

Some Enchanted Evening

by John K. Nixon

It was my good friend Phil Jones who introduced me to the McGill Outing Club. We were both students at McGill University. The club was dedicated to outdoor activities, including hikes and other healthful pursuits, in the countryside around Montreal. It was late October, 1958, and the club had organized a Halloween weekend at its clubhouse in Shawbridge, in the Laurentian hills north of the city. A bus had been chartered to transport the students to and from the clubhouse.

About 4 p.m. on the Friday afternoon, I found myself queuing to board the bus, clutching an overnight bag and looking for faces that I might recognize among the waiting throng. Glancing behind me I spotted a diminutive figure standing in the queue, an attractive oriental girl who looked to be about 16 years old. I made a mental note of her and secretly hoped that I would see her again during the coming weekend. After boarding the bus I was curious to find out where she would be sitting, but, with the crush of students and distracted by conversation with my seatmate, I saw no more of her during the hour or so bus ride to Shawbridge, nor after disembarking at our destination.

A few select students had beds reserved on the upper floor of the small clubhouse, while the rest of us had rooms reserved in a nearby motel and small guest houses in the village. After dispersing to our various points of accommodation to deposit our bags and to freshen up, we all assembled back at the clubhouse, where, as I recall, victuals and refreshments had been prepared. A crackling wood fire had been lit in the generous living room fireplace and, by 7:30 p.m. or so, some 40 or 50 students had congregated in this one room to warm themselves against the evening chill, after rearranging the furniture around the perimeter of the room. The inevitable beer began

to flow and some students tried half-heartedly to initiate a singsong, with limited success. Gradually the opening moves of the time-honoured mating game were being enacted among the assembled throng, most of whom were huddled cross-legged on the floor, cheek by jowl as it were.

I had been fortunate to find a place on a sofa in one corner of the room, from which I had a commanding view of the scene before me. I felt somewhat out of place, as I knew only a handful of other students present, and none too well. Suddenly I became aware that someone was looking at me from the other side of the room. I peered through the fog of cigarette smoke and then recognized the smiling face and form of the small oriental girl I had spotted earlier in the bus queue. She was sitting on the far side of the room with her back to a piano. I grinned back awkwardly, then lowered my gaze for a few seconds. Looking up again, I saw that she was still looking directly at me. Her smile had broadened revealing a perfect set of gleaming white teeth.

Before I knew it, I had risen from my seat and began a slow laborious journey across the room, my path blocked by numerous bodies in various postures on the floor. It seemed ages before I had clambered over and around a sea of arms and legs to arrive at her side. Later I heard that my move had not gone unobserved and word had spread quickly to “Block Nixon!”

Amazed by my audacity, I finally stood before her, feeling somewhat apprehensive. She smiled up at me and, before I could open my mouth, asked: “Do you play the piano?” This caught me completely off guard! As I had stumbled across the room, desperately racking my brain for a suitable conversational opener and imagining various

potential initiating scenarios, it had never occurred to me that she might speak first! I mumbled something like, “No, do you?” Then, before I could stop myself, all of the questions that I had been silently rehearsing came pouring out in a continuous stream, each question popping out before its predecessor had even been answered. “Do you like music? What kind of music? Do you read books? Do you like poetry? Do you enjoy travelling?...” In retrospect, it was a virtuoso performance in the art of seduction! I did not quite plan it that way; in fact, once I was launched, some kind of death wish seemed to possess me. If I was going to fail, I might as well go down with all guns blazing!

The effect was electrifying. This scintillating young beauty was staring at me entranced. At least, that was how I construed her wide-eyed look. In fact she was trying to make sense of this peculiar stranger, who was quite unlike any other young man she had met! After the initial flush of confusion, we both visibly relaxed and before long I learned more about my newfound friend.

Her name was Yuni and she had arrived in Canada from Indonesia less than two months earlier on a Colombo Plan scholarship. She was to spend two years at McGill studying geology and this was her first trip outside the country of her birth. As we chatted, I was impressed by her fluent command of English and her obvious intelligence. She in turn expressed surprise that I had heard of Indonesia, could find it on a map and knew that it had been the former Dutch East Indies, facts which few other Canadians she had met had known. When I assured her that I was familiar with nasi goreng and sambal and other Indonesian delicacies, she appeared visibly impressed. Later she confided that that evening she had short-listed three promising young men among the assembled students. By this stage in our conversation, I had apparently moved into the number one spot!

By ten o’clock, I was thoroughly bewitched by this tropical enchantress, with skin the colour of cinnamon, dark eyes that sparkled as she laughed and a flashing smile that illuminated her face and all around her. When she indicated that she was tired and ready to return to her guesthouse, I gallantly volunteered to walk her back, an offer that she hesitantly accepted. Outside, the brisk night air



provided welcome relief after the fetid smoke-filled clubhouse. As we trudged together under a starlit sky, I realized just how tiny she was—almost a foot shorter than me. I felt curiously lightheaded, scarcely believing what was happening. Arriving outside her guesthouse, we chatted briefly, and then on impulse I stooped to kiss her forehead. Before I could complete the manoeuvre, a warning forefinger appeared and laid itself along my nose. A small voice whispered “not yet,” as she turned to enter the front door.

The rest of the weekend is something of a blur in my memory. The next day we strolled together along wooded trails beside frozen lakes and learned more about each other’s background, family history, interests and preferences. It was a clear crisp day and the trees were mantled in autumnal red and gold. All of this was new to Yuni and she exclaimed in childlike wonder as she picked up a shard of ice from a frozen puddle beside the trail. She had never seen ice before outside a refrigerator! By the time we had returned to Montreal on the Sunday evening, I was besotted beyond reason by this beautiful exotic creature who had deigned to be my friend! So began a friendship that developed into a



love affair, culminating in our Montreal wedding less than two years later. The relationship would endure for more than forty-five years, until her untimely death in 2004, producing two children and six adorable grandchildren.

In June, 1997, Yuni and I, with our daughter and her new husband, drove from Montreal for a day in the Laurentians. On impulse we decided to see if we could find the magical place where it all began. A new Laurentian autoroute had been constructed since our university days and nowhere on the map could we find Shawbridge. It transpired that Shawbridge had merged with the neighbouring village of Prevost and the old anglophone name of Shawbridge had disappeared. After five minutes of touring the narrow lanes around the village, we stumbled on a two-storey building with a steep pitched roof, grey stucco walls, and doors and windows outlined in bright red and white paint. At the back of the house a prominent white sign proclaimed “McGill Outing Club” in red lettering.

As our daughter looked on in amusement, Yuni and I approached the building and peered through the windows into a darkened living room. I could make out the smoke-smudged brick fireplace on the opposite wall surrounded by dark wood paneling on which hung several paintings of Canadian mountain scenery. To the left of the fireplace, a door gave access to the kitchen area, just as I remembered. Instinctively I peered to the right, seeking the sofa on which I had sat that fateful night, and to the left in search of the piano. Some chairs had



The photo (overleaf) of my bride-to-be, Yuni, was taken in Shawbridge, QC, just two months after our first auspicious meeting. Photos above are from December, 1961, in Yuni's home town, Yogyakarta. We married in Montreal, June, 1960, but celebrated a delayed reception in Indonesia in December for the benefit of Yuni's family. For the reception we both dressed in traditional Javanese dress. Above left photo: Yuni's mother is on the far left with her uncle on the right.

been stacked against the walls but no sign could I discern of sofa or piano, those silent witnesses to a love story that began that enchanted evening almost forty years previously, with smiles exchanged between two strangers across a crowded room.

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