



# What Do You Remember?

By Cynthia Lim

Three months after my husband Perry's cardiac arrest and brain injury due to anoxia, I was still unsure of the extent of his brain damage and what remained of his former self. I knew he was never going to be able to resume his career as an attorney but I held out hope that his witty and loving self would return.

When he awoke from a two-week coma, he spent several months in acute-care hospitals in Los Angeles until he was transferred to a residential rehabilitation center in Pomona. There was no pattern to his behavior and no way of predicting what his state of mind would be when we visited. In his lucid moments, I saw glimpses of the former Perry, his sparkling eyes full of love, his Cheshire Cat smile with a sign of mischief, the arching of his brows and his deep, nasally voice. Whenever one of the attendants pointed to me and asked him, "Who's she?" he would always break into a smile and say the same thing: "My beautiful wife, Cynthia." But in his agitated moments, I didn't know who he was. There was a hardness in his eyes, a disconnection that made him appear as a stranger to me. He was lost in silence and unresponsive, frowning.

I hated the long drive to the rehabilitation center which often took more than an hour or sometimes up to ninety minutes during rush hour after work. During that long drive, I cried for my old life. I cried for my genial companion who was conversant, considerate, and made me laugh. I cried when I thought of our future, for the vacations still to be planned, for our dreams to grow old and retire together. I cried when he didn't recognize his favorite fly fishing reel.

Perry had loved fishing and had amassed a large collection of equipment. Before his expeditions, he would spend hours in the garage fussing with lines, rods and reels. He used to call me from work, excited about the latest purchase.

“Cyn, I just ordered this really nice Shimano fly fishing reel. I can use it for saltwater fly fishing. What do you think?”

“Sounds good to me,” I said, not knowing the difference between a fly fishing reel for saltwater or freshwater, or why this one was so special.



*Cynthia and Perry Before His Injury*

But after his brain injury, when I brought him that special reel at the rehabilitation center, he didn't recognize the purple felt bag. He took out the reel and ran his stubby fingers over the cut-out holes, then turned it over, his face puzzled.

“It's your special Shimano reel,” I said. “Do you remember when you bought it and how excited you were?”

“No,” he said, slowly turning it in his hands. With the weight he lost during his coma, the tops of his hands seemed more wrinkled and freckled. He put the Shimano reel on the desk.

“What about this one?” I asked, handing him another reel. He pulled the spool into place, then cranked it one turn.

“It's a spinning reel,” he whispered, “for fishing with a lure or bait.” He set it down on the desk, disinterested, then turned away. In that moment, it seemed that all hope was lost.

I felt like a widow but Perry wasn't dead. I was mourning the loss of someone who was still alive, albeit in a different form. And during those times, I longed for the comfort of religion. I thought of the healing prayer that Perry's cousins, both rabbi's, sang in Hebrew while he was in intensive care. I had squirmed when I heard the unfamiliar Hebrew words and didn't know if I should bow my head or look up. Perry was not observant as a Jew and my Chinese family never attended church. But the Hebrew phrases became comforting to me.

*“Refaeinu Adonay V'Nerafeh, Hosheenu v'nerasheinu kee Tehilateinu Atah, Heal us, oh God, and we shall be healed,”* I would sing to myself when I left the hospital in the evenings. Something about the cadence and melody resonated with me. I felt a sense of spirituality, a connection with an ancient tradition. And now, mourning for the old Perry and our old life, I longed for a formal ritual, a way to say goodbye to his former self. I wanted to sing a liturgy at a Catholic funeral mass, recite Kaddish in Hebrew, receive visitors while sitting Shiva or light incense and pray in his memory in a Buddhist temple.

I wondered if I could adapt to the new Perry and love him in the same way. I thought about what still remained to love and how bad it would have to get for me to stop loving him. What remained of a

marriage if shared memories were lost? In most brain injury cases, short-term memory was the first to go, whereas long-term memory generally stayed intact. Memories that occurred right before the event were usually lost. I quizzed him on what he could remember.

“Do you remember our trip to Prague and Vienna?” I asked. We had gone there for spring break, three months before his heart attack.

“Not really,” he said.

“How about your fishing trip to La Paz?” He had taken that trip a month before his heart attack with Paul, our younger son and our neighbor, Manny.

“Not really.”

“What about Zack’s graduation?” Our older son’s high school graduation occurred the week before his heart attack.

He looked at me without a hint of recognition.

“What do you remember?” I asked.

“I remember going to law school and working really hard. I remember taking the bar exam and passing. I remember my law firm,” he said, his voice fading to a whisper. “I remember how much I love you.”

## Meet Cynthia Lim

*Cynthia Lim grew up in Salinas, California. She holds a BA in Experimental Psychology from UC Santa Barbara, a Masters in Social Work from UC Berkeley, and a doctorate in social welfare from UCLA, and had brief stints as a VISTA volunteer in Indianapolis, Indiana, and Boise, Idaho. She recently retired as the Executive Director for Data and Accountability for the Los Angeles Unified School District. She has lived in Los Angeles with her family for the past 30 years. For more info, visit [cynthialimwriting.com](http://cynthialimwriting.com).*



**“To be brave is to love someone unconditionally, without expecting anything in return.” -Madonna**