

# Natural Selections

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## A LIBRARY WITHOUT A HOME—THOUGHTS ON WELCH HALL

JOSEPH LUNA



Bookshelves and old telephone booth. 2nd Floor, Welch Hall. December 2010. Photograph by the author.

During last month's issue, as we lamented the passing of Otis, the obsolete but charming elevator in Welch Hall, the library staff was hard at work packing up the collections and moving to the 17th floor of Weiss, while work crews were gearing up to begin the long-postponed renovation. Around that time, I had the opportunity to photograph Welch Hall empty, wandering through its various reading rooms, vaults, and former kitchens (more on those later). And while snapping photos of empty bookshelves and offices, I was reminded by the old and often inscribed adage that "the library is the heart of the university." One might wonder that with the university library under renovation, could it be that the heart is on life support?

Recent technological innovation would suggest so. For one, the question "we have a library?" is not entirely uncommon around campus. No one needs to visit the library for a journal issue when most articles are readily accessible via the Internet. The hundreds of outdated text and reference books, often in the previous *lingua franca* of science, French and German, are by and large useless for today's bench scientist. Factor in the state of the building, with the lower levels "uninhabitable" and the exterior damaged by years of ivy growth, one gets a sense of the passing of a historic but hopelessly convalescent Welch Hall.

Nothing could be further from the truth.

I met with the University head librarian, Carol Feltes, to discuss the state of the RU library on the heels of the closure of Welch Hall, and what

struck me most was the undaunted optimism of what is decidedly more of a thorough and sensitive modernization than simply a renovation. "It's a fascinating and exciting opportunity: how do you manage such a historically important collection during a revolution in the sharing of information? This is one of the reasons I took this job during the initial planning stages of the renovation [in 2005]," says Feltes. The closure of Welch Hall has allowed the library to rebalance its collections by finally paring down obsolete or redundant holdings, accessioning and restoring historically important works, and expanding the digital backbone that underlies modern journal access for everyone on campus. The heart, as it turns out, is alive and well.

As for the renovation, Feltes is encouraged, "The building is so beloved. Welch Hall will finally be restored to

its former glory." And what a glorious past it's been. Built in 1929, Welch Hall was named for seminal pathologist and one of The Rockefeller Institute's founding trustees, William Welch, and was quite literally the Collaborative Research Center (CRC) of its day for the young institute. The 1st floor hall housed the dining room, famous in the Institute's lore, as the incubator for chance encounters among staff that would lead to many fruitful and unexpected collaborations. The unspoken rule set during lunch (other than jackets being required) was that you could not sit next to colleagues from your lab. As a result, physicists chatted with virologists, and soil microbiologists with physicians, to name a few examples. The former brought the first purified virus in crystalline form (J. H. Northrop and W. M. Stanley) and the latter the first viable antibiotics isolated from soil microbes (Rene Dubos and Oswald T. Avery). The dining room was used up until the early 1970s when it was fully supplanted by the Weiss cafeteria, but as late as last month you could still see vestiges of the former kitchens, since turned copy machine and break rooms, their swinging doors, china cupboards, and functional dumb waiter, dusty but intact.

The library proper, on the 2nd floor, has the distinction of being originally designed to showcase a priceless painting. In 1924, while abroad in Europe, John D. Rockefeller had the opportunity to buy the *Portrait of Monsieur Lavoisier and his Wife* by French Neoclassical painter Jacques-Louis David. The painting, depicting the discoverer of oxygen at his desk surrounded by the glassware of his trade, is notable for the striking depiction of his wife, who vividly dominates the scene while showcasing her

affection for her husband, who looks at her intently. Painted in 1788, David's depiction was prescient. After witnessing the beheading of her husband and father (on the same day no less!) during the Reign of Terror, Madame Lavoisier devoted her life to preserving and popularizing her husband's work. It is largely to her credit that we have any record of Lavoisier's chemical triumphs at all, and the story is an early example of how behind every great man of science, there is more often than not, an even greater woman.

The huge canvas graced the northern end of the 2nd floor for nearly fifty years until 1977 when it was purchased by the Metropolitan Museum of Art (which could better handle the mounting insurance costs). This past fall, an almost life-size reproduction was given by Paul Nurse to the university and was briefly reinstalled in its former home before being moved to the lobby of the Rockefeller Research Building, where it will be for the duration of the renovation.

When the painting returns to Welch Hall in a few years, the occasion is sure to echo the building's opening in 1929. The first floor will once again be a dedicated events space and home to Monday lectures, while the library will once again occupy the second and third floors. The various subbasements will be reorganized to house 30,000 titles, leaving plenty of room for informal gathering places, a dedicated area for 1st year students, and computing facilities. In short, Welch Hall will be made anew, ready to serve for another century with the same quiet cork floors, the same wood shelves and carved moldings, only this time with bathrooms and (thank heavens) central air.

From the comfortable central air on the 17th floor of Weiss, I asked Feltes if the move back to Welch feels so far away as to be out of reach. "Are you kidding?! It will be here before we know it. We have a lot of great work ahead of us."

With over 2,000 titles, a cozy reading area and twenty-five-cent coffee, the library is open for business. Pay it a visit on the top floor of Weiss. ☺

Reference:

1. Benchmarks, Oct. 15, 2010.

## Natural Selections

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## Enough is Enough: An essay on American political rhetoric in the wake of the Tuscon tragedy

JEANNE GARBARINO

Fear. Anger. Sadness. Confusion. Disappointment. Disgust. Each of these feelings is at war and the battlefield is my heart, my country. Yet, there is no victor as I will never be able to make sense of the violent acts committed by the monster who is Jared Lee Loughner.

As someone who is perpetually plugged in, I first learned of this tragedy very shortly after it occurred. Fourteen were injured and six lay dead, including a nine-year-old girl who attended this event out of a desire to learn more about our government. All at the hands of a mentally disturbed madman. My stomach turned.

It has been nearly a decade since I have truly wept for America and, just as the events occurring on that sunny Tuesday morning in September became a tool for every politician, I immediately knew that this would just add fuel to the fire that pollutes American politics. Almost instantaneously, bloggers and journalists were pointing their fingers at the vitriol practiced by many so-called American spokespeople. Names like Sarah Palin, Glenn Beck, and Rush Limbaugh were being tossed around, almost as if they could be considered guilty by association. It became an endless

encounter of one-upmanship and I wondered if we were losing sight of what had happened, what the implications were for our country, and what we need to do to keep it from happening again.

In part, I can understand the need and/or desire to politicize the Tucson tragedy. But, regardless of political alignment, it is quite obvious that the political environment in America is toxic. Our two-party system is completely inefficient and so many of our representatives seem to only take the stand that will prevent their opponent from being successful, leading to a vicious cycle of ineffectiveness and dangerously powerful political rhetoric. I have recently observed many of my fellow Americans soak in these ill-conceived messages, further perpetuating the anger. Where does it end? While it was Loughner and only Loughner who pulled the trigger, it begs the question as to what his motives were and, even more so, what it was that brought him to these conclusions.

The best and most recent example of how explosive the political environment is in America is that of the healthcare debate. Naturally, you will find opinions spanning from complete disagreement to full-throated

support of President Obama's healthcare initiatives. For many Americans, however, this debate has morphed into an incendiary spectacle wrought with malice. The discussions surrounding the health care bill brought with them a spike in the amount of death threats and violent acts aimed at public officials who supported such measures, including Loughner's primary target, Representative Gabrielle Giffords (D-Arizona).<sup>1,2</sup> In addition to toting signs reading "kill the bill" (including a cartoon of President Obama sitting in a casket) and "vote no or you're gonna go," some protesters have expressed their vehement opposition to the healthcare bill through acts of vandalism. One person has even gone as far as cutting the gas line at a house thought to belong to a member of Congress. But, again, no one is telling these people to take the law into their own hands, right?

After receiving two threatening messages, Representative Louise Slaughter (D-New York) blamed the GOP for "fanning the flames of coded rhetoric." Is this a fair statement? Nathan P. Kalmoe, a Ph.D. candidate in Political Science at the University of Michigan, addresses this very question in his latest paper "Does Violent Political Rhetoric

Fuel Support for Political Violence?”<sup>3</sup> In this survey, he concludes that even mildly violent political statements can lead to increased violence in those with aggressive tendencies.

Before we can make generalized statements on the effects of violently tinged political rhetoric, especially with regard to the shootings that took place in Arizona, we must keep in mind that this is just one study based on a survey of approximately 400 people. However, perhaps Mr. Kalmoe is on to something. Sure, we have all heard militant metaphors used in numerous political speeches, including those made by great Americans such as Abraham Lincoln and Theodore Roosevelt. To “fight” for a particular cause does not necessarily conjure up visions of being on the front lines. Even “The Map,” where Sarah Palin used crosshairs to

point out the House representatives—including Gabrielle Giffords—that voted in favor of the healthcare bill, did not scream to me “assassinate these people!” However, I am a sane person who would rather make love and not war. The same could not be said about Loughner.

The blame game will most likely get us nowhere and it is essential that all politicians and public officials should take responsibility for inducing a vitriolic political atmosphere. Do we really need to ask ourselves if the violent imagery painted by so many political pundits was at the root of this insane action? Even if this type of rhetoric played little or no role in shaping the opinions of Loughner, wouldn’t we be better off as a country if our political conversations were defined by intelligent debate and not by sadistic spin? During

his profound commentary on this tragedy, Jon Stewart plainly states, “It would be really nice if the ramblings of crazy people didn’t in any way resemble how we actually talk to each other on TV. Let’s at least make troubled individuals easier to spot.” I couldn’t agree more. Let us not further devalue the lives lost on January 8, 2011 with empty tit-for-tat squabble. Enough is enough. ☉

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2. Lovley. “Exclusive: FBI details surge in death threats against lawmakers.” *Politico*. Web. 30 Aug. 2010.
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## ***Vox Clamantis In Urbe*** ***The Trains beneath our Feet*** **The MTA and the Subways**

JACOB OPPENHEIM

At the time of this writing, Governor Cuomo has just been sworn in. Given this respite from state politics, I’ll turn to one of the city’s most important public institutions—the Metropolitan Transit Authority (MTA). The MTA controls the subways (New York City Transit) and buses, the Staten Island Railroad, the commuter rail systems (Metro North and Long Island Rail Road), operates the Nassau County Bus System, and the East River crossings. It is a behemoth whose operations are vital to all residents of NYC and its suburbs. In this article, I’ll explain its history, current structure, multitudinous issues, and the prospects for reform, with the main focus being on the subways.

The rapid growth of the cities of New York and Brooklyn in the nineteenth century created a need for mass transit to move people around the burgeoning metropolis. Horse-based transportation was slow and bumpy, and generated massive amounts of filth. The first attempts at providing intra-urban rail transportations were built above the streets—the loud and stinking elevated trains (els). By the turn of the century, it was clear that the new city of greater New York needed an underground rail system, like London already possessed and Paris was building.

The initial subway lines were built by the two largest el operators: the Interborough Rapid Transit (IRT), which built the numbered lines, and the Brooklyn-Manhattan Transit (BMT), which built most of the currently lettered lines, that connected with previously built elevated routes in the outer boroughs. The city gave no-interest loans for the construction of the tunnels, under the condition that they could later be repossessed and that the fare would never surpass five cents. By the 1920s, the dueling companies had built most of what is today the world’s largest urban passenger rail system. By the end of the decade, however, the city government had turned on the IRT and BMT; believing that the city could run a more efficient rail system, Mayor Hylan ordered the construction of a new system, the Independent Subway (IND). Hylan’s successors devised ambitious plans to bring rail to every part of the city, as well as to replace the els, which were correctly believed to be impeding development. In 1940, Mayor LaGuardia ordered a takeover of the two private subway companies, both of them struggling under the burden of

*Going to Work...*



Cartoon by Rossana Henriques



a fare that had not been raised in nearly 40 years.

The far-reaching plans for the IND, however, were left incomplete due to a lack of money during the Great Depression. However, the els were taken down in Manhattan before the 2nd Avenue subway was built, depriving the East Side of service. Most of Queens was left without subway access. The subway system quickly became a tool for machine politicians to garner public support. By keeping the fare at five cents, they kept the masses happy, but bled the city dry. In 1953, control of public transportation was handed to a separate political authority, which in 1965 became the MTA.

Over the years, the MTA was given control of the East River crossings to provide it with an additional source of revenue, the Metro North and Long Island Railways, when their private operators went bankrupt, and various New York area bus services. The burden of running an increasing number of unprofitable services brought the MTA to a state of crisis by the late 1970s. The MTA lacked the money to repair tracks, signals, and cars, the system was covered in graffiti, and breakdowns were common. The State came to the MTA's rescue, promising to fund its capital plan, and eventually instituting a payroll tax throughout the metropolitan area to fund the MTA. With a cleaner, safer, and far better-run subway system, ridership shot back up, attaining near peak levels (set in the late 1940s) by 2009. Increased revenue allowed the MTA to embark, belatedly, on a debt-financed expansion: the extension of the 7 line to the far West Side, and the building of the 2nd Avenue subway.

The recent financial crisis, however, brought everything crashing down. The payroll tax (and other associated levies) came in far under expectations. The State further exacerbated the crisis by confiscating \$143 million of this revenue. Ridership decreased due to the poor economy. The MTA was forced to cut services on the subways and buses last year, and to raise fares more than desired. In addition, long-term fiscal issues began to manifest themselves with the three largest culprits being the State and local governments, the unions, and the capital budgeting system.

Long before the current crisis, the State had begun to fail in its obligations to the MTA. In the 1990s, it defunded the capital plan, forcing the Agency to take on debt for track, signal, and train repair, as well as for expanding services. Both the State and the City Departments of Education quietly defunded the program through which public school students were given free Metro cards, putting the burden in the lap of the MTA, akin to having the bus system support and run school buses. The payroll tax mechanism to

fund the MTA continues to annoy suburbanites, as it generates revenue not from those who use City services, but from anyone who works in the metropolitan area. The MTA has been saddled for the past twenty years with operating the money-hemorrhaging Nassau County bus system. State law has also forced the MTA to run an Access-A-Ride program for the disabled. Ferrying the disabled in taxis to the subway or buses turns public transit into a chauffeur service—clearly an inefficient way of running things. In addition, such unfunded mandates cost the MTA enormous sums that derail its primary purpose—to run the subways, buses, and trains for the people of New York.

Organized labor presents the MTA's second largest problem. Until recently, the Transit Workers Union (TWU) had managed to turn the MTA into a fraud-driven welfare program for its members. Archaic work rules allowed members to collect overtime for routine work. Work schedules were frequently organized so that employees would be paid to do nothing; for instance, one cannot perform track work during rush hour, making an eight-hour afternoon shift cover only four hours of actual work, further increasing the demand for overtime. Pension costs have skyrocketed due to an absurdly low retirement age of fifty, the ability for overtime pay to count towards pension benefits, and lax oversight of a disability system rife with fraud; at one point, 90% of LIRR employees retired with disability. The MTA is stuck paying former employees pensions of up to (and sometimes over) \$100,000 per annum, from age fifty onwards. Despite this largesse, many employees do not even perform the work they are paid to do. MTA employees tasked with cleaning trains were recently found reading the newspaper rather than working. Signal inspectors were found to have lied on their reports. Worse yet, these employees cannot be fired easily, due to the State's archaic labor rules.

The capital plan has led to a whole new set of problems. It is financed entirely by debt, costing millions in interest payments yearly. Projects routinely come in over budget and late, often by years. The Fulton Street Transit Center is currently hundreds of millions of dollars over budget, and will be completed at least three years late. Wasteful and fraudulent expenditures continue to plague construction and renovation projects.

The good news is that, after years of feckless leaders who lacked the institutional backing to truly reform the Agency and take on the TWU, the MTA finally has solid leadership in Jay Walder, the current chairman and CEO. Known for saving the tube in London and for his suc-

cessful (and lucrative) career in both private and public enterprises, Walder is an ideal technocrat. He has already attacked waste, unnecessary bureaucracy, and outright fraud in the budget, saving the agency hundreds of millions of dollars yearly. The union contract is up for renewal next year, and the continuing budget pressures put him in a good position to negotiate real reforms. In addition, Walder has initiated long-term measures to streamline contracting and capital planning.

Ultimately, however, the MTA needs a permanent funding mechanism. A payroll tax, which bears no resemblance to the services it funds, only engenders resentment. Instead, public transportation should be funded by taxing cars and trucks, which would simultaneously raise revenue, promote ridership, and reduce carbon emissions. However, the notoriously venal New York State Legislature has shot down proposed tolls on many of the East River crossings, as well as congestion pricing (charging people to drive into the downtown core of the city).

The State government continues to play politics with the MTA, over fifty years after it was made an independent agency to extract it from such machinations. Rather than fund the MTA, or take on antiquated labor laws that drain it of hundreds of millions of dollars yearly, politicians prefer to grandstand about the need for a forensic audit and the pain that a certain service cut is having on their constituents. Nevermind that Walder has already undertaken such an audit, and that it points back at the state government (and the special interests in Albany) as the source of the financial issues. Nevermind that no transit agency can run a bus that loses hundreds of dollars every trip because it is only ridden by a handful of people daily (as many of the eliminated routes in Brooklyn and Queens were).

New Yorkers need to acknowledge that the MTA is a government-owned and -operated transit company, not a social welfare program. The MTA neither exists to fund the government in Albany nor to give cushy jobs to union members. While keeping the state budget afloat, bringing children to school free of charge, and ensuring a bus stop on every corner (and Access-A-Ride for every disabled resident) are worthy causes, they are the responsibilities of the government that creates those mandates, not a transit authority. Until this view is accepted by all, the MTA will be chronically underfunded, which would be a shame for the world's largest and greatest subway system, one that continues to capture the imagination of people all the world over. ☉



*This Month Natural Selections interviews Eugene Martin, former Postdoc and Research Associate, Pfaff Laboratory  
Country and State of origin: USA, New York.*

## New York State of Mind

**1. How long have you been living in New York?** Twenty-eight years: I lived in Westchester, New York for the first 23 years of my life, left for Florida, and then returned to NYC for the last five years.

**2. Where do you live?** As of writing this, Rockefeller Housing on 70th Street on the Upper East Side.

**3. Which is your favorite neighborhood?** I love the Lower East Side (LES). When I was a teenager, pining to be a part of the city, I always imagined the city to be like the LES: a bunch of dingy stores selling oddities and cheap food, the vibrancy of the NYU students, and the occasional mischievous-maker to keep things interesting.

**4. What do you think is the most overrated thing in the city? And underrated?** Overrated: The street-vendor pretzels. They taste like they're burning.

Underrated: The omnipresence of the cabs. I, at least, always forget just how convenient it is having constant cab service available at the wave of a hand. Then, when I leave Manhattan, occasionally being forced to make a long walk will remind me.

**5. What do you miss most when you are out of town?** Glorious life-sustaining piz-

za, and bagels.

**6. If you could change one thing about NYC, what would that be?** I hate that police can randomly search bags as one enters the subway. It's a civil right that we lost upon the destruction of the World Trade Center and it's a reminder that our country values security theatrics over individual privacy.

**7. Describe a perfect weekend in NYC.** Start Friday evening by giving Tom grief at the Faculty Club. Wander Central Park and the Metropolitan Museum of Art on Saturday, find some dive bar to pass away the evening. Then, on Sunday, cross the Brooklyn Bridge with a good person and eat some pizza at Grimaldi's.

**8. What is the most memorable experience you have had in NYC?** The most memorable experience shouldn't be printed here (but, if you see me, ask about two hot water bottles, a bottle of champagne, and lots of people screaming). The second most memorable experience is driving along to see a slayer show: the car in front of me stopped at a red light and two passengers got out. The passengers then commenced getting into a bloody fist-fight on the sidewalk. The light turned green, the car honked, and



they both jumped right back into it.

**9. If you could live anywhere else, where would that be?** I'd love to live in Ireland. It'd be nice to be in the land of the red-heads, where the sky is overcast and the weather cool.

**10. Do you think of yourself as a New Yorker? Why?** I'm a New Yorker by birth. But, I'm not a New York City-er as I still have to ask for directions when traveling in the West Village. ☺

## PDA Corner—About the CFC, PDA Travel Awards, and Free PDA Lunches

ISABEL KURTH

A new year always comes with new beginnings, and for RU specifically, we will face a major new beginning in March, when the steering wheel is handed over from Paul Nurse to Marc Tessier-Lavigne. As for everyone else, our goal is to continue our work with the new president as successfully as possible and involve him in the issues that are most important to postdocs and Research Associates (RAs). The main issues that we have been dealing with during the past few months and that we continue working on concern the Child and Family Center (CFC) waiting lists, travel awards, and new initiatives.

Last year we performed a survey with the goal of understanding the major problems regarding the CFC at RU. Check out our website for the survey results <http://ds9.rockefeller.edu/pda/>. The survey was sent out to the entire RU community, faculty and administration included. 137 answered the questionnaire with informative feedback. Overall, people were enthusiastic about the programs that the CFC offers, the care that is taken for the kids and the overall organization. However, a big problem is the long waiting lists for applicants. When the survey was taken, 53% of the people who have kids were enrolled in the CFC, while 34.5% were still on the waiting list. If you figure that approximately 60% of parents waited between 6 and 18 months before

they got the approval for admission to the CFC, it seems that getting into childcare is a more difficult task than many might have thought. It turns out that the demand for the infant room is the greatest, with 70% of parents applying for this age group; therefore, the waiting list for the little ones is the longest. Waiting one to two years before their child is accepted to the CFC oftentimes puts a tremendous pressure on young couples, most of who are postdocs and new parents. In fact, 54.7% of these individuals state that non-CFC childcare puts a significant financial hardship on the family and 60% agree that the use of non-RU childcare hinders their productivity in the lab. Considering that many of the young parents are already under pressure from a busy lab schedule and the planning of their careers, it seems that having a child during a Ph.D. or postdoc in NYC is an extremely exigent task. Rockefeller recruits people with the impression that childcare is available on site for everyone. However, the question is how long you wait for it. So, what are the solutions? We had several meetings with members of the parent board, as well as with Virginia Huffman from HR, and Karen Booth, the director of the CFC, to discuss ideas and come up with solutions. Everyone is aware of the waiting list problem but short-term solutions seem to be far away. We clearly un-

derstood that one of the best solutions—an expansion of the CFC on campus—is not possible at this point. Financial reasons and the availability of physical space are the limiting factors. One challenge is that infant rooms need a more elaborate organization, due to the higher caretaker-to-child ratio, and the more demanding standards for the inventory and equipment of the rooms, according to Karen Booth. Adding more infant rooms is therefore a more complicated task than we imagined, but we believe that more pressure coming from the bottom up and voices from parents can help push for that aim.

Currently, Virginia Huffman is working with Alex Kogan from the Housing Office on shared nanny rooms. The idea is that RU would provide empty apartments or rooms where parents can organize their own childcare, by hiring shared nannies for instance. We will have an open meeting in February to discuss these issues and ideas in detail and we encourage all parents to participate. If you have any comments, ideas or problems, please contact us over e-mail (pda@rockefeller.edu). What are the solutions in the meantime? We strongly encourage parents to organize shared nannies, and help one another find affordable childcare in the neighborhood. Also, we encourage parents who are currently experiencing financial shortages to apply to the financial hardships fund that RU has instituted to support these kinds of situations. All information regarding these funds is kept confidential and information can be obtained from Virginia Huffman.

Another problem that was voiced in the survey is the lack of transparency of the waiting list. Oftentimes, parents don't know how long it will take for their child to be accepted, and this adds an additional complication to the planning and organization of childcare. We proposed the introduction of an online waiting list system, where parents

can follow their positions on the list, similar to what the Housing Department did in setting up their housing waiting list. This does not give exact values in months, but can give an idea about how long the wait still might be. In addition, Karen Booth will introduce new biannual information meetings at the CFC, which will allow for (expecting) parents to be more aware of, and better plan for, their childcare.

Money is also an issue on another topic—conferences, meetings, workshops. Often enough, postdocs are eager to participate but are not financially supported by their supervisors. To that aim, the PDA funds a Travel Award that sponsors postdocs to attend these kinds of professional events. Priority is given to postdocs and RAs that have been at RU for more than three years and have never gone to a conference. We award these fellowships (\$400 to \$500 per person) on a biannual basis—in March and October. This fall, we had eleven applicants and we were able to fund four of them with \$500 each. The next deadline for applications will be on March 31—watch out for the e-mails if you are interested in getting support.

We are also planning on setting up a monthly PDA lunch, where we sponsor lunch in the Abby for about ten postdocs. This will give you a great opportunity to meet new people and hear what everyone here is doing. If you are hungry, make sure to RSVP quickly once the emails arrive!

Also on our agenda is the meeting we will have with Marc Tessier-Lavigne. This is the time when we can make a big impact, and are confident that he will be receptive to our concerns. Besides the issues described above, we plan to discuss the salaries, which have not been raised since 2006, despite increasing rents and costs of living. We think it is time for a raise, and hope it happens with the new president. ☉

## Dinner Party

CARLY GELFOND

Against all odds, we are sixteen at the table tonight. At the outdoor restaurant in my neighborhood of Brooklyn, glasses clink as we sit under a purple sky on a Saturday evening in early September.

It's my first time as the family's host.

Across from me, wrapped in a pink shawl to keep her warm against the breeze that carries the coming autumn, sits Gram. She looks at the menu and then up at me. "Well, what are you going to have?" I ask her.

"I'm going to try the steak," she says. Two months ago when I sent out the invitation, I hadn't thought it possible that she would be here tonight. At 92-years-old, she is barely a wisp of a woman. Because of complications associated with a leaky heart, she is only eighty pounds, despite a healthy appetite. And yet, while she may have lost some weight, she hasn't lost her attitude. "Tell the waitress there's a draft in here," she says.

"We're outside, Grandma," I say.

Don't hold this against me, but I had tried to keep the dinner party a secret from her. I'd

thought she wasn't up to the trip, and I hadn't wanted her to know what she was missing.



Cartoon by the author

I guess I should have known better. When she called to ask that a ride be arranged into Brooklyn for her, I may have been caught off guard, but I wasn't really that surprised. She

may be low on energy these days, but she'll never be low on sass. If she wants something, you'll know.

Thankfully, she acknowledged that the pre-dinner cocktail hour at my apartment, a fourth-floor walk-up in a rickety old brownstone nearby, was probably out of the question. Earlier in the evening, as I called out words of encouragement to a group of cousins, aunts, and uncles trudging up the dark ("romantic") staircase to my tiny ("cozy") studio apartment, I breathed a momentary sigh of relief that they weren't carrying Gram in tow.

Cocktail hour had been my attempt at trying out what the matriarchs of my family had been doing for years: welcoming us all into their homes with vacuumed carpets and steaming pots and the good china. The faces of those answering the doors on holidays past were weary, but also somehow vibrant, their cheeks pink from the heat of the oven.

Grandma Sara had always been capable of achieving a dinner gathering that looked effortless. And there had been lots. In her



lifetime, how many hours had she spent ironing the tablecloths, baking the carrot soufflé, checking the oven once, then again, then a third time to get the noodle kugel just right—crisp on the top, not burned, but cooked all the way through? She was the one to emulate.

For now, I'm stepping into my new role as a host of the family on tiptoe.

I'm slowly collecting and practicing the recipes, little sets of instructions recited to me by heart. When I visited Gram in Florida last summer, where she has retreated for many of the past winters, her health was on the decline, so we spent the mornings inside her little apartment, cooking. I stood at the counter, frantically measuring flour, grating zucchini, whisking eggs, while she sat in her bathrobe at the kitchen table, sipping coffee, ordering me around.

I've picked up a lot. There is a sweet zucchini and corn loaf and a matzoh ball soup. There is mock chopped liver and pink beet horseradish. There is brisket; there is corned

beef; Mandelbrot and coleslaw. Many of these I have tried to make, some of them successfully. My carrot soufflé is getting there.

Tonight, Gram has met us at the restaurant, driven in from New Jersey by my cousin, Drew. They are half an hour late. There was traffic in the tunnel and they got a little lost. Drew had been driving for over two hours. "Thanks, Drew," I tell him as I help her out of the car. "I owe you one."

Now seated, I look at her across the table from me. She is small and hunched. The skin on her face is a maze of wrinkles. But her lips, painted a rebellious shade of bright pink, arc into a wide smile when she sees me looking at her, and I can see how thrilled she is to be here.

I must admit, I have to hand it to her. She wouldn't take "no" for an answer. After years of plopping gefilte fish onto everyone else's lettuce leaves, she was coming to her granddaughter's party in Brooklyn. Even if it killed the rest of us to get her here.

Together we eat and talk and, lo and behold, it is a fabulous party. Next time, I will cook. Maybe I'll give the carrot soufflé another whirl. I will take the torch that's being passed to me and run a little bit further.

#### **GRANDMA SARA'S CARROT SOUFFLÉ (as dictated verbally to the author):**

*Ingredients:*

*1 pound cooked carrots, puréed*

*3 eggs*

*¼ cup sugar*

*2 tablespoons flour*

*1 teaspoon baking powder*

*1 pinch salt*

*¼ teaspoon nutmeg*

*1 teaspoon cinnamon*

*¾ stick butter, melted*

Preheat oven to 350 degrees. Mix all ingredients in a large bowl. Transfer to casserole dish. Top with corn flakes, brown sugar, nuts, or grapenuts. Bake for one hour, or until knife comes out clean. Don't overbake. ☉

## **Book Review: *Life* by Keith Richards, with James Fox Movie Review: *Ladies and Gentlemen: The Rolling Stones*, directed by Rollin Binzer**

BERNIE LANGS

The singer/songwriter Paul Simon once lamented on the Dick Cavett Show in the 1970s that there are no geniuses in modern popular music, and that most of the genre, including his own material, was fairly mediocre. I strongly disagree with this appraisal and I believe that the songs beautifully crafted by John Lennon and Paul McCartney for The Beatles are genius. I also think that the philosophical tone and subtexts of David Bowie's Berlin work is borderline genius. In terms of technical abilities, there are brilliant players, such as Eric Clapton, but I believe there is only one musician who is a genius in rock and roll and that is Keith Richards. Careful listening to the best years of Mr. Richards's work reveals a man who could find spaces and rhythms in time for his guitar work that are almost beyond comprehension. I've long thought that I understood how Mr. Richards accomplishes this: he loves music and plays it with joy and abandon. After reading his fabulously entertaining autobiography, *Life*, this hypothesis was strongly confirmed.

*Life* is a lengthy book and it is packed with some of the funniest material I've ever read in any book, much of it at the expense of Mr. Richards's writing partner in The Rolling Stones, the singer Mick Jagger. Although Mr. Jagger is praised as a brilliant blues harmonica player

and the greatest showman of his generation (which I also believe to be true), Mr. Richards spends much time putting him in his place and wondering how their strong bonds from the past, built on a foundation of loving the blues, have evaporated. At one point, he even gets rid of a pet bird he owns because it was like having Mick Jagger in a cage with its constant lip pursing.

I was surprised at how detailed Mr. Richards's memory is, given that he abused heroin and alcohol for so many years and was on top of so many "celebrity most likely to die" lists. The description of his childhood years in post-war Britain are incredibly well-written and a joy to read. His discovery of the guitar, the blues, and his band mates are of particular interest. The late Brian Jones is savaged in the book and the late Stones keyboardist and founder, who was not officially in the band, Ian Stewart, is canonized. (I spoke two sentences to Stewart in 1975 and managed to embarrass him with praise.)

Keith Richards notes all over his book how much he loves playing and reiterates the great mantra of rock and roll: it is the passion as much as it is the technical skill that makes a performer and artist excel. Proof of this is found in the newly re-released film, *Ladies and Gentlemen: The Rolling Stones*. The movie shows footage of

the band in 1972, touring around what many believe to be their greatest album, *Exile on Main Street*. The differences between Mr. Richards and Mr. Jagger are made more apparent after reading *Life*. Although Mick Jagger dances with joy to the sounds of the band, he is a performer, almost an actor, for the length of the show. His every facial expression is calculated. In contrast, Keith Richards is just grooving along, knowing that the band is cooking and that he's the engine of this rock and roll train.

Some of the best moments in *Ladies and Gentlemen* feature Mr. Richards singing, especially the acoustic "Dead Flowers," which was a highlight on the *Sticky Fingers* album. From what was then new material, it is amazing just how fast a band can play on songs like "Rip this Joint" and "All Down the Line". This is The Rolling Stones at their best and it is not to be missed by their fans.

Keith Richards took American blues and the style of Chuck Berry, flew with it, improved upon it, and regurgitated this amazing new sound back to the world. Although there are moments in the autobiography when you realize that he's one mean and angry man, just the sight of seeing him smile blissfully in the concert film reminds you of why you listened in the first place. ☉

## *Life on a Roll*



*Winter on Lindisfarne Island by Tom McDonagh*



*Don't Lose your Head by Daniel Andor*

