

Prologue

“Every man’s memory is his private literature.”

~Aldous Huxley

May I tell you the story of how I never proposed to Jan?

No getting down on bended knee, no diamond ring in a box – because I was so broke after a divorce that I couldn’t afford a ring.

No Jan sitting in some fancy restaurant, choking up, blurting out a joyful “Yes.” We had been friends for a while because she worked at the CBS TV affiliate in Seattle and I would travel there for stories, often working out of their newsroom.

One evening . . . the first time she ever invited me to her tiny one-bedroom apartment overlooking Lake Washington . . . we sat and talked. It was never more than that . . . sorry . . . no scenes that censors would take out of the movie version.

It was just that, somehow, we knew - both of us - that we would be together from then on, HAD to be together.

I gently kissed her goodnight and walked away and felt as if I had been in an earthquake. I was shaken and elated, scared, but also ecstatic with the sense of being alive . . . I knew my life had changed in brilliant ways.

We were married in San Francisco on Valentine’s Day in 1985, and then lived here and there across the globe . . . San Francisco, Tokyo, Moscow, London and back to Tokyo and Beijing.

My job as a journalist for CBS News provided Jan and me with the ability to see and experience the world. Much of it was wonderful, some of it still gives me nightmares.

In Sarajevo one day, a mortar round hit near where the crew and I were standing outside by our armored car. Two people were killed and a piece of shrapnel buried itself in our armored car inches away from where I was standing. We went there to do a job . . . we reported on the old women and children killed and we dodged the same sniper fire.

In the aftermath of the Rwanda genocide, I was sent to cover the thousands who fled to a volcanic plain in what is now the Democratic Republic of Congo. Soon thereafter, a cholera epidemic broke out and people died for lack of a gallon of water and some salt. How many bodies do you see stacked up near mass graves that are being dug by bulldozers before you lose count and forget? I did a story at an orphanage where we knew the littlest and sickest babies would be dead in a few hours before the story even aired back in the US.

I did it and I coped.

But the week when I had to fly from Tokyo to Seattle by myself and arrange for Jan to move into an assisted living facility, a place I was told she should probably never leave . . . that was when I learned how a man can fall to the floor because he is weeping so hard.

I had already lost so much of her. But this was arranging for her move to America while I remained in Asia. This was the physical reality of what Alzheimer's had taken from her mind and from me.

Here is part of the note I sent out that weekend to friends explaining my decision. It captures the part I hated most. I was her husband, her lover and her best friend, and I felt that I was failing her.

I am now being dragged down in ways which will start affecting my health and well being, if it hasn't already. This is not unusual for caregivers, and studies show that being an Alzheimer's caregiver to a loved one can shorten your life rather dramatically.

I am just barely smart enough that -- when it is pointed out -- I can and do see what is happening to me, such as my deepening level of exhaustion or the effects of living on a never-ending emotional roller coaster. I am reliably informed that if I do not make this change, and soon, this will not end well for me. And while my welfare is secondary because, in this battle, we must all put Jan first, there is logic to knowing that if I falter and fail, she will suffer for it.

I once told friends that I would trade my soul for Jan to be healed, and they shushed me . . . worried that the devil's demon Mephistopheles who bested Dr. Faustus might hear.

If he is listening, the offer still stands.