



The Reality of Brice

by Marc Michel Brice ('83)

Last year my father was shockingly diagnosed with level 4 lung cancer. There is no level 5. I say shockingly because my father never got sick or missed a day at work. And it's rather ironic that my adolescence growing up in NYC can be remembered by matchbooks my father collected after every visit to a restaurant, bar, hotel or lounge neatly left in a Cuban Cigar box as if it were a time capsule well preserved to tell his story he would never tell us himself.

Early on my father assumed financial responsibility for his entire family. His unreliable father had left my father's mother and three children for the younger more exciting Toinon Boris, the children's young scout master that he would later marry and live with in Bruxelles for the remainder of his life. I found my father's matchbooks from New York's renaissance days when only French Cuisine fed the wealthy bellies of its upper crust. Le Cirque when it was at its original location on E.54th St, Le Cygne, Le Pavillon, Le Petit Dominique, Le Pierre, Le Veau D'or, Café D'argenteuille, Café de la Paix and if you still had energy to dance then it was Regines Disco, a place to hang out with the rich and famous, the bell bottoms and the corduroys dancing together, hidden in a haze of cigar and cigarette smoke. Conversation came easily as the champagne flowed freely. We, on the other hand, didn't dine at these places: these were the places where my father dined with business associates. I vividly remember our weekly trek from the West Side across Central Park West to the Upper East Side to dine at "U Like Chinese Restaurant." How can you not like a place that tells you how you are going to feel? It's genius. U Like was a classic Americanized version of what New Yorkers thought was authentic Chinese food. The Matchbook cover reads "Finest in congenial atmosphere. Open 7 days, free local delivery. U Like" I remember always being greeted with a smile and a quick hello and being guided just as quickly to our table as if the timer was about to ring.

The timer is always about to ring in NYC which is why everyone walks and eats faster. My father would always walk ahead of us followed by my mother, sister and me. The sidewalks on an island are always more narrow than its Midwest counterparts. Two seconds would not go by before a pot of hot tea would be plunked down on our table. I remember the distinctive sound of the plunk as it was placed smack dab in the middle of our family gathering. My father would assertively grab the pot and ask: "Tu veux un thé?" He would then pour some in our mugs like a soldier handing out daily rations to the troops at a mess hall. You always knew however that if you wanted to you would be able to get more. I was always fascinated by the round tea mugs with no handles. The warmth of the tea mugs greeted you like an old friend from whom you always knew what to expect. The minute we would sit down my sister Kim would head off to the ladies room for what my father called "L'inspection." Not a bad thing to do because if the toilettes are dirty, chances are the kitchen is not much better.

I remember always ordering the # 15 orange chicken with white rice. There was no charge for the headache you would get from the MSG. We didn't talk much about MSG then, it was all part of the experience. No pain no gain -- isn't that what they tell you? The most anticipated part of the evening was when the bill would come. It was always accompanied by fortune cookies. The cookies were encased in individual plastic wrappers that you would end up tearing open with your teeth. I'm still not sure why they are wrapped in plastic: there is nothing to keep fresh in there.

My sister and I could not wait to hear what fortune was coming our way. One night we got the same fortune in two different cookies. I remember being so let down. A little like finding out Santa Claus is not real. Today I imagine it was a pissed-off factory worker putting the same fortune in hundreds of cookies to get back at this world, which never let him realize his dreams. If his fortune wasn't coming true why should someone else's? I felt even more let down when I found out there are no fortune cookies in China. As far back as the 19th century a cookie very similar in appearance to the modern fortune cookie as we know it was produced in Kyoto, Japan. But since the Chinese do not like the Japanese very much we will leave them out of it. My father would always grab the bill. Like a goalie tender to a hockey puck, his hand would be out long before it go to the table. This was his way of asserting control in a world he really had no control over. My father never gave us warm hugs or would tell us he loved us but he got us a lovely mother who did.

We would spend most weekends out on Eastern Long Island stopping half way for dinner at the infamous Howard Johnson in the town of Islip. Howard Johnsons was popular back in the 70's. I remember its orange logo. As soon as we were seated my sister was off to the ladies room for "The Inspection." I often would make my sister Kim laugh. I once made her laugh so hard while she was drinking her vanilla milk shake that it ended coming out of her nose and spraying onto the wall. My parents --especially my father-- was furious with us. You just didn't do that, it wasn't "correct": he would say in French "it's just not done." It was all black or white for him and judging by the fact that I always ordered chocolate and my sister the vanilla white I guess he was getting something right.

While I was in France recently my wife marveled at how well behaved children are, especially at the table. I explained to her that parents in France have an incredibly efficient technique of disciplining their children. You tell the children to come up close, then you tell them they are misbehaving and then "Whack!" Pain is an incredible and effective motivator.

"What was the attraction of Howard Johnson to a Frenchman" I recently thought, looking at the matchbook? It wasn't a Croque Monsieur or Boeuf Bourguignon. It was 28 flavors of ice cream, and fried clams. Like the "U like" Chinese restaurant you knew what you were going to get and they did it consistently well. It gave my father a little certainty in a world he could not control. When I later found out that two famous French chefs Pierre Franey and Jacques Pepin had been hired by Howard Johnson as executive chefs to revamp their entire menu, I quickly understood. As I get to the bottom of the cigar box I finally find the matchbook I was almost sure to find: "Windows On the World." This was the famous restaurant located at the top floor of the World Trade Center. My father's office was on the 66th floor of the north tower. You could go from the ground floor to the 110th in 58 seconds. Windows On The World had the most amazing entrée. It was a view of the NYC harbor and they served it to you on a plate. My father always insisted on dining at Windows on the World whenever we had family in from abroad. It was his way of showing them that he not only was he a survivor of Hitler's wrath but he was now literally sitting on top of the world.

On 9/11 what could never happen did. Windows on the World, along with my father's office came crumbling down. Its 30,000 bottle wine cellar crashed down 107 flights and the 1982 Bordeaux's and the 1990 Burgundies and their young Napa counterparts all poured out their contents, mixing with toxic and granulated white dust .

Gone is my father and gone is the "U like Chinese" restaurant, now replaced by a Starbucks. Gone is the plastic charm of our favorite Hojo with its fried clams and 28 flavors of ice cream.

It's 2014 on a cold Sunday afternoon and I'm sitting at a Chinese restaurant located in uptown Chicago where I currently live. I just requested the bill. I'm pleasantly surprised to see it accompanied by not one but two fortune cookies. As I tear open the rappers with my teeth and crack open my cookies, I'm reminded not once but twice that the only certainty in life is that nothing is truly certain.