

PROMETHEUS UNBOUND

INSTANT SLUM CLEARANCE

APRIL 1, 1965 | JUNE MEYER



Harlem is life dying inside a closet, an excrescence beginning where a green park ends, a self-perpetuating disintegration of walls, ceilings, doorways, lives. It is also, of course, a political embarrassment for which no political solution is adequate. A housing project planned in the middle of a slum is not an answer. Harlem has been much lamented, but these statistics may be less familiar than others:

1. A typical Harlem child will score lower on an I.Q. test in the sixth grade than he scored three years earlier in the third grade.
2. Nine-tenths of its housing units are more than thirty years old.
3. Half the youngsters live with one parent or with none.
4. Harlem has a population of a quarter of a million, but it doesn't contain a high school.
5. Traffic deaths for Harlem youths appreciably exceed the rate plaguing the whole island of Manhattan.

Skyrise for Harlem is a proposal to rescue a quarter million lives by completely transforming their environment. New Harlem will encompass a half million people by removing old limits in exchange for natural boundaries. Harlem will widen from river to river across the island. Its new space will accommodate an additional quarter million residents—everyone willing to participate in the integrated transformation of a ghetto.

Skyrise for Harlem can be completed in thirty-six months. The first year will be spent in what R. Buckminster Fuller describes as "tooling up": organizing the mass production of structural parts and utility units, including all basic furniture.

Redevelopment generally means the *removal* of slum residents while land is cleared for new buildings and new purposes. In fact, "redevelopment" is frequently a pretext for the permanent expulsion of Negro populations. Fuller's design permits all residents to remain on site while new and vastly improved dwelling facilities rise directly above the old. No one will move anywhere but up. New Harlem will be supported by columns driven into the backyards of the slum, and once the elevated replacement is complete and inhabited, the lower depths will be cleared for roadways and park space. The design will obliterate a valley of shadows: Skyrise for Harlem means literal elevation of Harlem to the level of Morningside Heights. Partial renovation is not enough. Piecemeal healing provides temporary relief at best and may create as many problems as it cures. A half century of despair requires exorcism.

The devastating effects of negligence become easier to understand—if more difficult to forgive—when you consider that New York City itself has been guided by nothing that resembles a master plan since 1811. The city is a model of design by accident, of construction in response to critical demand, high-level payoffs and tax expediences. Following the Harlem riots of 1964 a profusion of remedies for what was at last accepted as a critical situation appeared everywhere; nowhere, however, was environmental redesign given prime emphasis. Yet it is architecture, conceived of in its fullest meaning as the creation of environment, which may actually determine the pace, pattern and quality of living experience.

An aerial view of New Harlem will disclose a radical landscape: vast, cleared ranges of space with fifteen peaks rising into the sky. These fifteen widely separated conical structures will house a half million people. A cross section of these structures resembles abstract, stylized Christmas trees evenly broadening toward their base with central, supporting trunks. Each tree town is one hundred circular decks high. The lowest level begins ten stories aboveground, above dust level and major cloverleaf-highway systems.

Fuller's circular decked towers are fireproof (concrete and steel cables) and may be delivered in large sections by helicopter. A central supporting mast also functions as the distributing tube for power, light, heat and disposal facilities independent of municipal utilities. The mast is compressional while the decks hang inside a tensional web (i.e., steel supporting cables). Open space between decks avoids a sense of impenetrable mass. From the masthead, lenses capture the light and heat of the sun.

Circling the central mast is a parking system of ramps that never cross. The huge interior space next permits a circling of shops, supermarkets, game rooms and workshops on every deck, plus, on some levels, a cross view of four hundred feet. The penultimate circling of the central mast contains dwelling units which provide an average of 1200 square feet per family as against an average of 720 in today's public housing. This 1200 square feet does not include the parking space given each family nor the balconies which constitute the perimeter of these great wheels of life. Every room has a view. From these hanging gardens, both rivers will be visible.

A comprehensive designer must conserve natural resources and yet control their effects. One of Fuller's solutions for this design problem will be seen in the sky. Protective watersheds will enclose the sky of Harlem like overlapping umbrellas. Rain may cascade visibly from these watersheds to be piped into New York reservoirs. The watersheds float on the strength of transparent truss systems.

Rather than the commonly known sidewalk, there will be wide walkways entirely separate from the cloverleaf ribbonry that will divide the high-speed through traffic from local traffic. Normal grid layout of city blocks will not stifle the reconstructed Harlem. Roughly, eight square city blocks will equal one of the new towering trees of life. Ordinary grid design with its parallel building produces a rigid confrontation of mass-against-mass and rectangular patterns deaden space into a monotonous experience. The circular-decked towers provide tension supports for roads and walkways.

Reconstructed Harlem will increase connections to other communities: 125th Street, as the overloaded thoroughfare of city bus, private car, commercial truck, railroad and subway traffic, now disappears into a coherent organization of goals and rates of approach to these goals. For instance, high-speed traffic from the Triborough Bridge will be separately routed over an arterial system similar to that of the Pulaski Skyway in New Jersey. Various peel-offs into Manhattan give option to the driver. Now it becomes possible to travel from the Triborough nonstop over Manhattan Island and onto a newly created Riverspan Bridge at 125th Street into New Jersey. This bridge multiplies functional reasons for Harlem residents and the other island inhabitants to commingle and cooperate. The inconvenience of having "to go down into the city" in order to leave it will no longer paralyze northern islanders.

Last year, New York City's Planning Commissioner Ballard and Mayor Wagner agreed on a proposal to domesticate the shoreline of New York to permit human beings a share of the river's edge. With Skyrise for Harlem, two marinas will provide recreation and supplement transportation via the river.

Skyrise for Harlem creates cultural centers decked into the sky; cultural centers offering practice studios for musicians, concert halls, theatres, workshops, forums for symposia, dancing pavilions, and athletic fields as well as pathways for strolling under trees. Contemporary sculpture will enrich the open spaces of elevated Harlem. Space will be reserved for the construction of major city institutions such as a Family Court. This accords with the five-year plan promoted by Manhattan Borough President Edward R. Dudley.



VIEW ARTICLE PAGES

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R. Buckminster Fuller designs a total solution to an American dilemma: here, for instance, is how it would work for Harlem

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As Dudley told this writer, the introduction of city institutions into Harlem "would serve to show that their area has not been specifically designed to be set apart."

During the last five years, New York City's Housing Authority has spent \$361,407,000 to shelter 30,915 families. Skyrise for Harlem will shelter about 110,000 families at a cost to be determined once the assembly-line manufacturing of all its parts is undertaken by an industry willing to convert, for example, from the furnishings of war to the furnishings of peace. The enormous sum of units entailed by this design assumes the pioneer, belated establishment of housing on a thoroughly industrial basis. One need only consider the economics of mass production and its cost saving per unit (per consumer) in the manufacture of automobiles to realize that the organization of a housing industry is incredibly overdue.

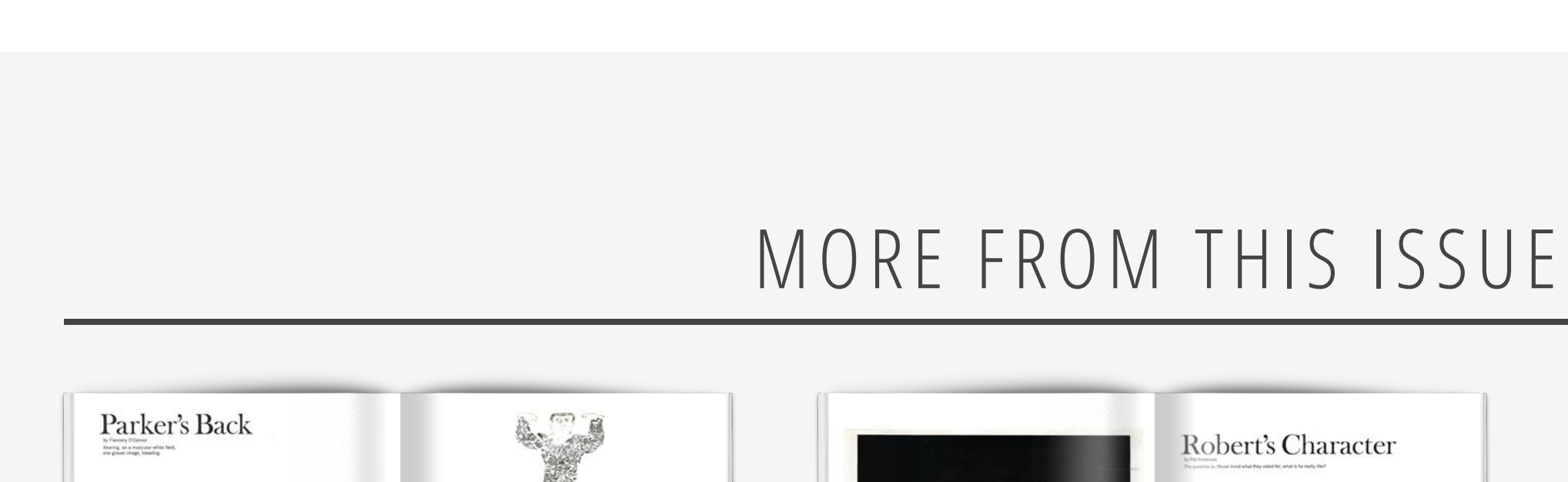
Private financing of Skyrise for Harlem should regard this undertaking as an obvious, regenerative investment. It well might prove possible for private finance to receive government assistance in the form of tax abatement (taxing property at the original value) and deficit subsidy comparable to that enjoyed by public housing.

Where we are physically is enmeshed with our deepest consciousness of self. There is no evading architecture, no meaningful denial of our position. You can build to defend the endurance of man, to protect his existence, to illuminate it. But you cannot build for these purposes merely in spasmodic response to past and present crises, for then crisis, like the poor, will be with us always. If man is to have not only a future but a destiny, it must be consciously and deliberately designed.

Before and After. In the photograph below, Harlem today. In Buckminster Fuller's rendering at left, the same area as it would be re-created. Central Park ends at the extreme left, the George Washington Bridge is at the upper right. Traffic will flow over a new bridge to be built at 125th Street into the system of elevated, interconnected highways connecting all fifteen towers. These highways will handle through traffic in all directions and permit exit into the buildings themselves.

Utopian Details. On the opposite page: **1.** A cross section of one tower showing the spiraling, three-lane ramp reaching from a ground level to top of tower; the ramp is edged with walks and parking areas. **2.** An overhead view of a tower at the tenth-story level showing the interconnecting elevated highway and the system of interchanges. **3.** A cross section showing the relation of the living units at perimeter of tower to the internal roadways. **4.** Floor plan of a typical apartment.

Above: **5.** Cross section of an apartment with adjacent parking area; exterior wall of tower is at left, center of column at right.



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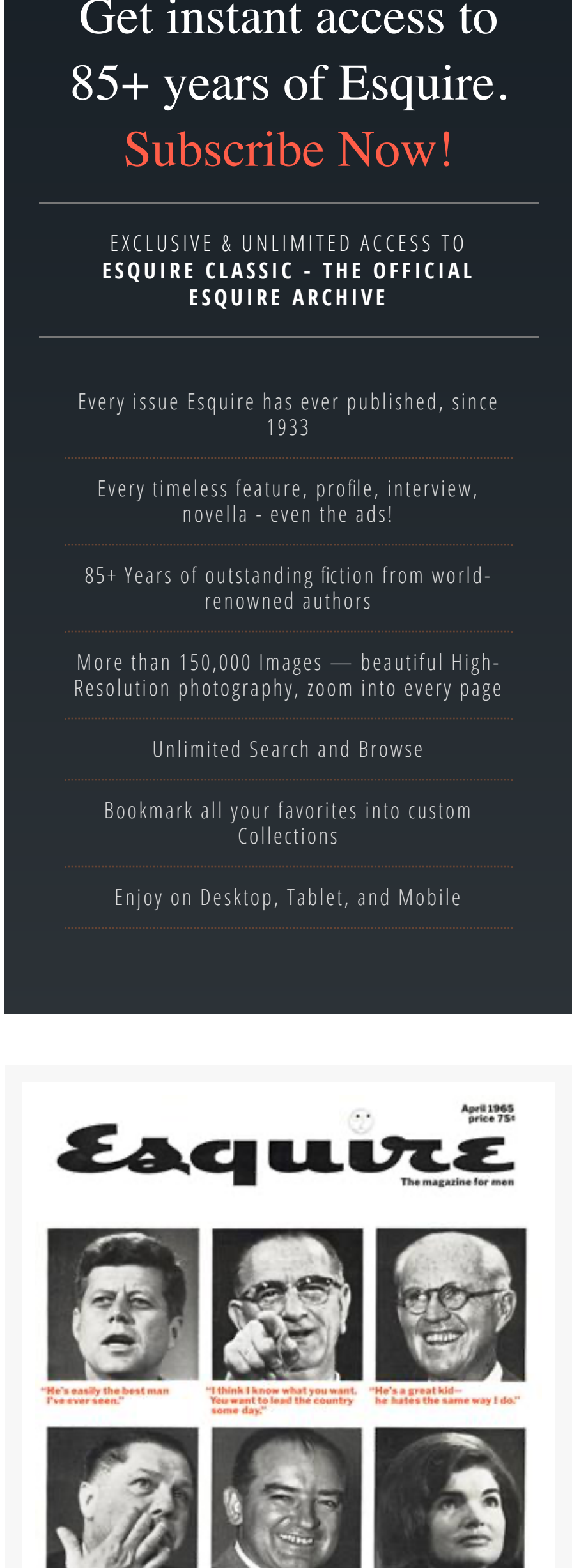
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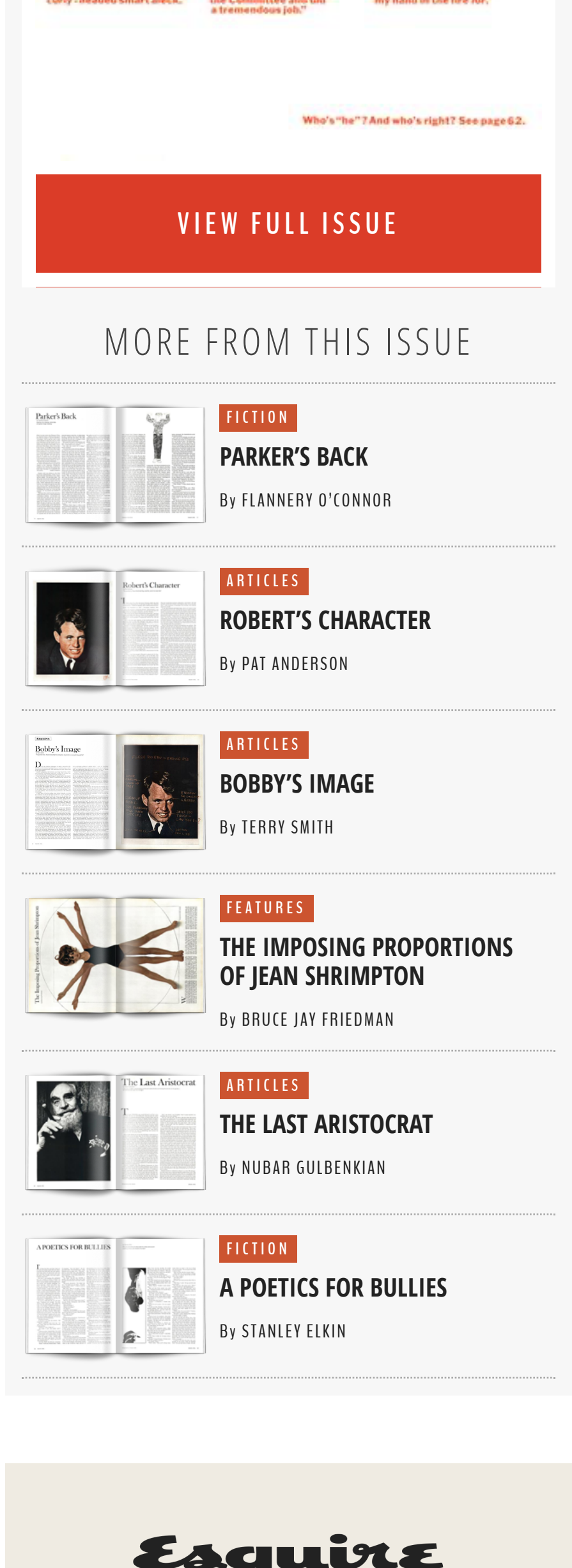
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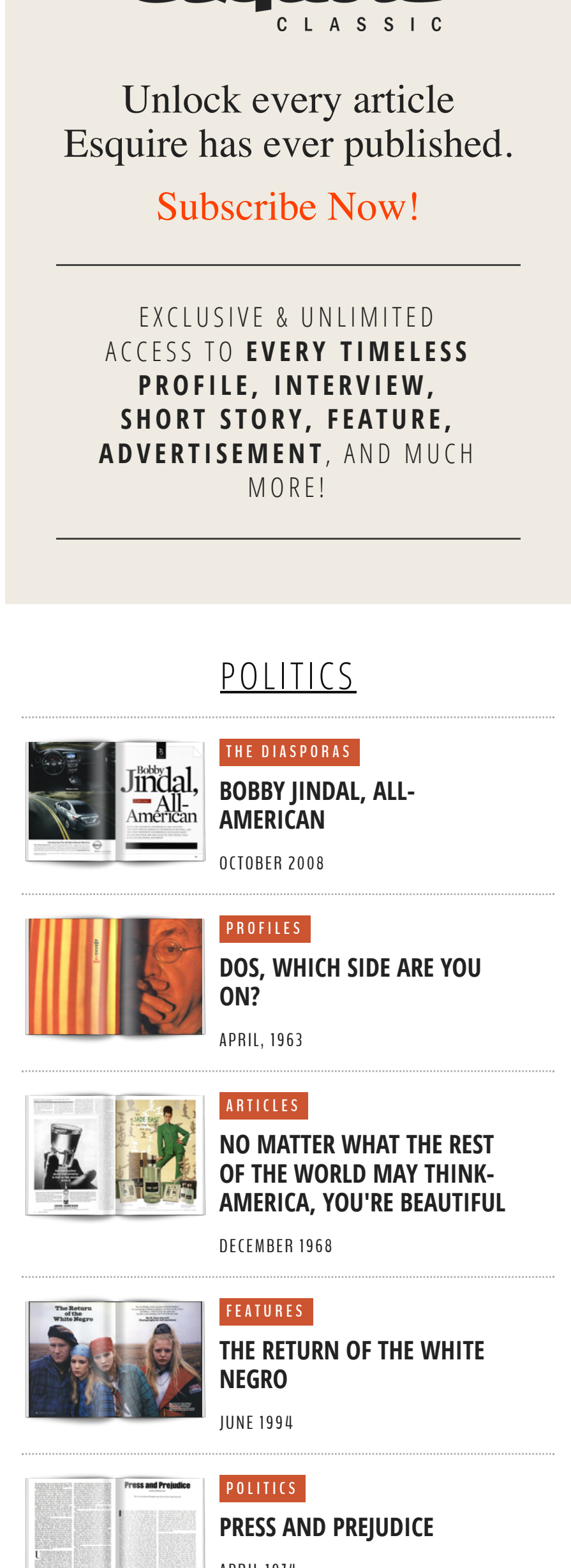
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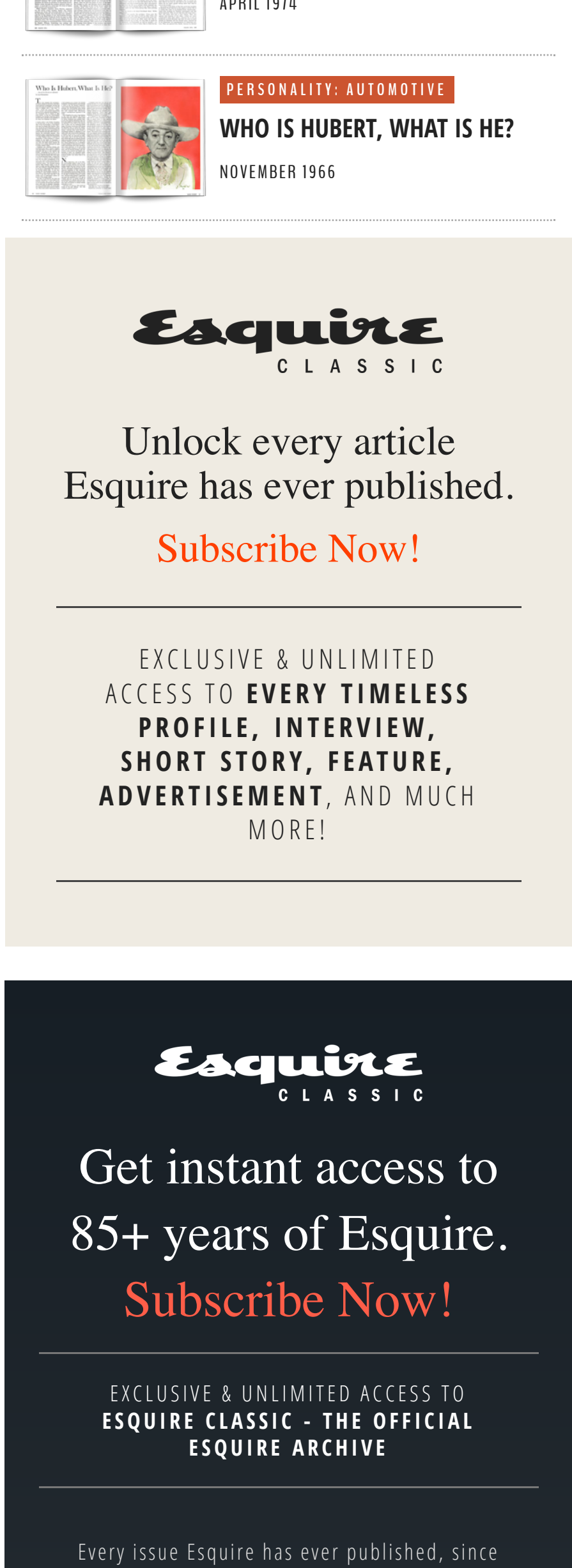
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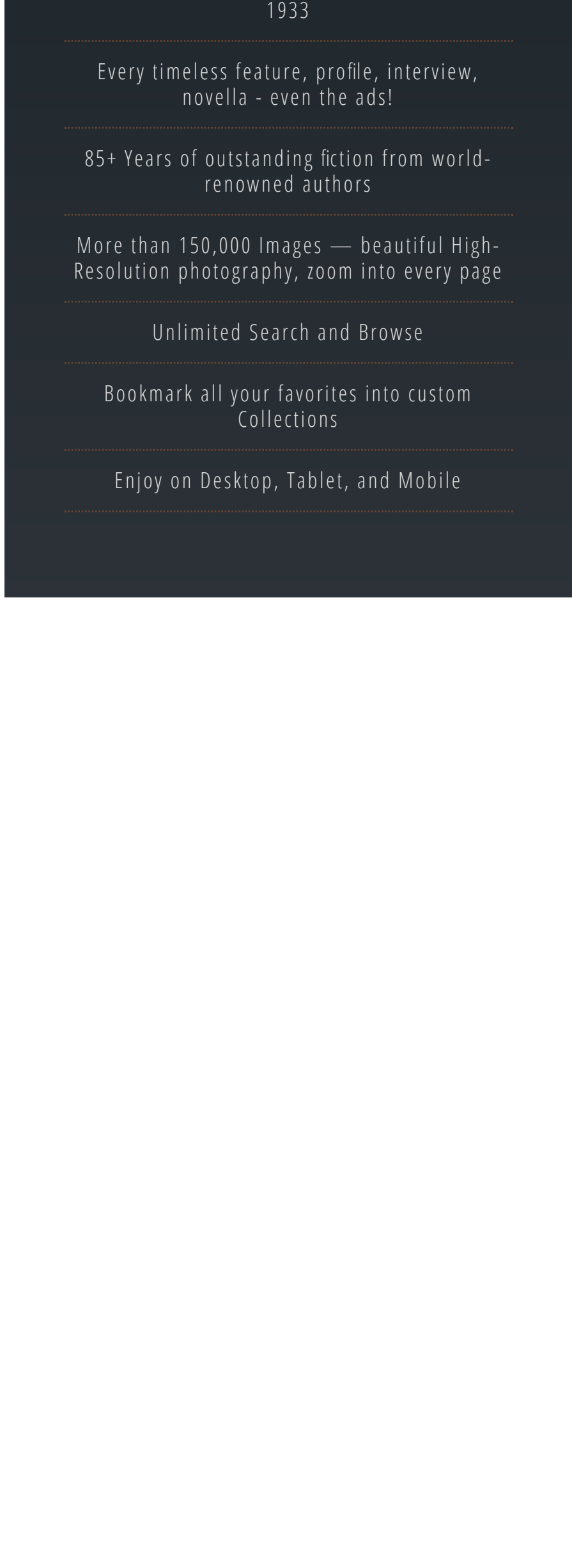
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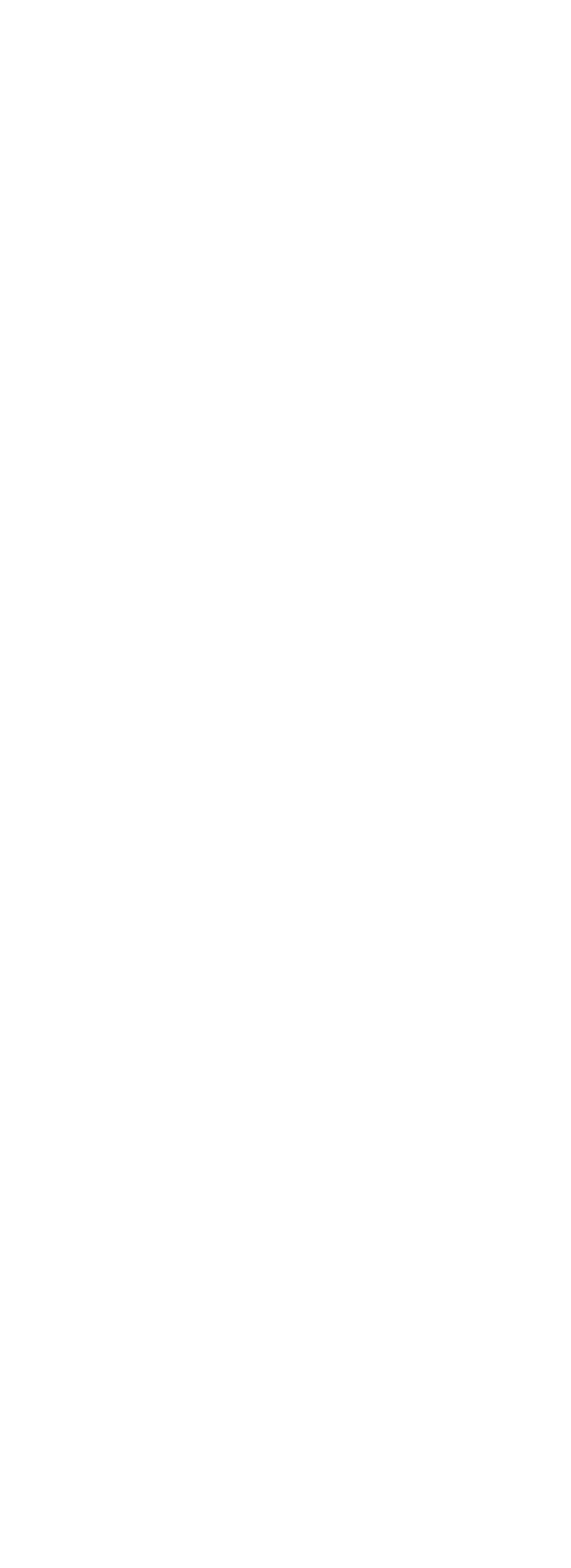
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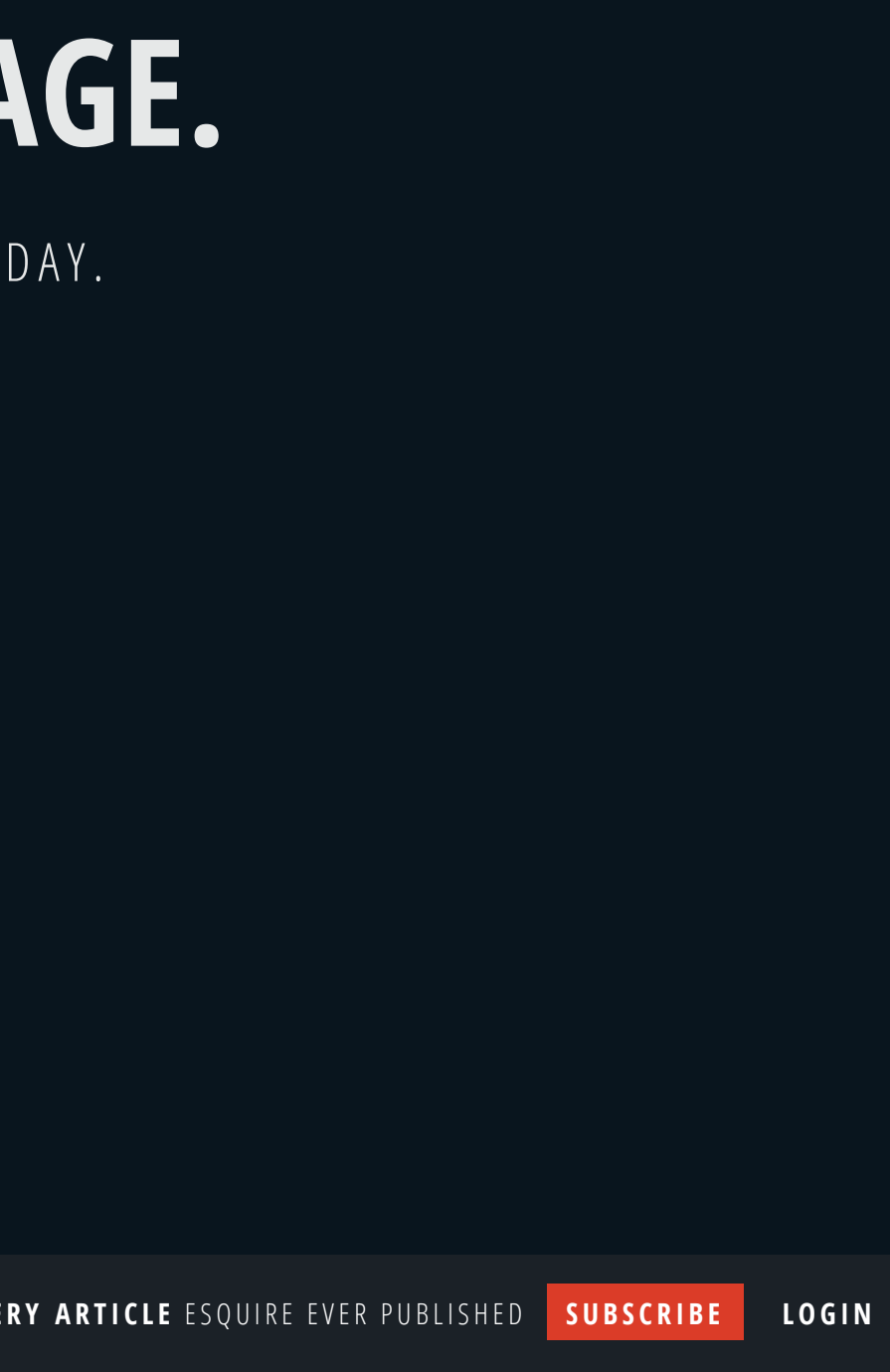
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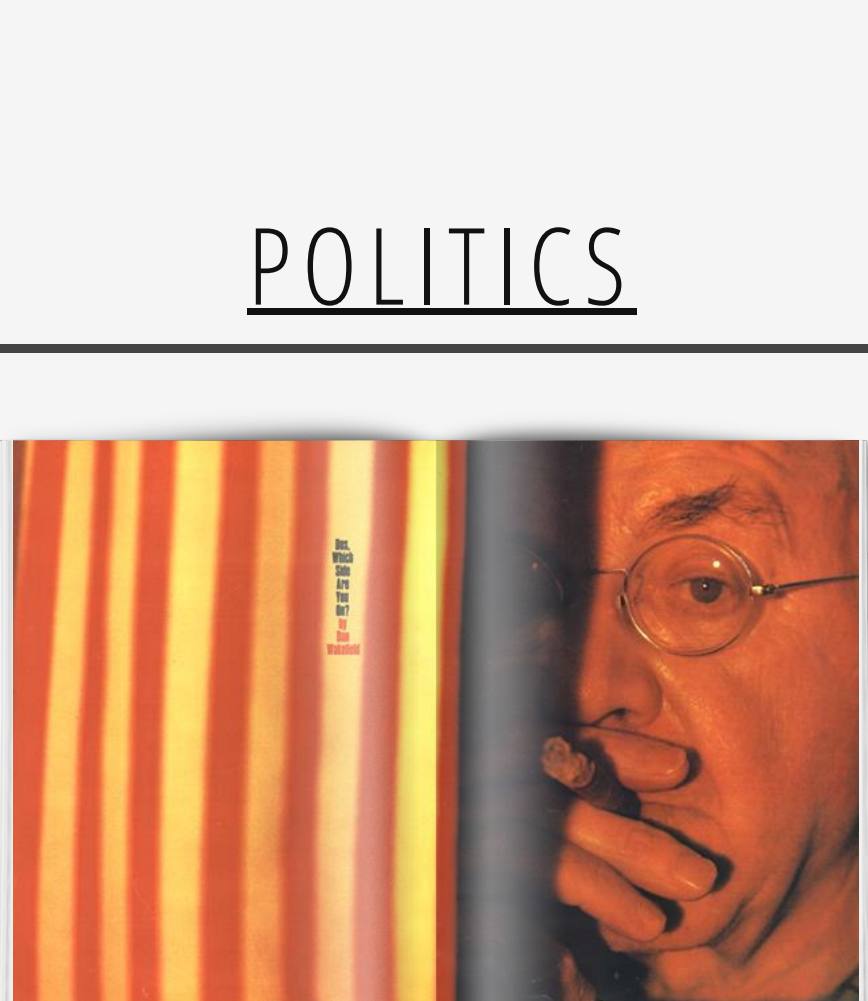
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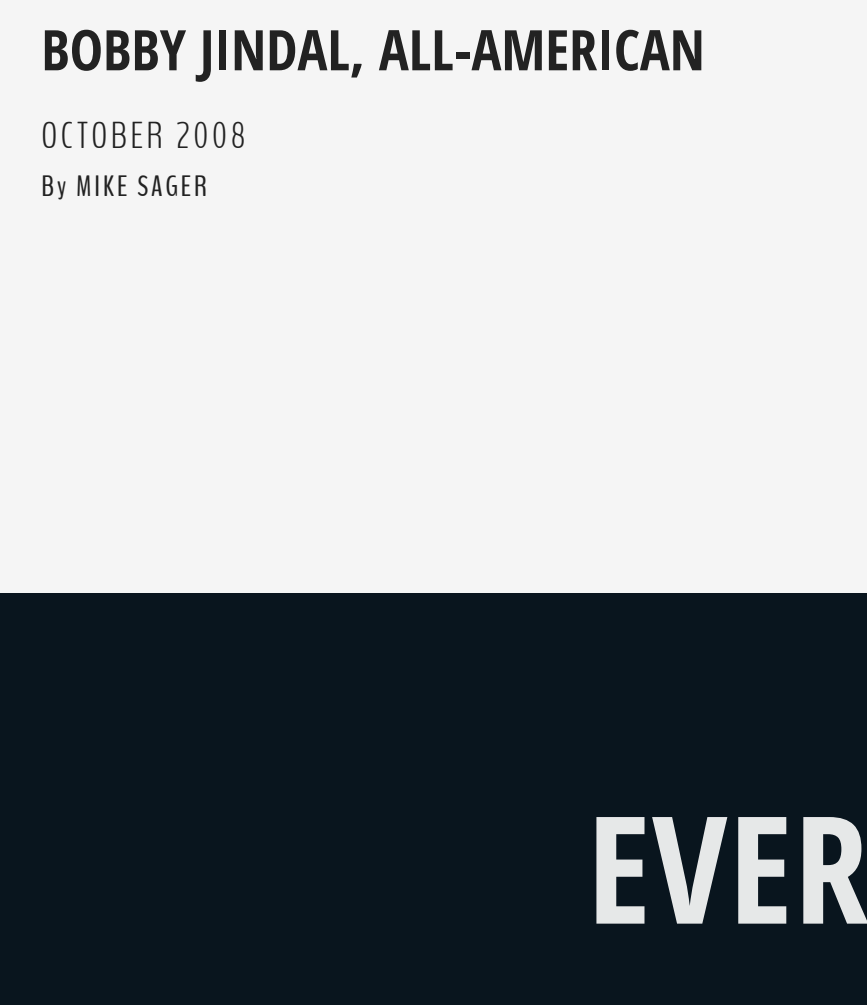
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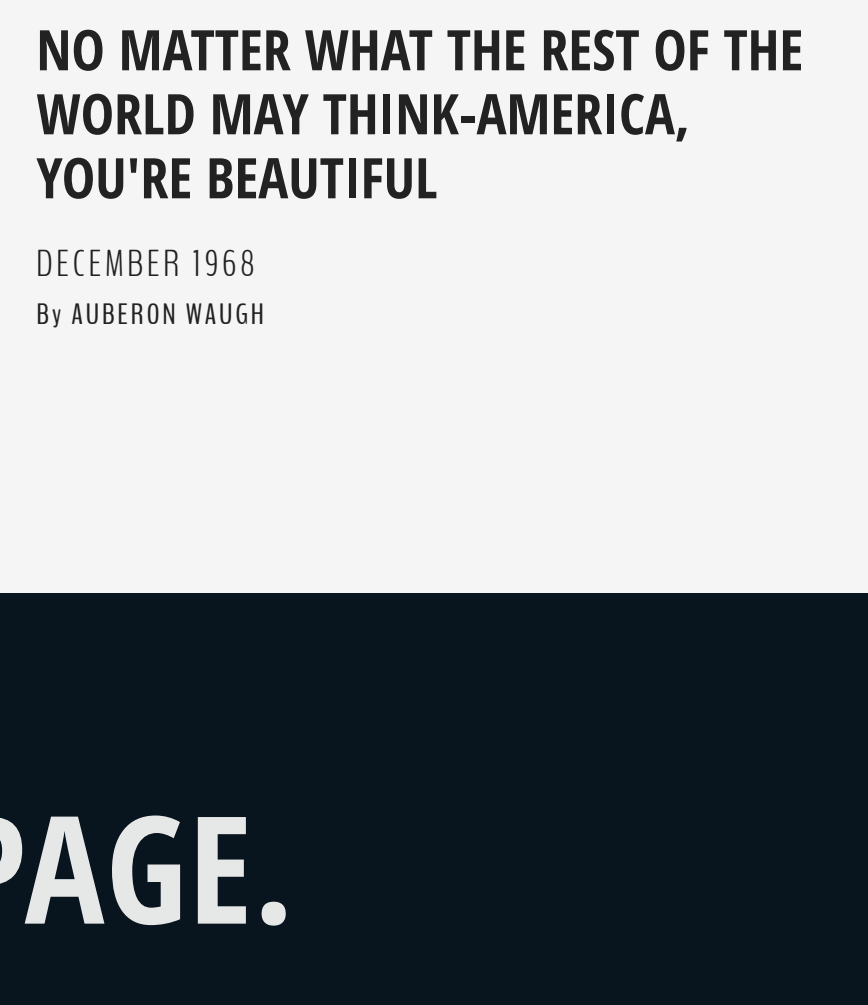
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