

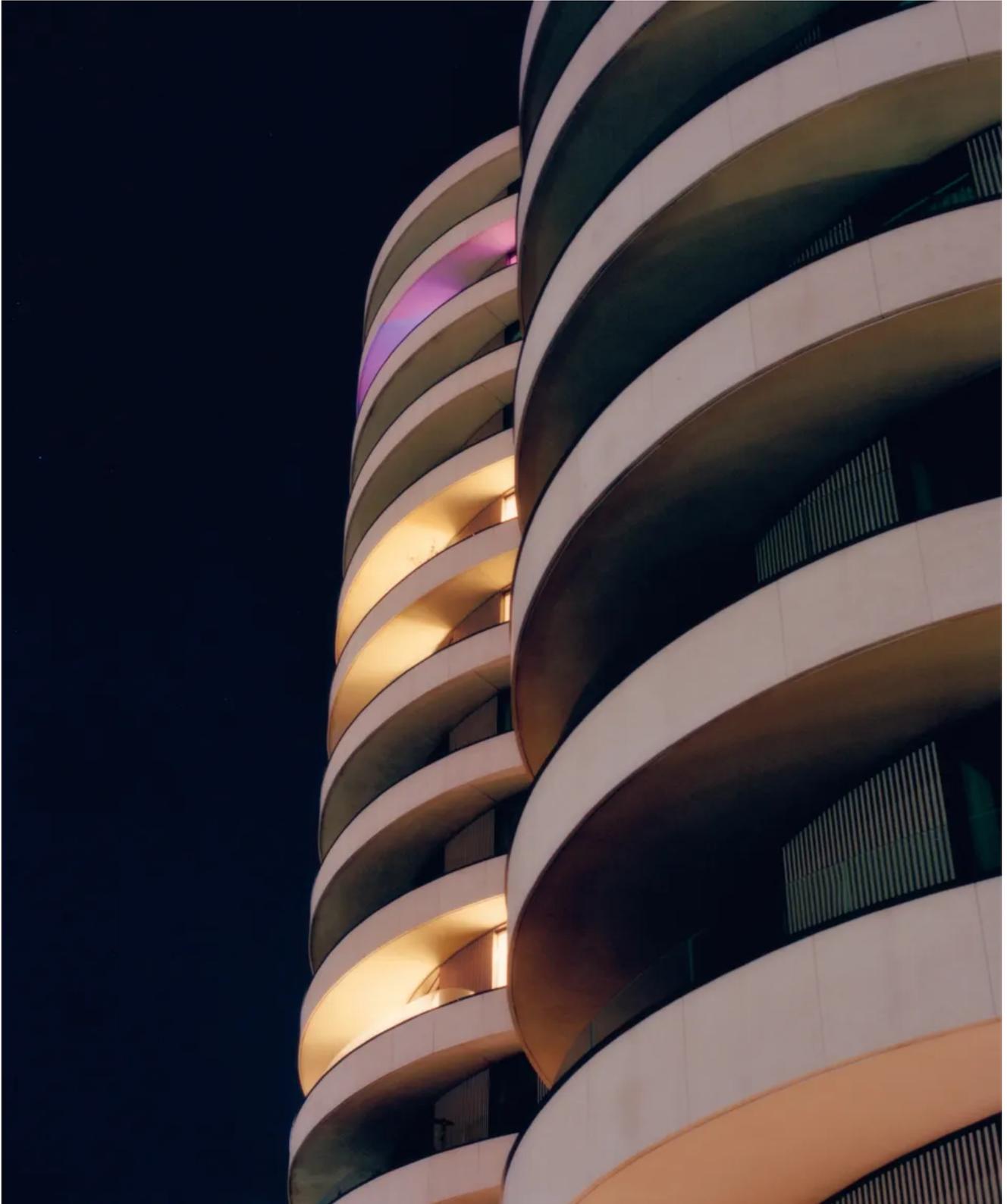
LETTER FROM LONDON

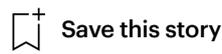
A TEEN'S FATAL PLUNGE INTO THE LONDON UNDERWORLD

After Zac Brettler mysteriously plummeted into the Thames, his grieving parents discovered that he'd been posing as an oligarch's son. Would the police help them solve the puzzle of his death?

By Patrick Radden Keefe

February 5, 2024





After Zac Brettler died, his parents struggled to decode the mystery of what had happened to him. They thought that they could pinpoint the moment he'd started to change: three years earlier, when, at sixteen, he began boarding at Mill Hill School, in North London. Zac had grown up in Maida Vale, a quietly affluent neighborhood in the city. His father, Matthew, is a director at a small financial-services firm; his mother, Rachelle, is a freelance journalist. As a child, Zac was bright and quirky, with curly red hair and a voice that was husky and surprisingly deep. He was an excellent mimic, and often entertained his parents and his brother, Joe, by putting on accents. Joe was nearly two years older than Zac, and he attended University College School, an elite day school in Hampstead. But when Zac took the University College entrance exam he struggled with the math portion, and wasn't admitted. He was clearly intelligent and creative, but he was less of a student than Joe, and after applying unsuccessfully to two other schools he enrolled at Mill Hill, as a day student, at the age of thirteen.

Established in 1807 and occupying a rambling hundred-and-fifty-acre campus, Mill Hill has a hefty tuition price, but it has a less academic reputation than its peers. In the bourgeois milieu in which Zac grew up, to mention that you attended Mill Hill could be interpreted to mean that you'd been rejected by more rigorous schools. When Zac arrived, in 2013, he found himself in the company of the cosseted offspring of plutocrats from Russia, Kazakhstan, and China. "It was the children of oligarchs," Andrei Lejonvarn, a former student who befriended Zac at Mill Hill, recalled. The kids wore designer clothes and partied at swank hotels. On cold days, rather than make the eight-minute walk from the dormitory to class, they summoned Ubers. Because London is a second home to so many rich people from abroad, the city has long been a bastion of gaudy consumerism. To Zac, his classmates' ostentatiousness seemed exotic; his parents weren't especially materialistic. Rachelle told me, "This world of Porsches and cosmetic surgery and Ibiza, it's everything we're not." Once, an administrator called the Brettlers' home to say that Zac had just left school in a chauffeured limousine. Zac confessed to his parents that he'd paid for this

extravagance himself. “I wanted to see what it would feel like,” he said.

The commute from Maida Vale to Mill Hill took nearly an hour, so Zac began boarding during the week. To his parents, he seemed relatively well adjusted. He got decent grades and excelled at tennis and cricket. Occasionally, he brought friends home, and they appeared to be nice kids. But Zac was becoming more fixated on wealth. He'd been interested in cars since childhood, and now expressed embarrassment at his family's humble Mazda. Like many adolescent boys, he developed a fascination with gangsters, watching documentaries about figures from the London underworld, among them the homicidal twins Reginald and Ronald Kray. He loved movies about guys on the make, such as “The Wolf of Wall Street” and “War Dogs,” which tells the true story of two young men in Florida who became international arms dealers.

By 2018, Zac had tired of boarding, and for his final year of high school he transferred to Ashbourne College, in Kensington, because it was closer to home. He still had a baby face, with unblemished skin and flushed cheeks, but he carried himself like an adult. He wore a Moncler vest to class and stored schoolwork in a briefcase. He talked to his parents about business deals—selling cars and high-end properties—that he was supposedly involved in. They didn't know how seriously to take these claims. Was their son precocious or playacting? Zac had always been congenial and a quick study, and these qualities, they figured, might well equip him to become a young entrepreneur. In any case, the Brettlers didn't want to discourage their son—or, worse, push him away. Even if they were dubious of his desire for wealth and glamour, they tried to be gently supportive.

In early 2019, as Zac was finishing up high school, he told his parents that he'd become friends with Akbar Shamji, a wealthy businessman in his forties who lived and worked in Mayfair, one of London's poshest districts. Shamji had a big, beautiful dog, a black Weimaraner named Alpha Nero, and Zac sometimes visited Shamji's flat, on Mount Street, and took Alpha Nero for a walk. Rachele sensed that Zac enjoyed the feeling of strolling alone through Mayfair alongside this elegant, obviously expensive animal, as if it were his own. But he was no mere errand boy for Shamji. Indeed, he told his parents that they'd become business partners and were discussing various deals, from launching a line of CBD-infused skin-care products to investing in a mine in Kazakhstan. Zac incorporated a company, Omega Stratton, which was described in a public filing, obliquely, as engaging in “security and commodity contracts.” He occasionally e-mailed his family from his business account. For a

month or so in the summer of 2019, Zac even moved into a luxury flat in Pimlico, in a new development called Riverwalk, which was right on the Thames, near Vauxhall Bridge. It wasn't clear if he had a roommate—he wouldn't let Matthew and Rachelle visit—but on a video chat he showed them the apartment's sleek interior. Zac had received admission offers from several universities, but he was now thinking of skipping college. He told his parents that he was earning enough from his assorted ventures to afford the rent at Riverwalk, though by the end of the summer he'd moved back home, saying that he'd been lonely in Pimlico.

Matthew and Rachelle felt mounting unease about Zac's trajectory. He was growing up too quickly, and he sometimes behaved belligerently—stomping around their flat, slamming doors, at times becoming physically intimidating. Fearing that he was taking drugs, they asked his childhood physician to draw blood at his next checkup and surreptitiously screen it. The result was negative. Once, when they went on vacation in Oman and left Zac alone at home, Matthew hid a video camera in the living room; all it captured was Zac with friends from the local tennis club, watching soccer on TV. At Rachelle's urging, Zac was evaluated by a psychiatrist. But the doctor found no clear indications of a disorder.

Matthew's firm is international, and on November 28, 2019, a Thursday, he was in the United States on a work trip. Zac had told Rachelle that he planned to spend the weekend with Shamji, doing a "digital detox": avoiding computers and phones. But that night, in the family's apartment, Rachelle discovered that Zac had left his wallet and keys behind. "I am a wee bit worried about you," she e-mailed him. "You have left your jacket and coat and credit cards here—how does that work for you for a few days?" She signed off, "Sending you much much much love." At 2:03 A.M., Zac replied, "All good x."

Twenty-one minutes later, a surveillance camera affixed to the Thames headquarters of the British spy agency M.I.6 captured sudden movement outside a building across the river. It was Riverwalk, where Zac had stayed that summer. The building's façade featured curved balconies overlooking the Thames. At 2:24 A.M., the camera recorded Zac walking out of a brightly lit fifth-floor apartment. He went to one corner of the balcony, then to the other. Then, returning to the center, he jumped.

The Thames is two hundred and fifteen miles long, but the stretch that ebbs and surges with the saltwater tide runs from Teddington Weir, in West London, to the North Sea. The tide was high that Thursday night, but by morning it had lowered

by some nine feet, exposing a broad shoulder of muddy shoreline in front of Riverwalk. Shortly after 7 A.M., a passerby spotted a pale body on the riverbed. Somebody called the police, and the London Ambulance Service soon arrived. The body was “cold to the touch and extremely stiff,” a paramedic later noted. “Life was recognized to be extinct at 7:36 A.M.”

Every year, scores of people attempt to kill themselves in the Thames, often by jumping off a bridge. Many survive the impact and are fished out by rescuers. But if a fall is fatal the body often drifts with the tide. Consequently, the police didn't realize, on discovering Zac's body, that he'd plummeted from a balcony directly above; it was more probable that he'd been borne to the Pimlico riverbed by the current. After loading the body onto a boat, they transported it to a mortuary. No wallet was found in the sweatpants Zac had been wearing that night, so the police had no idea who he was.

Four miles northwest, in Maida Vale, Rachelle woke up worried about her son. She kept calling Zac, but his phone went straight to voice mail. At around nine-thirty, the doorbell rang. The Brettler flat occupies the ground and basement levels of a handsome red brick apartment building. At the door, Rachelle encountered a muscular chauffeur with a shaved head, dressed in a tailored blue overcoat and a purple tie. He had a phone to his ear.

“Where's Zac?” the chauffeur asked.

“I don't know. Who are you?” Rachelle said.

“Who are *you*?”

“I'm Zac's mum.”

The man had been holding his phone so that whoever was on the line could follow the conversation. Through the phone, Rachelle heard a male voice say, “That can't be his mum. His mum is in Dubai.”

Rather than explain what this could possibly mean, the man climbed into a Range Rover and drove off, leaving Rachelle in her vestibule, feeling deeply unsettled. That evening, she called a police hotline and reported Zac missing. Zac had been gone only since the previous afternoon, but she had a sense of foreboding. Through a friend, she got the contact information of a private investigator. She'd alerted Matthew, who had decided to return to London. Rachelle had also tracked down a friend of Zac's who

had a phone number for Akbar Shamji, and she arranged a meeting.

On Monday, December 2nd, the police still hadn't connected the John Doe found in the Thames with the missing-persons case in Maida Vale, so, as Matthew later said, "we thought we were looking for a living person." Rachele and Matthew went to the Méridien hotel in Piccadilly, where Shamji had suggested talking in a guest lounge to which he had access. Shamji was forty-seven and rakishly handsome, with an aquiline nose and a full head of dark hair. He wore a tight-fitting suit with a busy pattern. Shamji said that he, too, was worried about Zac.

He handed the Brettlers the black overnight bag that Zac had taken with him four days earlier. He explained that he'd spent Thursday evening with Zac at Riverwalk, along with Dave Sharma, a fifty-five-year-old friend who lived in the apartment. Sharma's daughter, Dominique Sharma Clarke, who was in her early twenties, was also there. It had been an upsetting night, Shamji continued. Zac had confessed to having a heroin addiction.

The Brettlers were astounded: they'd seen no signs of heroin use. According to Shamji, Zac had said that he'd been secretly using the drug for years. That Thursday evening, Shamji went on, both he and Sharma had vowed to find Zac a treatment program. Then he and Dominique departed, leaving Zac with Sharma. On Friday morning, Shamji said, Sharma had informed him that Zac had disappeared. "We started to worry," Shamji told the Brettlers. "He's obviously gone off to get some drugs." Sharma arranged for an associate of his—the chauffeur, whose name was Carlton—to look for Zac at the Maida Vale apartment.

Shamji unnerved the Brettlers further by explaining that he and Sharma had known their son not as Zac Brettler but as Zac Ismailov, the wealthy child of a Russian oligarch. Shamji had been introduced to him roughly eight months earlier, by a man named Mark Foley, who worked for Chelsea Football Club, a team then owned by the Russian billionaire Roman Abramovich. Foley had told Shamji that Zac was looking to invest some of his family fortune. Shamji said that, until he spoke with Rachele, he'd been under the impression that Zac's father had recently died, and that his mother lived with Zac's siblings in Dubai. Zac had claimed that his family owned a penthouse unit in One Hyde Park—a superluxury development in Knightsbridge famous for its secretive, often absentee tenants—and had described the Maida Vale flat as an investment property where he was living only temporarily, and alone.

Shamji seemed like a credible person: he'd attended Cambridge University and had

impeccable manners. Moreover, Zac had told his parents that Shamji had an office on Berkeley Square—a rarefied address even by London standards. His wife, Daniela Karnuts, runs a successful fashion label, Safiyaa, which has made clothing worn by Meghan Markle and Michelle Obama. Yet Shamji’s story seemed outlandish. Matthew found him nervous and fidgety, noticing that he avoided eye contact with them. But Shamji emphasized that he and Sharma were desperate to find Zac and “get him back” for the Brettlers. They all agreed to stay in touch and continue searching.

The next day, Rachelle was in the front room of the family home, on the phone with Joe, when she saw a police car pull up outside. “I instinctively knew why they had come,” she said later. Two uniformed policewomen entered the apartment. One of them held Rachelle’s hand as they told her that Zac’s body had been found.

In a chill rain last fall, I visited the Brettlers. I’d initially connected with them over the summer, and we’d since had several long, and sometimes painful, conversations about their son. The Maida Vale apartment is spare and modern. Rachelle writes about crafts and design, and the space was elegantly decorated, and brightened by colorful glass vases. A framed snapshot on a bookshelf showed Zac and Joe as little boys, dressed up in costumes at a school fair. Zac was “a cute, fun goofball,” Rachelle said. Both Brettler parents are now sixty-one. Matthew is bespectacled, athletic, and bald. He has a conspicuously analytical mind and an amiable intensity, and he has coped with the devastation of losing a child by channelling his energies into investigating Zac’s demise. Rachelle is petite, with lively eyes and a tendency to smile even when she’s relating a sad story. Joe drifted in and out as we talked. He is twenty-five, with corkscrew curls, and has a casually affectionate manner with his parents.

In the four years since Zac’s death, the family has had to confront the extent to which the boy they thought they knew had been living a double existence. Zac had always possessed a Walter Mitty quality: he’d burnish his achievements (boasting to friends about his athletic prowess and his business prospects), or play up his supposed connections to prominent people (falsely claiming, for instance, that he knew Virgil van Dijk, the captain of Liverpool Football Club). But none of the Brettlers had ever imagined that Zac might be moving about London pretending to be someone else altogether.

Matthew said, “Zac was very good at picking people’s—”

“Sweet spots,” Rachelle interjected.

“He was a very good reader of people,” Matthew went on. In “War Dogs,” one character says, of the movie’s antihero, “He would figure out who someone wanted him to be, and he would become that person.” The Brettlers recognize now that Zac assembled fabrications like a magpie, picking up strands of truth in one corner of his life and repurposing them as fiction in another. Across the road from the Brettlers was a glamorous Russian woman, a single mother who drove a Bentley. She befriended Zac after he introduced himself on the street, and when she cooked meals she occasionally gave him some of the food. Her name was Zamira Ismailova. “He took her *name*,” Rachelle noted.

I spoke to Ismailova recently, and she told me that she’d known Zac by yet another fictitious name, Thaimas, and that she’d believed him to be a young Kazakh who lived by himself. Because the Brettlers’ building has a common entrance servicing multiple flats, she had no inkling that he shared the place with his parents. She spoke English with Zac, but he occasionally threw in a word of rudimentary Russian. London is full of children whose families and fortunes come from abroad but who are raised to be thoroughly English. “I never doubted what he said,” Ismailova told me. She learned the truth only after Zac’s death.

Shamji was right about Zac being a fabulist, but Matthew and Rachelle are adamant that he wasn’t suicidal. He’d never talked about killing himself, nor did he seem depressed. On the contrary, he was brimming with plans and ambitions, all too eager to commence adult life. Just after seven o’clock on the evening he died, Zac e-mailed Rachelle to say that he’d used her credit card to pay for a test to obtain his driver’s license. “I hope that is okay x,” he wrote. While I was at the Brettlers’, Rachelle disappeared into Zac’s bedroom and came out holding the overnight bag that Shamji had returned, which Zac had packed hours before he jumped off the balcony. “It’s not a bag of someone planning to commit suicide,” she said, pulling out neatly folded items. “You’ve got underwear, underwear, T-shirt, T-shirt. You’ve got *deodorant*.”



Police recovered an iPad among Zac's belongings, and discovered that two days before he died he had done an Internet search for "witness protection uk."

When Zac moved into Riverwalk, in July, 2019, he told his parents that he was renting the apartment from Verinder Sharma, an Indian rubber tycoon. At the time, Rachelle did a Google search for "Verinder Sharma" and "India" and "rubber," and found no obvious match. In fact, Verinder was the birth name of Shamji's friend Dave Sharma. In London, he was known to friends as Indian Dave. And he wasn't a rubber tycoon. He was a gangster.

The morning Zac's body was identified, the private investigator the Brettlers had hired, Clive Strong, visited Sharma at Riverwalk. Sharma, who was short, sharp-featured, and physically fit, liked to box, and told Strong that he'd just returned from a sparring session. According to Strong's notes, Sharma said that Zac had presented himself as someone whose "father was an oligarch," and had claimed that he'd clashed so much with his mother—who lived in Dubai, along with four of his siblings—that she'd barred him from their various luxury properties in London. He was therefore homeless, despite being fantastically rich. "I felt sorry for the young man," Sharma told Strong. "I said that he could stay in my flat"—the Riverwalk apartment.

Sharma, the last person to see Zac alive, told much the same story as Shamji: the previous Thursday evening, Zac and Shamji had come to Riverwalk; Sharma's daughter, Dominique, joined them; after a few hours, Shamji and Dominique left; Sharma fell asleep, and when he awoke, at 8 A.M., Zac had vanished. In Sharma's opinion, Zac had been a troubled kid who was "becoming suicidal." Sharma noted that he was happy to talk to Strong, because he was a private investigator, but he preferred not to speak with the police, as he'd had some "bad experiences in the past."

Sharma didn't volunteer what those experiences were, but he did have a history with law enforcement. In 2002, he was arrested on heroin-smuggling charges. He was later implicated in the murder of a bodyguard turned night-club owner, Dave (Muscles) King, who was killed in a drive-by shooting in 2003, as he was leaving a gym in Hertfordshire. It was the first time that a fully automatic AK-47 had been used to murder someone in England. At a high-profile trial, the judge described the assassination as "thoroughly planned, ruthless, and brutally executed." The gunman and the driver were each sentenced to life in prison.

Sharma had been one of Muscles' friends in the drug trade, but they fell out. When authorities arrested Sharma and others in the 2002 heroin bust, the only suspect they didn't end up prosecuting was Muscles, and in front of witnesses in open court Sharma angrily called him a "grass": an informer. Moments after Muscles was shot to death, the assassin called a mobile phone in France, which the police subsequently linked to Sharma. I spoke to a former official who was involved in the investigation, and he said that Sharma was a dangerous person. At the time of the murder trial, authorities had tried to locate him in France for questioning, but he'd gone underground. "I've no doubt Sharma was involved in organizing the shooting," the former official told me. "But we didn't have enough evidence to charge him."

After returning to England, Sharma worked as a debt collector. I spoke to a source who's had occasional business in London's underworld, and he said that Sharma wasn't afraid to exert his will through physical force. Stories circulated about Indian Dave hunting down people who owed money and dangling them off rooftops. When Clive Strong, the detective, visited him at the Riverwalk flat, he wanted to see the balcony. Sharma flicked a switch on the wall, the glass door slid open, and they stepped out and looked at the Thames. Strong made a note of the fact that the glass door was opened and closed from inside the apartment.

On December 5, 2019, two days after Zac's body had been identified, Dave Sharma and Akbar Shamji were arrested and questioned. Sharma refused to talk to the police, but he provided a handwritten statement saying that on the night in question he'd passed out at about 12:30 A.M., having become "heavily intoxicated" after drinking Jack Daniel's and taking a sedative. Before he woke up at 8 A.M., he said, Zac must have killed himself by jumping off the balcony. "I was not responsible," Sharma added. "I am still very upset about this."

Because the authorities didn't initially make a connection to the Riverwalk building when they discovered Zac's body, police didn't enter Sharma's apartment until four days after the fall. When two officers inspected the place, they found it "immaculate," one said. On the balcony's glass safety partition, right around where Zac had jumped, they noticed an area that appeared to have been recently wiped clean, though they couldn't tell what might have been cleaned off. One officer asked Sharma if he remembered whether the balcony doors were open or closed when he got up that morning. Closed, he said.

Sharma had some visible injuries—a cut on the bridge of his nose, another between his right thumb and forefinger—but the officers' report doesn't indicate that they asked how he acquired them. As the investigators scanned the floor, they noticed something: the back of a "burner"-type phone that had belonged to Zac had fallen into the track for the sliding balcony door. They found the front part under a sofa. The phone had evidently broken in two, suggesting that it had hit the floor with force.

When a pathologist examined Zac's body, he found no trace of heroin. A forensic investigation determined that Zac had nearly made it clean into the Thames, but his hip had clipped the low stone river wall. He had a compound fracture of his left elbow, probably from hitting the water. The pathologist also noted an injury that couldn't as readily be attributed to the fall: Zac's jaw was broken on the right side.

The most dramatic revelations came when the investigators examined the phones of Shamji and Sharma. Interestingly, Shamji had deleted his WhatsApp exchanges with Sharma in the weeks before Zac's death. But Sharma had taken no such precautions, so Shamji's messages were visible on his phone. The police cross-referenced this data with CCTV footage from cameras around the Riverwalk complex, which allowed them to reconstruct the movements and the communications of both men that night.

Shortly after 9 P.M., cameras captured Zac and Shamji parking Shamji's red Mercedes outside Riverwalk. Accompanied by Alpha Nero, Shamji's dog, they went up to Apartment 504. A couple of hours later, Sharma's daughter, Dominique, parked in an underground garage and also entered the flat. At 1:25 A.M., Shamji and Dominique left with Alpha Nero. They descended to the garage and talked in Dominique's car until 1:56, when she dropped Shamji and the dog off at the Mercedes, and both cars drove away.

Sharma had lied about going to sleep for the night at 12:30 A.M. At 2:12—nine minutes after Zac e-mailed "All good x" to Rachelle—Sharma telephoned Shamji from the apartment. Shamji was on his way back to Mayfair, and they spoke for nine minutes. But something must have alarmed Shamji, because he turned around and drove back to Riverwalk. At 2:24, the camera on the M.I.6 building captured Zac's plunge. The footage—shot from a considerable distance, at night—is grainy, but he is clearly alone on the balcony. Nobody pushes Zac, in other words. But, just after the jump, the footage appears to show the silhouette of someone moving around the apartment.

Two minutes after Zac hit the river, Sharma telephoned Dominique. The call lasted three and a half minutes. Then, at 2:34 A.M., Shamji's Mercedes reappears on the CCTV. He goes up to Apartment 504, Alpha Nero still by his side. After twenty minutes, he leaves the building, heads back to his car, and loads in his dog. But, rather than get in himself, Shamji walks around to the other side of the building, where a promenade runs along the Thames. According to subsequent police testimony, this is what happens next: "Mr. Shamji is then seen to look over the river wall in directly the spot that Zac has fallen into." The wall is about four feet high, and Shamji cranes his torso over it, peering down into the water. Then he straightens, returns to his Mercedes, and drives away.

London is so beautiful that it can be easy to forget that much of it was built on imperial plunder. This dissonance between the veneer of refinement and the

sinister forces pulsing beneath has become especially stark in recent decades, as the United Kingdom, stripped of its empire, has found a new role as a commodious base for global kleptocrats. In the recent book “Butler to the World: How Britain Helps the World’s Worst People Launder Money, Commit Crimes, and Get Away with Anything,” Oliver Bullough explains that a combination of lax regulation, permissive law enforcement, plaintiff-friendly libel laws, discreet accountants, unscrupulous attorneys, deluxe real estate, and venerable schools has turned London into a mecca for moneyed reprobates—a modern-day Casablanca. The London property market offers countless opportunities for someone looking to park a dodgy fortune. Take a stroll around Belgravia or Regent’s Park, and you’ll notice that many of the multimillion-dollar dwellings stand unoccupied, their blinds drawn. Here is a safety-deposit box for some tycoon in a turbulent industry; there is an insurance policy for a corrupt minister of mines. London is the capital of pristine façades, often painted in wedding-cake shades of cream or ivory; the city’s dominant aesthetic is literally whitewash. As a 2021 report by the British think tank Chatham House put it, the U.K. is a “comfortable home for dirty money.”

To launder cash—or a reputation—is to mingle the dirty with the clean, and one consequence of London’s new identity as a twenty-four-hour laundromat is that the city is full of crooks with pretensions to legitimacy and businessmen who seem a little crooked. Akbar Shamji arrived in London with his family in 1972, when he was less than a year old. His father, Abdul, came from an Indian family in Uganda, where he’d built a thriving trading company called Gomba. But Idi Amin, who became Uganda’s President in 1971, blamed the country’s economic inequality on its successful Asian minority, and in 1972 he announced that he was expelling all Asians. They had just ninety days to leave. When the Shamjis arrived in England, Abdul was determined to rebuild his business. He started by shipping Johnnie Walker whisky to Zaire, and expanded into trucking, mines, and hotels. There was a handbag factory in Blackburn and a crocodile farm in Malaysia. The reincarnated Gomba was incorporated in the offshore tax haven of Jersey, and its offices were on London’s Park Lane. As Abdul grew richer, he donated money to the Conservative Party. Margaret Thatcher attended a fund-raiser at his home, a mock-Tudor mansion in Surrey, where Akbar grew up.

Abdul’s holdings came to include several prominent London theatres, including the Mermaid and the Garrick. For a time, he was even a part owner of Wembley Stadium. In the 1980 thriller “The Long Good Friday,” Bob Hoskins plays a London crime boss trying to remake himself as a legitimate property baron. He owns an elegant

white pleasure boat and hosts parties on it while cruising the Thames. The vessel used in the movie was reportedly rented to the filmmakers, at what one of them called a “humongous” price, by its owner, Abdul Shamji.

Abdul endured a scandal in 1985 after his principal backer, the Johnson Matthey bank, went under. Gomba owed significant debts to the bank, including five million pounds that Abdul had personally guaranteed. Questioned in court about his finances, he asserted that he had no Swiss bank accounts. But it emerged that he did—six of them. A Member of Parliament lambasted him as a “crook.” Abdul insisted that he was a scapegoat, but he was tried and convicted for perjury. “You lied like a trouper,” the judge said, sentencing him to fifteen months in prison. Akbar was seventeen at the time.

In 1993, fresh out of Cambridge, Akbar told an interviewer that his father had “moved his Monopoly board” back to East Africa, though the older Shamji retained at least one of his U.K. holdings: the Mermaid Theatre. When Akbar was twenty-one, he was installed as its general manager. Akbar had done some acting at Cambridge; in a student production of “Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves,” he played a swindler named Honest Achmed. The Shamjis poured money into the Mermaid, but, according to Marc Sinden, its artistic director at the time, the theatre presented hardly any shows. The family built a new restaurant and a stainless-steel kitchen, but nobody used them. “There were piles of monogrammed cutlery with the Mermaid logo on it, and china plates all still in their boxes,” Sinden told me. “It was as though I’d walked into a hospital that was fully equipped, but they’d forgotten to put the patients in.”

The Shamjis did mount a brief run of a one-man show about Muhammad Ali, and they paid Ali to visit London for the première. “There were photographs everywhere of Akbar with Ali, and talk of what Akbar had done to save the theatre,” Sinden said. “But he’d bloody near ruined it.” The show lost money. I spoke to the lead investor, a former boxer named Tony Breen, who told me that the Shamjis ended up owing him thirty-five thousand pounds. Breen suspected that the theatre was “a money-laundering operation.” (A lawyer for Shamji denied this claim, calling it “absurd.”) At the time, Akbar drove around London in a Rolls-Royce Corniche. When things started to get a “bit funky” with the Shamjis, Breen recalled, he suggested that he be given the car, in lieu of payment. But Akbar objected that the Rolls belonged to Abdul, who’d never allow it. Akbar “was his father manqué,” Sinden said. (Abdul Shamji died in 2010.)

By the early two-thousands, Shamji had segued into the music business, operating a couple of undistinguished labels in the United States. In the decades since, he's hopscotched from one industry to another. His LinkedIn page is spotty; the Experience section calls him a "thought provoker." The Web site for a company called CPEC, which bills itself as a leading player in India's renewable-energy sector, features a photograph of Shamji shaking hands with Prime Minister Narendra Modi, and lists Shamji as having been the company's chairman and C.E.O. between 2010 and 2020. But an old shareholder document indicates that CPEC's board of directors consisted mainly of Shamji and two of his siblings; according to other records I found online, another senior executive was Daniela Karnuts, Shamji's fashion-designer wife. More recently, he has been getting very into crypto.

When Shamji was arrested, on suspicion of murder, he was interrogated at Charing Cross Police Station. After the police made clear that they knew he hadn't gone straight home to Mayfair—but had returned to Riverwalk for twenty minutes before descending to look in the river—Shamji said that he'd simply forgotten about this part of the evening, though only a week had gone by. ("If I'd had a night like this," one of the officers told him in a subsequent interview, "I would remember it.")

Shamji didn't volunteer what he and Sharma had spoken about on the phone call that ended three minutes before Zac's jump. He insisted that he had no memory of any calls from late that evening. Why had he returned to the apartment? To say good night, he claimed. When the police asked him *whom* he'd said good night to, Shamji initially maintained that he'd found Zac in the apartment along with Sharma, and that they'd all hugged before he departed. But, as the investigators knew, this was impossible: Shamji had entered the building ten minutes after Zac landed in the Thames. Alerted to this discrepancy, Shamji shifted his narrative again. Maybe he hadn't actually seen Zac the second time. His memory was foggy.

Shamji was asked to explain the interlude when he went around the Riverwalk building and looked into the Thames. "It's a nice bit of river," he said. "I sometimes sit there." Serene spot, picturesque view—as good a place as any for a smoke break at three in the morning. "I spend a lot of time outside," he said.

The cops pressed: Given how long the promenade is, why had he approached the precise point where Zac had fallen? "It seems a great coincidence to me, and I don't believe in coincidences," an officer said. When Shamji was asked if he'd seen Zac's body in the water, he said that if he had he would have immediately called the police.

Nothing malign had transpired that night, Shamji maintained. Yet he kept behaving like a man with something to hide. “If it’s not as bad as it looks, then why not tell us what it is?” another officer said. But Shamji continued to stonewall.

The police, meanwhile, learned about some further deceptions on the part of Dave Sharma. He hadn’t slept until 8 A.M., as he had claimed. He was up and texting with Shamji by 6:50. When Riverwalk’s head concierge, Ana Nunes, arrived for her eight-o’clock shift, police boats would have been visible through the lobby windows. A colleague told her that Sharma had already called the front desk, asking if there was any indication that somebody had jumped from the building. At 8:10, the front-desk phone rang again, and Nunes answered. “Hi, Ana,” Sharma said, according to a statement by Nunes. “Can you please tell me if someone jumped from the balcony?”

Sharma was calling from Apartment 504. If he’d stepped out onto the balcony, or just looked out a window, he likely would have seen the dead body down below. Perhaps he called Nunes to find out whether the police had drawn a connection between the body and the building. Or perhaps Sharma believed that, through some wild coincidence, it was someone else’s corpse, and Zac had survived the fall. This might explain why he sent the chauffeur, Carlton, to visit the apartment in Maida Vale that morning.

According to phone records, Shamji and Sharma exchanged messages several times that day. Yet when Shamji met with the Brettlers at the Méridien hotel, three days later, he didn’t mention that a corpse had been discovered outside Riverwalk hours after Zac went missing. Nor did Sharma or Shamji alert the police that the victim might have fallen from Sharma’s balcony, which would have enabled them to identify Zac—and commence their investigation—four days earlier.

When Sharma was interviewed by police, he responded to dozens of pointed questions with a gruff “No comment.” Although both he and Shamji had been arrested on suspicion of murder, they were released on bail, and were free to go on with their lives. To Matthew and Rachelle, it felt as if, after an initial flurry of activity, the investigation started to lose momentum. “They took their foot off the gas,” Rachelle said. Some of this was likely a consequence of the pandemic, which set in not long after Zac died. The Brettlers may also have contributed, inadvertently, to the diminution in the energies of the London Metropolitan Police by keeping the whole incident relatively quiet. The death itself was not a secret: “I have the saddest news. Our beautiful son Zac died,” Rachelle wrote in a Facebook post. Family and friends

turned out in large numbers for a funeral at Hoop Lane, a Jewish cemetery in Golders Green. But the London press, which is insatiable when it comes to the mysterious deaths of young white people, never picked up on the story. No florid *Daily Mail* spread featuring photographs of Zac and Riverwalk; no grandstanding about police inaction. The result was a lack of sustained pressure on law enforcement. And the Brettlers, at least at first, put their trust in the authorities, assuming that the unexplained death of a nineteen-year-old from West London would compel a rigorous investigation.

This faith in the proper functioning of law enforcement and the justice system might seem naïve anywhere these days, but especially in London. In 2014, a fifty-two-year-old resident named Scot Young died in circumstances similar to Zac Brettler's, plunging from a fourth-floor apartment in Marylebone and getting impaled on a wrought-iron railing. Young was a property developer who'd become mixed up with unsavory Russian businessmen. Before his death, he told friends and family that he feared for his life. But the Metropolitan Police declared the death unsuspecting; they didn't even dust the apartment for fingerprints. As it happened, a month earlier, a friend of Young's, Johnny Elichaooff, had died after falling from the roof of a shopping center in Bayswater. Suicide, police had concluded. A vicious killer appeared to be stalking London: gravity. The Russian oligarch Boris Berezovsky had died in 2013, hanging himself, supposedly, at his Berkshire estate, after many attempts on his life by adversaries who wanted him dead. The previous year, another friend of Young's, Robbie Curtis, who'd also become entangled with dodgy Russians, died after falling in front of a Tube train. Two years before that, yet another Young friend, the British developer Paul Castle, was killed (again, by Tube train).

In each case, there were circumstances—debt, drugs, divorce, depression—that made suicide plausible. But the fact of so many sudden deaths over a short period of time involving high-flying London businessmen with Russian connections seemed dubious on its face. The press called the alleged suicides a “ring of death,” but as far as Scotland Yard was concerned they were just a series of unfortunate events. In 2017, BuzzFeed News published a groundbreaking investigation identifying fourteen men “who all died suspiciously on British soil after making powerful enemies in Russia.” According to the report, U.S. intelligence had shared evidence suggesting that numerous deaths being described by the London police as suicides had actually been murders. But a culture of timidity within British law enforcement, combined with weak institutional capacity after years of budget cuts, had shut down investigations. Some people expressed an even darker view: Britain had become so reliant on the

largesse of Russia's oligarchs that decisions had been made at a high level not to persecute London's new mafia class, thereby extending to them the courtesy of being able to kill their enemies on British soil with impunity. One national-security adviser to the British government told BuzzFeed that ministers were desperate not "to antagonise the Russians."

The Brettlers did not view Zac's death as part of an international conspiracy, but they did come to fear that the Metropolitan Police had an inclination to categorize any suspicious death that wasn't obviously a murder as a suicide. Rachele and Matthew emphasized to me that they harbored no stigma about suicide, and resisted the notion that Zac killed himself only because so many clues pointed to something more nefarious.

They began their own investigation, tracking down friends of Zac's and hounding the police for information, and uncovered additional signs that their son may have been in danger. They spoke to a friend who'd seen him two days before he died (and who didn't know about Zac's oligarch persona). The two boys had gone for a drive, and Zac kept fearfully looking over his shoulder. He mentioned that he might have information for the authorities, and was considering going into police protection. I spoke with the friend recently, who asked that I not use his name. "He was being threatened by someone," he told me. "Apparently, they threatened to harm his family." Of course, it was difficult to know how seriously to take such talk from Zac, given his propensity for dramatic stories. Nevertheless, police recovered an iPad among Zac's belongings, and discovered that two days before he died he had done an Internet search for "witness protection uk."

To a degree that his parents didn't fully appreciate, Zac's career as a fabulist started early. Numerous former classmates told me about his inventions. "He made up quite a lot of stuff," a friend who met Zac at Mill Hill when they were both thirteen said. "He told a lot of people that his mum was dead." Zac probably concocted this lie for sympathy or attention, the friend ventured. As an insecure new arrival at a school that he had not wanted to attend, he may have discovered that compassion can be a shortcut to intimacy—and that many people will open their heart to a stranger if they hear he's suffered a terrible loss.

Zac also told classmates that he came from money. "Most of the lies related to wealth," his Mill Hill housemate Andrei Lejonvarn recalled. Zac claimed that his family lived in One Hyde Park, and that his father was an arms dealer who owned a

pair of Range Rovers. Lejonvarn was Zac's doubles partner in tennis, and Matthew Brettler once drove them to a tournament. Before Matthew picked them up, Zac warned Lejonvarn that both Range Rovers were in the shop for repairs; his father would be driving a Mazda, and was "very touchy" about it, so Lejonvarn shouldn't under any circumstances mention the Range Rovers. When Lejonvarn, who'd been expecting to meet a hardened arms dealer, got in the car, he was surprised by Matthew's gently inquisitive manner. "He's, you know, a nice guy," Lejonvarn recalled. He said of Zac, "You could smell the bullshit."

At one point, Zac told Mill Hill classmates that New Balance wanted to sponsor him as a cricket player.

"You're full of shit!" one of them said.

"Zac, you're a compulsive liar," Lejonvarn chimed in.

For a moment, Zac seemed genuinely chastened. "I know," he said. "I'm a compulsive liar." Then he launched into a story about how he'd developed the problem after having this terrible accident as a kid.

"No! Zac!" Lejonvarn cut him off. "You're doing it again!"

When I told Matthew and Rachelle how extensive and long-standing Zac's duplicity seems to have been, Matthew offered the redemptive gloss of a mourning parent. His son, he said, had always had "a slightly preternatural ability to tell stories." Being a boarding student, Matthew observed, is "a little like when you go to college, living away from your parents for the first time. It dawns on you that you're meeting people who know absolutely nothing about you. You've got a tabula rasa—a reset point. You feel like you've got a little bit of editorial control in a way that you didn't previously. I think that's what happened with Zac. Being in that boarding environment with people who had this mind-boggling access to money, Zac suddenly saw a space in which he could create another version of himself."

Another Mill Hill friend told me that Zac would forge quick bonds with people "for a certain moment, and then disappear" as they came to doubt his stories. The friend who saw Zac in London shortly before he died reflected, "If you're lying to your friends, it's a bit of a lonely place to be, isn't it?"

It's difficult to say exactly when Zac Brettler graduated from telling classmates fanciful tales to road-testing an alter ego in the more hazardous environment of adult London.

Nobody I spoke to from Zac's high schools remembered him pretending to be the son of a Russian or Kazakh oligarch. When did the charade begin? I recently spoke with Mark Foley, who confirmed that he has worked for many years as a consultant for Chelsea Football Club, managing properties. One evening in early 2019, he said, he attended an opening at the Chelsea Arts Club and got to talking with a young man who mentioned that he came from a wealthy Russian family. They agreed to meet for coffee several days later.

Shamji has maintained that Foley introduced Zac to him as Zac Ismailov. It is ironic that Foley vouched for Zac's story, because he is presumably no stranger to the post-Soviet oligarchy, given that Roman Abramovich owned Chelsea for nearly two decades. "From my knowledge of Russian investors, they're a fairly secretive bunch," Foley told me. "You didn't always get the full story from them, and they played their cards close to their chest." Zac, he said, struck him as "one of these types."

It's tempting to see, in Zac's final year, an echo of Tom Ripley, the sociopathic con man of the Patricia Highsmith novels, who achieves the life style he covets by preying, brilliantly, on others' gullibility. But it's startling to think that Foley could have been duped by a London teen-ager who'd never so much as vacationed in Russia—and that Zac might have been so reckless as to attempt this trick on precisely the sort of oligarch-adjacent Londoner poised to see through it.

Last December, I wrote to Akbar Shamji. "Zac's death is an event which I do not wish to talk about," he responded, declining to speak by phone or to meet in person. When I pressed, he wrote that Zac "had built an extraordinary web of lies," and intimated that it would be insensitive of me to dredge up this sad story, saying that he didn't "feel comfortable" taking Zac's "parents deeper into these wounds." But in subsequent weeks I e-mailed Shamji various questions, and he replied. His answers were slippery, and he outright ignored many difficult questions, but he was unfailingly, almost ostentatiously, polite.

In early 2019, he told me, he was working with a friend and occasional business partner, John Connies-Laing, on a real-estate project in Lisbon. They needed financing, and Foley offered to introduce them to his new friend Zac. When I asked Shamji if he'd bothered to Google Zac's name before the meeting, he responded, "Personal introductions in London are far more trusted than social media, particularly with Eastern Europeans who have to keep a lower profile." When I asked Connies-Laing about this, he said, via e-mail, "Mark was well connected in the Oligarch world

and I had absolutely no reason to think that Zac was not credible.”

According to Shamji, he and Connies-Laing met Zac at a café in St. John’s Wood, and Zac mentioned that he’d recently made an offer on a lavish home around the corner, on Hamilton Terrace. Zac was dressed casually, but, Shamji told me, he was convincing in his role. As Shamji explained to police, Zac “talked the life of a very rich young kid—he had fancy watches, fancy cars, planes, all the stuff that is very aspirational wealth in London.” Shamji didn’t actually *see* any cars or watches or planes, but he assumed that Zac preferred a more understated mode of presentation. As their friendship solidified, Zac began joining Shamji when he walked his dog. They’d meet in front of One Hyde Park. Shamji never saw Zac emerge from the building; he was always waiting outside.

The financing from Zac’s family for the Lisbon deal never came through, and the project ultimately foundered. But Zac and Shamji pursued other opportunities together. Shamji was cagey when I inquired about the particulars, but I pieced together details in other ways. There had been a notion to sell fibre-optic cable to India. Zac introduced Shamji to the uncle of a friend of his who had the cable and was looking for a buyer. The three men met at the Dorchester, an extravagant hotel favored by London’s status-conscious rich. But, when I spoke to the potential business partner (who didn’t want me to use his name), he said that within minutes of sitting down he had the distinct impression that Shamji was “full of shit.” They’d scarcely ordered tea and scones when Shamji pulled out his phone to show off the photograph of his handshake with Prime Minister Modi. With a sigh, the man told me, “I know too many Akbars.” He was more impressed by Zac: “The frightening thing is, had he actually done some deals, he would have ended up a serious player.”

Another time, Zac arranged a meeting with a family acquaintance, Antony Buck, who in 2015 had sold a skin-care company that he founded to Unilever. Zac and Shamji had alighted on the idea of a line of CBD-infused skin-care products. “Investment into R&D is approaching \$20mn across two unconnected facilities,” Zac wrote in a WhatsApp message to Buck, adding that his “partner Akbar” would be joining them for the meeting.

Shamji said little during this encounter, letting Zac hold the stage, and Buck also was impressed. “Zac was very self-possessed and persuasive,” he told me. “He wasn’t like someone turning up in his dad’s suit.” (Buck noted that he took the meeting as a favor, just to offer advice, and considered the R. & D. claim to be sales puffery; he had no

further involvement in the project, which petered out.)

If Zac could secure such meetings through his own connections, why go to the trouble of creating a false identity? He may have supposed that he'd enjoy quicker entrée to the business world if he came off as a more colorful figure, and he wouldn't have been wrong to think so: in the circles he hoped to run in, an introduction from Mark Foley counted as currency. Some of Zac's friends told me that he bragged to them about his "Russian connections." He'd hardly have been the first entrepreneur to embrace a fake-it-till-you-make-it approach. But, as Matthew and Rachelle began tabulating their child's deceptions, it became clear that he hadn't merely traded on an exotic identity; he'd also been pretending to have a giant fortune.

Shamji has provided mutually incompatible answers about what he understood Zac's background to be. He told me, via e-mail, that Foley had introduced Zac as "a very wealthy young man whose father had died." In 2019, he told the police that when he first met Zac the story was that the oligarch was alive; then, a few weeks into their acquaintance, the father had "some sort of incident with his heart, and Zac had to fly all of a sudden to Switzerland." After the patriarch supposedly died, Shamji said, Zac started playing pauper, claiming that his mother, in Dubai, was freezing him out of his inheritance. It now seems most likely that Zac, in a chance encounter with Foley at the Chelsea Arts Club, spontaneously told a story about being an oligarch's son, and Foley bought it—allowing Zac to suddenly level up in London society. When he met Shamji, he cemented the persona with a fake surname. Zac doesn't appear to have extracted significant money from Shamji or Sharma, but during their months together he did secure free rent, free meals, and the prospect of various business deals. Like many teen-agers, Zac seems to have lived mostly in the present; he lacked the long-term strategic calculus to pull off a larger grift.



Rachelle and Matthew Brettler. Although they were unaware that Zac had been code-switching between two identities, Matthew says that his son always had “a slightly preternatural ability to tell stories.”

If Zac was indeed engaged in a con, it bears some resemblance to the so-called Nigerian-prince scam, a classic Internet phishing scheme. A swindler poses as a prince who has temporarily lost access to tremendous family wealth and just needs a little money to unlock it. Sometimes the ruse exploits kindness: the mark is moved to

generosity on hearing of the prince's travails. But more often what animates it is greed: the mark gives money today in expectation of a share of the liberated inheritance in the future. One reason such deceptions are so common on the Internet is that, in the anonymity of cyberspace, they're generally low risk. It's more dangerous to hoodwink people you know in real life.

One point that has bedevilled Matthew is whether Shamji was duped by this ruse or was somehow in on it. Shamji, in his accounts to the Brettlers, to the police, and to me, has maintained that he believed Zac to be an oligarch's son until the moment he met Matthew and Rachelle, after Zac's death. But Zac's company, Omega Stratton, was registered in his legal name, and I have seen e-mails that Zac sent to Shamji using an address that identified him as Zac Brettler. Moreover, Mark Foley denied introducing Zac to anyone as Zac Ismailov, telling me that he'd only ever known him as Zac Brettler. When I suggested to Shamji that he must have known Zac was code-switching between two identities, he responded, "Zac had explained that his father sometimes wanted them to use a different name, because of threats to their lives." Brettler isn't a common name, but, just as Shamji claims to have never Googled "Zac Ismailov," he maintains that he did no due diligence on "Zac Brettler."

"Zac spoke with a mild but distinct Russian accent all the time around me," Shamji told me. But when I interviewed Antony Buck and the man who met with Zac and Shamji at the Dorchester, both said that they were under no illusions about Zac's identity, because they knew his background. In their presence, Zac spoke with no discernible accent; if he had, they told me, they would have found it bizarre. "Akbar knew *exactly* who he was," the man from the Dorchester exclaimed. "He was Zac Brettler!"

Shamji told the authorities that he first met Dave Sharma around 2016, at a gym in North London that they frequented. Despite their apparent differences, the two men became friends. Matthew and Rachelle expressed horror to me that Shamji would have introduced their son, then eighteen, to an alleged drug trafficker who'd been implicated in a gangland shooting. But Shamji doesn't seem to have experienced any hesitation; he says that he introduced them because Sharma, who lived alone in a big apartment, might be able to offer the temporarily homeless Russian heir a place to stay. According to Shamji, Sharma and Zac became close. They also appear to have explored joint business ventures, though when I inquired about these Shamji again shut down. The phone records the police gathered, however, make clear that Sharma was obsessed with Zac's supposed wealth, and seemingly felt that he deserved a share

of it. Before Zac's death, Sharma's embittered entitlement grows acute. "I'm thinking fuck this little kid," Sharma messaged Shamji on the morning of November 28, 2019—Zac's final day.

The digital trails of the three men indicate that a crisis was unfolding. Shamji, who'd been in Turkey on business, had just returned to London. He says that he curtailed his trip, in part, because Zac was claiming to be suicidal and in need of help. It seems likely that Zac did speak to the older men about wanting to die. His parents believe that he did so as a bid for sympathy. He was scared, in too deep, and perhaps seeking compassion, just as he had been when he'd lied as a student. He may have pretended to be using heroin for the same reason.

That Thursday, Sharma pushed Shamji to ask Zac "how much he's been given to live on," also suggesting that they "check his accounts" and "go to a cash machine with his card." The men don't appear to have carried out this plan, but if they had they would have been in for a surprise. After Zac's death, Matthew checked his son's bank statement: there were only four pounds in his account. In another message, Sharma said, "Akbar I want 5% of that 205 million and that's it." When I asked Shamji what Sharma meant by this, he replied, "I had heard those chaps talking about big numbers and big deals. I really don't remember all the details." The messages imply that Zac had enlisted Sharma in an effort to restore his notional lost fortune, and that Sharma now wanted a substantial commission in return. The fact that there was no fortune appears to have started dawning on Sharma the night that Zac died.

The messages also undercut Shamji and Sharma's claims that the evening at Riverwalk had centered on a solicitous conversation in which they and Dominique, Sharma's daughter, offered to help Zac quit heroin. The situation was clearly more volatile. At 10:35 P.M., Shamji texted a friend of his named Mervin Sealy, sounding agitated. "I have just been heating up knives and clearing up blood," he wrote. A few minutes later, he followed up with a voice message to Mervin: "I'm not fucking around, nigger, come to fucking Pimlico and pick up this fucking car and drop me home, bro." He added, "Shit's about to go wrong. Wrong!"

By the time police disclosed these messages to the Brettlers, nearly two years had passed since Zac's death. They'd often felt isolated in their anguish. "I was living on that balcony with Zac, in my head," Rachele told me. "I literally had a stomach ache for months after he died, because you're having to digest grief."

But, even as the authorities were starting to imply that it might be impossible to know

what happened that night, Matthew and Rachelle were developing their own working theory. As they saw it, Zac may not have been pushed from the balcony, but he didn't commit suicide, either. He'd been left alone in the Riverwalk flat with Sharma, who was furious with him, having presumably learned that there might be no fortune to plunder. It seemed harrowingly clear to the Brettlers that there was danger in that apartment, and that Zac had felt he could not escape it by walking out the front door.

One night not long ago, I visited the promenade that runs between the Riverwalk building and the Thames. The lights of the M.I.6 building were mirrored in the water, and traffic coursed across Vauxhall Bridge. I gazed up at Apartment 504, its windows dark, the curving balcony projecting over the walkway. Suddenly, the scenario that the Brettlers had outlined seemed all the more plausible. The balcony's lip doesn't extend far enough that you could jump straight down to the river. To reach the water, you'd have to leap outward six or eight feet—a feasible distance from a height of five stories. When Matthew and Rachelle spoke about their son's final moments, Matthew sometimes brought up a memory of how bouncy and athletic Zac had been as a child, how he'd jump down the stairs in one audacious lunge. If Zac had intended to kill himself, the surest way to do it would have been to drop straight down onto the promenade. It's a long balcony, and he jumped from the point that was closest to the river.

Matthew told me about a conversation he'd once had with a man who attended West Point: "He said, 'You know, the Marines is full of nineteen-year-old kids who think that bullets bounce off their chests.' It's that sense of impregnability. They don't appreciate danger in the way that a more mature mind does." Zac didn't jump off the balcony to die, his parents concluded, but to live. It was a desperate gesture but also a bravura one, the sort of escape you'd see in a "Mission: Impossible" movie. And Zac might have even succeeded in making a Hollywood getaway—had his hip not clipped the embankment.

The Brettlers are certain that whatever awaited Zac in that apartment was more terrifying to him than the prospect of a five-story drop. And, if this version of events were true, then Dave Sharma would have a great deal to answer for. But by the end of 2020 Sharma was dead.

Riverwalk was built by the London property impresario Sir Gerald Ronson, who was convicted in 1990 on charges of conspiracy, false accounting, and theft in connection with a stock-fraud case; he did a stint in prison, and then in 2012 was

made a Commander of the British Empire for his philanthropic work. “Imagine the parties you could throw here,” he told an interviewer from the *Evening Standard* in 2016, when construction was completed.

Just as there were no press accounts of the boy who plunged to his death from Apartment 504, there is no report on the Internet acknowledging a second death, a year later, in the same apartment. One day in December, 2020, Matthew was at home in Maida Vale when he got a call from Rory Wilkinson, the lead detective investigating Zac’s case. “Verinder Sharma has been found dead in his apartment,” Wilkinson said. Matthew inquired about the circumstances: Was it a suicide? A murder? A murder that looked like a suicide?

It was a drug overdose that might have been a suicide, Wilkinson said, adding that Sharma’s case was being treated as “not suspicious.” When Matthew pushed for details, Wilkinson gave an odd reply. “He said, ‘I’m being kept sterile from the investigation,’ ” Matthew recalled. According to Wilkinson, it would represent a conflict of interest for the people investigating Zac’s death to know too much about the subsequent death—in the same location—of the man who’d been their prime suspect. “The police told us, ‘You need to give Sharma’s family privacy,’ ” Rachelle recalled, with a tremor of indignation. To this day, Sharma’s death remains “completely mysterious,” Matthew said. “Was there a postmortem carried out? Was there an inquest?” Authorities have refused to say. (Several former law-enforcement officers I spoke to expressed bafflement when I outlined this turn of events, and said that the lack of transparency about Sharma’s death is highly unusual and not justified by any tenets of traditional policing.)

The demise of Sharma eliminated a key witness in Zac’s case, and by the time the pandemic subsided, in 2022, the Brettlers were feeling acute dissatisfaction with the handling of the official inquiry. “I have no experience, it goes without saying, of conducting serious crime investigations,” Matthew said. “But I find the approach adopted by the police to be completely mind-blowing.” The investigators conceded that Shamji surely knew more about the circumstances leading up to Zac’s death than he was letting on. Yet they never deployed any leverage to push him into being more forthcoming. Prosecutors could have charged him with perverting the course of justice in the investigation; instead, they greeted his pattern of unabashed prevarication with an existential shrug.

Indeed, the cops had repeatedly signalled an impulse to chalk the case up as the

suicide of a troubled kid. When they searched the Riverwalk apartment a week after Zac's death, they discovered blood-like smears in one of the bedrooms and on a sink—but they never bothered forensically testing them, because they had already concluded that there'd been no "obvious physical assault." On recovering highly suggestive texts, they did not take basic investigative steps to flesh out their implications. The police never contacted Carlton, the chauffeur who showed up in Maida Vale; or Mark Foley, who introduced Zac to Shamji; or Shamji's wife, Daniela Karnuts, who, according to his police interview, had met him at the door when he'd arrived home late that night.

Matthew told me that one of the strangest aspects of their ordeal had been trying to determine whether the officials' curious behavior reflected incompetence or something darker. Arrest reports aren't considered public documents in England, and when the family asked for a copy of Sharma's criminal record the authorities declined to furnish one. When I requested information from the Metropolitan Police about Sharma's death, they told me only that it was "not suspicious." Matthew, after discovering old press accounts of Sharma's apparent involvement in the drive-by shooting of Muscles, wondered whether Sharma might have been a police informant. If he had, that could explain the oddly curtailed investigation of Zac's death. Despite being implicated in a notorious shooting, Sharma had somehow returned to England and not been charged. Matthew told me he'd always trusted police to investigate in "good faith," but their conduct in this inquiry was "difficult to square with that."

In February, 2022, Matthew and Rachele met with Detective Inspector Wilkinson and one of his colleagues, at Hammersmith Police Station. Matthew recorded the meeting, with permission. When he asked if Sharma had been an informant, Wilkinson said, "I have no idea." If this were true, he noted, it would have been a closely compartmentalized secret. But he gave no indication that he'd met interference on that ground.

The Brettlers had prepared detailed questions, and Wilkinson was clearly uncomfortable with the forensic tenor of Matthew's cross-examination. "We have put in a lot of work into this with a lot of people," he said. At one moment, Wilkinson joked, pointedly, that it felt like *he* was being interrogated.

Matthew asked Wilkinson if police had interviewed Mervin Sealy, the friend Shamji texted about "heating up knives and clearing up blood."

They hadn't, Wilkinson said, because "Mervin wasn't there."

“I find that astonishing,” Matthew said. “You don’t interview the guy?”

“The trouble is, he doesn’t know what’s going on,” Wilkinson objected.

“We don’t *know* that!” Matthew exclaimed. “We haven’t asked him!”

Rachelle maintained a more reserved demeanor, but she, too, had been obsessively researching the case, and she was no less affronted. “In the first year or so, we’ve just been dazzled with the shock of Zac’s death,” she told Wilkinson and his colleague. “The second year, we’re hoping to get a response.”

On some level, Wilkinson seemed to endorse the Brettlers’ theory of the case: Zac had given the false impression to people that he “stood to inherit an awful lot of money,” and “that story was beginning to unravel.” He told them explicitly that he believed Shamji had lied to investigators. But the Brettlers felt that the police had a tendency to blame the victim: the message was that, however Zac died, it was in circumstances of his own making. “He’d gone in way over his head,” Matthew allowed to me. “But I don’t think that means he deserved what came to him.” Maybe it was suicide after all, Wilkinson suggested. But the one thing he knew for certain was that he didn’t have enough evidence to support a murder prosecution. It appeared that the police could tolerate a degree of ambiguity about what had transpired, even if the grieving parents could not. The problem, Wilkinson concluded, feebly, is that “we can’t force anyone to tell us what happened.” (The Metropolitan Police declined to address specific questions about the case. A spokesperson expressed, via e-mail, “sincere condolences” for Zac’s family. Investigators had explored “every possible hypothesis,” the spokesperson continued, but “were not able to provide fuller answers.”)

One afternoon in December, I met Rachelle for tea in central London, and afterward she proposed a walk around Mayfair. We headed to 52 Berkeley Square, supposedly Shamji’s former business address. It was an attractive five-story building fronted by a wrought-iron fence. At the entrance, Rachelle brought my attention to a panel featuring twenty-five buzzers for different businesses. Either the accommodations were very crowded inside or this was all sleight of hand—an illustrious address functioning as a mail drop.

We headed toward Mount Street, passing the Connaught Hotel, a sumptuous heirloom of the British aristocracy now owned by the ruling family of Qatar. “During COVID, we did quite a lot of biking, and we used to come and bike along this street,”

Rachelle said. “Once, I saw Akbar outside that hotel, on his phone.” I asked whether, consciously or not, she’d been looking for him. She acknowledged that she had been. In the years since Zac’s death, she’d haunted this corner of London. “Sometimes I wondered if I would see Daniela,” she said, referring to Karnuts, who has reared two children with Shamji. “I knew what I would say to her,” Rachelle added, her voice thickening, her eyes rimmed with tears. “ ‘I’m Zac’s mum. As a mother, is there anything you can tell me about what happened that night?’ ” (Karnuts did not respond to repeated requests for comment.)

Any time there is a death in the United Kingdom in which the cause is unknown or apparently unnatural, the authorities are obliged to hold a public inquest. On December 13, 2022, Rachelle and Matthew filed into Poplar Coroner’s Court, a brick building with a grim interior, and walked past an ancient sign that read “DO NOT SPIT” and announced a penalty of forty shillings. They were accompanied by Rachelle’s brother, David, and three friends who had joined them for moral support. Earlier that year, the Crown Prosecution Service had officially declined to prosecute Shamji, explaining that, because the state couldn’t prove an underlying crime, it didn’t make sense to pursue ancillary charges against someone who might have obstructed the investigation. In a Kafkaesque sequence of correspondence, the Brettlers sought an appeal, called a Victims’ Right to Review, but were denied, on the ground that they weren’t victims. When they requested a meeting with prosecutors to discuss this denial, they received a letter that said, “Sadly, a meeting cannot be offered to you as these are only provided to families who have been bereaved through homicide.”

Three years had passed since Zac’s death. The inquest would be presided over by a coroner, but the coroner would function rather like a judge, hearing evidence and delivering a ruling. And the proceedings would be adversarial: the Brettlers were accompanied by a lawyer, Alexandra Tampakopoulos, who could cross-examine witnesses. Police officers testified. Statements from a paramedic and from a Riverwalk doorman were read aloud. A pathologist explained that he was brought in after a doctor who’d begun an autopsy concluded that some of Zac’s injuries, including the broken jaw, indicated possible foul play. But the pathologist was willing to attribute the broken jaw only to a hard impact. The injury could have been caused by water or by a fist—it was impossible to say.

“Zac was a nineteen-year-old boy who was trying to work out his place in the world,” Rachelle said, in a written statement. “He wanted a big life, full of status, wealth, and power. . . . Unfortunately, he was living this lie, and creating a dangerous situation for

himself.” Matthew also contributed a statement, in which he described meeting, in February, 2022, with an employee from Riverwalk—where, evidently, discretion is a core amenity. The employee recalled that a colleague had actually recognized Zac’s corpse on the riverbed, but had warned him “not to share that information with anybody.” (My efforts to reach the colleague were unsuccessful.)

By this point, Dave Sharma was dead, but his daughter, Dominique, was called as a witness, and testified by video. Dominique (who declined my request for an interview) has worked in real estate in London. “My dad basically was not a very active parental role in my and my siblings’ lives,” she told the coroner. She had developed a close relationship with him nonetheless, and he’d introduced her to Zac. Like her father, she’d believed that Zac was “from a very wealthy Russian family.” Sharma had bonded with Zac in a short period of time, and, she said, sometimes invited him to join the family for Sunday lunch. Dominique told the same story that Shamji had about Zac admitting to heroin abuse at Riverwalk. She insisted that the evening had ended without acrimony, and said that when she left the apartment her father was asleep.

How did she account for the phone call that he’d made to her right after Zac jumped? A “pocket dial,” Dominique said. But, as one police constable noted, “this call lasts for 03 minutes and 28 seconds, making it too long in duration to be likely that this call was a pocket dial or unanswered call.”

Roughly thirty minutes after that call ended, Dominique telephoned Sharma. He didn’t answer. “Why are you calling him at two-fifty-nine in the morning?” Tampakopoulos asked.

“Probably just because I was, I don’t know, a bit worried,” Dominique said.

She was also asked about a text that her father sent her at 6:41 A.M., more than half an hour before Zac’s body was discovered. “Dom, let them know they all better tread carefully around me,” Sharma wrote. “I will take no prisoners to protect my family.” As Dominique pointed out, Sharma often rambled in texts, sometimes to the point of incoherence. But the thrust of this message seemed clear: he was a man to be feared, and would lash out at those who crossed him.

“I don’t even remember that,” Dominique said.

When the coroner asked her about Zac’s mental health, Dominique replied that she thought he’d been suicidal. This incensed the Brettlers: Dominique’s dubious

testimony on the events at Riverwalk should have called her credibility into question; instead, the coroner was soliciting her amateur—and hardly disinterested—opinion about Zac’s state of mind. In Matthew’s assessment, Dominique’s contributions were “bullshit from start to finish.” (Dominique, through a lawyer, told *The New Yorker* that her testimony was entirely truthful.)

Another statement came from Roger Howells, the psychiatrist who’d evaluated Zac in January, 2018. The doctor said something that surprised me. Rachele and Matthew had told me that Zac had become obstreperous and even menacing toward them, but Howells mentioned several incidents of physical aggression. One involved Zac “losing his self-control in an argument and throttling his mum.”

This revelation made me wonder, not for the first time, how clearly the Brettlers had perceived the severity of their child’s situation. Were they inattentive? Joe Brettler told me that his relationship with his brother had been competitive, and sometimes testy. But, like his parents, he’d regarded Zac as a casual “bullshitter” rather than as a pathological charlatan. Siblings often know things about each other that their parents do not, but Joe had no inkling of the Ismailov persona.

In my wrenching conversations with the Brettlers, I’d been struck by the frank manner in which they discussed Zac and his problems, without any reflex to uphold appearances. According to the psychiatrist’s report, Rachele said that Zac had choked her “more in rage than in earnest.” When I asked her about the encounter, she said that she’d been alone with Zac, and that they had been having a familiar spat, in which he insisted that the family should buy a nicer car or move to a nicer home. She told him curtly, “That’s not happening,” adding that he sounded “spoiled,” and suddenly his hands were around her throat. “I’m five foot four, and he’s nearly six foot, and I don’t understand where this anger has come from, and I don’t feel good and I don’t feel safe,” she told me. After that incident, she insisted that Zac see the psychiatrist, and “it lanced something,” she said: he was never violent with her again.

In Shamji’s e-mail responses to me, the empathy that he claimed to feel for the Brettlers was undercut by the biting tone in which he sometimes referred to them. “The fact is that Zac was somehow so tormented by them and his life that he would do anything to escape,” he wrote. On another occasion, he said, “I know it’s hard for his parents to accept how much he hated them and the lengths he went through to try and make a new persona. Finally he couldn’t live with himself or his lies.”

Zac, in his session with the psychiatrist, said that he found his parents “controlling,”

but the opposite seems to have been true: the Brettlers gave their son an enormous amount of freedom and trust—much more, they now feel, than they should have. Shamji’s insinuation that Zac was driven by hatred for his parents to invent an alter ego and, ultimately, to kill himself is malicious and self-serving, but the tragedy has forced the Brettlers to ponder the origins of their son’s instability and resentment. “I’ve spent my life—my children’s lives—trying to fix anything I could fix for them,” Rachelle told me. When I informed her that Zac had told classmates, at thirteen, that his mother was dead, I worried that it would be painful for her to hear. Like any mother and son, they had their ups and downs, Rachelle told me. But she was close with Zac, or had felt that she was. On summer breaks, they sometimes travelled to New York. “We would have fun,” she said. They’d bike around the city, and she’d take Zac to play tennis at Randall’s Island. “He might say that he hated me,” she said. “But we had a real relationship.”

The star witness at the inquest was Akbar Shamji. He no longer lived in London, and he’d become the C.E.O. of a crypto company, Bitzero. In the spring of 2022, he’d announced grand plans to convert a complex of Cold War-era missile silos in Nekoma, North Dakota, into a crypto-mining facility. Bitzero’s North American headquarters would be in the state, Shamji promised at a press conference, noting, “We’re torn between Fargo and Bismarck.”

When I asked Shamji where, precisely, he lives these days, he was vague. “Work keeps me travelling a lot in the US, Canada and Scandinavia,” he wrote, adding, “I spend time in London also.” His plans for the crypto mine don’t appear to have come to fruition. (Bitzero has a new interim C.E.O., Carl Agren, who told me that Shamji was asked to resign in September.) In a recent press release, Shamji was identified as the chief executive of yet another company, DarkByte, which bills itself—in language so laden with jargon that it cannot be explicated—as having something to do with A.I. (Marc Sinden, whom the Shamjis hired at the Mermaid Theatre back in 1993, summarized Akbar’s modus operandi for me as “Big announcement, and then fuck all.”)

Shamji’s children, who knew Zac, are both active on social media, and Rachelle, with a touch of masochism, sometimes scrolls through their Instagram feeds, gazing at pictures of the smiling family. There is even a dedicated account for the Weimaraner, Alpha Nero. Of course, social media is just another stage for confected personas, but it has been frustrating for Rachelle to see Shamji simply move on. In one e-mail, he told me that, for him, “the matter is closed,” implying that all this was ancient history.

Akbar's son, who is now about the age that Zac was when he died, is a successful model. A photograph on Instagram shows Akbar, wearing a leather jacket and a big grin, in the fragrance department of a store, pointing to his son's face on a big advertisement for a Tom Ford *parfum*.

Shamji beamed into the inquest from a hotel room. His hair was long now, and fell around his shoulders. He swore to tell the whole truth and nothing but, then launched into the same tale he'd told before. "I wasn't a chief protagonist," he insisted. "It wasn't my apartment or my drug addiction."

Tampakopoulos said, "What the family wants is for you to tell us the truth. And you don't need to be worried about Mr. Sharma. He's no longer with us."

But Shamji was as amnesiac as ever. He claimed to have no memory of his own texts. One message that Sharma had sent Shamji, at 4:30 P.M. on Zac's final day, said, in reference to Zac, "He's not allowed to runaway now, he's in to do with us."

"That's just the way Sharma used to talk," Shamji said. " 'Us' was like a royal 'we' to him. It wasn't me and him, it was him and the world."

Other answers were farcical. Asked to explain his text to Mervin about "clearing up blood," Shamji said, "It's not like 'blood,' as in out of your vein." He elaborated, " 'Blood' is a more earthy, street-y way of saying 'bro.' " He hadn't been clearing up blood. He'd "been clearing up, *blood*." (Mervin did not respond to my requests for comment.)

Shamji testified for hours, his voice sonorous, his tone vaguely patrician. Sometimes he leaned into his purported sympathy for Zac's parents and brother. At other times, he exhibited mild impatience with the proceeding. The coroner, Mary Hassell, conveyed a similar eagerness to get the whole thing over with, frequently cutting off Tampakopoulos. "I appreciate that Zac's parents have all of these unanswered questions," she said. But only two people knew exactly what happened in the flat before Zac jumped, she continued, "and neither of them is here today."

Matthew interrupted to point out that Shamji had come back to the apartment minutes after Zac jumped. "So if anybody on this planet who is still alive had any capacity to share with Rachelle and me what happened and why it happened, that person is Mr. Shamji," he said.

But this was an inquest, not a criminal trial, and the coroner implied that the Brettlers

were trying to get something from the proceeding that it wasn't equipped to provide. To Matthew and Rachelle, who by now had become attuned to the obdurate implacability of British authorities, the coroner's response was maddening: this was their final opportunity to ascertain the truth. After two days of testimony, the coroner issued an "open" verdict, meaning that she wouldn't rule on whether the death was a suicide or suspicious. "I can't speculate," she said. "I don't know what happened."

Although Zac's death remained, officially, an unsolved mystery, the inquest succeeded in stripping away ambiguities around several key elements of the case. According to the coroner, the evidence showed that Shamji had almost certainly known Zac had gone off the balcony, and that when Shamji peered over the river wall he was "looking for Zac." She also concluded, on the basis of the testimony and the retrieved text messages, that "Zac was obviously scared" before he died.

And, in one stray moment, Shamji let something slip. Asked about the message in which Sharma said, "Akbar, I want 5% of that 205 million," Shamji said, "This would be because Zac had promised." He went on, "Zac was always promising huge sums of money, and I pretty clearly told Sharma . . . I told him more than once that I don't think there's any golden pot at the end of that rainbow."

One reason that it's so difficult to know what happened at Riverwalk is that Zac was by no means the only impostor in the apartment that night. Dave Sharma was a leg-breaker posing as a benevolent mentor. Akbar Shamji was a dilettante posing as an accomplished entrepreneur. And Zac was just a London kid, posing as the son of an oligarch. Each was pretending to be something he wasn't, and each was caught up in the glitzy, mercenary aspirational culture of modern London. On a cold morning, I took a brisk walk through Regent's Park with Matthew. He was talking about his disappointment in the official investigation and describing how, for him and Rachelle, the past four years have been a dark journey of discovery. With time, and with endless probing, they have come to understand more fully the life of their son. They have also come to see their city in a very different light. "It's been eye-opening for us," Rachelle told me. "This whole world we did not know about, this underworld that exists on our doorstep." As Matthew and I walked, he muttered, "Sometimes it really makes me hate London. It makes me want to leave."

We talked about Zac's deceptions, and Matthew suddenly brought up a podcast he'd listened to about Bob Dylan. "I didn't realize that Dylan would tell people he ran away to join the circus at the age of thirteen," he said. "I'm not trying to equate Zac with

Dylan in terms of talent. But there are a lot of people out there who have created a fantasy existence for themselves, and it hasn't prevented them from operating in the real world when their feet finally hit the ground."

One day in the summer of 2019, the Brettlers attended a birthday party for Matthew's mother, in South London. Joe and Zac came, and everyone was in good spirits. But Zac said that he needed to leave early. He had recently moved into Riverwalk, and he told his parents that later, when they were about to cross Vauxhall Bridge, they should call him. When the party was over, Matthew, Rachelle, and Joe drove north, telephoning Zac on the way. As they crossed the bridge, they looked up at the Riverwalk building, and there was Zac, alone on the fifth-floor balcony, a tiny figure, waving. ♦

Published in the print edition of the February 12 & 19, 2024, issue, with the headline "The Oligarch's Son."