

TO BHMA International edition

Ink is In:  
Greece’s  
Growing  
Tattoo Scene

By Nansy Samaka

A basic, beginner-friendly tattoo kit can cost as little as €100, and includes a basic tattoo machine, also known as the ‘gun’. Margot Robbie famously got her hands on one such machine during the final weeks of filming Suicide Squad and gave any willing costars and crew small flash tattoos. As it turns out, getting the gear is only fractionally easier than opening your own parlor in Greece.

Opening a tattoo studio in the country requires a few basic permits and health inspector visits, none of which confirm one’s ability to tattoo someone’s skin properly.

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Romance  
Scammers  
Turned a Texas  
Man Into  
an Unwitting  
Money Mule

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

By Joe Barrett

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

TYLER, Texas— Garrick Stafford had been texting all summer with a woman he met online, a redheaded makeup artist named Sarah Williams. Then she asked for \$150 to pay her cellphone bill.

“Oh, crap,” thought Stafford, a quality inspector at a machine shop in this East Texas city known as the Rose Capital of America. “Someone’s asking for money right off the bat.”

So he blocked her for months. “My mistake,” he said later, “was unblocking her.”

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A Bulgarian border police vessel carrying crew members from a ship damaged in a drone attack, to Varna, Bulgaria, following a rescue operation after one vessel was sunk and another damaged in the Black Sea off Bulgaria, October 6, 2026.

PEYO MIMCHILOV/REUTERS

FINANCIAL TIMES

Black Sea is now the world’s  
deadliest shipping route

By Alice Hancock

One region in the world has become more deadly than any other for merchant sailors, and it is not the Strait of Hormuz.

More sailors died in the Black Sea than in any other body of water this year, outstripping fatalities in the Gulf, which has garnered more attention worldwide. A critical corridor for global grain supplies and Russian oil, the Black Sea is riskier for

vessels than the Middle East, shipowners and seafaring groups said.

Crew in oil tankers, cargo ships and grain carriers entering the sea close to the EU and Nato must run a gauntlet of attacks by drones, missiles

or explosive-laden boats as Russia and Ukraine step up their battle for the vital route. Some estimates put the number of attacks in the Black Sea as more than six times higher than in the Gulf.

“For me, the Black Sea

and calling [at] Ukrainian ports is near suicidal,” said Oleg Grygoriuk, chair of the Marine Transport Workers’ Trade Union of Ukraine. “The general feeling is that there is a life risk threat all the time.”

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TO BHMA International edition

Beyond the pink ribbon

By Kristina Tremonti

Every October, Greece turns pink: ribbons on lapels, balloons over charity walks, public buildings illuminated in solidarity. The language is of early detection, hope and the promise that no woman faces breast cancer alone.

In Greece, between June 2022 and June 2026,

the free breast cancer screening program—named after Fofi Gennimata, the PASOK leader who died of the disease in 2021—detected at least 6,000 early-stage cases, according to the Ministry of Health. Initially rolled out under the national Prolamvano (“I prevent”) umbrella with EU Recovery and Resilience funding, the program has now transitioned to

national funding, offering free examinations to 2.7 million eligible women at more than 470 public and private facilities.

This October I tried to book a mammogram. I started with 1566, the national healthcare booking phone line, but the courteous operator could only check hospitals I named, not search available slots across Athens.

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ΔΕΗ

One with the future

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Fatalities of commercial sailors caught in battle between Russia and Ukraine are outstripping deaths in the Gulf

# Black Sea is now the world’s deadliest shipping route

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More than 570 vessels have been struck in the Black Sea this year, according to maritime security company Ambrey, killing at least 40 sailors, the International Maritime Organization has said. That compares with 24 confirmed fatalities in the Hormuz.

Some ships have been hit in the crossfire of attacks on ports, while others were deliberately targeted. During the third quarter, attacks averaged more than four a day, Ambrey said.

Reporting of attacks in both regions remains patchy, making the true scale of the damage difficult to establish.

Some shipping companies are prepared to brave the risks of carrying oil out of the Middle East — incentivised by record-high freight rates. But more are unwilling to send their vessels into the Black Sea where margins are lower and trading is far more dangerous, shipping groups say.

In the murky dawn light of October 15, two drones hit the 37-year-old chemical tanker Wine Trader as it anchored off Romania’s Black Sea coast waiting to pick up a cargo in Moldova.

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Smoke rises from a fire on the cargo ship Nadezhda after it was hit in a drone attack near Russia’s Black Sea port of Novorossiysk, in this still image obtained from social media video, August 3, 2026.

nection or browser settings.

The same night another chemical tanker called Yara J was also hit while anchored near the entrance to the Sulina Canal, about 15km from Wine Trader. This week Russia claimed another five cargo ships were hit off Ukraine’s coast. Romanian authorities reported that another tanker was hit off its coastline on Thursday, leaving three sailors

missing and one dead. “The situation is unbelievable,” said Salvatore Adorno, deputy person ashore at Sicilship, Wine Trader’s manager. “In my opinion each attack on a ship is an attack with the intention to cause death. If you hit the accommodation area in the same place twice the intention is to kill.”

Romania’s President Nicușor Dan accused Russia of escalating the war on the edge of Nato territory on Friday.

Since the start of Moscow’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the Black Sea has been a high-risk region for ships to trade in. The water was mined early on and, despite a lull during a UN and Turkey-brokered grain export agreement that collapsed in 2023, Russia has continued bombarding Ukrainian ports. Interference in ships’ satellite navigation systems on both sides has been rife.

But since this summer, the tit-for-tat attacks on shipping and port infrastructure have reached their most intense level.

“This is a different ball game,” said Bridget Diakun, research director at Lloyd’s List Intelligence. “I’ve been tracking the war’s impact on seaborne trade for years and



I’ve never seen anything like this.”

About 387 ships were struck between July and September, more than five times as many as in the previous quarter, according to Ambrey.

Part of the reason for the escalation was a Ukrainian drone campaign against Russian vessels that started in an effort to cut off diesel supplies from Crimea but quickly spread to shipping in the Kerch Strait, where the Sea of Azov meets the Black Sea.

In September, Robert Brovdi, USF commander, said Kyiv had hit more than 300 Russian vessels in 11 weeks. Targets included not just sanctioned tankers but bulk carriers

transporting Russian grain.

The Kremlin’s reaction has been to intensify its attacks against ships visiting Ukraine’s ports in a relentless effort that Moscow has maintained even as Kyiv’s strikes have slowed. Russia accounted for around 90 per cent strikes on shipping the past 45 days, Ambrey said.

The effect is clear in Ukraine’s ports in Greater Odesa. The port handled fewer than 10 ships last month, compared with roughly 400 in July, according to Ukraine’s largest private port operator TIS.

For crews, strikes from both sides have become deadlier, particularly as Ukraine has begun to adopt Russian

tactics, security analysts say.

Previously, Ukraine “would target a loading manifold or would disable the engine room or rudder,” said Tomas Alexa, senior analyst at Ambrey. Now “similar to Russia they attack [ship’s] bridges and accommodation blocks”, which can increase casualties among the crew.

The geography of attacks has also become far less discriminating. “We truly have a boundless war between Russia and Ukraine which will affect all other Black Sea states,” said Andrii Klymenko, head of the Black Sea Institute of Strategic Studies, a monitoring group.

In mid-September, the Joint War Committee, which

## Why class matters in America

The next few years of US politics will revolve around the issue

By Rana Foroohar

By any definition, I have lived the American dream. My paternal grandparents grew up in mountain villages outside Trabzon in Turkey without indoor plumbing. My maternal grandfather was a Swedish orphan and his wife, my grandmother, was the ninth child of a Lancashire coal miner.

And yet, because my mother grew up in the US and

my father immigrated there at a time when the American dream was still alive and well, I now have the good fortune to work with, and write for, some of the best-educated and most privileged people on earth.

The American dream has been the driving belief system of my country. If we Americans think we can do better than our parents, we are willing to put up with almost anything — grotesque wealth inequality, a non-existent social safety net and even the



increasing awareness that our country is turning into a banana republic with a power-mad would-be autocrat at the helm. No wonder corruption has become a key issue in the upcoming midterm elections.

But I think class is an even bigger one. It is the backdrop for everything from the Republicans’ economic nationalism to the Democrats’ focus on the cost of living crisis and concentrated corporate power, and for specific state initiatives like the California billionaire tax that will be

voted on in early November.

The idea of getting the country’s richest 100 people to pay for healthcare for the poorest isn’t just a batty idea supported by millennial socialists. Last week, Scott Kirby, the chief executive of United Airlines, declared wealth inequality a “danger to society” and called for a national wealth and inheritance tax as high as 100 per cent in some cases.

Kirby is now being pilloried by conservatives. But they should be careful. Siding with

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A view shows a vessel that was hit by a drone in the Black Sea, in this handout image released by the Bulgarian Interior Ministry on October 13, 2026.

decides so-called “war risk” zones for insurance purposes, expanded the highest threat level from several high-risk areas to almost the entire Black Sea, excluding only the territorial waters of Romania, Bulgaria and Turkey.

But now that ships in those areas have come under attack, even the most resilient shipping companies are reconsidering trade in the Sulina anchorage close to the Danube river basin and Bulgarian coast.

Underwriters told the FT that war insurance could reach 15 per cent of a ship’s hull value, almost double the rate for vessels in the Gulf. That has driven shipowners to use older vessels, which are gener-

ally cheaper to insure because their hulls are worth less.

Vessels can be up to 50 years old and have few other options for where to trade because of their dilapidated state, said Deha Aydin, a Turkish marine consultant at law firm Esenyel & Partners. They would face “a high risk of detention in European ports”.

Many also operate outside standard union agreements, leaving seafarers at the mercy of unscrupulous shipowners.

Some crew who had asked to leave ships after reaching the Black Sea through the Bosphorus reported being told by shipowners that they must compensate the company if they quit contracts early,

according to the International Transport Workers’ Federation.

Most crew in the region come from less traditional seafaring nations such as Syria, Egypt, Azerbaijan and Benin “because they’re more desperate to take pay”, ITF secretary-general Stephen Cotton said.

Contracts for Syrian seafarers in the Black Sea, seen by the FT, show that pay can be as little as \$800 per month, although most of the contracts state that salary will be doubled on a pro-rata basis for every day spent in the war zone.

One says that if a sailor dies, their next of kin will receive between \$25,000 and \$50,000 depending on their

rank. Mahfuzul Islam Plabon, a Bangladeshi seafarer who was aboard a tanker hit by a Ukrainian sea drone while sailing to the Russian port of Novorossiysk a year ago, said he would never return to the Black Sea “no matter how much money they offer”.

Flames engulfed the vessel, destroying the life raft, leaving the crew to huddle in the bow until they were picked up three hours later by the Turkish coastguard, he said.

Plabon, one of the few seafarers willing to talk since many fear being blacklisted by owners, said he was paid an extra \$40 per day to go into the war zone.

Yet as crews become harder to find, experienced seafarers are increasingly essential to navigate the Black Sea’s mined waters, where satellite interference has forced captains to rely on paper charts, Ambrey’s Alexa said.

Taras Vysotskyi, Ukraine’s agriculture minister, said crews are “really afraid” of working in such conditions.

Ukraine has diverted grain through smaller Danube ports. But Vysotskyi said it was impossible to utilise the capacity of these places because they kept being attacked.

Russia is also rerouting

grain through much more expensive routes via the Baltic and from Vladivostok in the Far East. Loadings from Black Sea and nearby Azov ports were 201,000 tonnes in September, a sixth of the previous month’s level, according to satellite monitoring from shipping broker IFCHOR Galbraiths.

Moscow has also turned to draping its fleet of oil tankers in anti-drone nets and adopted more complex GPS-spoofing techniques to avoid being hit by Ukrainian drones.

The consequences extend far beyond Ukraine and Russia. Kyiv’s exports of agricultural commodities by sea collapsed to 1.4mn tonnes in August — roughly 75 per cent below prewar levels, according to the Ukrainian agriculture ministry.

“The biggest risk will not be felt in short-term shipping delays today, but in the fields next spring,” Andrii Verevskyi, chair of major Ukrainian sunflower oil exporter Kernel, said this month. “Export revenue is what pays for fuel, seed and fertiliser. If port outlets are choked and freight costs wipe out operating margins, small and mid-sized Ukrainian farmers simply will not have the cash to plant.”

Markets as far-flung

as west Africa and Indonesia would have to find other supplies. An executive from an international grain trader said Indonesia had booked a large share of its outstanding grain purchases from Russia over the next three to four months, and was already turning to Australian suppliers amid concerns that Russian shipments might not arrive.

Klymenko, the longtime Black Sea watcher, fears the situation will only deteriorate unless Nato’s forces intervene, which is highly unlikely — despite the European parliament calling for an EU naval operation in the Black Sea citing the “deadly attacks”.

“It’s naive right now to hope for any ceasefire in the Black Sea,” he said. “Unfortunately the war will not only continue, but will escalate and widen.”

Now that both sides had realised the power of disrupting shipping routes, it would be hard to stop, he added. “It’s like putting toothpaste back in the tube. You cannot do it.”

*Additional reporting by Alec Russell*

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Russian soldiers fire from aboard a Ka-27 helicopter of the Russian Black Sea Fleet during a patrol the Black Sea, in this photo taken from video released by Russian Defense Ministry Press Service on January 5, 2024.

billionaires may not work well politically given that the latest Pew figures show that over 60 per cent of Americans now consider themselves working class, up six points from two years ago.

Appealing to working people has brought the Republicans electoral success in recent years. Donald Trump’s inflationary wars (both trade and hot) have undermined that appeal to some extent. Democrats are finding that economic populism is more salient than identity politics.

And so, both parties are now locked in an internal, existential struggle between leadership, key donors (who want neither tariffs nor tax rises), and political reality, as they

try to play the class card.

Doing so successfully requires a proper understanding of how class works in America, a topic both nebulous yet all encompassing.

Some people self-define as “working class” because they don’t have a college education or work with their hands (this is the model former Maine Democratic Senate candidate and oysterman Graham Platner tried to leverage before he was tainted with allegations of sexual assault, which he denies).

Others do so because of economic insecurity. This brings a lot of under- or unemployed, AI-threatened white-collar workers into the tent given that healthcare and

retirement schemes are connected to employment in the US. Half of college graduates and upper-income adults now consider themselves part of the “working class”.

More Republicans than Democrats also self-define this way, which says a lot about how the left has become associated with wealth. Overall, more white people than Black people call themselves working class, which reaffirms the idea central to behavioural economics that a loss (in this case, of relative economic status) is more painful than a gain is pleasurable.

Unions would like anyone who lives off a pay cheque to identify as working class (hence the United

Auto Workers organising adjunct professors), underscoring that wealth rather than income may be the real class divider in America. Pew numbers show the median wealth of upper-income households is 49 times that of lower-income ones today, as opposed to 31 times in 2022. Those top households drive inflation in key areas like housing and education.

It’s clear that the idea of class is politically salient. Republicans have tried to emphasise things like re-industrialisation as well as not taxing tips as solutions to the challenges of the working class. Democrats are talking up corporate power, labour protections and aid for working

people. But the mobility challenge — Harvard professor Raj Chetty’s landmark work found that 90 per cent of children earned more than their parents if born in the 1940s, versus 50 per cent if born in the 1980s — will require solutions from both sides of the aisle. It is tied to both the need for higher GDP growth (a whopping 6 per cent a year to right the ship) and better distribution of that growth.

Ultimately, says Jennifer Harris, the head of the Hewlett Foundation’s economy and society initiative, which funds economic research and advocacy on both the left and the right, being “working-class may be less about an income level than a creed or a set of

ideas about what democracy needs in America right now.” It needs to work, for starters (the midterms and any White House refusal to accept the results will tell us much on that score).

What’s more, democracy and mobility are deeply intertwined. Research shows that belief in a better future is connected to satisfaction with the political system. And having a voice in politics depends on economic opportunity. The American dream does not come cheap.

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# Beyond the pink ribbon: Greece's breast cancer patients left to find their own way

Greece has become good at finding breast cancer early. But, it has yet to build a system that carries a woman to recovery without her organizing, and often paying for, much of it herself



*Continued from Page One*

So I found hospital names online and read them out to him one by one. Some leading women's hospitals were fully booked for the month; others did not post appointments to the central system. I would have to call them myself.

The next 12 calls took 80 minutes. After long holds and transfers, the answers ranged from an appointment within two weeks to none at all. Some lines went unanswered. One switchboard was unsure whether its hospital performed mammograms; another said it did, only for the radiology department to tell me otherwise. Just one employee asked about my menstrual cycle to time the examination. At another hospital, bookings had simply ground to a halt because the breast radiologist was retiring.

It was a small experiment, not a scientific survey, and routine screening is not an urgent referral. But it illustrated a problem repeatedly described by doctors and patients: obtaining care can demand considerable administrative persistence. "Population screening is about more than sending text messages

and offering free examinations," says Dr. Evangelos Filopoulos, a breast surgeon and president of the Hellenic Cancer Society.

That burden reaches beyond the patient. According to the European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE), 66 percent of Greek women do housework daily, against 41 percent of men. Among those providing childcare, women are more than twice as likely to devote over 35 hours a week to it. Greece ranks second from the bottom of the EU on EIGE's measure of gender equality in time use. When a woman becomes ill, a household may lose income and a central source of unpaid care. The consequences reach children and elderly relatives alike. Seeing her through treatment is not merely a matter of hospital efficiency, but of social policy.

## **'Deal with it yourself'**

The doctors and advocates interviewed by *TO VIMA International Edition* describe a country that treats breast cancer well in parts, but leaves patients to connect those parts themselves.

Paraskevi Michalopoulou, president of Alma Zois, the Hellenic Association of Women with Breast Cancer,

says the real problem begins the moment you have your mammogram and they find something. After that, "nobody connects you to anything." A woman may have to find her own oncologist, biopsy appointment and hospital, while coping with the fear of a possible diagnosis. With no psychological support integrated into the referral process, some are so overwhelmed that they postpone the next step. The first days after a suspicious finding can thus become a period of confusion rather than an organized clinical response.

Dr. Emmanouil Saloustros, president of the Hellenic Society of Medical Oncology, agrees that "cancer care remains fragmented." Patients have to coordinate diagnostics, biopsies, molecular tests, surgery, treatment and follow-up across services that are not sufficiently connected.

Dr. Georgios Pissakas, head of radiation oncology at Alexandra Hospital, points to a shortage of operating rooms, compounded by too few histopathologists to deliver the tissue analysis results needed to determine the next stages of care. Chemotherapy, largely delivered through day clinics, is comparatively

accessible. Radiotherapy is more difficult, with waiting times of around two months. "A woman whose oncologist refers her early, while chemotherapy is still under way, will usually find a slot. One referred at the last minute often will not."

Once treatment begins, appointments tend to be better coordinated, particularly for patients with metastatic disease, Michalopoulou explains. It is before therapy starts and after it ends that women face the greatest difficulties, often finding themselves caught between the public and private systems. With public hospital doctors sometimes also practicing privately, the distinction can become blurred. "I may have chosen a doctor in the public sector but ended up in the private one," says Michalopoulou. The consequences can be costly; women unable to secure timely treatment in the public system may find themselves borrowing money or selling possessions to pay for private care.

## **Good treatment, hard care**

S.R. underwent regular mammograms from her late thirties. Nevertheless, at 55 she was diagnosed

with breast cancer. A trainee mental health counselor sensitive to the psychological complexities associated with illness, she moved between public and private hospitals to keep treatment on schedule.

What she paid for privately, she says, was not better medicine but warmth and dignity. In a public hospital she received chemotherapy sitting upright alongside some 15 patients at different stages of the illness. With some reading quietly, but others crying out in pain, the room intensified her distress rather than offering reassurance.

She also recounts differing approaches to Herceptin, a targeted treatment she required every 21 days. In a private clinic it was administered intravenously and, she says, billed to EOPYY, the national public health insurer, as a full day of hospital treatment. At a public hospital, a doctor told her it could be injected into her thigh in minutes at a fraction of the cost.

Mary Hinari, president of the cancer patient association K.E.F.I., describes chemotherapy rooms holding 20 people for four or five hours, followed by lines of up to two

hours to see an oncologist.

The problem is not the caliber of Greek oncologists. Greece has 6.6 doctors per 1,000 people, among the OECD's highest ratios, but 3.8 nurses, against an OECD average of 9.2. "We have plenty of doctors," says Filopoulos. "What we don't have are nurses and administrative staff."

Time with patients is another casualty. Hinari describes doctors unable to give a frightened patient the conversation she needs because there is a queue outside the door. Without secretarial support, Michalopoulou says, paperwork "takes up a great deal of the doctor's time." Saloustros stresses that effective oncology care requires time to explain treatment options, manage side effects and support patients and their families. Yet much of that time is lost to administrative approvals and paperwork, leaving doctors with fewer opportunities to provide the personal attention essential to safe, high-quality treatment.

## **The hidden bill**

Breast cancer treatment in public hospitals is free. But, as Filopoulos puts it, "cancer is financially toxic." Lost

wages, private examinations to avoid delays, travel and uncovered rehabilitation costs accumulate around the treatment itself.

One woman, unable to secure public radiotherapy in time, paid about €15,000 privately. “This was an enormous financial burden for our family,” says a relative. “We had to make considerable sacrifices, scrimp and save wherever possible, and even sell valuable personal belongings to cover the costs.” The family requested anonymity, fearing consequences if the patient needed to return to a public hospital.

The financial burden extends beyond medical treatment, with psychological support often difficult to access without paying privately. Patients, particularly those with advanced cancer, may need sustained counseling, yet support is poorly integrated into routine care. K.E.F.I. offers up to 15 free sessions annually and has provided 1,432 sessions to 287 patients; private appointments can cost €50 or more. Hinari argues counseling should be “built into the system and be entirely reimbursed by the national public health insurer.” In Germany, statutory insurance covers medically indicated psychotherapy; France offers up to 12 publicly supported psychological consultations annually, with full coverage for eligible patients with recognized long-term conditions. Their approaches show how emotional care can be treated as part of the health system’s responsibilities, rather than a service patients must fund through charity.

Radiotherapy exposes an especially sharp gap between public entitlement and practice. Pissakas estimates Greece has about 56 radiotherapy machines across public and private providers, against roughly 85 suggested by European benchmarks for its population. EOPYY contracts private centers to supplement public capacity.

Under Article 23 of EOPYY’s benefits regulations, patients owe no co-payments for the covered conventional radiotherapy procedure, although the radiation oncologist’s fee may be charged separately. For stereotactic radiotherapy, that fee is covered too.

Three interviewees allege that some contracted providers demand more. Pissakas says patients can be asked for €1,500–€2,000 on top of doctors’ fees of around €1,500. Hinari alleges that certain payments are requested in cash; Filopoulos says rules are not be-



ing enforced. No provider was named or found to have breached the rules, and *TO VIMA International Edition* has not independently verified individual charges.

Pissakas raised the allegations publicly in 2020, 2023 and 2025. “The big problem in Greece is this: when you sign an agreement, do you honor it? And if you don’t, who holds you to account?” He accuses regulators of failing to enforce the contracts. Patients who are unable to pay rejoin the queue for public care, he argues, adding to the waiting lists that private centers were contracted to help reduce.

He says EOPYY never supplied the aggregate private radiotherapy figures he requested while leading the

Greek Radiation Oncology Society, although the insurer itself processes the claims. However, such transparency is particularly important when patients may be reluctant to raise complaints themselves against providers on whom their treatment depends.

Distance makes the financial burden worse. Radiotherapy machines are concentrated in Athens, Thessaloniki and a few regional cities, requiring some patients to spend weeks away from home. Travel may be reimbursed, Michalopoulou says, “but not accommodation, which is an enormous expense. It is one thing to stay one night, and another to stay 45 days to follow your treatment plan.”

France pays hospitals

a nightly rate to accommodate patients traveling for treatment free of charge in so-called “hospital hotels,” while Norway’s patient-travel scheme also covers accommodation.

With an Athens hotel costing at least €100 a night, according to Hinari, patients often depend on charitable accommodation. K.E.F.I. provides an apartment for families traveling from outside Athens, while organizations such as Pnoi Agapis offer donated properties near Agios Savvas Hospital, filling a gap the state leaves unaddressed. Maria Karra, co-founder of Emfasis, says the organization helps women who sleep in their cars for consecutive nights during cancer treatment in Athens because they

cannot afford a hotel. Relatives of hospitalized patients have done the same.

**Before the first dose, after the last**

For younger women, chemotherapy can threaten fertility, leaving little time to decide whether to retrieve and freeze eggs. “That procedure isn’t reimbursed,” says Michalopoulou, “not even in public hospitals.” Some institutions offer it free or cheaply, but finding them urgently is another burden. “How is a woman supposed to know which clinic does it for free, and whether she can get there in time?” she asks.

Greece covers approved fertility medications for eligible cancer patients, although a comprehensive reimbursement route for retrieval, freezing and storage remains unclear. Cyprus offers eligible women a €2,000 state grant, while Israel, France and Belgium provide more explicit public insurance coverage for medically indicated fertility preservation.

The end of a treatment can bring a new administrative ordeal. “I get a message when my car is due for a service,” says Michalopoulou. “Why shouldn’t a patient get a text saying: this month you need these tests?” Women may have to arrange follow-up appointments and fresh referrals themselves. Hinari says electronic referrals sometimes expire before a booked appointment arrives. In Eng-

land and Sweden, specialist nurses and personalized care plans help coordinate the follow-up, rather than leaving patients to manage it alone.

Nor does diagnosis trigger an automatic income allowance. Hinari recounts the case of a woman awarded 67 percent disability for three years after a mastectomy. “Is the breast going to grow back?” she asks dryly. Women certified with at least 67 percent disability may qualify for €338 monthly—but, generally, only if they are not working or entitled to an insurance pension. Eligible employees can claim sickness benefits, whereas some self-employed women cannot. In contrast, Cyprus announced a monthly allowance in October for financially vulnerable breast cancer patients, covering treatment and extending to up to a year afterwards.

For patients nearing the end of their life, the gaps in care can be particularly distressing. Pissakas describes patients discharged without adequate home or palliative support, leaving them feeling that “in effect you are told: go home and die.” In June, the Health Ministry announced a €368.9 million National Palliative Care Action Plan for 2025–30, intended to address the needs of some 135,000 people annually. Until those plans translate into services, charities such as K.E.F.I. continue to fill the gap, providing psychological and social support at home to terminally ill patients and their families.

**A network on paper**

In October, Deputy Health Minister Eirini Agapidaki announced plans for seven integrated public breast centers—six in Attica and one at the Theageneio Hospital in Thessaloniki—intended to coordinate care from diagnosis through treatment and follow-up. The initiative responds to longstanding calls from doctors and patient groups for specialists to work together with women, rather than leaving them to navigate the system alone. No starting timetable has been confirmed, and the initiative’s success will depend on adequate staffing, shorter waiting times and measurable improvements in patient care.

Greece has invested in detecting breast cancer early and treating it. What remains is to connect those achievements into an accessible journey through diagnosis, treatment and the years beyond. Until then, too many women must thread the pink ribbon through the system themselves, drawing on their time, savings and families to do so.

*Both the Ministry of Health and EOPYY were contacted for comment but neither responded by the time of publication.*



# Ink Is In: Greece's Growing Tattoo Scene

Continued from Page One

Up until last year, tattoo businesses lacked any statutory protection—for either the customer or the service provider. At press time, the tattoo sector is still operating under the same legal framework as barbershops and beauty parlors. It was only in December 2025 that an amendment issued by the Ministry of Health put some health code specifications in place for tattoo parlors in Greece.

Still, they barely scratch the surface of what is truly needed to secure a safe, sterile tattooing environment that meets European and global standards.

During the 10th Athens Tattoo Expo, *TO VIMA International Edition* caught up with a few artists to gauge their views on how the tattoo industry in Greece is evolving. A common thread ran through their varied experiences: the importance of distinguishing between professionals and novices.

## Formalizing the learning curve

The consensus among industry veterans is that bureaucracy and health inspections do not make for a reputable artist.

"Tattooing is a profession that takes years to master. It takes time and some degree of financial sacrifice to move from apprentice to skilled professional," according to Giannis Andreou, known professionally as Dane, who has been in the business for over 17 years.

Speaking with *TO VIMA International Edition* about what Greece's tattoo scene looks like today, he seems positive yet cautious.

"The younger generation have better access to information and enter the industry faster, but you can't just wake up, pick up a tattoo machine and become an artist."

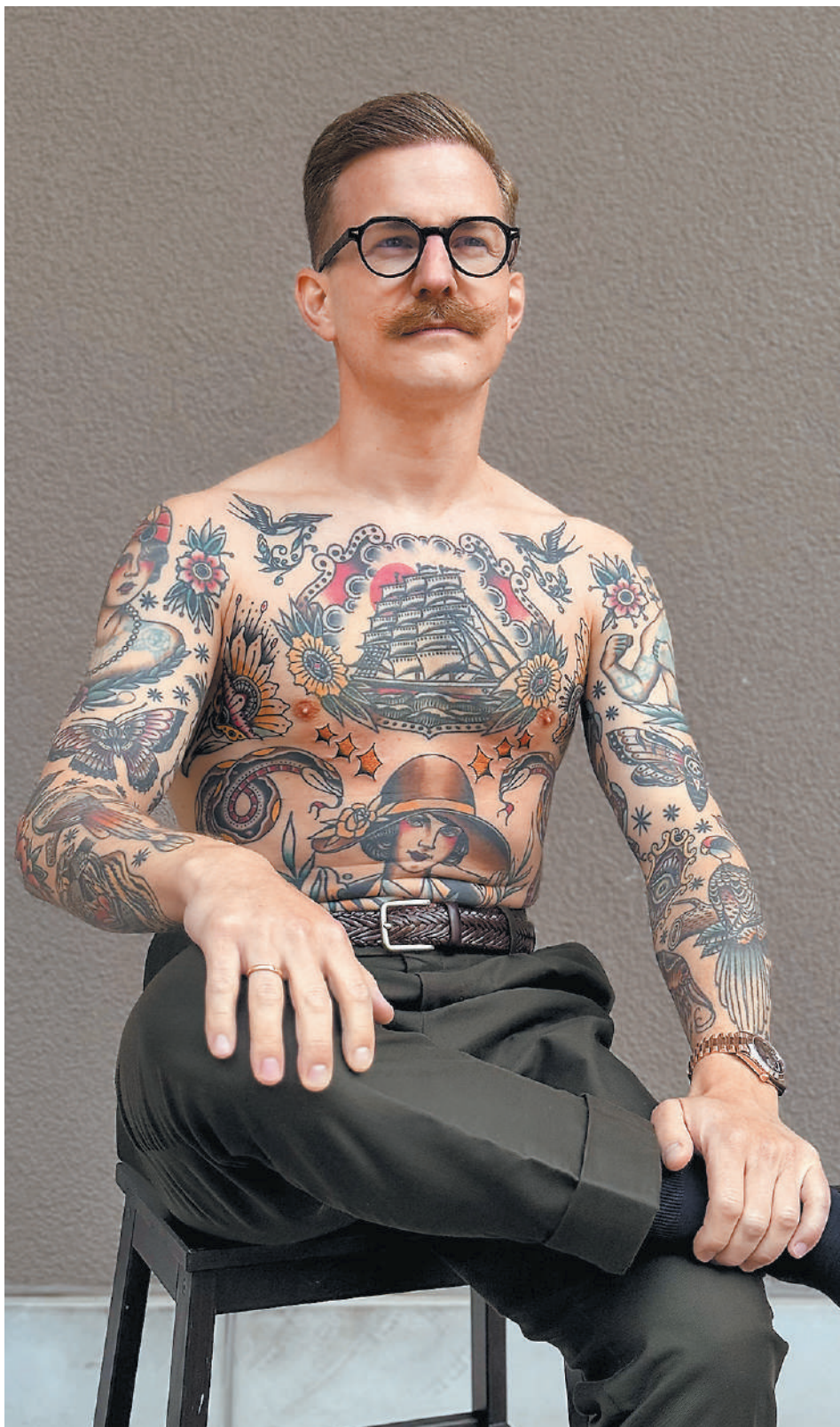
Apprenticeship in established tattoo parlors has long been considered the first step for anyone wanting to become a reputable tattoo artist. In an effort to legitimize these skills, institutions like the Athens Tattoo Academy offer certification in the craft with guidance from industry professionals. This change hasn't been warmly received by all artists, however, some of whom view the trade schools as "cash grabs".

"There is no better way

As tattoo parlors multiply throughout the country, legislative gaps and inadequate safety checks have veteran Greek artists concerned over the future of the industry



Client showcases old-school American tattoos done by Dane, artist and owner of The Lovelorn Tattoo studio.



GIANNIS ANDREOU/DANE TATTOO

to learn than shadowing and studying under a professional," another artist said, adding: "Beginners need a serious mentor."

## Oversaturation, change and risks

Athens and Thessaloniki are two of the biggest tattoo hubs in the country. The Greek capital alone has more than 200 registered tattoo studios.

Dane opened his The Lovelorn Tattoo in 2021. "I believe the tattoo industry in Greece is doing better than the industry internationally. I travel often and lived abroad for a few years, and I've noticed that demand here hasn't dropped," he said.

Despite consistent difficulties, including the big dip in business during the COVID pandemic, the tattoo sector in Greece continues to grow.

Matina, a tattoo artist who works in the Sayagata Tattoo Studio in Thessaloniki, has noticed that most clients still come through recommendations rather than research. "Word of mouth is a lot more powerful in Greece than abroad. Clients won't necessarily come to you for your specific tattooing style, but because you did their friend's tattoo."

The use of AI has also brought about new challenges for artists, as Matina notes: "Some people want an exact AI-generated design with no alteration on the artist's part. Excessive use of AI will destroy original tattoos as we know them."

New legislation enacted in 2025 has specified all the tools that are required to operate a tattoo parlor in Greece. Additionally, the minimum floor space required by law for a tattoo workstation is now set at 15 square meters. There are vague rules on proper hygiene and sterilization techniques, which mention using only disposable materials, but no actual rule

guidelines on what proper sterilization entails.

Tattoo artist Sotiris, the owner of the Fabrika Tattoo Aesthetika who goes by AMOK professionally, spoke on the importance of setting and imposing clear sanitation guidelines.

"Health services inspect us, but they do so under a very generalized rulebook, it's simply not effective for our industry." One of the biggest concerns that comes with vague rules is how open they are to individual interpretation. "Yes, it's important to prefer a studio over getting tattooed in a household setting, but not all studios are created equal."

As Sotiris points out, "unfortunately, the local industry is all over the place: each tattoo parlor operates in line with the personal ethics and standards of the individual owner."

## A place of one's own

The Greek Tattoo and Piercing Union seeks to address all of the above issues by bringing the community together and separating the professionals from the wannabes and fly-by-night operators. With just 120 members at present, it's still in its early stages.

*TO VIMA International Edition* spoke with union president Kyriakos Valassis and treasurer Elpida about the organization's core mission. "After the pandemic, tattoo studios were the last businesses to reopen. If we had proper representation, it would have been easier to advocate for the sector," Kyriakos said.

More changes in legislation are imminent, according to reports, and the Tattoo and Piercing Union is hoping to help institute proper safety regulations in collaboration with state officials.

On her part, Elpida spoke about the union providing a shield for tattoo and piercing artists: "We are looking to recruit as many members as possible, so that we too can have a voice in future legislative changes that affect our industry."

# Christos Christofis: 'I wanted to grow alongside the artists'

The art collector speaks of the works that only disclose their meaning years down the line, and of the art that finds its place beyond established exhibition spaces

By Panos Kougias

It all began with a fisherman's smile. In 1973, in a studio on Akadimias Street, Athens, Christos Christofis found himself standing in front of a watercolor by N. Nikolaidis. More than half a century later, he continues to recall that encounter with a precision akin to that with which he catalogs the works in his collection.

Born on Oinousses, having studied marine engineering in England, Christofis embarked on a career in shipping. He neither inherited a collection nor was brought up in a home filled with paintings. Rather, he learned to look at art through visits to exhibitions, bookshops, and ateliers. Only then did the acquisitions, the acquaintances and friendships, the exhibition curations and ceaseless documentation begin—all focused, above all, on living Greek artists and their work in a conscious decision to trace their artistic evolution as it happened. During our conversation, he does not describe his collection in terms of a list of acquisitions, but speaks instead of the gaze that matures, of the works that only disclose their meaning years down the line, and of the art that finds its place beyond established exhibition spaces. It is there, it seems to me, that the essence of his collection lies—not in the things one comes to possess over time, but in the way in which one learns to perceive art in a broader sense.

**Professionally, shipping is your sphere of expertise. How did painting enter the picture?**

My fascination with painting began during my years as a student in Newcastle, from 1966 to 1971. Whenever I saw an exhibition advertised, I'd go. I'd wander into bookshops, leaf through volumes on art, trying to learn. Later on, business trips gave me the opportunity to visit museums abroad. But it was only in 1979, when I moved back to Greece, that I began to attend shows systematically and read art publications like *Zygos*. In those early days, I was an art lover, not an art collector.

**Do you remember your first ever purchase, in 1973?**

Down to the last detail! I wandered by chance into Nikolaidis's studio, on Akadimias Street. He primarily painted warships—commissions for men in the Greek Navy. But my gaze went straight to a smiling elderly man. It was Barba-Lias, a fisherman from Petries on Euboea. I bought the watercolor for five hundred drachmas. I still have it, and I cherish it. Later on, through talking with painters, I came to understand just how hard it is to portray a smiling face. And I esteemed it all the more after that.

**When did this love begin to turn into deliberate collecting?**

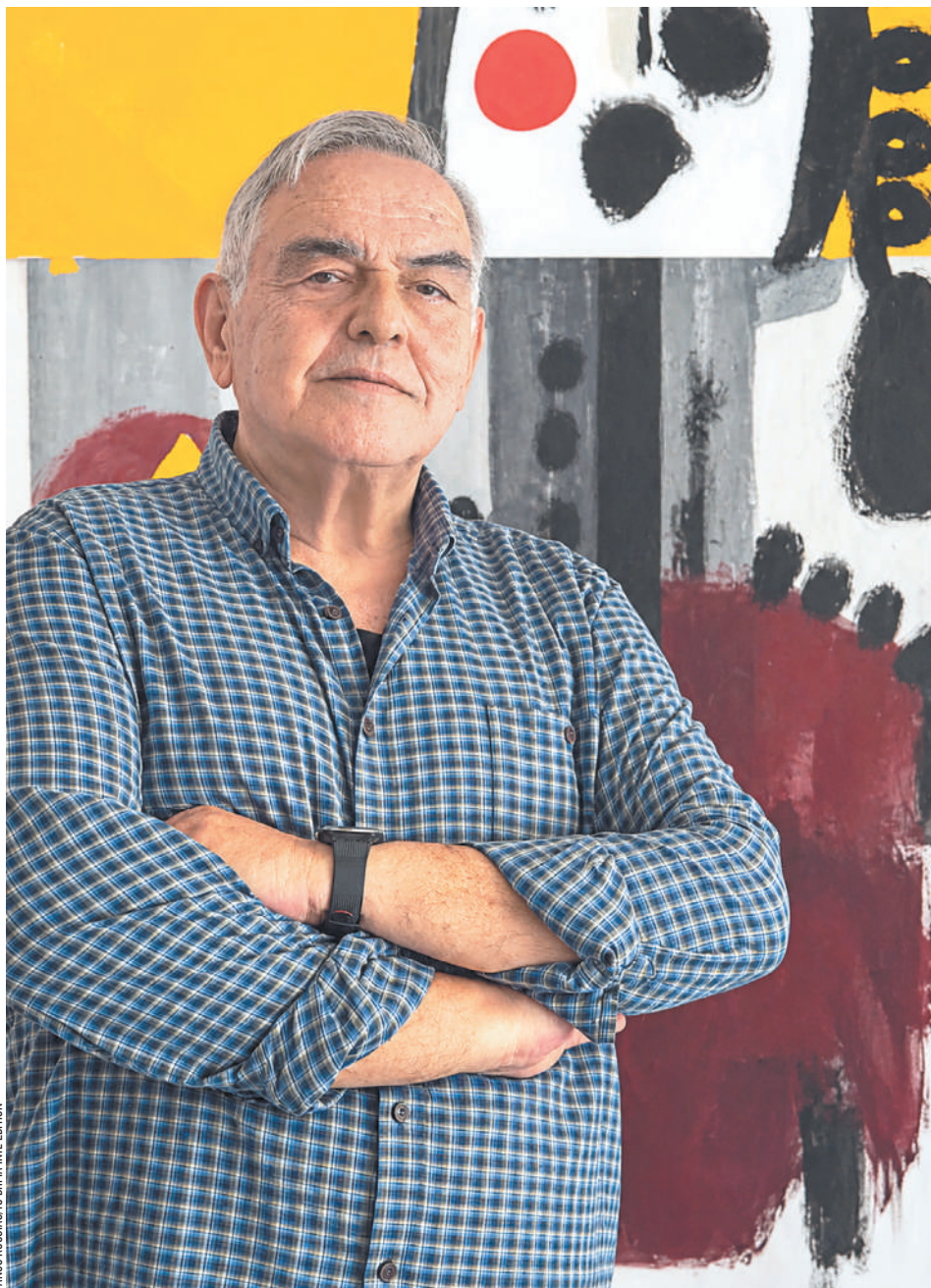
Round about 1983-84. I'd hardly miss a single exhibition, I was reading everything I could get my hands on, and had started to form a viewpoint of my own. Of course, I couldn't buy whatever caught my fancy; I had to restrict myself to what my budget allowed. The paintings I collected at that time were predominantly figurative and anthropocentric, mirroring a large part of the Greek art produced in that decade. I documented everything from the start, too: when and where I acquired each piece. And I've kept that up till today.

**Why did you elect to focus your collection exclusively on living Greek artists?**

I wanted to grow alongside them. To live my life in parallel with theirs, to follow their careers and their development as artists. It was never a matter of authenticity or how sound an investment a work would be. I was especially interested in the new and in upcoming artists. There is great joy to be had in spotting something in an unknown artist and then, years later, seeing the heights they have scaled. It's a choice I have never regretted. I also tried, as far as possible, to ensure that each new acquisition entered into a seamless conversation with the collection's existing works.

**What occurs in that moment when you decide a work is of interest to you?**

First and foremost, it has to



Christos Christofis in front of *Trois Reines*, a work by Yannis Varelas.

speak to me. Over the years, you accrue experiences and imagery, comparisons. The mind acquires such a wealth of information that you only have to lay eyes on a piece to instantaneously recognize a detail, a kinship, an element that draws you in. If I find myself before ten works by the same painter, it doesn't take me long to pick out those I prefer.

**Your rapport with several painters evolved into friendship. How decisive a factor is that?**

I formed a connection with Michalis Madenis just as he was starting out on his career, and I have kept a close eye on his output ever since his first one-man show. Tasos Mantzavinos and I also developed a very close relationship; we would converse and while away the hours together. I am deeply invested in knowing what the artist

is creating, and how they are growing. I have stayed close to various individuals for decades—with Manolis Bitsakis, for instance. Still, that doesn't mean that friendships dictate my acquisitions; the initial encounter with the artwork itself remains paramount.

**Has there been a specific work that vindicated your choice many years later?**

In 2001, I purchased a drawing by the architect Christos Papoulias from a group exhibition. I saw something enigmatic in it, and I have had it hanging on my wall for twenty-five years. Recently, I was asked if I would loan it out for an exhibition. This was a vindication. It doesn't matter if it has commercial value or not. I chose it because I liked it.

**How did you get involved in curating exhibitions?**

I started out rather timidly through my participation in exhibitions and my social interactions with artists. I believe that curation isn't something that can be taught; it has to be mastered in practice: from the things one observes and selects, and from the idea you want to serve. It's a lot like writing. You select works, uncover the connections between them, come up with a concept, then put pen to paper. I have revisited my older texts, and there are exhibitions among them which I still enjoy.

**You have also shown works in spaces other than conventional galleries. What are you looking for in these alternative venues?**

I presented work by ITSMI at the «Kanaria». Recently, we've started something radically simple: I bring a work, we hang it for four

or five hours, discuss it, look through catalogs, and then I take it back. In a way, these are one-man one-work shows. I do this with friends and artists. My aim is for the art to provide the impetus for a gathering, rather than being restricted to a formal visit.

**Your collection is accompanied by texts and thorough documentation. What place does the written word hold in your approach?**

To my mind, it is part of an indivisible whole. I did not start out buying four or five paintings to decorate my home with. I wanted to study, to understand and to document. I am especially drawn to creators in whose work the image engages intimately with the written word. I hold the writings of Chouliaras in high regard. In drawings by ITSMI, the inscribed phrase is no mere title; it is a fundamental part of the work. This nexus between image and discourse continues to fascinate me.

**Has your gaze altered with the passing of so many decades?**

Definitely. I don't drive the painting; the painting drives me. Initially, I was drawn far more to intense, expressionistic works. And while I still like them, I have gradually turned toward a simpler style, sometimes even to forms of abstraction. I am fascinated when something infinitesimal has the power to stop you in your tracks without the need for a narrative or nostalgic allusion.

**How do you feel about contemporary Greek art and the younger generation of Greek artists?**

I believe that they were given a major boost by the artists who ventured abroad, to Germany, Switzerland, Belgium, the Netherlands, and beyond. They were exposed to disparate ways of working, they blazed new trails, and returned with a more international outlook. When people ask me which young artist is going to rise to the top, I reply that no one can be certain. You can have your preferences, but you can never tell where an individual oeuvre or artists is going to end up.

# Romance Scammers Turned a Texas Man Into an Unwitting Money Mule

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

He fell for a beautiful woman online then found himself laundering cash for an international crime ring. ‘It wasn’t love toward the end.’

Continued from Page One

Once he let her back in, they spent nearly two years texting about movies and making plans to meet—though it never seemed to work out. And she kept asking for money.

Then one day last October, as he and his siblings were at a funeral home choosing an urn for their father’s ashes, Stafford, 49, got an unexpected message. Markus Johnson, an investigator with the Richland County Sheriff’s Department, about 900 miles away in Columbia, S.C., wanted to talk.

Johnson had been working a case involving someone scamming a company out of about \$21,000. Why, Johnson wanted to know, had that money ended up in Stafford’s account?

“That was for my girlfriend,” Stafford replied, then caught himself. All his nagging doubts suddenly rushed to the surface.

As scams surge nationwide, the “lonely hearts” ruse remains a classic: Con artists, who could be prisoners on contraband cellphones or overseas syndicates, prey on vulnerable people seeking companionship.

Increasingly, though, thieves do more than drain the victim’s savings; they use them as a foot in the door to the U.S. financial system and turn them into conduits to launder money for other plots.

“They’re looking for a U.S. citizen with a pulse,” Johnson said. “If that person happens to have some money they can steal in the process, that’s an added bonus.”

Romance scams also help U.S. criminals avoid attention from banking regulators by spreading ill-gotten gains across more accounts, said John Breyault, vice president of the National Consumers League. “Romantic interest is a very strong emotion,” he said. “Scammers recognize this and devote a lot of time to develop the trust needed to exploit the victim.”

### ‘Please baby’

Stafford, a soft-spoken churchgoer, loves motorcycles, camping and fishing. He lives in a bus-size motor home—a remnant of his time on the road as a welding inspector for large construction projects.

When “Sarah” first sent him a friend invitation in May 2023, the come-on was so casual it didn’t raise alarms. “She



started off, ‘just tell me about yourself,’ ” he recalled. “She wasn’t, like, overly flattering or anything.”

Stafford said he knows he’s not the best-looking guy or wealthy enough to attract attention from someone as glamorous as Sarah, whose pictures included fashion and bikini shots. “Why would you want to be with an overweight, broke dude?” he texted at one point. “I’m struggling as it is...I couldn’t afford a family right now if I wanted to.”

Still, the attention felt good. Typically around 11 each night, they would text about what they had for dinner or their future. Phone calls were rare, he said, “like pulling teeth.”

Stafford still isn’t sure why he didn’t cut her off for good after that first request for money, but by Christmas that year, he realized he missed her. Once they reconnected, though, the asks only grew. Several thousand dollars for a seminar in digital design. Seed money for an antiques business. Medical costs for her sick mother.

Over nearly two years, Stafford drained \$15,000 of his savings and ran up another \$15,000 in credit-card debt. He even applied for a \$55,000 loan. “I have good credit, but thank God they only approved \$35,000,” he said. His late father helped clear the credit-card balance, but he is still chipping away at the loan.

Meanwhile, Sarah also had another use for him: collecting payments for her antiques business.

In February last year, when she asked for his bank account and routing information so she could direct \$2,000 into the account, he tried to draw a line in the sand.

The next day, he sent his account details.

From there, things got worse. Whenever a payment arrived in Stafford’s account, Sarah would frantically press him to move the money into various crypto wallets—sometimes requiring him to leave work. He briefly set up other accounts, but banks, suspecting illegal activity, would soon freeze them.

Still, Sarah always had a reason why she couldn’t open her own accounts or make the transfers herself—citing bad credit or a move to London from Miami. In all, Stafford

said, about \$50,000 moved through his account or others she had him set up, while another \$100,000 in bad checks she sent him bounced.

Stafford’s experience follows a pattern. Victims or other accomplices typically shift money from their own accounts into crypto wallets controlled by the scammers, who then might split the money into smaller batches and move them through other accounts to complicate the trail. In Stafford’s case, the money ended up in overseas bank accounts, where Johnson’s warrants couldn’t reach them. That helps explain why scam victims often have little chance of recovering their losses.

Some unwitting accomplices become criminals. In

2021, an 81-year-old Missouri woman pleaded guilty to identity theft after helping a man she considered her long-term love interest, despite never meeting him and getting repeated warnings from banks and law enforcement that he was using her for his rip-offs.

### Gut feeling

Back in Columbia, Investigator Johnson, an army veteran turned trenchcoat-wearing gumshoe, had been looking into the case of a local home builder scammed out of about \$21,000 by a fraudster using an email address just slightly different from a brick supplier. The increasingly common ruse has ensnared businesses and even local governments.

When Johnson traced the calls and emails behind the rip-off, the trail led to scammers in Nigeria. When he followed the money, it led to Garrick Stafford in Texas.

“Sarah,” it turns out, wasn’t a Miami makeup artist. “She” was a married couple in Nigeria, who had taken turns playing his love interest—sometimes letting AI answer his texts, Johnson’s investigation found. And the antiques business was just another front in a web of deceit that used dozens of lonely people like Stafford as unknowing money launderers.

When Johnson’s call came, Stafford felt anger and betrayal, but also something else.

“It was actually a big relief,” Stafford said. “I’d had this gut feeling for a long time. It wasn’t love toward the end. I

was being used like a mule.”

After connecting with Stafford, Johnson kept digging. Through warrants, he mapped the scammers’ myriad emails, phone numbers and crypto accounts, and messaged the fraudsters to let them know he was on their trail—insinuating he would sit back and see who would crack first to make a deal.

Panicked, one scammer drafted a formal letter, denying any knowledge of illegal activity and pledging to help the investigator any way he could.

The swindler also recorded all his calls, which gave Johnson transcripts of the group trying to get their stories straight and scrambling to remember which phones or computers they used for various ploys, and debating which devices to destroy.

“They start calling each other, turning on each other, freaking out,” he said.

Johnson contacted officials in Nigeria to try to hand the case to someone who could actually prosecute it, but got no response. He also tried to get the U.S. State Department Office of Special Investigations in Nigeria to help. He forwarded his findings but never heard what happened with the case.

The State Department didn’t respond to requests for comment. Earlier this month, the Justice Department announced the arrest of dozens of people and elimination of 3.7 million social-media accounts in an operation targeting West African scammers, with the help of international law enforcement and tech companies.

### Nothing she can do

Finally, Johnson reached the redheaded woman whose photo led Stafford to dream of a less-lonely life.

“She’s got a normal office job, but previously had done some modeling. Somehow they got ahold of the photos,” Johnson said. “When I was trying to track down who she was, there was just site after site after site of these classified or dating ads that were all people using her photos to try to scam more people.”

The woman, who declined a request for an interview, told Johnson she had sympathy for the victims—members of her own family had been scammed in the past—but said there’s nothing she can do now to regain control of her image.

Hello my gorgeous baby.  
You finished early today.  
Glad you are home safe.

Yes, baby ... did you eat?

Had chicken again. You?

Yummy. Pasta and beef again. LOL

Trade you!

LOL