentious—are based on family," he's said.) Cecily Strong, a dark-haired comedian who regularly killed with her impression of Melania Trump, was in a sulk about being asked to make fun of the Democratic Senator Dianne Feinstein in a sketch about the confirmation hearings for Trump's Supreme Court nominee Brett Kavanaugh. (Strong's Feinstein had barked, "We're back from lunch. I had *soup,*" in a doddering drawl.) Leslie Jones, at fifty-one the oldest performer on the show, was becoming increasingly vocal about her conviction that the writers didn't know how to write for her. (Jones had been made a cast member in 2014, when Michaels, responding to criticism about the show's record on diversity, auditioned twenty-five Black women in the middle of the season. Two seasons later, Jones was nominated for an Emmy.) One more distraction: Pete Davidson, at twenty-four the youngest cast member, was being battered on social media after the pop star Ariana Grande called off their highly publicized quickie engagement.

Talking about the cast, Michaels continued, "I want to try to make them understand the distinction between their own political feelings and the script." There had been a lot of last-minute tinkering lately, with cast members wanting to adjust their lines just before air. At SNL, the writer is paramount, and sometimes the cast resents this. He continued, "If they think that they shouldn't be making fun of this person or that person, we have a problem." Michaels has been broadcasting political satire on the show since the seventies, when Chevy Chase played Gerald Ford as a bumbling klutz and Dan Aykroyd impersonated Jimmy Carter talking a caller down from a bad acid trip. ("Were [the pills] barrel-shaped?" he asks. "Okay, right, you did some Orange Sunshine.") He's accustomed to dealing with the ardent

political sensitivities of millennials. “Also,” he added, “there’s nobody we ever *did* on the show who wasn’t thrilled about it,” he said. “See Anthony Scaramucci. Or Dick Cheney.”

Michael Che, a Black comic who is Jost’s co–head writer and Update anchor, said, “Really? Cheney liked it?”

Michaels made a half grin. “Oddly enough, we’re not as menacing as you would think,” he said. He learned years ago that politicians like to appear on the show, in order to look smarter by satirizing themselves.

Jonah Hill would soon arrive on the seventeenth floor. Before he came in for a ceremonial powwow with Michaels, the inner circle had a little more business to go over. Lindsay Shookus, the talent coordinator, mentioned that this would be Hill’s fifth time hosting. That meant they could do a sketch about him joining the Five Timers Club, a pretend wood-paneled sanctum where veteran hosts (Steve Martin, Justin Timberlake, Melissa McCarthy, among others), drink brown liquor and wear smoking jackets emblazoned with a Five Timers crest.

“Yeah-yeah-yeah-yeah,” Michaels said, the syllables tumbling out in a staccato rush. It’s a verbal tic, along with “No-no-no-no, I know,” which also indicates agreement. The longtime SNL writer Robert Smigel says that Michaels’s “yeah-yeah-yeah-yeah” thing is the one bit of Jewishness still left in him.

“Do we *have* a jacket?” Michaels asked.

“We can have one made,” Shookus said.

“So few things fit…,” Michaels mused, referring to Hill’s recent weight loss. Mentally scrolling through Hill’s previous four appearances on the show, he mentioned a sketch that Hill had done about a six-year-old at Benihana. “So he’s here to do comedy?”

Shookus nodded. “He’s sick of talking about vulnerability.” Hill was fresh from promoting his directorial debut, a brooding independent movie about a suicidal teenager and skateboard culture, called *Mid90s*.

“All right,” Michaels said. “Bring him in.” The room emptied, and Jonah Hill strode in and stuck out his hand. He had on jeans, a black shirt buttoned

up to the neck, and a trim khaki-colored jacket.

"Congratulations on the movie," Michaels said, as Hill took a seat in a chair across the desk. "Was Scott Rudin involved in it?"

"He produced it!" Hill said brightly, not realizing that Michaels was making an extremely deadpan joke, the kind that comedy people refer to as "dog whistle." Rudin is known for being an energetic promoter of his own projects, and had likely pushed for Hill's booking on SNL.

"Reaaaally?" Michaels said in mock surprise, making his joke clear.

Hill broke into nervous laughter. "Ha ha ha! That was very good! Your delivery was so dry that I literally didn't pick up on it."

Then Michaels indulged in a little insider talk, designed to draw Hill in and make him feel like he had a seat at the grown-ups' table. A message was embedded in the talk, as it often is when Michaels unspools a tale of Old Hollywood and drops a lot of names.

"I think Scott has turned into the best version of Scott Rudin," Michaels said. "He was more driven at the beginning." (Rudin is known for impetuously firing assistants and throwing staplers. A few years later he would be forced to step back from his businesses after former employees went to the press with these tales.)

Hill nodded. "I would hear all those bad things about him, but, as a director, I had nothing but the best experience," he said. "Do you recognize that sort of change happening with a lot of legendary people?"

"Oh, yeah-yeah-yeah-yeah," Michaels said. "Mike used to tell this story about when they were editing *Catch-22*." (He took it for granted that Hill knew he was referring to Mike Nichols. Sometimes he will pause after saying a famous friend's first name; then, as if realizing that his interlocutor is at a loss, he will supply the surname almost apologetically, in a clipped way. This results in a lot of sentences with a halting cadence: "Paul…*Simon* used to say…" Or "Jack…*Nicholson* told me." Colleagues refer to "Jack" and "Mick" and "Paul" as "Lorne's all-stars.") "Mike was walking on the beach with his editor, Sam O'Steen, and another friend. Sam said to the guy, 'You notice something different about Mike? He's not an asshole anymore.' "

Hill gave a huge laugh, elated at being included in this cozy conversational orbit with the late director of *The Graduate*.

"Because he'd *been* an asshole on his first two movies," Michaels clarified. "It's that thing of, when you start to *believe* in yourself, when you're not so frightened—"

Hill jumped in: "Then you don't have to be a psychopath!"

The cautionary tale dispensed, Michaels turned to business: "So, we're going to do a comedy show? The writers are going to come in, you're going to pretend to like their pitches."

Hill wagged his head up and down. "It's pure joy to be here," he said.

Michaels rules SNL with detached but absolute power. He harbors no illusions that his Canadian tendency toward self-deprecation is taken seriously by anyone. One talent agent routinely tells clients auditioning for Michaels to always remember that *he* is the real star of the show. He is the alpha in most of his employees' lives. To those people, and to the wider comedy world, he is, not accidentally, a mythic figure, a mysterious object of obsession. "He is aware of his own Lorne-ness," Mike Myers says. Conversations about him are peppered with comparisons: He is the Godfather (Chris Rock, Will Forte), Jay Gatsby (Bernie Brillstein), Obi-Wan Kenobi (Tracy Morgan), the Great and Powerful Oz (David Spade, Kate McKinnon), Charles Foster Kane (Jason Sudeikis), a cult leader (Victoria Jackson), Tom Ripley (Bill Hader), Machiavelli, and both the Robert Moses and the Darth Vader of comedy (Bruce McCall). Bob Odenkirk feels that Michaels "set himself up as some kind of very distant, strange Comedy God." "There's so many people who, their whole lives, have been trying to figure him out," Bill Hader says. Another colleague put it this way: "I feel about Lorne the way I feel about the ocean. It's huge and beautiful, but I'm afraid of it."

Michaels's office door opened, and Hill turned his chair to face the room, as thirty-some people filed in, most in jeans or sweatpants, several in slippers, many chewing gum. At least a few were fresh from talking about Michaels and the show in therapy sessions, Monday afternoon being the

optimal therapy slot, given the week's ironclad schedule. As in elementary school, people sit in the same place each week: four across a velvet couch, a dozen on chairs placed against the walls, others standing in the doorway and wedged near Michaels's private bathroom (his Emmy statuettes are crammed in a corner by the sink), and around fifteen on the floor, their legs folded like grade-schoolers. The effect was of a young prince—Hill—on a throne, a throng of supplicants at his feet, the potentate behind him at the desk. (More than one staffer has heard their therapist say, "You start your week by *sitting on the floor*?") Tina Fey describes the Monday meeting, with its mandatory genuflecting, as "a church ritual."

Michaels, his back to a window framing the Empire State Building, put his feet on his desk. He's had it since 1975, when he first set up shop at NBC. "There were deer running through the halls of Rockefeller Center then," he told me. Of all the floors he was shown when picking out space for his new venture, he chose seventeen, because he was born on the seventeenth of November, and because it was serviced by a different elevator bank than the executive floor. He found the network-issued steel desks and shelves too corporate, so he hunted out some funkier wooden pieces in dusty NBC storerooms. The network had initially put Michaels in temporary quarters, in the vacant office of a former programming executive. In the desk he found some old Maalox tablets and a desiccated ivy plant. As if trying to keep alive a connection to a swankier era of NBC—the age of Toscanini's NBC Symphony Orchestra and *The Tonight Show* with Steve Allen—he nursed the plant, faithfully hydrating it with a special mister. Today its vines of heart-shaped leaves climb the window frame and spread along the top of a pair of barrister's bookcases. The shelves hold hundreds of SNL episodes on VHS tapes.

Instead of the barren expanse that characterizes the average mogul's desk, Michaels's is cluttered with framed photos and kitschy totems—a bobblehead doll of Yankees outfielder Paul O'Neill; a Bokar Coffee can (it's the brand his mother drank) full of sharpened pencils, points up; a cut-glass canister of Tootsie Rolls (he once made a nice profit investing in the