

On a sunny late June 1962 morning Mom directed me to return to school for my cordovan oxfords. I had forgotten to change into them on the last day of school, and wore my black indoor uniform loafers home on the bus. "Go get them!" she shouted. I was ten at the finish of fifth grade, a cautious child. To leave Washington Heights, our military housing complex, alone, on foot, was a daunting prospect. But I obeyed Mom and hiked to the main gate carrying nothing, not even my dependent's identification card. A Japanese guard waved 'bye,' asked no questions as I entered Tokyo streets, to feel my way to Sacred Heart campus.

Beyond the sentry at my left was Meiji Park. I gathered my recollection of the school bus route, past the commuter rail station, and into the modern business district of Shibuya. Perhaps it was a Monday—maybe I'd been out of school a week—the sidewalks filled with boys in school uniform shirts and jackets, businessmen, department store shoppers in kimonos or skirts and blouses, pedestrians young and elderly; people I had come to trust during the first year my Air Force family lived in Japan.

City bustle around me, I rested briefly against a building, my head in a whirl. I exchanged smiles and bows, then made my way across a wide, busy intersection among the throng. With vague memory of the way, I began to ascend a narrow street into Hiroo, where homes rested along the road to my destination. Relieved to see the massive tori gate on my right, I walked under it and entered Sacred Heart school grounds.

My mission urgent, I turned up the stone driveway to the main building. Free of my uniform navy jumper and white blouse, and instead wearing sneakers, summer shirt and shorts, I felt out of place. Up the marble steps and into the halls of my all-girls school, I passed a few nuns, but they didn't seem to notice me. In the cloakroom, that place where the daily business of shoe change and outerwear hanging was conducted under the demands of silence, I pulled the culprit shoes from my cubby. Without hesitation, I returned to the hall and exited into the drive, past the silent tea house and stone lantern, then under the tori—but what next? I should have turned left to descend through Hiroo, but did I?

I must have wandered; have no recollection of how long, or how I ended up in the village of Shinjuku opposite Washington Heights, the other side of Meiji Park. But when I found myself in front of a familiar shop, face to face with my American playmate, Kathy, and her mother, Mrs. Meadow, I was relieved.

"How did you get here? Are you alone?" Mrs. Meadow looked concerned. Kathy smiled in surprised.

I was tired, and gave in to self-pity. "My mother made me walk to school for my shoes." I clutched them in my arms.

Mrs. Meadow, always friendly when I played with Kathy in their home, didn't smile this time, but pointed to her car. "You can ride home with us." I gladly accepted her offer of a small icy bottle of Pepsi, and rolled into the backseat of her Chevy.

I let the front screen door slam behind me, and held the shoes out to my mother. "Mrs. Meadow brought me home," I told her, but said nothing about the journey.

"Put them in your closet," was all I recall she said. She must have been relieved to see me, but I'll never know.

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