

PAN MAGIC

A Short Story By Willi Chen

MILTON LYONS brought the rubber-tipped sticks against his chest with a flashing gesture of pride, quickly struck his tenor pan with skill—and the musical notes sailed out of the makeshift tent like oiled gems of delight. Ringing sounds, tingling the nerves, harmonious melody coursing through the air.

For months, a gaunt broody Lyons stood before his steel pan and with spontaneity, pounded out the musical notes, sounds emitting a marvellous rhythm he had to coordinate, knowing full well that the subtle tones must be kept low-keyed to support his accentuated high octaves booming with staccato emphasis. A papered window opened at the side of the one room rickety shack and Wendy looked out. She was a shadow in ink; a ghostly apparition as if out of sleep, with frazzled hair, she was looking at her husband entangled in his own despair with his banded forearms, throbbing chest, his quick hands creating a blur in the feeblelight, from the flickering flambeau casting shadows. "Milton, Julie and Jenny ent have no passage. You could spare a small change?" Wendy spoke at the window.

"Ah buy tampee with meh last money" Lyons replied. He stopped playing on his pan and dropped his hands into his pockets. After much time his hand surfaced with coins.

"This is all ah have. Take it - Thirty two cents."

"Dat can't even buy channa. Is passage moneyah want. And is stale bake them chirren taking to school tomorrow."

"Well, leh them stay home, where I could be near them. I never went to school. I wash car and car parts and sell bottle in my day"?

"Doh be chupid. Exams coming and them chirren doing good."

"Well, sell them two common fowl in the yard. What you want me to do"?

"You go sell your neighbour fowl to send yuh chirren to school?" Wendy asked.

Lyons looked sternly at his wife and picked up his sticks. Once more he stoked his pan into pulsing resonance. For a moment his music took him to a high level of coherence, a cogency of multi-toned passages he had longed to produce. A fleeting moment of success. He had striven to get these tonal notes right, with constant practice and had resolved to strike his left stick with the right force, at the right moment, in unison, to achieve the fluidity, the compromising vibrations, so elusively complex and dexterously difficult.

With Wendy's haunting voice still on his mind he stopped his pan playing and approached the table for a drink of water, looked up the road where the Star Brite Steelband was rehearsing. He recognised the vibrant energy the players displayed, as the base drums dispensed a riotous rumbling of discordance.



He wanted to compete in the solo tenor pan category. The first prize money was surprisingly generous. The new government had revised the policy for the Carnival Celebrations. The steelbands had various prizes to compete for, as did the Parade of Carnival bands, the Calypso King and Queen, and the Chutney Soca champs—two million dollar 1st prizes, other monetary prizes worth thousands of dollars.

Lyons knew he had to face the great Carnival stalwarts of the city, Mas and pan players from the many camps, who had spent their whole lives focused on the National Festival. As a poor Marabella handy man-pan beater, he knew the odds were great, but he wanted the name 'Marabella' to appear on the billboards. To bring honour to Wendy and his daughters.

He sat on the upturned bucket and looked at his desolate yard, holding his two steel pan sticks in his hands, touching his cheeks. His mind was far away, to the lighted platform, imagining himself standing centre stage before the crowded pavilion.

But the pain in his forearms and elbows had returned. The arthritic aches, the sudden muscular seizures that at times moved to his shoulders. A feeble Wendy appeared, carved in ebony, her homemade loose gown touching her toes, with a saucer and two biscuits and a sucrier fig. He looked up and was thankful. Always at his side, this woman he met across the Dry River had been more than a life companion. She bore him two daughters and was so much endeared to both. She worked nights at a sidewalk food stall as Milton's illness had prevented him from working.

As the day arrived for the Pan Solo competition, Lyons took his steel pan with him. Wendy walked at his side with the support stands. He wanted his daughters to come. Wendy kissed him on his cheeks amongst hundreds of people seated around the stage, ablaze with the hovering panoply of stage lights. The air was alive with colour from the overhead high wattage bulbs to-

gether with the sheen from multi-coloured banners.

Music kept the crowd alive, the rising crescendo of steel drums reverberating across the stands, up the night sky. Lyons kept his banded arms close to his chest. Fever heated up his body but he was determined. His inkwell eyes were deeply sad. This was a do or die moment. He thought of Julie and Jenny left in the care of their neighbour. And his life flit before him: the leaking roof, the broken wash tub, the bare household, devoid of furniture and basic amenities, the open top bath enclosure in the yard, the borrowed one-burner stove, the kitchen, empty of food stuffs. Then he felt the slow throbbing pain along his arm and wrists. Wendy realised something was wrong she felt his chest, clasped his hands and then looked into his eyes. What could transpire between husband and wife? What could have been the facts which only they both knew? Whatever, Lyons straightened himself and breathed in the cold air. His hands tightened on his pan sticks, a fierce glow came out his eyes. But he never spoke. And then he heard his name called.

In a concert, years ago in the Savannah grounds, Lyons played to a large crowd. He was called twice to repeat his performance. And whenever asked how he displayed such skill in playing his tunes on his pan, he said that it was his magic pan, which he had painstakingly tuned and cherished, allowing no one to touch the instrument. And this was how his pan was called, magic pan—known for its sounds, the haunting strains of melodies that touched the many hearts around. Lyons always referred to himself and his pan, commenting that it was pan magic that caused so much musical delight to all his friends and audiences holding them into rapture.

"Milton Lyons, the last PanMan from Marabella."? Lyons walked up to the stage and placed his tenor pan on the support stand. He felt the heat and the glare of the stage lights on his shoulders. In the glare he stood alone in his open-neck white polo shirt he had borrowed from a friend, and which Wendy had spent a whole

day scrubbing in her almost waterless tub. In his banded forearms—and painful elbows, he felt an urgency he never experienced before.

On this stage, he looked down on the large audience, awakened by the glowing thrill of the moment, as his wrists curled and twisted and he leant forward, stood back, and under his blazing whirring sticks, the tenor pan erupted in an uproar of musical splendour of thrilling scales. But he was nervous. He was sweating. The night air failed to cool the heat enrapturing his body.

He held his two sticks with a confidence he had never experienced before. This was a call to duty, a desire that came out of his tormented soul and the silvery notes of musical tones wafted out over the heads of the huge crowd. Thrilling, captivating, hauntingly reminiscent of the back in times melodies, "Smoke gets in your eyes", "The Panman's Rhapsody," the Spanish tunes, Bella Bella Marie" and "Comanchero".

His face was wet as he stood in command and his limbering arms moved over his pan with expert adroitness. His heart swelled with joy, the temporary pain halted by the precious octaves of music he was dispensing through the magical skill he had in complete control with himself. And then it was over, - a resounding climax of his superb panmanship.

He bowed to tumultuous, continuous applause, turned to go out, but felt the pain again strong on his arms that travelled across to his chest. He felt someone hold on to his arms, taking him away from his pan. Dizzy, he could hardly stand. They took him backstage.

He was leaning against the stage wings and heard, felt people around him. He had fainted, having expended his energy under the hot stage lights. And when he opened his eyes lying on the floor, Wendy was hugging him, speaking to him with her left hand under his head, her right hand fanning him excitedly, with an envelope that came from the judges. She spoke above the uproar of continuous applause, "Milti, you woi boy, you beat them. All ah dem. \$1,000, we rich now!" She opened the envelope and showed him.

Then, he smiled, his eyes lit up and his body convulsed, clutching the envelope in a fierce grasp that made Wendy increasingly concerned. He remembered the MC introducing him as the Last Panman. She tried taking the envelope from him. To no avail. In a low, whimpering voice he managed to say, "For Julie and Jenny, take care." She hugged him afresh, whispered in his ear but he remained with a frozen smile, saying nothing. She shook him on his shoulders, looked into his unblinking, unseeing eyes, - then she clutched her heart and screamed.

Her shrill voice screeched into a faraway mournful note echoing across the pavilion stands, over the crowds and losing itself in the cool paths of passing night winds.