

“March 8, 1966”
Extract from “Remembering Nelly” (work in progress)



by Michel Alix ('69)

(Editor's note: Nelly Alix was probably better known to many of us as “Madame Alix”. She taught Classe Elementaire from 1959 to 1966, and passed away on March 8, 1966)

It was a cold day in New York City. The snow hadn't melted from a recent snowstorm, but the sun was out, shining bravely. The subways were running again at near-normal capacity. It was business as usual. My father drove my mother and her three kids at seven-thirty a.m. from our home on East 235th Street, at the edge of the city, to the Woodlawn elevated subway.

I don't remember which vehicle we used. Was it the Harnat truck? (Har-nat was the name of my father's auto parts business; a combination of *Harvey* and *Nathan*: the original owners.) Or was it one of the many cars my father would fix, use briefly, and sell? This fifteen-minute ride was a chance for our family to be together, like at Sunday outings or mealtime on weekends. For us kids, the occasion was ripe for a last minute set of instructions or a browbeating.

The early morning wind whipped up powdery snowdrifts on the edge of the road. After spinning tires over patches of crusty ice on the side streets, we crossed under swinging traffic lights, and rolled on the caked slush of the avenues. We overtook the skeletons of trees, garbed in white shadows, and the snow-dusted expanses of Van Cortland Park and the Woodlawn Cemetery. (In the afternoon we would take the bus back over the same roads, but in the mornings my dad would drop us off at the subway terminal and continue to his job on East 195th Street, a short distance away.)

At the Woodlawn subway station, my Mom, two brothers, and I huddled past the turnstiles and clambered up the stairs to the elevated platforms where there was almost always a train waiting, warming its engine. Once aboard, we did what we usually did in the subway, reached into our briefcases for books to review our homework and braced for the nightmare of morning classes. If there was any writing to do, we had to hurry and scrawl in-between the looping turns of the train as it curved across the Bronx. Even through the bumps and grinds of stops, we managed legible penmanship. At each major station, like Fordham Road or 145th Street, new passengers flocked in, grabbing the ever-dwindling seats or overhead handholds, until we were fairly surrounded by a thick curtain of human flesh.

At one point, I must have left the others as I changed to the Pelham Bay local. Depending upon the class or year we were in, we were housed either at 96th or 72nd streets in Manhattan, the two French School buildings separated by twenty-four city blocks. Maybe I stayed on to attend classes at 72nd while the others got out early to go to 96th street. John, older by a year, and I were beginning to separate out socially; we no longer shared boyhood discoveries, plans, or secrets. We had almost become like two birds in a flock, anonymous, not unfriendly, but mostly indifferent to each other. Whatever his secret life was, it was different from mine.



Mme Alix with her three sons Michel ('69), David ('73), and Jean-Francois ('68) in 1961

The French School – a grammar school, high school, and college prep school, was intended to provide a French education “in a can,” as it followed the curriculum given in all France’s non-vocational, pre-university schools. The French School was a place where many of New York’s hoity-toity stocked their kids. It was a testing ground for the offspring of cosmopolitan European-Americans and ambitious Jewish Americans (Can their kid learn to read, write, and speak French, yet still get excellent grades?), diplomats from the UN (ex-French colonies), the international set, and a small group of middle-class French-Americans of which we were part. The tuition was steep and our parents only managed to pay it through scholarships from the French government and a subsidy from the school itself.

The school was a refuge and a showplace; it embodied Mom’s lingering link to French culture for herself and her kids. She had married a French-Canadian American, with an emphasis on the “French” and she wasn’t about to lose anything gained, including the bonus of an American identity. That went for us too, so my older brother and I took the American PSATs and did the dual-educational shuffle, as arduous, I suppose, as coming home to German or Yiddish-speaking relatives and several weekly hours of Hebrew School (the routine of many of our Jewish friends and classmates).

I must have kissed Mom goodbye before we ran toward the train. Then I was immersed in reviewing homework I could barely read as the books and notebooks bounced up and down to the beat of the “El”. Often we opted for the “hot seats” -- seats with heat vents underneath – in which case, our legs broiled while our heads and shoulders shivered. At Woodlawn station, there were plenty of those seats, so we scattered a little instead of sitting together.

I was almost fifteen, with a head as full of random impulses as a pinball machine in full tilt. I wanted to be independent, not to be a momma’s boy, to reach on up into the stratosphere of adult life while staying safely immature. This was the season of the terrible teens. I must have retreated into my little world that morning because I don’t remember the trip very well.

There was the hard plastic feel of the newer subways, streamlined, parallel seats -- instead of crowded catty-cornered sofas like the old ones, with their white enamel poles, leather handsets, and seat covers that you can still see in 1940’s movies. In the new trains, the seats hugged the walls of the car and were contrasted in their simplicity with a tapestry of posters and ads spread out in bands on the areas of the

wall where vertical strips of fuselage met with horizontal. The spirit of the times was for a hint of nudity (women in night clothes or bras): Vivien Leigh from “Psycho,” tantalizing, though incomprehensible. “Baby Doll” (a grown woman in a crib) – now what could that be about? And random publicity. Travellers looked haggard from being torn from their sleep and stolen too early from their morning coffee.

We were in no better shape of course. At night we went to sleep, puffed full of dreams from television series or sitcoms, in a terror that we had memorized the wrong History (Geography, or Latin) chapters and performed the wrong Math exercises. And somewhere in the night, Mom sat or lay reading a book, or listening to the radio, while Dad worked in the garage. He changed sparkplugs and hunted for the source of strange noises inside the motor of the car he was working on. We all had dark circles around the eyes from too little sleep and too much worry.

Mom was “going down,” as they say in some dialects. She was no longer the pillar of resolve and resourcefulness she had once been. In the past decade, she had aged beyond her years, going from seductive youthfulness to a kind of blighted agelessness; a worn Buddha smile replaced her youthful good looks. She was afraid that parts of her mind were shutting down, that she had survived her 1961 stroke only to see headaches and sick spells blot out her every prospect. And there was still the little one, David, who needed all her strength and attention.

She was a teacher at the French School and this year David, ten years old, was in her class. And he wasn’t doing that well. The French School was competitive, almost maddeningly so. And its “athletic” notion of intelligence served as the only criterion of success. The school specialized in producing brilliant variety show numbers, children who could do verbal and mathematical high-wire acts, yet seemed to get stumped in real world environments. Success is an easy master, but failure takes a month of Mondays to learn. The Americans usually understand this better than the French.

Mom had thrived in her own school of hard knocks back in war-torn France. She was eighteen when her mother died of cancer, and her father had simply taken an early retirement, expecting his daughters to earn their living outside the home immediately and leave him free to wither away in peace. While her older sister married, Mom took a job at the railway. She learned to type and to exploit her language skills (English, German, and of course French) in that effaced French posture that is so hard to learn. (Employers in France expect you to have every

competence, including primary submissiveness and self-effacement.) Her father, in his years of success working for a notary and for the town council, had manifested this quality abundantly and climbed the ranks of the middle class until he fairly towered over the peasantry from which he issued.

If you can fill the everlasting second
 With sixty seconds worth of distance run
 Yours is the earth and everything that's in it,
 And what is more, you'll be a Man...

From Kipling's *If* (a poem my grandfather read to my mother)

Mom had shown her mettle when the German blitz overran her part of France in 1941. A Frenchwoman, she joined an England-based clandestine network, was caught through treachery, and was condemned to death by the German occupiers. She survived three years of prisons in France, Belgium, and Germany, as well as displacements in cattle cars, until the victorious Americans released her from the Munich prison-fortress of Stadelheim in 1945. She then worked for one of the American intelligence headquarters in Paris before meeting and marrying my father, a U.S. GI. She adapted to the political insanity that marked France after the war, learning to start fresh, to vote, and to untangle bureaucratic knots.

In 1948, she was ready to relocate to America with her U.S.-born husband. Then, after a few years in Massachusetts in my father's hometown of Springfield (where her three boys were born), she talked him into moving to the then biggest city in America, New York. In 1961, she suffered a major stroke and spent several weeks in a hospital, lying in a coma. One day, she awoke, got out of bed, and went to find the head nurse. And the roulette wheel of her life took a few more spins.

On March 8, 1966, something was seething beneath the surface of the day. A hint of storm clouds, rain, or a sudden cold snap; she felt an uncommon lethargy. The morning classes elapsed uneventfully, but come lunchtime, she felt the familiar discomfort in her stomach. Was it the many years of living on indigestible chaff and grass the Germans engineered as food for their prisoners, and the hot water that was supposed to be soup or chicory coffee? Or maybe she had awakened too soon or too quickly? There was a dizzy feeling to the standing position. Perhaps she should "wrap it up," call it a day, despite the afternoon hours she still needed to fill. She went into the school's office and asked for the afternoon off.

Little David was surprised to be called out of his lunchtime and recess. Was the school day really at an end so soon? They made their way down into the subway, and into the daytime transit system. At noon, the trains had a dusty smell of ashes, and the stench of hobos and the unwashed poor. David chattered like the little elf he was, talking in circles, mixing French and English words, trying to be entertaining. But the surroundings began to blur for her like an out-of-focus movie.

Her head throbbed with pain and she felt an imperious need for air. The train was beginning its slow ascent at that time from the depths of the tunnel up the steep grade of tracks to the elevated platform at the Yankee Stadium station (161st Street). Woman and boy rushed through the open doors. The cold wind on the platform failed to revive her. She slipped slowly down onto the ground, while little David frantically groped to support her slumping weight. It took a few minutes for the transit authority police to receive the call for help and take her into the station office, with the little boy, dazed and helpless, following in their trail. The ambulance finally showed up, and the medics tied her into a gurney. With siren sounding and lights flashing, the ambulance headed for Misericordia Hospital (just up the hill).

David was stranded in the south Bronx. Despite the impressive circumference of Yankee Stadium nearby, the neighbourhood was blighted, and some of the inhabitants ragamuffins and petty criminals. It must have been very scary. A transit cop called a colleague to get the little boy by car to the hospital. Then as he sat riding the front seat of the police car, he watched, amazed, as his dad's Harnat truck sailed past him into the hospital parking lot.

My own day went uneventfully. I attended classes, followed my usual routine, taking the subway and bus home. Surprisingly, David was home alone when I got in around four p.m. and he told me what had happened. My older brother stumbled in, a few minutes later. David described the hours he had spent at Misericordia, and how Dad had taken him home after a while, before returning to the hospital. We were just three boys that afternoon in the big house on 235th street. Little did we know that we would spend three years soldered together in that same house, performing the rituals of daily survival.

Mom died without recovering consciousness in the late hours of that winter afternoon. I'm sure the surgeons said what they usually say: "We did our best to save her." Later that month, on the 24th she would have been forty-four. My Dad

tried to ensure stability in the ensuing months and years. He helped my older brother and I to finish the French School, he paid for trips to France in summer, and strived, to the best of his ability, to fill the void we all felt.

March 8, 1966 shattered all of our early lives. We lost our beacon, our mentor, and our first love. David spent his whole life grasping his mother's invisible skirts. He became the most upright of us all, a pillar for his dead mother, and in her memory. He has left us too now, dead of cancer at fifty-four. And it grieves me to think that there is no one now to hold her aloft. She lives on, of course, in our hearts. Dad went on to marry twice again and to breed another three children, who are all currently alive.



David Alix (deceased, May 4, 2010)

For a long time, I felt guilty for her sudden disappearance. I had predicted the event, in the unfeeling way that some children have of forecasting the inevitable. In the throes of rollicking hormones, I had even found myself wishing that one of my parents would die. *Had my wish come true?* In any event, we three boys found ourselves condemned too early to tracing out our own life paths: the eldest to his “desert island” in Provence, France; myself to constantly-changing horizons; and David to the safety of a New York state home, filled with his own three children.

Would things have been different if she had lived? I feel somehow that the game of life is slightly rigged -- that the casino's “bank” holds the advantage. And while the wheel goes round and round, and the little ball bounces, some bets are foretold. But if my mother had not died young, I don't suppose I would have gone to work on weekends as I did, and learn to tough it out job-wise. That lesson has lighted most of my yesterdays, providing a ground on which to stand. David also learned to fend for himself from age sixteen onwards.

I doubt that we three boys would have fulfilled all our Mom's wishes, since the values of her world were slowly dissolving at the time she passed on. Would she have been angry like her older brother that people were losing their faith? That God and goodness were evolving into a mere political pose? That civilization was going the way of rapacious capitalism? That art was turning into the merchandising of silly objects, and literature becoming baby food for the ever less-competent masses? Would she have resolved to hide behind the technician's dream of progress: our current "project" -- communication gadgets, grafts and surgery, CT scans and DNA? Technicism or eugenics by any other name? Would she have agreed to be just another flea on this flea-engorged planet?

I suppose not. She would have battled for something positive. Already she had discovered nutritional health and ecology at a time when the opposite concepts thrived. Already she could see that the plastic age's days were numbered. She refused to be brainwashed by empty optimism and slogans in the face of obstacles that could only be surpassed by teeth-gritting will.

Her children succeeded in becoming enamoured of education. The eldest earned a doctorate in French literature. I obtained an American M.A. in the humanities. And little David, who became big David, ushered his children through U.S. universities. He rebuilt his little house into a small kingdom. He worked hard and well until the angel of death came for him too.

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