

MARTIN'S AT MIDNIGHT

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They called him the Texan. Subir Roy was tough and rash and daring, rather unlike the average middle-class Bengali boy. A big-built young man with strong hands, whenever he met an old friend, he greeted him with a resounding thump on the back that left the poor fellow wincing in pain. After graduation, he decided not to pursue studies any more, and joined his father's business. But the strong, extravagant man never remained confined to the office. He was often seen in the coffee house hanging out with his old buddies. Boisterous and large-hearted, Subir would always pick up the bills for the whole table. The jovial, generous man was popular among us. Sometimes he took out his father's car and drove recklessly through crowded streets. If you happened to be in the passenger seat, you could see the speedometer needle touching 80. Fearing for life, friends seldom accepted his offers for a lift. But Subir would laugh dismissively and drive like mad, enjoying the frowns and tense moments of his friends.

To us he seemed to be having a carefree life, enjoying himself thoroughly. His mother had died when he was very young. His

father had many businesses – automobile spares, electrical appliances and so on. Subir went to the office and did his work – clearing files, taking meetings, phoning up clients and chasing orders. But then, all of a sudden he would simply disappear without telling anyone anything, for going to a movie, or a bar in Park Street or pick up a friend and drive off to Diamond Harbour where the Hooghly is wide and turbulent. His father knew he was temperamental and didn't let it bother him too much. He had other assistants to manage things. The old man was a non-interfering type. Since his wife's death, he had become quiet and a bit stoical. He hardly worried about his younger son, let alone asked him where he had been. Perhaps he knew the mettle his son was made of and accepted him the way he was. Perhaps he knew the futility of trying to mould his son.

But nothing remains the same forever. Things began to happen in Subir's life too. One Sunday, he had gone on a picnic out of town. After a lot of booze and banter that went on till late in the evening, he was on his way home. He was driving through the Wellesley area when he noticed Martin's Bar. Now, Martin's was not a very respectable watering hole. Cheaper than most other bars in town, it was the haunt of the shipboys from the port and other riffraff. Subir had heard about it but never been there. On a high after the picnic in an orchard outside the city, he was now in a mood to explore the joint.

Not that he hadn't seen such seedy bars before. Martin's was not his kind of place, past its prime long ago. Well, if it had seen such good days at all, that is. The furniture was quite ordinary. In a corner, there was a band trying its best to cheer up a motley crowd. The singer was belting out a raucous rock-n-roll number and the drummer, who was probably drunk, rattled on. A constant buzz rose from the crowd. A thick haze of cigarette smoke hung in

the air. The sailors whistled, screamed and thumped the tables. Subir shared a table for two in a corner with another man who occasionally laughed out loud for no visible reason, but he never spoke to anyone.

Subir noticed the girls sitting with the sailors at some tables. Behind the bandstand, there was a door which often swung open to let the girls go out or come in. Yes, he had heard that Martin's was a pick-up joint. He kept watching the scene with interest. A girl left a table and started making rounds of the other tables. She came to his table as well and flashed a smile but Subir was not in the right mood. He didn't respond. However, he noticed that she was fair, frail-looking and not unpleasant to look at. She appeared very young, barely twenty. Evidently an Anglo-Indian. The band singer was tired and replaced by a second man. He tried to change the mood by crooning a soft, romantic number which was a hit in those days:

Roses remind me of Rio
Rio reminds me of you
Once in a garden fiesta
You stole the rose that I threw...

But he had asked for trouble. The crowd was in no mood for such sweet romance. The sailors shouted him down by raising a chorus of 'Shove it' and 'Ya ya' and 'Buzz off'. So the man switched reluctantly on to a hot number, 'Baby, don't step on my blue suede shoes...' and there were cheers and table-thumping in approval. Everybody was happy.

Back to his busy, business routine, Subir still thought of the frail, fair-skinned girl in an empty moment. Unknowingly the scene came back – she coming to his table, flashing a coquettish smile.

He was not the sort to fall for someone just like that, not a sentimental fool. But there was something about the girl that pulled him all the time, made him recall her. A few weeks later, he happened to be passing by Martin's at about 1:30 in the afternoon. On an impulse, he got off the taxi and went in.

The scene was a sharp contrast to that raunchy night. There was not a single customer. No band, no noise. The silence of the deserted bar stressed its dilapidation all the more. A couple of bearers lounged here and there as they had no work to do. Martin's was the sort of place where business peaked late evening and turned riotous towards midnight. Nobody had heard of time restrictions in those days. During daytime, there were few visitors though the bar opened at 1 o'clock. The thirsty ones began to arrive in ones and twos well after four.

He looked around and then in a semi-dark corner, saw a girl sitting at a table, her head on her arms. He ordered a beer and looked back at her. Then he noticed that she had actually hid her face in her hands, and her body was shaking uncontrollably. She was crying; her attempt to hide her personal misery making it all the more poignant. Once she raised her head and dabbed at her eyes with a hanky, but then put her head down again. Was it the girl with the provocative smile? Subir was not sure. He sipped his beer and thought. If it was her, why was she crying? Another man would have wiped the whole thing off his mind without doing anything more about it; but not Subir. *What the hell! I must find out.* He picked up his glass and walked across to her table.

She quickly wiped the tears and flashed a smile, as she always did at the hint of a client. Yes, it was the same girl with a smile. He offered her a beer which she gladly accepted. Then another. After the second glass, she wanted to know whether he would take her

out and quoted her rates for an evening and a whole night. Subir took her out and stayed with her till eleven. He paid her well and held her hands warmly. 'Why were you crying?'

To begin with, she hesitated, reluctant to go into her own story. Clients are often curious but what's the point of telling them? But Subir wouldn't let it go. However, what she told him was nothing very extraordinary. Most bar girls have more or less the same story to tell. She was Linda Ferris. She lived in a dingy apartment in a back lane of Wellesley. Both parents dead, she lived with an aging aunt who wanted her to work and earn. Linda had had no good schooling, had done no technical course, in short no skills. She had joined Martin's, helped by a woman in the neighbourhood, having found nothing better. She was one of the bar girls who 'entertained' customers at the tables and, preferably, by going out with them. Some of her clients were nasty and kinky but she had no choice. A large part of what she earned had to go to Martin's and the manager was furious if the amount was not up to his liking. Then she quietly wept again.

This was a situation Subir had no idea about, something he had never handled before. It was quite out of sync with his world of fun, fast driving, booze, and couldn't-care-less attitude. But he felt a strong urge, so far unknown to him, to do something for this Anglo-Indian bar girl. He went back to Martin's and met her three times within a week. Then he made up his mind. He was not going to let Linda rot in that vicious hole, to be passed around by those scoundrels from the ships. He would take her away, give her a new life, a real home. She was a nice, sweet girl who didn't deserve the life she was living. By no means.

Would he marry her? Of course he would. But marriage meant witnesses, registration and a whole lot of nonsense. Word would soon get around that he was marrying an Anglo-Indian bar girl. Tongues would wag. No, he didn't need all that. They

would travel together and live like husband and wife wherever they went.

Linda was not overenthusiastic in the beginning, but the prospect of having a husband and home was too alluring, especially for someone in her situation. He had a friend in Mozambique who would fix things for them. He was a good soul and would keep his secret. As for Kolkata, nobody had to know anything. Not even his father. None of his friends.

So they slipped away to Mozambique, quietly, surreptitiously. The first year was alright. His friend was an exporter of minerals to different countries, and was doing fairly well. He gave Subir a reasonably good salary and a place to live. But gradually things began to sour. The friend's business ran into difficulties due to political turmoil in that country. Profits fell drastically. He had to cut down on his expenses and retrench several employees. Subir had to take a salary cut which made things difficult for them. Linda was not qualified enough for any job but tried to help out by working as a babysitter with an Australian family, but that was not much of a help.

At home, things began to get tough. Subir was not the type to keep his cool in a difficult situation and not used to not getting things he wanted. Besides, he had a bad temper, would get furious at the slightest provocation. In such moments he reminded Linda of the manager at Martin's. As often happens with young couples who make huge decisions on an impulse, she now began to suspect whether she had been right in striking out into the unknown with Subir. In her lonely moments, sometimes she felt nostalgic about Kolkata despite the poverty and misery she had suffered over there. Martin's was not a happy memory, but some other moments came back. The occasional trip to Lighthouse to see an Elvis Presley

movie. Every visit to the fashionable theatre was an event. She also remembered the strains of guitar floating in the evening air from the large apartment building behind theirs where a guitarist lived. He played in the Grand, the city's iconic hotel. And of course, Bow Barracks during Christmas when the Anglo-Indian community had a big bash. Illuminated brilliantly and decked up with flowers, the place captured the Yuletide spirit. There was so much of wonderful music and dancing. Once Jerry Bing, the crooner from the Great Eastern Hotel, came and sang 'When the swallows come back to Capistrano...' There were, of course, nights when she and her aunt had only a couple of beef rolls for dinner until she joined Martin's which improved things somewhat, though not too much. She had to stay out at night with clients and that raised eyebrows and carping remarks from some of the neighbourhood women, but there was nothing she could do about that.

But life with Subir didn't turn out to be what she had hoped for. His drinking had gone up in proportion to his declining income. He tried to add to his earnings by working elsewhere after duty hours which gave him fatigue and bursts of temper. They had to move into a smaller house which was cramped and cold. They began to have late-night fights which wrecked her mentally. She was only twenty-two and felt that things would never go well for her. Was this why she had left home and come this far? She grew bitter.

Things came to a head when Subir's friend told him he was going to wind up his business, and gave him a three-month notice. Subir should look out for another job, he said. In a country like Mozambique that wasn't going to be easy. That night, Subir came home dead drunk and called her a 'slut' and a 'pest'. A slut? Perhaps it hurt her all the more because she had been what she had been in Kolkata. It stung all the more. Subir's sympathy and his all-out bid to rescue her from Martin's had a lot of romance and

chivalry about it. But now that the sense of security had eluded them, all the romance and sense of sharing were evaporating.

She had met Tony Fraser, a Malaysian Christian from the West Indies, at the house where she used to go for babysitting. Tony liked her and sensed her frustration. He was on the last leg of his posting in Mozambique and would soon go back home to Jamaica. He invited her for coffee in the afternoons occasionally. She liked his ways but was hesitant to open up to him. But one day, after one of those fiery fights at home, she couldn't restrain herself anymore. As on that afternoon at Martin's, she put her head on the coffee table and cried.

Things moved fast after this. Tony said he loved her and wanted to take her home. To hell with her past and all that. Since her husband had called her a slut, he no longer had any moral authority over her. Wouldn't she come to Jamaica with him? She would love it over there. Bright sunshine, the roaring surf and the swaying palm groves. His mother badly wanted him to marry and settle down. She would love Linda.

Linda took time to decide. Was she going to make the same mistake twice? But did she have a choice? Subir was impossible to live with and life with him held no charm any more. There was no guarantee that things would improve making them happy again. Tony was a soft and mature person, not an impulsive bulldozer like Subir. What if she went back to Kolkata? But what did Kolkata hold for her? She wouldn't be able to find a decent job over there. All she could do was return to Martin's, ask for her old job and pick up the same trade. She shivered at the thought.

They left for Jamaica one morning. Just like that. Just like she had done while leaving Kolkata. Subir was adamant that no one

should know, not even his father. Nor did Linda bother to tell her aunt or anyone else in her street or at Martin's. She saw no point. Nor did she see a point this time round. Why invite arguments and complications?

Initially, Subir didn't know how to react. He looked for her everywhere and found no clue. The night passed and so did the day after. No Linda. Then he searched the wardrobe and found that all her clothes and things were gone. Finally, in a drawer, he found the ring he had given her. She used to wear it all the time. But here it was, and no Linda.

With fists clenched, he walked up and down the room. She couldn't do this to him. Where had she gone? She knew very few people here. Subir knew nothing about Tony. He simply had nothing to go on. Like his father back home when they had left. The old man had searched heaven and hell for him, but Subir knew nothing of it. Nor had he bothered to think of it.

He kept awake for two nights. Then he made up his mind. Now that she was gone and the job would be finished in a matter of days, Mozambique had nothing for him. He missed her. The more he thought of it, the more he missed her. But the damned impudence of it! Subir uncorked another bottle.

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His father looked at Subir with tired eyes. In the intervening three years, he had aged considerably. They sat face to face silently for some time. Then he asked in a tired voice, 'Where have you been?'

'Mozambique.'

'Didn't care to tell me?' His father looked out the window.

Subir remained silent. He wanted to know about his older brother, had not seen him since he stepped into the house.

‘Where’s Dada,’ Subir asked.

‘Canada. He has got married and settled there.’

They were silent again. Then his father heaved a sigh. ‘Go and take a shower,’ he said. ‘I ask the maid to serve you lunch.’

Subir walked through the large, old-fashioned house. It had several rooms. Subir noticed the thick layer of dust on the sofas. The window screens looked soiled and discoloured. Dust and cobwebs settled everywhere. Subir’s mother had died when he was in school, and now his older brother had settled in another part of the world. The house looked uncared for, neglected.

The old widower could not look after everything. Just a house, it’s no longer a home. Unconsciously, he deeply sighed.

He took rest for a couple of days before going back to his father’s office. The old man had told him nothing, but his eyes lit up when he sat on the chair across the desk. ‘Would you like to take a look at these files,’ he asked. Subir nodded. He felt embarrassed in the presence of his father. It was a new feeling for him because he had hardly ever felt embarrassed for anything he had done. But, what the hell! He was back and he would take things up where he had left off. Perhaps the old man needed him. Perhaps he needed help. The last three years were a bad dream. Both of them knew it was time to roll the dice once more.

He didn’t get back to his friends right away because a lot of explaining would have to be done. Where was he, what was he doing, why did he come back? And so on and so forth. All that could wait. He put his head down to work. Business deals and meetings kept him busy till late in the evening. One night, after dropping someone home rather late, he happened to be driving down Free School Street. The neon sign of Martin’s was glowing

as usual. That brought back a flood of memories. Linda... Subir jammed the brakes, got off and entered the bar.

It was nearly midnight. Stepping in, he stood for some time and surveyed the scene. Well, things were the same as before. The boisterous sailors, raucous band, clumsy bussers, the haze of smoke and the hookers. He ordered a beer and sat in a corner.

‘I wanna love you, I wanna kiss you...’ the band singer was crying hysterically. Subir recalled that on his first night here, the sailors had hooted down a singer for trying to sing something soft and romantic. He sipped his beer and tried to recollect the words of that song. It was nice though the rowdy sailors didn’t like it. He tried hard to remember the words. Roses. It was something about roses, wasn’t it? Then the words came back to him: ‘Roses remind me of Rio, Rio reminds me of you...’

For the first time in his life, Subir put his head on the table and cried. A clock chimed in the distance. It was midnight.

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