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THE IMPERIAL
ROCKEFELLER

A BIOGRAPHY OF

NELSON A.
ROCKEFELLER

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Chapter VI



THE PRINCE OF POCANTICO

ONE MORNING IN 1971, the conversation in the Governor's conference room turned to acupuncture. The press had reported that James Reson, of *The New York Times*, had undergone an emergency operation while visiting China and had been treated with this ancient therapy at Peking's Anti-Imperialist Hospital. "My grandfather built that hospital," Nelson remarked with a rueful smile. It was true. The hospital had originally been constructed by John D. and given to the people of China as the Peking Union Medical College.

One had a sense that all the world was Nelson's province. The scope of his fortune, an estate of approximately \$182 million, including property, investments and trusts, barely suggested his reach. To measure him by the money alone would be to imagine the power of the Catholic Church as the sum of its Sunday collections. Consider this day. Governor Nelson Rockefeller leaves his Pocantico estate at 8:30 A.M. for Manhattan. If he were not immersed in paper work, he would see, through his limousine window, the morning sun splashing on the Hudson River Palisades. These staggeringly beautiful shafts of basalt would have disappeared long ago were it not for his father. John D., Jr., had been horrified to see the Hudson Palisades ground

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into crushed stone to build Manhattan's towers, and so he bought the surrounding land and gave it to New Jersey. Now the Palisades are preserved forever within the protective boundaries of Palisades Interstate Park.

Nelson glances at his newspaper, which headlines the latest FBI caper. The FBI, in large part, grew out of crime research financed long ago by the Rockefeller family's Bureau of Social Hygiene. For that matter, Rockefeller money underwrote Dr. Alfred Kinsey's study of human sexuality, the Lynds' sociological landmark, *Middletown*, and Margaret Sanger's research of birth control.

Nelson has in his reading file a report from the Brookings Institution, which his family also helped to create. And there is an article he hopes to get to in *Foreign Affairs*, a journal published by the Council on Foreign Relations, which the Rockefellers also helped found.

The car passes a steep hill at the northern tip of Manhattan crowned by The Cloisters. It would pain his father to see the decay into which much of the neighborhood has fallen since Junior built this oasis of urban tranquillity.

Later, at 55th Street, Nelson's first appointment is a courtesy call by the new French consul general for New York. The diplomat is well briefed, and expresses gratitude for the Rockefellers' part in perpetuating the glories of his homeland. Nelson knows that he is referring to the vast Rockefeller contributions that helped reconstruct Versailles and the Cathedral at Rheims after World War I.

He receives a call from Happy. "Yes, Sweetie. Of course, I knew he'd love it." A member of the family has just returned from a visit to California's Redwood National Park, then Jackson Hole, in the Grand Tetons, and finally Tennessee's Great Smoky Mountains National Park. The young Rockefeller, Happy reports, was treated royally everywhere. Why not? Rockefeller philanthropy saved these natural wonders.

In the afternoon, Nelson is to make a speech commemorating U.N. Day. He searches the text in vain for mention of how the U.N. headquarters came to be where it is. He loves that story. The speech writer is probably unaware of it. In 1946, the nascent United Nations was on the point of abandoning all hope of a permanent home in New York City. In a frantic eleventh-hour feat, Nelson found a tract on

Turtle Bay and convinced his father to buy the land for \$8.5 million and to donate it to the world organization. The old man was relieved to get out of the matter by money alone. His impetuous son had already offered the theater at Rockefeller Center for meetings of the U.N. General Assembly and had urged the family to donate Pocantico as the permanent U.N. site.

Returning up FDR Drive after the U.N. ceremony, Nelson glances briefly at the stream of planes approaching La Guardia Airport. Several bear the markings of Eastern Airlines, the line brother Laurance helped to found. Laurance is Eastern's major individual stockholder.

Nelson's driver expertly cuts ahead of a Lincoln Continental, all the while admiring the car's contours. His passenger could tell him something about that classic design. In 1934, Nelson worked briefly at the Paris offices of the Chase Bank. While there, he was dazzled by a French automobile of flowing sculpture. The next summer, at Seal Harbor, he described the car to his neighbor Edsel Ford. "Could you get just the body sent over for me and mount it on a Ford chassis?" he asked. Ford agreed, and the result became the prototype of the Lincoln Continental. Nelson still had the original at his place in Maine.

Back at the office, Nelson has to handle a hot potato. He wants to use surplus revenues from the public authority that operates New York's toll bridges and tunnels to help relieve the subway deficit. But the bank that is trustee for the bondholders of the authority has brought suit declaring that this diversion would violate the bondholders' rights. Nelson will have to talk over this ticklish matter with the bank's chairman. He asks his secretary to get the banker, his brother David, at Chase Manhattan.

It has been a long day and it is not yet over. Nelson has promised to take Happy to the theater this evening. He is easily bored and always restless there, but he loves the setting, the enchanting airiness of Lincoln Center. Although Lincoln Center is really brother Johnny's show, the rest of the family contributed nearly \$30 million to build it, and Nelson managed to wangle another \$15 million out of the state for the Center's New York State Theater. Later the limousine glides away from Lincoln Center and makes its way cross-town.

He is relieved that they do not have to drive all the way back to Pocantico. Tonight they will be staying at their three-story apartment on Fifth Avenue.

We were having a dinner meeting at the Pocantico estate. After dessert, one of the staff pulled a candelabrum close and lit his cigarette from it. Nelson peered over his glasses. "We have matches for that." His tone lowered the room temperature perceptibly.

Pocantico was his refuge, and Kykuit, the main house, Nelson Rockefeller's castle. His dominance in the family is suggested by the fact that Kykuit had originally been his grandfather's home, then his father's, and finally, of the five brothers, Nelson's. There were seventy-one other homes at Pocantico. Most of them, modest dwellings occupied by Rockefeller associates and employees, were clustered in the tiny hamlet of Pocantico Hills, part of the estate. The ten Rockefeller family homes were located within 150 acres called the Park, set off by an eight-foot wrought-iron fence topped by two feet of barbed wire. Nelson's Kykuit overshadowed all the other homes in size and grandeur. John III lived in a French chateau, handsome, yet reflecting its owner's diffidence. Laurance, the most modern Rockefeller, built a contemporary home, Kent House, of white brick. David occupied Hudson Pines, which he had bought from his sister, Babs, after her divorce. Winthrop, riding against tradition and paternal pressure, did not have a home at Pocantico.

New York suburbanites are forever comparing the horrors of their commutes into the city. It would have been difficult to improve on Nelson's thirty-five minutes by chauffeured limousine from midtown Manhattan to 6.5 square miles of sculptured parkland along the Hudson River. His estate was one place where the pragmatic Nelson exhibited a sense of history. When he elevated Joe Canzeri from advance man to manager of Pocantico, he told him: "My father built this place for his father. There is nothing like it anywhere in America. Your job is to keep it that way."

When John D., Jr., began Kykuit in 1907, he gave his architect a challenge of subtle complexity. "I want a residence so simple that any friends visiting my father would be impressed by the homelikeness and simplicity of the house. While those who are familiar with and

appreciate fine design and beautiful furnishings would say, 'How exquisitely beautiful.' " The architect got it half right; one searches in vain for the homelikeness and simplicity.

The cadence of life at Pocantico during the lifetime of John D., Jr., suggests both the solidity and the absence of spontaneity in the family. As long as Junior lived and occupied Kykuit, his sons took turns in having Sunday dinner at the big house with him. Marriage and the arrival of their own children did not alter this custom. They then brought their families, following the same order of visitation as regularly as the seasons follow each other.

Pocantico proved a boon to the fortunes of the Republican Party in New York. Every fall, Nelson invited members of the Governor's Club to lunch on the estate, their reward for putting up a \$500 annual membership fee, which went toward supporting the state GOP organization. Though the Governor's Club was purely a fund-raising device, the Rockefeller association gave it a distinct social cachet. I remember my amusement when a business acquaintance asked me if I could wangle him an invitation into the club. "I'll do my damnedest," I had replied, "if you've got five hundred dollars."

At one of these Pocantico outings I skipped the post-luncheon rhetoric and took the opportunity to explore the grounds. The formal gardens around Kykuit revealed the cultural gulf between Nelson and his father. Junior's acquisitions—a Renaissance fountain by Giovanni da Bologna and powerful sculptures by George Grey Barnard, *The Heaver*, *The Rising Woman* and *Adam and Eve*—stood alongside Nelson's choices—coolly modern works by Brancusi, Arp and Calder. The farm roads that had once laced Pocantico had long since been obliterated and relocated. I soon realized why. I followed a lane that disappeared into a forest; then, suddenly, the road opened again atop a high ridge, spreading Long Island Sound at the viewer's feet. With another turn it dove between thick hedges before bursting onto a vista embracing miles of the Hudson River. Another sharp curve and the towers of Manhattan rose. These visual delights had been ingeniously engineered into the seventy miles of roadway.

The Governor's Club members had been served lunch that day in the Playhouse. Have no fear of grown men and women crouched over

toy furniture. The Playhouse dining area seated three hundred comfortably. Also under the same roof were an indoor tennis court, pool, gymnasium and bowling alleys.

Jim Cannon, a Rockefeller colleague, remembered his family's Pocantico summer. The Cannons had been invited to use one of the main houses in the Park while Jim worked on a special project with Nelson. Cannon's children and various young Rockefellers spent their days horseback riding, swimming, playing tennis. Nelson also provided a Datsun roadster so that the older children could be taught to drive. His two youngest sons, then twelve and ten, had already learned in this way on the estate's roads. At noon, the Pocantico staff set up a snack bar where the young people ordered cheeseburgers, Cokes and shakes, just like on the outside, except that at the Pocantico Burger King no money changed hands.

Carl Spad's family occupied another Pocantico house while Carl worked to defeat Congressman Ogden "Brownie" Reid, a Westchester neighbor who had offended Nelson by shifting from the Republican to the Democratic Party. Spad found it a pleasant assignment. When he had to entertain local politicians, he called Joe Canzeri, and a bar and barman appeared along with trays of refreshment. Should Spad's eye become jaded, workmen replaced the paintings in the house with others from Nelson's collection.

Pocantico was hardly the model of simple elegance that Nelson's father had envisaged, but life there took on surprisingly simple touches. When those of us on the staff came to work at Kykuit, no phalanx of servants appeared. The door opening, coat taking, drink mixing and meal serving were all accomplished by one houseman. Nelson employed no valet and Happy had no personal maid. The small staff performed almost invisibly, moving in, completing their tasks noiselessly, and quickly withdrawing. Nelson spoke French to the houseman and Spanish to most of the maids. At home, he took a stubborn pride in looking after himself in certain matters. He insisted, for example, on packing his own bags, and took great pride in a method he had learned from his father that promised two relatively wrinkle-free suits.

During one Pocantico lunch, as the houseman poured the wine

and I eyed the bottle with evident curiosity, he obligingly peeled back the napkin to reveal the label, Calon-Ségur, '67, a highly respected Médoc third growth, but not inordinately expensive.

Anne-Marie Rasmussen, the Pocantico maid who later married Nelson's son Steven, recalled a Christmas tradition at Kykuit when she still had the downstairs perspective on the Rockefellerers. All the servants lined up in the front hall sitting room, where they could admire the Christmas tree. Each member of the family then thanked them personally, and the servants were presented with an envelope. Anne-Marie, new to the staff in 1956, found \$10 in her envelope. Older hands received \$20.

Pocantico was virtually the only place where Nelson Rockefeller played. He had given up tennis years before, and now, on weekends, he played the estate's eighteen-hole golf course, usually with Laurance or his two young boys. Occasionally, his partner was Bobby Douglass. "He was pretty good, but erratic," Douglass found. "We played for silver dollars. His brother David told Nelson just before silver dollars went out of circulation that they would probably go up in value. So he and Laurance bought a few bags. They used them to settle their golf bets. Nelson was a tough competitor, but not so tough that he didn't want a few strokes after I began to take some of those dollars." Whenever Nelson had to give up any of the coins, he would remark grudgingly, "Do you know what yesterday's quote on these was? Three dollars and twenty-nine cents each!"

He took his recreation in short bursts, two hours at the most on a weekend. Then it was back to the house to lay down a barrage of telephone calls in preparation for the week ahead. He had a thick black address book and put through his own calls whenever at home.

Life became simpler for him at Pocantico. Not simple, but simpler. He had, at various times, Chrysler, Lincoln and Cadillac limousines on the estate and thirty-seven restored antique cars in running order. One year Nelson gave Happy a Rolls-Royce costing, at the time, \$33,000. The car hardly ever left Pocantico, serving essentially to get her from one Rockefeller house to another. A bit extravagant, wasn't it, an aide teased him. Nelson shrugged. "We're getting along, you know. It's time to start having a little fun." For himself, he preferred driving the grounds in his favorite, a '65 Mustang, for which

he dressed appropriately. "I thought he was a laborer," Norm Hurd, the stare budget director, recalled of one Pocantico visit. "I walked right past him." Nelson's outdoor weekend dress was a forty-year-old sport jacket, shapeless slacks and gnarled shoes.

But the man with the threadbare elbows and baggy pants remained ever the Hudson River patron. "He'd walk me around and never stop," Joe Canzeri recalled. "'Deepen the pond. Transplant the hedges. Sharpen the boys' ice skates. Seal the windows in the orangery. And remind me to call Henry Kissinger.' I scribbled it all down in a notebook because he never forgot anything."

I watched Nelson perform as squire at his Washington home on Foxhall Road. He had thrown a party there for the Washington press corps. More than a hundred journalists roved the pampered lawns, nibbling canapés and swiftly emptying trays of drinks, while a roving trio of Latin musicians serenaded. Between handshakes, grins and winks for his guests, Rockefeller was muttering to Canzeri, who had arranged this seemingly flawless evening. Evidently not all that unflawed, for Rockefeller was pointing angrily to something in the distance. He then melted among his visitors. A harried Canzeri dispatched an assistant in the direction of Nelson's unhappiness. Joe turned to me with a hopeless shrug. "He says a goddamned *log* is showing!" I peered out across the carpeted acres, across a pond and into the trees, and sure enough, I could barely distinguish the tip of a felled tree. It was the "five-percent rule" in action. Nelson was forever reminding Canzeri of the maxim passed on to him by his father. "The first ninety-five percent is always easy. It's the last five percent that produces perfection. And that's what I'm after."

Kykuit was apparently not enough home for Nelson at Pocantico. He had long admired the architecture of the East. In the early 1970s, he brought Junzo Yashimuro from Tokyo to design a Japanese house. In his quest for fidelity, Nelson also arranged for eight Japanese carpenters to emigrate temporarily to build the house. The workers arrived with improper documentation and had to be deported, which briefly spawned a spate of "Japanese wetback" stories around the office. Nelson arranged their re-entry, and the house was completed for a relatively modest \$650,000. The Rockefellerers used it principally for guests and occasional entertainments. Nelson's contention, all

along, was that he had built the house for Happy. Thus they continued to live at Kykuit, and she did not move into the Japanese house until after Nelson died.

Soon after the new house had been completed, Harry Albright, who served Nelson in several key posts, was invited with his wife, Joan, to have a drink there with the Rockefellers and other friends. Nelson had set up a guest book and asked everyone to sign it. Albright scanned the signatures and spotted the name of one earlier guest particularly qualified to judge the house's authenticity, the Emperor Hirohito. Anwar Sadat, Lord Louis Mountbatten, King Hussein, the Shah's wife, Empress Farah Diba—all of them came as his personal guests, not as state visitors.

Nelson was an attentive host to less exalted callers at Pocantico. Al Marshall and Norm Hurd arrived there exhausted and freezing at two-thirty in the morning after abandoning their state car nearby during a blizzard. Nelson alerted his servants to stay up to tend to the needs of his two associates. At eight o'clock the next morning, he bounded cheerily into their bedroom, his arms heaped with spare clothes, razors, toothbrushes, soap and towels. He held up a pair of belled corduroy pants before his scholarly state budget director. "Try these, Norm. I got them at Brigitte Bardot's boutique in the south of France last summer. They're too tight on me now. If they fit you, keep them." Hurd happily did.

In November 1976, the President of the United States visited Pocantico. At his side was his Vice-President and lord of this manor. Jerry Ford had come, at Nelson's prompting, to dedicate Pocantico as a National Historical Landmark. The designation did not mean that tourist crowds could now troop through Kykuit as they did Mount Vernon or Independence Hall. Pocantico was to remain the Rockefellers' private preserve, but now it had been recognized as a monument of American history.

Pocantico resembled a subdued Eden with its discreet abundance and the instant fulfillment of wants which the staff met with an unobtrusive competence. One might well wonder if being reared in these gardens of unflinching peace and plenty affected one's religious

needs and outlook. In Nelson's case, the case of the astronauts' visit was instructive.

On December 24, 1968, Frank Borman, James A. Lovell, Jr., and William Anders, the Apollo 8 astronauts, became the first men to circumnavigate the moon. The nation, weary of war in Vietnam, hungry for undiluted heroism, eagerly embraced these conquerors of the heavens. New York City welcomed them with a parade up Fifth Avenue. Nelson Rockefeller ordered a state dinner in the astronauts' honor at the Waldorf Astoria Hotel. The staff plunged into frenzied effort, and within two days, more than two thousand invitations were mailed to a blue-ribbon guest list. The task was expedited by a master card file of names that the Governor maintained, indicating addresses, phone numbers, spouses, children, and level of intimacy (General Almerin C. O'Hara: "Dear Buz").

The matter of footing the bill, estimated at \$60,000, was resolved with Nelsonian flair. The occasion was to be a state dinner and consequently, Nelson reasoned, a state expense. His only obstacle was the required advance approval of the state comptroller, Arthur Levitt, who had cultivated a reputation for a tight fist. Rockefeller called Levitt to inform him that he had just approved a pending increase in the comptroller's expense allowance. And, by the way, wasn't it marvelous what these three brave men had done for the country's prestige and spirit and, of course, shouldn't the Empire State pay them a fitting tribute? Levitt swiftly agreed.

On the day of the dinner, I was called into the Governor's office to go over the text for the event, which I had prepared. "You left out God!" he said in the now familiar accusing tone which suggested that a staff member was deliberately out to sabotage him. With another man, I might have raised an issue I found intriguing—whether space exploration strengthened or weakened the basis of conventional religious belief. A case could be made that these cosmic probes demystified the universe, made it more explainable in terms of chemistry, mathematics and physics, rather than by theology and faith. But this kind of philosophical soul-searching bored Nelson Rockefeller. And so, I merely waited for him to think out loud. "What these men have done shows the power of God, what He's created." His eyes filled