Isn’t it Amazing?

by [Peter Lopatin](#) (August 2019)

Big Bar, Karel Cerny, 1936

“Did you know there are no microphones in the Metropolitan

Opera?”

The woman asking me this odd question looked to be in her eighties and was smartly dressed and carefully made up. She was seated to my left at the busy antipasto bar of a favorite restaurant of mine near Lincoln Center, where I had managed to grab the last available seat. It was about 10:15 on a Friday night and I had just left Geffen Hall, still firmly in the grip of that ineffable feeling of expansiveness that is aroused in me most deeply by the experience of fine music, artfully performed. I decided that a late dinner and glass of wine would top off the evening nicely.

“Uh, yes, I know,” I answered, unsure of what she was getting at.

She smiled warmly and took a sip of her white wine, which, as it turned out, was all she would order that evening. The waiter brought me the usual basket of parmesan crispbread and herb-scented rolls, and I ordered a glass of Montepulciano.

Although slight and frail in appearance, there was still a gleam in her eye, which in retrospect I see as a sort of beacon and, as to that, one to which I would be able to offer only a weak reply. It would not be long before her frailty would seem so very much greater.

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Upon taking my seat, I had noticed her Metropolitan Opera program and asked what she had seen.

“Carmen,” she said.

“How was the performance?” I asked. Her face lit up.

“Oh, it was wonderful!” she said. “There wasn’t an empty seat in the house!”

“Oh, that’s great,” I said. “Who were the performers?”

“Um…uh…” she said, obviously struggling to remember. “Here,” she said, handing me her program, “you can see for yourself.”

It was then, while I leafed through the program, that she asked her question about microphones.

As soon as I answered, she quickly added: “Isn’t it amazing that they can sing like that?”

“Yes,” I said, smiling, “It *is* amazing.”

And it is, if you think about it. Although I have attended the opera regularly for many years, I find that I never get *used to* it, and I don't want to. When the beautiful no longer comes as a pleasant shock, one is in danger of becoming jaded. And so, after her question puzzled me, I allowed it to delight me, and I began to reflect on the nature of aesthetic experience.

Those reflections were interrupted when the woman asked, pointing directly at the crispbreads in my basket, "May I have one of those crackers?"

The oddness of her request—its violation of the tacit boundary between diners in a public eatery—made me hesitate before answering. *'Why don't you just ask the waiter for some bread?'* I thought to myself.

"Uh, sure," I said, and handed her one of the crispbreads. She smiled, broke off a piece the size of a postage stamp and ate it, placing the rest down on the counter.

"What's your name?" she asked.

The question surprised me. Given the twenty or so years difference in our ages, I surmised she wasn't flirting with me. Her tone was playful, almost childlike. I gave her my first name. She smiled and took a very small sip of wine, little more than a wetting of the lips. I ordered a bowl of soup. In the seat to my right, a man of about forty was, for

the moment, occupied with his cellphone. Next to him, where the bar made a right-angled turn, two young women, about thirty years old, accompanied by an older woman—obviously their mother—took seats.

“Did you know there are no microphones in the Metropolitan Opera?” the woman to my left repeated.

I turned and looked at her as she took another small bite of crispbread, washing it down with a sip of wine.

“I’m sorry?”

“There are no microphones in the Metropolitan Opera,” she said for the third time, still smiling.

The waiter brought my soup.

“Uh, yes…I know. But you just . . . ”

“Isn’t it amazing that they can sing like that?” she interrupted.

‘Oh, God,’ I thought. *‘She’s losing it.’*

“Yes, it’s quite amazing,” I answered, in a tone uninflected by any trace of enthusiasm, hoping that my reply would bring this odd colloquy to a close.

“What kind of soup is that?” she asked.

“It’s called Ribolito,” I said, flatly. “It’s an Italian vegetable soup.”

I half-expected her to ask for a taste of my soup. I took a healthy swig of the Montepulciano, moved my breadbasket a little closer to me, and hunched over my space at the bar as if to put up an invisible force field between us, hoping she would sense it as a *‘No Trespassing’* sign.

I thought: *‘That could be me fifteen or twenty years from now, couldn’t it? Sitting right here, next to some stranger, repeating what I’d said not two minutes before. But twenty years, not fifteen!’*

As I enjoyed the soup, I glanced across at the two sisters, who had begun an animated conversation with the man to my right. They were a bit plump, wonderfully vivacious, with dewy complexions and bright eyes. Light-hearted and fully at ease, they radiated youthful enthusiasm. (*They* would surely not forget what they had just said!)

Turning my attention to snoop on their conversation, I learned that the man was an “interventional radiologist” from New

Jersey. The medical allusion brought to mind my younger son, now 26, who was diagnosed at the age of six with a malignant tumor the size of a golf ball, located inconveniently deep beneath the front part of his brain, behind his left eye, north of his soft palate, in two adjacent anatomical spaces I had never heard of: *the left infratemporal fossa* and *the cavernous sinus*. The melodiousness of the Latinate terminology still stands out in my mind against the foreboding recess suggested by *'cavernous.'* My son was to endure a year of grueling treatment: radiation, chemotherapy, surgery, more chemo, more radiation. This, on top of Cystic Fibrosis, a hereditary lung disease, treatable, though as yet incurable. A heavy burden for anyone to bear, all the more so for a young child. And the two illnesses were quite unrelated, just a remarkable case of bad luck.

"Good night," the old woman said.

I turned to face her, surprised by what seemed to be her abrupt departure. She offered a warm though oddly fixed smile. She had not ordered anything to eat nor had she taken more than a few sips of her wine. Most of the crispbread I had given her remained on the counter, beside her wine glass.

"Oh, good night," I said, helping her on with her coat and forcing what I know must have been an awkward smile.

She thanked me and left. I was relieved that I would not have to endure the further annoyance of her amnesiac droning. But I felt as well some measure of smallness on my part. She had not come to the restaurant for food or drink, but for human

contact. And in spite of her mental infirmity, she still possessed the capacity for aesthetic pleasure, which is more than can be said for a great many people with properly firing neurons. I could have been more patient and indulgent, I thought. But how can you converse with someone who can't remember what she said not two minutes ago?

I ordered some selections from the antipasto bar and turned my attention from the aesthetic to the gustatory, and—not for the first time—gave some thought to the differences between our judgments of the former and of the latter. I reflected on the correspondence between the 'gourmet-gourmand' distinction and that between the aesthete and the culture-vulture. I considered the use of "taste" as a descriptor of gustatory sensation—the raw material of our judgments about food—and also as a term denoting refinement of aesthetic judgment itself.

As I savored my antipasto choices—some simple but perfectly made meatballs in sauce, braised fennel, lentil salad and a rich potato gratin—and continued my musings about aesthetic theory, I lent an ear to the occasional conversation between the radiologist, the sisters, and their mother, catching only brief snippets: something the sisters said about dance and something else about a charity walk to raise money for something-or-other. I enjoyed the pleasant buzz I had begun to feel from the wine, the general hum of conversation, and the taste of my food. But I kept thinking, as well, about the old woman and where she might be heading. *Is someone waiting for her? Ten minutes from now, will she even remember our conversation?* I ordered a second glass of wine.

Two beautiful young women, not out of their twenties, took the

now vacant seats to my left. The one to my immediate left, in the seat just vacated by the old woman, had her blonde hair pulled tightly back, so the delicate yet bold features of her face—suggestive of finely sculpted marble—were highlighted. She was tall and willowy. Both girls conveyed a strong impression of vitality and exuberance (and with good reason, as I was soon to learn). I felt all of my 67 years.

The conversation among the sisters, their mother, and the doctor had become more animated. One of the sisters was talking about her fund-raising walk. She said it was to raise money for Cystic Fibrosis. That caught my attention. But before I could say anything, the girl to my immediate left called out, with surprise in her voice, to the sisters: “Did you say Cystic Fibrosis?” I turned toward her.

“Yes,” replied the sister who had spoken. “We did a 5k walk to raise money for CF research,” she added.

“My brother has Cystic Fibrosis,” the young woman to my left replied.

Surprised by the coincidence, I said, “My son has Cystic Fibrosis.”

“Really?” She put her hand on my arm and her eyes became instantly liquid. The sisters heard what I had said and took notice as well.

“How old is he?” she asked, clearly concerned.

“Twenty-six,” I said. “And how old is your brother?”

“Thirty-two,” she said.

“How is he doing?” I asked, hoping for good news. Her eyes became watery and she paused for a deep breath before speaking.

“Not so well. He’s waiting for a lung transplant. How about your son?”

I told her about my son and how well he has been doing in managing his illness and staving off the decline in lung function that is characteristic of the disease. There is great variation in the severity of CF from patient to patient and many young people with CF—people younger than my son—are far more ill than he and struggle terribly. With advances in treatment, though, many who would have succumbed in their teens are now living well into adulthood, and with a steady pipeline of new treatments, prospects are good for that trend to continue. But still, it remains—as yet—a disease without a cure.

“Doug—that’s my brother’s name—he gets tired so easily now,” she said. “He’s so brave,” she sighed, full of love and worry. I put my hand on her arm and sighed with her. I felt as if I were on the deck of a ship amid great ocean swells. She asked

me my name—as had the old woman only a few minutes earlier—and I happily provided it.

“My name’s Allison,” she said with a smile. “And this is Julia,” she added, introducing her friend. I shook each girl’s hand.

We chatted some more about my son and her brother. Holding back her tears, Allison spoke admiringly of her brother’s courage. I told her about my son’s battle with cancer, and perhaps went on a bit too much, as parents often do when they talk about their remarkable children. I asked her if she and her friend had come from a performance at Lincoln Center.

“Yes, we’re ballet dancers at the New York City Ballet,” she answered matter-of-factly. “We just did a performance of The Nutcracker.”

‘*Yes, of course!*’ I thought. The willowy forms, the perfect posture, the hair drawn back, complexions slightly flushed as if they had just come from a workout at the gym, and that combination of athleticism and strikingly feminine grace that is the ballerina’s hallmark.

Julia said something about needing to ice her leg after she left. I asked Allison how many times a week they performed. “Six,” she said.

“Tell me something,” I said. “What do you do if you just don’t

feel up to it on a particular day? I mean, if you're just under the weather or achy?"

"You just go out there," she said with a smile. "You just go out there and you work through it."

Then she sighed and said, "When I feel like that, I just think of Doug and how hard it is for him every day, just getting through his day. How can I complain?"

I imagined Allison poised perfectly *en pointe*, then turning one exuberant *fouetté* after another, and finally executing a *grand jeté*, all with that characteristic air of effortlessness that comes only from years of sustained and devoted effort. *'So beautiful, so young, so alive,'* I thought. I wanted to sweep both of them up in my arms—Allison, especially, of course. I couldn't help but think of the contrast between her physical vigor and her brother's struggle, as she described it to me, simply to make it through his day.

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The sisters had picked up on the news that Allison and Julia danced at the New York City Ballet and remarked delightedly on the coincidence that they too were dancers, though only amateurs. In the conversation that followed, it emerged that,

as a child, one of the sisters had studied with the same dance teacher as had Allison, a stern European of the old school who, the sister explained, despaired of making a dancer out of her because she was not of the right body type. *'Vaht am I going to do vit zees thighs?'* the sister said, imitating her old teacher, and laughing. The dancers, the sisters and their mother, the doctor and I all laughed. At some point, Julia left to ice her leg and I found myself worrying that she might have injured herself. I offered a toast to Doug, and Allison raised her glass to my son's health. While she continued to chat with the sisters about dance, I thought again of the old woman and her effort to make some kind of contact with me.

Immersed in the pleasures of this youthful company and warm conversation, I lost track of time and then suddenly realized that I would have to hurry to Grand Central to catch my train back home to Connecticut.

"I hope Doug gets his lung-transplant soon," I said to Allison, as I put on my coat. She thanked me warmly for my good wishes and seemed genuinely sorry that I had to leave. I said some rushed goodbyes to all and made my apologies to Allison for leaving so abruptly. So much seemed to be left unsaid and I wanted to linger.

Nearly in a swoon from the strangeness and poignancy of the coincidences—Cystic Fibrosis, dance, radiology, cancer—I left the restaurant and put my collar up to the cold. I marveled at the improbable vertices where the lines of our lives sometimes cross, and at how so many currents of frailty and strength, sorrow and exuberance perennially challenge and support us. And as I stepped out onto Broadway to hail a cab, I thought: *Yes, it is so amazing that they can sing like that!*

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Peter Lopatin was born and raised in New York where he earned his JD degree and practiced corporate law for thirty years. Along the way, he studied philosophy as a graduate student at the New School for Social Research. After retiring from his legal practice, he obtained a Certificate from the New School in teaching English as a Second Language and has been an ESL teacher since then. He has taught at the University of Connecticut/Stamford, Norwalk Community College, Manhattanville College and, most recently, at the Stamford English Language Academy. Peter's short stories and book reviews have appeared in *Commentary*, *The Weekly Standard, The New Atlantis,* and *New English Review*. His poetry has appeared in *New Millennium Writings* and *Poetry East.*