

# Nelson Rockefeller's other woman — and me

BY MEGAN MARSHALL

It was bound to happen. As soon as Megan Marshack's name hit the headlines again recently, a friend wrote to check in with me. This time, the news was of the other Megan's death, at age 70 — my age, too. For a moment, my friend told me, she thought I had died.

Back in 1979, when Megan Marshack and I were 25-year-olds and her name was in the news in connection with Nelson Rockefeller's death, there weren't many other Megans, let alone Megan Marshacks or Megan Marshalls. That was beginning to change. The publication in 1977 of Colleen McCullough's "The Thorn Birds," with its heroine Meghann Cleary, Australia's bestselling novel of all time, followed by the star-studded ABC mini-series of the same title in 1983, spawned thousands of pint-sized Meghanns or Megans or Meagans.

But it would take those girls a couple of decades to grow up and experience anything like what their namesake had been through: a doomed love affair with a married man. Meaghann of "The Thorn Birds" fell for a Catholic priest married to the church. Megan Marshack, as published rumor had it, was living it out in the present with her boss, former vice president and four-term New York governor Nelson Rockefeller, married to another woman. The circumstances of his death near midnight on a Friday in January 1979 instantly became the subject of prurient speculation: Why was Megan, rather than his chauffeur as the first reports claimed, with him in his Manhattan office when he suffered a fatal heart attack? She would not answer the question, and no one was ever able to find out.

In addition to sharing a name, Megan Marshack and I had eerily similar resumes. I was born and raised in California, too; I was living on the East Coast as an aspiring journalist; I'd worked at one time as a research or "staff assistant," as Marshack was initially identified, to a much older famous man. Was it any wonder that many of the mostly male editors I interviewed with for full-time work in the late 1970s and early '80s simply couldn't believe I wasn't the Megan Marshack? Wouldn't Megan Marshack, after all the scandal, want to alter her name?

But she didn't. I admired that about her, even as I sometimes cursed her for standing in the way of my own career. I didn't get those jobs, only leering grins across the prospective boss's desk and invitations to lunch. Could they see inside me? Did they somehow know that I, too, harbored secrets like Megan Marshack's? Only mine weren't as romantic as the ones alluded to in the obituary Marshack wrote in advance of her death, which seemed to hint at her feelings for Rockefeller: "Won't forget, can't regret," she concluded, quoting the song "What I Did for Love" from "A Chorus Line."

From today's perspective, my predatory paramours could fill a #MeToo court docket: the recently divorced college professor who lured me into bed one night near the end of the semester after I'd spent the evening babysitting his son; the music teacher, a well-known



DENNIS CARUSSO, NEW YORK DAILY NEWS/MICHAEL ROMANOS

Similar names, very different lives: One of these women, Megan Marshack, left, unofficially landed a former vice president. The other, Megan Marshall, officially landed a Pulitzer Prize.

concert artist, who felt for my bra clasp as I sat at the keyboard; and yes, the then-famous man, my employer, with whom I'd had a monthslong, dubiously consensual affair. He punched me in the arm and then stomped on my foot as I tried to break off the relationship, at last more frightened by him than about where my next dollar would come from.

Was it this that caused me to commit to a freelance working life, to writing books alone in my office at home rather than continuing to seek full-time jobs? At least at first, Megan Marshack proved more thick-skinned than I was in braving her far greater portion of lurid curiosity. I was relieved to learn, in reading her obituary, that she'd remained in Manhattan after Rockefeller's death, working for CBS News, covering the Sarajevo Winter Olympics in 1984 and other international and domestic stories as a reporter, and then as the "hard news producer" for late night local news. But in 1998, the year the Clinton-Lewinsky scandal broke, she retreated to California to write for the Placerville Mountain Democrat. Had the press begun to hound her again as another young woman's name dominated the headlines in a shocking mash-up of sex and politics?

I knew Placerville from childhood — old Hangtown, they called it, for a triple execution carried out in 1849 at the height of the Gold Rush. It was where my family stopped to stock up on provisions en route to summer vacations in the Sierras — a good place to settle, I could imagine, if you wanted to write for a small town newspaper that wasn't going to fold and to live among people

who didn't care about your East Coast past. The mountain air was clear, and forest fires not yet a serious risk. She married a colleague, and they had two decades together, until her husband's death last year in a car accident. Marshack's own death in a nursing home from liver and kidney failure suggests she experienced some hard times.

"The deepest feeling always shows itself in silence; not in silence, but restraint," wrote the poet Marianne Moore. The lifelong silence Marshack maintained about her relationship with Rockefeller, even if possibly sealed with an NDA and a check drawn on a robber baron's legacy, spoke of an old-fashioned affair, set in a Manhattan brownstone, conducted in a fur coat and with Dom Pérignon, and carried on over a period of years with "the most caring and considerate boss I've met": that creature of the irretrievable past, a liberal Republican.

How civilized, even enviable! Nothing like the sexual hazing I experienced at 18 and 20, the price of admission to the workplace for all too many young women then. Nothing like the Oval Office tryst that derailed Monica Lewinsky, as she has lately written; or the porn star coupling of the only former president to have been found guilty of rape in a court of law.

I've never publicly identified the offenders in my past, not wanting to revisit the vulnerability I felt 50 years ago. Wouldn't it be nice to think Megan Marshack's silence concealed something more noble: love?

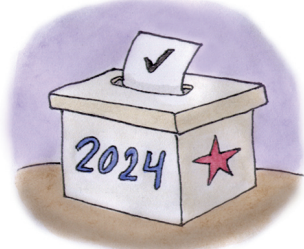
Megan Marshall is the author of three biographies, including "Margaret Fuller: A New American Life." Her essay collection, "After Lives: On Biography and the Mysteries of the Human Heart," will be published in February.



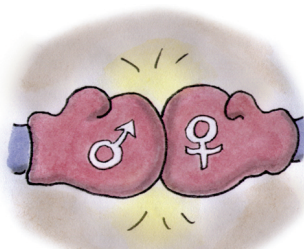
Nelson Rockefeller

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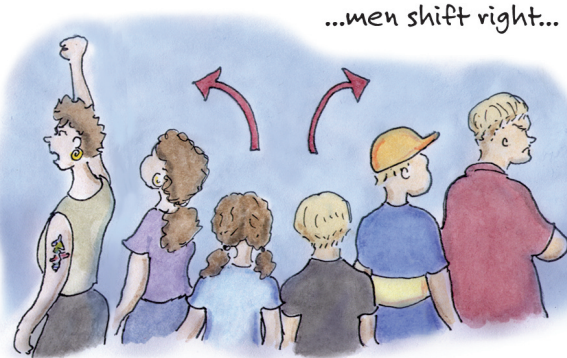
THIS YEAR'S presidential election...



...is proving, among other fraught things, to be something of a battle of the sexes...



...reflecting, perhaps, a growing inability on the part of men and women to find common ground...  
...as women shift left...

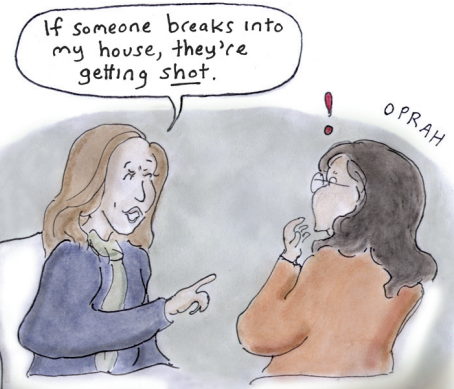


...men shift right...  
...and their interests seem increasingly misaligned.

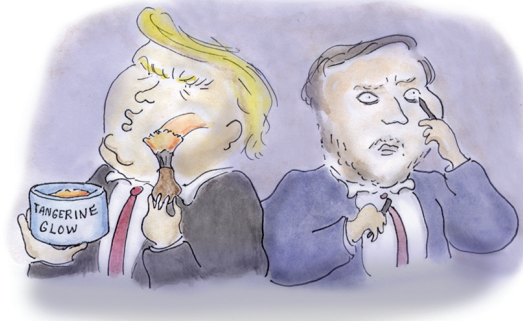
	♀	♂
EDUCATION LEVELS:	↗	↘
JOB PROSPECTS:	↗	↘
MARRIAGE RATES:	↘	↘

Recently, there's been a bit of role reversal...

...with the woman of the hour finding herself accused of swaggering bravado...

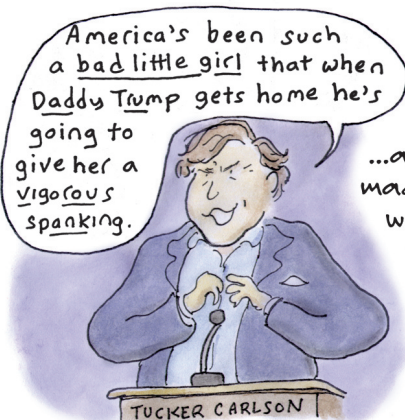


...and the men of the hour roundly mocked for an apparent preoccupation with their looks.



But this hasn't resulted in an uptick of fellow feeling.

Rather, some have even ramped up the opposite-sex hostility...



...and made it weirder.

So, although eight years ago, many women excitedly anticipated a triumphant shattering of "that highest and hardest glass ceiling"...



...this year, sobered by all that's transpired since...



...women seem to be reaching now for shattered glass analogies that aren't quite as triumphant...

"I think there's a silent majority... a silent group of women who will crawl over broken glass to vote against Trump and quietly vote for Harris."  
—Former Republican Congresswoman Barbara Comstock

...but that still, it's worth noting...



...hold out hope.