



Reprinted from the January 10, 2018, issue of U.S. 1 Newspaper

### At the Nobel Prize Banquet

by Pia de Jong

The trumpets sound a fanfare, and I walk with 1,300 invited guests into the courtyard of the City Hall of Stockholm, which has been transformed into a dining room. Students wearing sailor hats and blue-yellow sashes lead us to festive tables that stretch from wall to wall. The men look chic in their white ties, patent leather shoes, and honor medals. The ladies flourish their evening dresses and sparkling jewels. The walls are decorated with carnations, specially flown in from Italy, the corridors are lined with crystals, and the ceiling has been transformed into a shimmering replica of the Northern Lights.



Illustration by Eliane Gerrits

When the Swedish royal family enters with the newly awarded Nobel Prize winners, we all stand. We toast Alfred Nobel with champagne from fluted glasses with golden rims. Then we dine off golden plates with golden cutlery. I have ended up in a timeless fairyland of truth and beauty, a place of lifelong dedication to science and literature.

Pling! Just as I am closing my eyes in a reverie, I suddenly hear the phone of the American journalist sitting next to me whose beat is the White House. She has hurriedly flown in for a panel discussion about the future of truth. Pling! Pling!

"Sorry, it's my Twitter feed," she says. "Trump is busy again. He is probably looking at Fox News and is getting excited." She has recently published a long article about the president's media habits. Without looking up from her phone she pokes her fork into the delicate appetizer. Pling! Pling! Pling! "It will need to be checked," she sighs and starts sending replies.

"Are not you tired of it?" I ask her.

"Hugely," she says. "And that's even before my jetlag. Twitter is a terrible medium. But that's just how this president communicates."

After the appetizers are cleared, there is a fanfare from above. Ballet dancers swirl through the room like snowflakes. Meanwhile, the Plings! continue unabated. The president is twittering right through it all, like an unhappy toddler who has been dragged by his parents to a symphony hall.

It's time for dessert. The lights are dimmed, and the music from the orchestra swells up. Dozens of waiters file down the monumental staircase holding trays overflowing with bilberry ice cream, surrounded by showers of sparks. But this fairytale setting escapes the journalist next to me. The tastiest desserts are on the table, but she is feeding on Twitter biscuits. She is like an astronaut who carries her own oxygen bubble.

We listen to the funny, wise, and touching speeches given by the newly awarded Nobel laureates. In a few minutes they summarize their search for truth and offer us a glimpse of the future and the past, where 1.3 billion years ago two black holes collided. I think of how the journalist characterized the president's sense of life earlier that afternoon: He lives in the eternal now.

At the end of the evening, when I glide out on the freshly fallen snow on my lover's arm, I can still hear the music in my ears. There is a layer of powder snow over the trees and the streets. Torches illuminate the footpath. Stockholm looks like a fairy tale. It is almost midnight. Does the carriage change into a pumpkin on a night like this?

Then I hear behind me: Pling!

Pia de Jong is a Dutch writer who lives in Princeton. Her memoir, "Saving Charlotte: A Mother and the Power of Intuition," was published in July, 2017, by W.W. Norton. She is filling in for Richard K. Rein, who says his column will resume next week.

[Add new comment](#)

Become a sponsor! Reach the viewers of PrincetonInfo.com and the readers of U.S. 1.