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This isn’t the moment I would have chosen to take stock of things, and I am not remotely comfortable writing autobiography, however abbreviated. In spite of the official facts (that I am a translator and professor of Japanese literature, that I live in Ann Arbor, that my first book won the National Book Award), I still don’t feel—twenty-five years after leaving Yale wondering “Now what?”—that life has coalesced.

I remember driving away from New Haven after graduation, looking back at Phelps Gate with as much disquiet as I had felt walking through it four years earlier. Being an undergraduate at Yale had seemed the perfect calling, and, despite the evidence, I had neglected to prepare myself for the fact that it would end.

Somehow, I managed to get over my homesickness for Yale, to avoid the draft, to spend a couple of years in Tokyo as a copywriter, to come back to Yale and get a Ph.D., to land a job teaching at the University of Michigan, to write, in time to produce my own graduate students, and even to master my stage fright enough to give a decent lecture. I became an “authority.” I found myself once more at Yale, invited to speak, and at Harvard, at Berkeley, in London, Venice.

Yet I don’t feel like doing any boasting. The Japanese have a saying, “The gods never give two things.” What sticks in my mind are the failures. To wit, Hollywood. It sounds, even to me, like a cliche, or warmed-over F. Scott Fitzgerald (Erich Segal?), but it happened—the only thing I ever did, I think, in step with the rest of my generation—I wrote a screenplay. I wrote it with a friend who teaches film, and we entered it in a contest for new writers sponsored by the (screen) Writers’ Guild. “This is just for fun,” we told ourselves. But when we were named first runner-up, we were on the next plane to Los Angeles.

We schmoozed. We picked an agent. We learned not to wear a coat and tie. We ate at the Ivy with the second cousin of anyone we’d ever known in the industry. We wrote another screenplay. Studio executives called us “comedic geniuses.” For about five minutes a producer at Warner Brothers wanted to buy it for Barbra Streisand. Streisand was involved with Don Johnson at the time, and the producer was looking for a movie they could make together. Before we could even check out property in Malibu, Johnson dumped Streisand for Melanie Griffith, and that was the end of that. Back to Ann Arbor.

“Darling!” our agent called, “Get out here right away! Daryl Hannah wants to do it.” I taught my seminar and dashed to the airport. My collaborator changed into Armani in the parking garage on Rodeo Drive, and we sped to our rendezvous with Daryl Hannah, who drove up in a rusty jeep, wearing cowboy boots and a red polka-dot dress and chugging from a large bottle of Evian. We were golden! She loved the script, she loved us, her development person at Lori- mar called us “comedic geniuses.” The next morning Warner Brothers bought Lorimar, and that was the end of that. Daryl went to New York and took up with John F. Kennedy, Jr., and we went back to Ann Arbor.

“Write another one,” the agent said. “There’ll be a huge bidding war!” But I’m still nursing my wounds. The last time she called, one of my graduate students was undergoing an oral exam, defending his dissertation. “Lee, I can’t talk. I’m in the middle of a dissertation defense.” “Sweetie!” she said, “Do you have a good lawyer?”