

"A breathtaking rumination..."
—Jennifer Chen, editor of The Peak



The
Magic
ircle

Charmaine
Chan

Charmaine
Chan
The Magic Circle

ethos
books™

Charmaine Chan's lyrical memoir speaks to the soul of anyone who knows the desperate pain of watching a loved one dying, little by little. By acknowledging the grieving process as one that begins long before death makes its final claim, Charmaine validates its part in the shared human experience, and gives voice to that awful sadness we seem only to permit ourselves during eulogies. She confronts the dread of no more being able to form new memories with the only other inhabitants of a shared local universe as us—our siblings—with precision, sensitivity and, above all, honesty.

—Serene Goh, head of SPH Content Lab

Grief overwhelms. It engulfs every other thought, feeling, and activity. And while the worst pangs of it may eventually be alleviated, those who survive the loss of a loved one will only learn to cope with the grief, never really “getting over it.”

In *The Magic Circle*, Charmaine Chan offers an intimate look at the loss of her sister to cancer and the grief with which she has come to live with. In a mix of raw honesty and good humour, she does not try to sugarcoat the reality of the pain caused by the loss of her sister, but rather manages to find the remedy that eventually makes grief bearable, a blend of strong memories and strong family bonds.

This work preserves Charmaine's memories of her sister in a voice unaccustomed to expressing such depths of emotion, the voice of one who seldom believed she would be heard, even if she did bother to speak. This brings a level of self-awareness to the story that gives it a measure of gravity, making it a compelling read. While grief never fully goes away after the loss of a loved one, this remedy has been tried and proven in the author's own life, and as I have seen in my years of acquaintance with her, it is a remedy that gives Charmaine the ability to bear the grief with strength and grace.

—Shelly Bryant, poet, writer, and translator

Chan deftly takes us back to her childhood in Singapore, juxtaposing fun, idyllic days and a tight family bond to how the family unravels and reconstructs itself—albeit jaggedly—in the face of Elaine’s illness. Yet, amid the despair and heart-breaking revelations, Chan injects moments of mischief and levity that make for delicious reading in spite of the depressing topic. It is clear that the intervening years have given Chan insights and perspectives that elevate the story from mere memoir to a breathtaking rumination about grief and memory, loss and love.

—Jennifer Chen, editor of *The Peak*

A personal confrontation with the preense volatility of memory, Chan's story grasps the emotions, effectively such that it necessitates intense, personal reflection. Presented to readers is the sum of Chan's personal life-circle, an ellipse of memories that recalls a Singaporean childhood cast between infinite possibility, and finite certainty.

—Dr Adam Staley Groves, Lecturer and Fellow at Tembusu College, NUS

We are stars in the immeasurable heavens, at once living and dying. This memoir wrenches and warms the heart, weaving reminiscences of the author's growing up years with the harrowing superventions of terminal illness and inescapable, tragic loss. Chan’s writing is assured and intuitive and her prose is well-honed. As I immersed myself in her story, her intimate companions hope, despair, faith, fear, sorrow and joy accompanied me to the bitter-sweet conclusion.

—Aaron Lee, writer-poet, co-founder of Laniakea Culture Collective

The

Magic

Circle

Charmaine
Chan

The Magic Circle
© Charmaine Chan, 2017

ISBN 978-981-11-3996-3

Published under the imprint Ethos Books
by Pagesetters Services Pte Ltd
#06-131 Midview City
28 Sin Ming Lane
Singapore 573972
www.ethosbooks.com.sg
www.facebook.com/ethosbooks

with the support of



The publisher reserves all rights to this title.
Except for the quotation of short passages for the purpose of criticism and review, no part
of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any
form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise,
without the prior written permission of the publisher.

Cover design by Maliah Zubir
Layout and design by Word Image Pte Ltd
Printed by Markono Print Media Pte Ltd

1 2 3 4 5 6 21 20 19 18 17

First published under this imprint in 2017

Typeface: Crimson
Material: 70gsm Prima Antique Cream Bulk 2.0

National Library Board, Singapore Cataloguing-in-Publication Data

Names: Chan, Charmaine.
Title: The magic circle / Charmaine Chan.
Description: Singapore : Ethos Books, [2017]
Identifiers: OCN 1000472646 | 978-981-11-3996-3 (paperback)
Subjects: LCSH: Bereavement--Singapore. | Sisters--Singapore--Biography. |
Cancer--Patients--Family relationships. | Chan, Charmaine--Family.
Classification: DDC 306.87092--dc23

For my niece Yazmin, and my sister, Elaine,
who in the end was the only one
with the power to push me into doing what I was born to do

Prologue

This story starts from the very beginning, as all the best fairy tales do, with “Once upon a time...”

Once upon a time, there lived a king in a faraway land. His lovely queen had presented him with three daughters, each one more special than the last.

At each birth, the Good Fairy had stood by with her magic wand and waved it over the child. At the first birth, she said, “She will be intelligent and physically talented—everything she turns her hand to, she will do well. She will possess a special kind of charisma. Everyone who knows her will love her as if caught up in a spell.”

At the second birth, the Fairy said, “She will be blessed with an extraordinary beauty and a rare and personal charm. But most of all, she will always be lit from within by a passion for life, so strong it will shine out of her like a living flame.”

At the third birth, she said, “This one I will give something rarer and truer than intelligence—she will have the wisdom of the sages and possess an ocean of dreams. I bequeath upon her the soul of a poet, the ability to make words sing, and the eternal spellbinding magic of true storytelling.”

The queen produced no more children, and the Good Fairy was relieved.

At least, that's how I like to mythologise my childhood. I'd always been thrilled by the fact that I was from a family with three daughters. I'd always felt special because we were *three sisters*, the magic combination in most fairy tales, myths and legends. How could I not see myself playing a part in a bigger story? A story that I couldn't identify as yet but could somehow sense unfolding around me, as events beyond our control unfurled through the years.

In A.S. Byatt's *Possession*, there is a retelling of the fairy tale of Childe Rolande, the hero who ventures far and wide to search for the cure to his father's illness. During his adventure, he meets three beautiful women, who each offer him very different things. The first one is the essence of gold, and offers him all the bright things of the earth. The second is a shimmering spirit of silver, who appeals to all the secret desires of his heart. The third he is least attracted to. She is a subtle shadow but only she offers the precious herb that will guarantee his father's recovery. "And you know, and I know, do we not dear children, that he must always choose this last," Byatt writes. "For wisdom in all tales tells us this, and *the last sister is always the true choice, is she not?*"

And of course, I am the last sister. I am the youngest.

I am Cassandra, the oracle, the seer with no power, the guardian of family history.

I am Beauty, who wanted a rose instead of rich gifts.

The Magic Circle

I am the humble bronze casket, the one that holds the right answer.

I am true.

I am brave.

I am Cordelia, the only one who dared speak the truth.

And this is my story.

O

Here is how my sister falls ill.

The disease first makes its appearance in May 2005. At the time, the world was doing its own thing—Michael Jackson was facing molestation charges and Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger had just been elected Pope Benedict XVI. It was just a few months before Hurricane Katrina would smash into New Orleans, decimating the city and much of the surrounding region.

When the story opens, my family was scattered across the world. My eldest sister Lorraine was living in the United States, a country she had called home for the past fifteen years. Elaine was in New Zealand, where she'd lived for twenty years. She'd married a New Zealander, had a daughter and was working for Air New Zealand. My mother was in New Zealand, having moved there only a few years ago to help out with Elaine's toddler daughter. My dad, who'd moved with my mother only to discover that he didn't much like the country, had promptly moved back to Singapore, where I was living.

It was that year that Elaine discovered she had cancer of the bile duct, otherwise known as cholangiocarcinoma. It was a cancer that was as rare as it was aggressive, described often as “lethal” and “incurable”. The very first symptoms appeared

in a dramatic fashion—she collapsed on a plane on a working trip en route to Los Angeles in May 2005. The doctors in the States ran a battery of tests on her and discovered two cysts in her bile duct—a congenital defect that was usually discovered in childhood and removed. But she had had no symptoms and the thing had grown inside her, malevolently, undisturbed.

When she returned to New Zealand, they performed extensive surgery on her, reorganising most of her major organs in a procedure known as a Whipple, removing not only her bile duct, but also her gall bladder, part of her pancreas and part of her liver. That was in mid-June.

In July, another blow—they had analysed the tissue they had cut out of her and discovered it was cancerous. Not only was it cancer, it was Stage 3 cancer.

She began chemotherapy in August.

By November, the cancer had spread to her liver and lungs.

At the end of January 2006, she collapsed on the steps of the hospital as she ascended for a chemo session. Family converged, flying in from the US, Singapore, Hong Kong, Melbourne and Sydney. She stayed in hospital for almost a month before they released her, letting her go home in March.

A single agonised promise, extracted from me. “I won’t let Yazmin forget you.”

She died in April. It had been nine months from diagnosis to death.

She was 36.

PART ONE

1

You've always been a bit of a smart aleck—the kind who excelled at Trivial Pursuit, Cranium and Quiz Night, the kind who could cite weird facts that nobody else knew, let alone cared about. For some reason, names lodged easily within your head—the most obscure Russian figure skaters, East German swimmers, English footballers—you could reel them all off with a snap of your fingers. Celebrity culture was a breeze and song lyrics were even easier—you could sing along perfectly to songs you hadn't heard in years, even the fiendishly difficult ones that most people only knew the chorus to.

As you entered your teens and progressed into university, you started to realise how valuable this memory of yours was going to be. It was the only reason you passed your Chinese exams, feverishly memorising essays, proverbs and idioms—some of which you barely even understood—so that you could regurgitate them, word-perfect, at crunch time. English Literature was a piece of cake—huge chunks of plays and entire poems rolled effortlessly off your tongue. Your memory made studying law actually enjoyable—because the rules of court and case law were all at your fingertips, easily recalled, to be cited whenever the need arose.

It was only when you started to gain emotional maturity that the personal aspects of memory started to crystallise. That moment when you sat with a boyfriend and his old school buddies, listening to them reminisce about the old days. The pain you felt, hope shredding, as you listened to a boy you loved telling you that he was haunted by the memory of someone else.

Still, you are lucky that many of your memories are good ones. It has become something of a habit for you to revisit them, taking them out like jewels for a good polish once in a while, before storing them away safely once again. To you, memories are like living things, kept alive by sharing and talking about them, so that they can breathe, resuming shape and colour in your consciousness. You have become the family historian, the one who takes delight in rescuing neglected remnants of the past from the outer edges of collective memory amid cries of, “How on earth do you remember all this?”

Funny how the making of memories itself is such a casual thing when the result, a shared memory, is intimate, unchangeable and—if valued—utterly compelling. Powerful enough to exclude others, powerful enough to wreak havoc and certainly powerful enough to hold us in thrall through the years.

So what happens to an *unshared* memory? What happens when the person who features the most, your partner in crime and time, so to speak, is about to leave you, to become but a memory herself?

What will become of you, left behind, with no one to turn to laughingly to say, “Do you remember?” With no one to add

the little details, to fill in the blanks, and at the end of it all, to reassure you that it all really happened as you recall.

Will doubt start to creep in? “Maybe it didn’t happen exactly as I remembered it.” “Maybe it was a figment of my imagination.” “Maybe I made it all up, maybe I read it in a book or watched it in a movie instead.” Might the day come when you wonder if such a moment *ever existed at all*?

Unless of course, you write everything down. Scribble these shared memories feverishly as you travel the distance between Hong Kong and Auckland. Pushing at the limits of your memory, dredging, sifting, and cherry-picking to see what jewel you can come up with to share with your sister. You think it might help her while away the interminable hours in bed, amuse her while she lies bored and listless on her hospital pillows.

But in a million years you could never have dreamed of how precious this exercise would turn out to be for the both of you. You could never have guessed at the eagerness of her response, the way her eyes would light up in her thin face at a particularly fond memory as you both tumble back in time, back to somewhere without pain or suffering.

So you talk and laugh, and she grips your hand and says, “Yes! We were crazy!” or “I’d forgotten all about that...” or “It’s funny to think I loved it so much. Couldn’t bear the thought of throwing it away even though it had become so disgusting!” with a wrinkle of her nose.

And you have never been more grateful for your memory, sitting with your sister by her bedside during those long afternoons in the last few months of her life.

You realise that this will be your biggest job here—to make those sterile hospital walls and her present harsh realities melt away through the power of your words and the equally strong power of your memories. Who would have known that that hastily scrawled list would acquire such poignancy and resonance?

You will hold off her pain, speak until you have no voice, speak until you run out of words, stave off the spectre of Death himself if you have to. You will enclose her in a soft web with the only magic you know, with memory and words and music, with the songs you used to sing, the games you used to play, foods you used to eat, things you used to do, people you used to know... Conjuring up the past and its attendant glories, making it all shimmering and new again for her, unfurling it before her very eyes, and send it rippling out across the room like a glorious carpet. This then will be your last gift to her, the only thing left you can give her that can have any meaning.

It starts with three simple words. “Do you remember...?”



“Do you remember how disappointed Leigh and I would be when you got to the age where you only wanted to build Lego houses for us, but not play with them?”

ABOUT ETHOS BOOKS

Giving voice to emerging and exciting writers from diverse backgrounds, we help foster an environment in which literature and the arts not only survive, but thrive.

That's why our authors and their ideas come first. By taking a collaborative approach to publishing, we bring each author's voice and vision to fruition.

We are always open to new ideas: different ways of working and fresh ways of delivering the unparalleled satisfaction only a good book can bring.

Established in 1997, Ethos Books, an imprint of Pagesetters Services Pte Ltd, aims to create books that capture the spirit of a people and reflect the ethos of our changing times.

Visit us at www.ethosbooks.com.sg

