

Prologue

Friday, November 18, 2005. I was listening to WUOM, my local National Public Radio station. Terry Gross was interviewing author Joan Didion on “Fresh Air.”

Earlier that week, Didion’s memoir, *The Year of Magical Thinking*, won the National Book Award for nonfiction. “Life changes fast,” Didion deadpanned. “Life changes in the instant. You sit down to dinner and life as you know it ends.” On December 30, 2003, Didion and her late husband, John Gregory Dunne, sat down to dinner. They never did finish that fateful dinner because his life, as they knew it, ended in an instant.

In the evening of December 31, 2003, fifteen days into my half-century mark, I was allowed more than an instant—a relatively generous fifteen or so minutes, in fact—to gather whatever I could to get out of my home of seventeen years, to walk away from my 26-year life partnership. Little did I realize then that life, as I had lived it for fifty years, would soon end, and that I would be embarking on my journey of the proverbial rebirth.

It was about 9 p.m. on that frigid New Year’s Eve. There I was, driving aimlessly on the streets of suburban Detroit, with not much more than my briefcase, a pillow and a blanket, and a trunkful of what passed for my prized possessions: my cameras. Imee Ooi’s *Chant of Metta* was swirling in my BMW’s CD player. It was not quite a month earlier when that alluring and haunting music first wafted in the air and into my ears, sparked a revolution in my subconscious, and life, as I knew it, changed in an instant.

By the time I found a hotel for the night, none of the restaurants seemed to be open on this oddly desolate night. My mind could not even focus on whether I was really in need of food. There was a pantry in the hotel lobby; I picked up a chocolate chip cookie. “No charge—on the house,” the clerk at the front desk smiled as he waved me by. This “act of random kindness,” dispensed with impeccable timing, transformed the unpretentious cookie into a scrumptious New Year’s Eve feast for me.

* * * * *

2003 had started on a high note. My parents had just celebrated their 50th wedding anniversary and my father's 80th birthday in December of 2002. My youngest sister, Vivian and her husband, Ted, and my other younger sister, Lina, flew in from Hong Kong, and Lina's daughter, Juliana, traveled from Toronto, to join in the festivities which included lavish Chinese banquets in two cities (Windsor and Toronto), formal family portraits by a professional photographer, and of course, gifts galore and many memorable home-cooked meals by Mom, our very own chef nonpareil. Then everyone dispersed, and I was back to my 12-hour workdays as an immigration attorney in a large corporate law firm, and to facing the grim reality that Mom was losing her 3-year battle with colon cancer.

Mom passed away at 3:59 p.m. on Sunday, July 27, 2003. Even though I had more than three years to prepare for that eventuality, I was hardly ready for the life-transforming metamorphosis triggered by her departure. My relationship with Mom had been complex, even contentious, oftentimes agonizing. In life, Mom bestowed her approval frightfully sparingly. Now, years after her passing, I have finally learned that another's approval is irrelevant, even superfluous, in my soul's search for life's truths and inner peace.

Six years hence, my life bears little resemblance to the supercharged, high-flying, fast-tracking, über-pressure, left-brain-dominant life as an attorney in a so-called silk stocking law firm. Memories of life, love and dreams are exhorting me to commit remembrances to print. No more self-sabotage; I goaded myself to crystallize disparate thoughts, distill the vast reservoir of recollections, and weave my tapestry to fill however many blank pages to come.

Liza Cheuk May Chan (陳綽薇)

Friday, August 28, 2009

Ann Arbor, Michigan

