

[NOTE] This story was first written in winter 1992 for a creative writing class, in my final semester at the University of Missouri-Columbia. In 2005, some parts were rewritten but the original spirit of the story remains.

All Rights Reserved © Tay Kay Chin

Becoming Capa

by Tay Kay Chin

Dear Hiromi,

I would like to thank you for the letters and the lovely flowers. And I must not forget the money.

Sorry that it has taken me so long to write.

The nurses here told me that you were a regular visitor during my hospitalization. They all described you as beautiful, 'like a movie star', but I think they were all trying to cheer me up.

A few of them said you seemed to be in love with me. How is that possible? I don't even know you personally.

Anyway, I have decided to accept your magazine's offer to 'buy' my story. To be honest, I have a lot of misgivings about doing this but I am desperately broke.

I don't know how I am going to pay my medical bill. So the money you are offering will come in useful.

I will try hard to answer the questions you have raised. I don't think I have much to hide. After all, I have been told that I am already quite a celebrity back in Japan. Is that right?

Please pardon me if I drift a little. There is a lot for me to remember.

Ok, let me begin.

My childhood was not unlike a typical Japanese boy's childhood.

My dad owns a textile factory in Toyonaka and my mom is an ever-loyal Japanese housewife. I was born and raised in Toyonaka as well, second of three siblings.

My older sister finished high school and went to work for my father until she met a salesman and got married. Now, my brother-in-law works for my dad and my sister stays at home to look after their three children.

My younger sister, who is very close to me, lives in California with her second husband. I understand that you have met her.

In high school, I played baseball, like most Japanese boys. I did not like the sport at all but it was a great way to meet girls.

My dad, being a typical Japanese man, wanted me to take over his business. From a very young age, he was always sharing with me his business strategies, about the people he met. Often, he made me promise not to tell my mom about his amorous conquests on his business trips to the big cities.

I was not a popular student in school. Some guys gave me a nickname – Lone Ranger – because I did not like hanging out with people of my age.

My favourite place as a kid was our community library. It was really in there, and among the books, that I became what most people called 'insane'.

Because of my frequent visits, I became rather good friends with a librarian working there. She was a woman in her late-30s. Not much was known about her except that she was also

from the big city and came to our town about 20 years ago to escape her parents.

Everyone in town called her Naoko but she told me I could call her Nancy.

One day, Nancy passed me a book in a paper bag. From the grin on her face, I knew it was something that I was not allowed to read.

It turned out that the book belonged to her. On the third page was an inscription that said: "For my dearest Nancy, my eyes see better, my heart beats faster, because of you. Bob. March 1949"

For the next few nights, Slightly Out Of Focus became my companion. It was not like anything I had read before and if not for my poor command of English, I would probably have read it cover to cover, in one sitting.

Somehow, I just had a feeling that Nancy was waiting for me to finish the book and asked her tons of questions.

"Hey Nancy, thanks for the book. Here, take it back before I decide to keep it."

"Oh, you can keep it, I have no use for it these days."

"Ah ... can I ask you something personal? Were you Bob Capa's lover?"

A smile, and the assurance that I could keep the book, was all I got from Nancy. The rest, I will tell you later.

Nancy was not just Capa's lover. She was the last love of his life, the woman he was visiting when the order came for him to go to Cambodia, where he eventually died in a landmine explosion.

Dying heroically on assignment was not his only claim to fame. Capa co-founded the legendary photo agency, Magnum, and was the man Ingrid Bergman wanted to leave her husband for.

He did not take up Bergman's offer or there would have been no Isabella Rosellini. That, Nancy would never forget. She knew that she was in the league of very special women.

For a 16-year-old beginning to be curious about the birds and the bees, Nancy meant everything to me. For me, she was the ultimate woman - smart, worldly, beautiful and mysterious.

Over the years, we became good friends who could share anything. In a way, she was my mentor. We shared many secrets but none scandalous enough for the gossip magazines.

A few years after I was given the book, a box addressed to me was left outside our home one night. In it was a short note and an old camera, not just any ordinary camera but a Leica - the Rolls Royce of cameras.

The note simply says, "From Bob to Nancy, now to Motoya: go spread some happiness."

And that was the last time I heard from Nancy.

Yes, you will find it hard to believe but the camera actually belonged to Capa. Can you imagine my shock and delight

when I first held it?

My grades in school were pathetic. I had read all the books I wanted to read in the library. My Nancy was gone. I had to learn how to use the Leica.

From that day, I stopped going to the library. In fact, I stopped living normally.

There was only one place I wanted to be after Nancy left - New York City.

I would be lying to say that I did not entertain the thought that she had gone there and I could finally declare my love (seriously, I think it was more like lust) for her.

But there were many other reasons why the Big Apple beacons for me.

For a start, it was far from my parents, who had become increasingly impatient with me and the ever presence of my camera.

New York was Capa's adopted home, so it must be good.

I don't remember how much money I had with me but when the vessel pulled into the Manhattan harbor at dawn, I felt like the richest man on earth.

And please don't ask me how I got my passport. It is enough to say that some people got into trouble for helping me.

By now I had learned to how use the camera to get things done. The few weeks on the ship, I had mastered the technique of walking up to a woman and saying, "Can I make a picture of your beautiful face?" That line never failed to land me a free meal or a free drink or a bed to share.

Stepping on the soil of the USA for the first time, I was tempted to go down on my knees and kiss the ground. I have finally arrived in the land of opportunity. I decided to become Bob Capa.

I knew nobody and nobody knew me. All I had was Capa's book and Capa's Leica.

At night, I would sleep on park benches. In the day, I tried to make some money doing odd jobs. Some days, I worked as a dishwasher. Other days, I would go to the harbour and find work as a labourer.

There were only a few things on my list of things to do when I had money: get a haircut, buy a few rolls of film, and find a more permanent place to sleep.

I remember going to the barber in Little Italy with a picture of Capa and telling a big man. "Like this. I want like this."

My transformation into Capa was finally progressing. Now I have his hairdo, I just needed to speak like him, and smoke like him.

In front of any found mirror, I would practice, "Hi, I'm Bob Capa, photographer." Capa was Hungarian, I am Japanese, we both have funny accents and that would be my biggest advantage.

I don't think Capa intended for his book to be a manual for

love or survival but I was able to draw many lessons from it to 'do well' in the big city. I think the biggest lesson I learned from him was self-belief and with that, I opened many doors for myself.

Within half a year, I was sharing an apartment with five other dream-seekers. It was nothing to shout about but at least I had a roof over me.

Among us was a French guy who came to New York to become a great chef. There was also the Argentinean tango dancer who wanted to be on Broadway. We hardly saw each other but when we did, we always tried to have a good time.

Yes, I know much of what I have written sounds like a typical immigrant tale. If so, it is probably because I went out to live my life as one. I wished often that I were born in a different era, in a different place.

The biggest thing Capa (or you can say Nancy) taught me was how to live. I imagined myself, very often, hanging out with Theolonius Monk and his friends, as they jammed into the night, with drugs, booze and lots of easy lays.

I bet my roommates shared similar dreams. How we wished that we could play with a time machine and move all of us back to the golden age of swing, to be in New York and be part of the Beat Generation.

Anyway, let's get back to me.

You know they say that if you throw a stone out of a window in Manhattan, the chances of hitting a photographer is fifty-fifty. Why, I don't know, the city seemed like a giant magnet to all of us wannabes.

I did not even know if I wanted to be a photographer, or why I wanted to be a photographer. All I knew was that I wanted to be Robert Capa, and that is why I am where I am now – lying in a hospital bed with broken legs and god knows how many broken ribs.

After cutting my hair to look like Capa and practicing for hours to speak like the Hungarian, I still did not feel like I was Capa. So I decided to take the next big step, and to do that, I needed a partner. I needed someone who believed in me. That someone would not question what I was about to share.

The first time I saw Monique, I only had sex on my mind.

We were both at a gallery looking at an exhibition by a German and she must have noticed my disapproving look as I breezed past each of the prints.

"You don't like them?" she asked me matter-of-factly as I was leaving.

"The only thing I liked about it is that it is free," I said, pretending to sound like I know a lot about photography.

"Are you a photographer?"

Now I knew it was a pick-up line. These Eastern European women, they are aggressive.

"Well," tugging at my Leica, I said, "I make pictures."

As typical as it sounds, Monique is Czech, and being only just

gotten accustomed to the term 'Eastern European sensibility', I had all intentions of having an intimate intellectual discourse. (OK screw it, all I cared about was INTERCOURSE).

To cut the story short, I moved across town the next day to continue our affair.

The most important thing you need to know about Monique is that she was a better photographer than I am. But she loved me, or perhaps she just loved the idea of me.

Sex with her was good and I liked the fact that she knew so much about photography.

I don't remember why but a week after we met, I decided she would be the one to share my grand plan with.

"Are you crazy? It doesn't work that way!"

Yes, in retrospect, it was a crazy idea but at that time, it didn't seem that way.

"OK, I will do it because you are a stupid Japanese and I love you for that."

That night, we waited till was very late. In New York, there is no such thing as silence. Everything is relative.

"Monique, I am ready to be Capa. Let's do it now."

I was standing stark naked against a white wall. Our place was dark, save for two tea lights that we had lit to provide extra ambience. I had selected the music – Beethoven's Ninth – the same one that was probably playing in Capa's head when bullets were flying as he fornicated in the foxhole (it was documented in his book).

With a push of the button, Monique turned on the Kodak Carousel and projected an image of Capa onto me. The picture was the one of him smoking a cigar and I selected it because he looked handsome there.

As instructed earlier, Monique cranked up the volume as I stood there, with my eyes shut, praying for God to come take me and turn me into Bob.

Then she came forward to me, and using a red marker, she traced my outline, and that of Capa.

I did not know how long it lasted but when I woke up, I was sweating like a pig.

"Bob, wake up. Wake up. Hurry up. Wake up. Bob."

I heard a female voice. Slowly, it was coming back to me. I knew her.

Slowly, I sat up and hug her.

"Hi, I am Bob Capa. Photographer."

"Yes Bob. I am Gerda. I love you."

With the light back on, I inspected the red line on the white wall from afar. We didn't talk about it, as we were not supposed to know. The event that just happened did not really happen, it was only a dream, as we had told ourselves before it started.

By know, I am sure you are confused like hell. You must be wondering, "What just happened and who is Gerda?"

You see, Robert Capa was born Andre Friedmann. He changed his name to make believe he was a famous American photojournalist and Gerda was his first love, who died much earlier on assignment.

Capa invented himself, so I did the same.

In New York, you can be anything you want to be, so for weeks, we just went around making pictures and introducing ourselves as Bob and Gerda.

Gerda, or Monique, continued to work part-time at the photo lab round the corner from our apartment, and in the night, she made pictures around Central Park. In the darkroom she had built before I moved in, she printed pictures into the wee hours.

I, in the meantime, was still practicing my Hungarian accent.

Disaster was just ahead only that I was too dazed to notice.

Some of the things that were about to happen were wrongly reported in the newspapers, so please hear my version.

I came home one day and Monique was sitting on the floor, crying her eyes out.

"Bob, we can't live like this anymore. I am pregnant, you have to find a job."

"Huh?"

"Huh what?"

"Why are you pregnant?"

"You little shit head, you do nothing every day but fuck like a rabbit ... that is why I am pregnant."

"What do you mean I do nothing? I am a photographer."

"Oh yeah, show me some pictures. Go ahead, show them to me."

"Hey, the pictures are in my head. They are developing."

"Don't hey me. Get this straight – you have nothing in your heads, and I mean both of them."

"And you are not Bob, your real name is Motoya. You are Japanese, not Hungarian. Get it?"

"Hey little Japanese man, you know Capa set up pictures?"

If there was one thing I couldn't stand, it was someone insulting my hero. Sure there were rumors that his famous picture of the Spanish soldier was staged, but there was no solid proof.

"You asshole. Look at your own passport in case you have really forgotten who you are. Here, look ..."

Well, I was quiet from the moment Monique decided to show me her side of the truth. At that moment, I did not know if I believe what she said or was I still living in Bob's world. As

far as I was concerned, Bob was I and I was Bob. Nothing, and no one, could separate us.

"Hey Mot, tell you something. If you are really Bob Capa, you have nine lives, so many times he was close to dying but he lived."

"Hey, why don't you try jumping off from here and see if you can fly."

"You little shithead."

So fly I did, down eight floors, and onto the pavement.

It was a spur of the moment thing. I think I really thought I was Bob and that I was infallible.

My Leica miraculously survived, but not my legs.

I think the biggest embarrassment was that my camera was not even loaded. So it is not true, as reported in some magazines, that when the police processed my film they found pictures of us having sex.

The doctors say that I was lucky to be alive but I am not so sure.

Monique never came to see me but she did tell my sister, whom I know you met when she flew out from California after my fall, that she would keep our baby.

Reiko is now my only blood relative who still talks to me. My parents are of course upset and ashamed and my other sister is upset because she had to endure their bitching.

Before I forget, I never met Nancy again and I don't think she came to New York.

I try to correct people who called this incident a suicide. It was not. I did not kill myself, and I definitely won't try to kill Bob.

I had no idea that the Japanese media would turn this into a big story.

But then, I need the money. So here is my story.

Still alive,

Bob