

Maureen

a short story

by

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Maureen

You couldn't say she was beautiful, the almost spherical head and pointy nose negating any possibility of that. But the large soft eyes that bestowed warmth and the delicate malleable mouth so capable of great expression that so readily induced the sensation of charm in its many forms gave her an attractiveness that few would deny. I was not one of that minority.

She was small - almost certainly under 5 foot. And although you could not see the form of her body or legs beneath the loose fitting khaki shirt and black full-length skirt of her uniform it was obvious from her speedy graceful movements that she was both fit and lithe.

We had first met when I flagged her down on the road outside of the Varkala railway station. I had quickly learned that taking a taxi from any Indian railway station was going to double even triple the fare. By walking just a few hundred yards it not only saved money but also endless hassle in regard to places to stay, for Indian taxi drives all seem to have uncles or cousins that just so happen to have the best hotel in town.

I had not noticed that the driver of the tuk-tuk was a woman, but on making this discovery my delight obviously registered across my face because she returned the favour in kind. Female tuk-tuk drivers are a rarity in India even today, but then, for me at least, an undiscovered species. She had been one of the first 10 to obtain a license in the state of Kerala and was the only one in this coastal tourist town.

As I got in she turned around and leaned on the backrest.

'Where you go' she enquired

Having just flown into Thiruvananthapuram from London I had decided that the 2-hour train journey to Varkala was well worth the added discomfit to my jet lag, as this was an excellent place to acclimatize, and the Bamboo House, high up on the cliff above the beach a quiet retreat.

Her disingenuous smile betrayed bad news 'You have not been for a long time, I think'.

'Not for several years.'

'You will find much has changed.'

'No Bamboo House?'

'All gone.'

'Do you know somewhere quiet away from the beach?'

Without further ado we were off. If I had expected that because of her sex I would not be subjected to the usual dicing with death, then I was wrong. We ducked and dived, weaved and wormed our way through the traffic until we arrived at the Palace Garden Hotel. This new hotel was set in the middle of a paddy field some 4-500 metres from the beach.

'It is run by a French woman, and so it is possible to eat western food.'

I pulled a face - to which she laughed - and got out.

'What's the point of coming to India to eat western food?'

'But westerners always tell you that the French are the best cooks in the world.'

'Stuff and nonsense! Everyone in India knows the Bengalis are the best cooks in the world.'

Getting out I turned back to her expressive face that was producing a slightly annoyed expression and to which she angled towards me by placing her head on one side in such a delightful way that it was quite disarming. 'And what is wrong with Keralan food?'

'Well now you mention it the very best *mutton curry* I have ever had is served right here, in Varkala, up in town at the Ootapura.'

The slight jump of her body and the head moving quickly from one side to the other added a whole twist to her captivating mannerisms. 'You know the Ootapura?'

'Please don't tell me that it's no longer there.'

'No indeed, would you like to go?'

'Tomorrow.'

Smiling she got back in and was in the process of driving off when I realized I hadn't paid. But then she called out,

'I'll pick you up at 7 and you can pay me then.'

'The cunning little sod.' I thought.

The hotel was more expensive than I would usually pay but not so much that I wouldn't indulge myself in my jet-lagged condition. When Valerie, the owner, greeted me like a long lost friend by pressing her body on mine and delivering a kiss on both cheeks, I knew immediately there was something wrong, or at least, not right. She had gone native for she was wearing a Keralan nightdress - a full length full sleeved highly patterned affair that so many Keralan women wear around the house even in daytime. And because her greeting had been so intimate I was now fully aware that she was naked beneath.

Too tired to care what this forebodes, I showered and lay on the bed and listened to the waves crashing on the beach in the

distance. I woke to the sound of an argument. It was 2 in the morning. A door slammed. I got up, slipped my trousers on and walked along the corridor to the reception desk - if someone was up I might be able to get a late supper.

A bearded Indian man Vantu came out of the door behind the reception and wanted to know what I wanted in seriously aggressive tones. I related my predicament with a certain nonchalance that I reserve for rude people. It certainly had an effect for we were soon joined by Valerie, who said she would see what she could do and would bring it to my room. Vantu did not seem amused.

Answering the knock on the door, there stood Valerie holding a tray with dhal, chapattis and vegetable curry, while down at the other end of the hall there stood Vantu quietly fuming.

Now it may be that at 5' 10" and weighing 14 stone that I have a powerful build that some women find attractive, but the real advantage is the confidence such physical prowess bestows, which in my opinion women find far more attractive. So when, on her way out, she deliberately ran her hand across my naked chest I was painfully aware of Vantu's agitation, and although at that distance he could not be certain there had been physical contact his fears must have been realized when she continued her flirtatious smile from me to him. None of this was boding well.

Avoiding the happy couple the next day was paramount and successfully achieved, so when 7 o'clock came the knock on the door did not bring any surprises for there was the tuk-tuk driver. Using her as a shield I walked quickly out and into the tuk-tuk. We were soon on our way.

'What is your name?' I enquired and to which she replied a name that showed off the Malayalam language's reputation for being the most difficult in the world to master. I found it completely unpronounceable and rather than waste time - which I had done several times before on my visits to Kerala - I simply said I would call her Maureen as the first part sounded similar. She then enquired if it was a nice name and I said that my cousin was called Maureen and that she was uncommonly beautiful and as such the association was rather apt. She took this for the compliment that it was supposed to be and with a smile and a nod of her head we were off to town.

Arriving outside of the Ootapura I went to pay but she said that she would wait as at that time of night there were unlikely to be fares back to the beach. I then suggested that

she should join me but to this she declined smacking her lips in disapproval.

I walked in through the open door and was greeted like a long lost brother by my old friend the Manager. It was to be a pleasant evening as we caught up on personal news. The mutton curry was, as ever, addictive and served with steamed parattas to die for.

I had almost forgotten Maureen waiting outside and although she had waited well over an hour she was as bright and friendly as ever. Having directed her to the small car park at the beach I got out and bought chi for us both from the small stallholder that the tuk-tuk drivers all used. There were still several waiting for tourists heading back to their hotels from the beach restaurants. Maureen was soon engaged in banter and I could tell by the numerous glances in my direction that I was obviously a topical part. Finally, she joined me, and we drank our tea sitting on the sea wall. After settling my bill I enquired - by relating the previous night's escapade - if she knew what was happening at the hotel she had taken me to. There had been rumours - well, there always are - of infidelity and on both parts. But because of the nationality issue this was to be expected - European women have a certain reputation in India - their perchance for young Indian men has given them a bad name amongst the locals. So there was no surprise for Maureen at my tale.

Things settled down over the next few days and I eventually did a deal with Valerie where by booking for a week she would give me a single person's price on the double room.

I was also locked into evening visits to the Ootapura with Maureen. And that, primarily, was because Varkala had changed - the quiet seaside resort was now a busy package tourist destination. The numerous beachside restaurants playing loud western music had destroyed the ambience that had first attracted me to the place. So craving the real Indian experience I was forced into my nightly visits that Maureen was more than willing to accommodate.

The conventions that govern Indian life are not knew to me and although each area has its own peculiarities single women accompanying men into restaurants was strictly for westerns. But things were about to change because one evening my friend the Manager asked why I did not ask Maureen to join me. Relating her refusal and the aforementioned conventions, which of course he fully understood, he said, with a grin, he might have the answer. The solution came in the form of Maureen's

cousin who along with his wife and several other relations just so happened to be enjoying the excellent cuisine. After introducing me to this very personable man and relating the situation I watched as he went outside and escorted Maureen - under some duress I may add - into the Ootapura.

By now half the restaurant was watching much to Maureen's discomfit. But then conventions must be obeyed and Maureen was forced to greet her relatives and eventually after her cousin's wife made a great display that she should join me - she eventually did. I offered her the menu - that she declined - claiming she was not hungry. So I asked the Manager to bring her a drink. If Maureen was already squirming with embarrassment at the situation the arrival of a Royal Faluda - a mix of tapioca and fruit juice topped by ice cream - in a glass almost a foot tall and carried with great aplomb by the Manager had her burying her head in her hands.

What followed next was pure theatre for the Manager addressed the entire restaurant in a mix of Malayalam and English on how his humble establishment was being graced by the presence of the very first female tuk-tuk driver in Varkala. The restaurant erupted in spontaneous applause - a genuine show of respect and of course affection. Maureen collapsed forward onto her folded arms and only when the applause and good-natured laughter had subsided did she venture a look up towards me beaming at her, as I was, from the other side of the table. The grin she sported was real enough but so were the gritted teeth.

Looking back we had at that moment breached some sort of barrier and formed an affectionate bond as unusual as her profession. We did not talk on the way back but on our arrival at the car park on the sea front it was she and not I that bought the chi. She also chose where we would sit - a place where our conversation could not be over heard. She even went so far as to check that there was no one on the beach directly behind us. I also checked as a humorous adjunct to collusion.

However, what then transpired was a monologue of even seriousness.

She told me how difficult it was for her, especially regarding the young western boys. How one boy, an Australian, had even gone to the length of finding out where her parents lived and asking them permission to court their daughter. Her family had automatically thought she must be having an affair and it had taken months to convince them that it was not the case. Her willingness to patiently wait outside of the Ootapura for me was as much to do with her wish to avoid the young travellers

at night who were attracted to her like fruit flies to a ripe mango.

She then went on to relate how on finishing university she had decided to apply through the Communist Party of India (CPI) - an organization she had been active in even before university - so that she could be in control of her own life. Maureen was a very modern miss even by Keralan standards. A state where for millennia women have been considered equals before the law. Being a tuk-tuk driver afforded her a salary twice as much as she would have had as a bank clerk, and, once she owned her own tuk-tuk this would rise 3 or 4 times. It has to be said that she generated large tips from the tourists including myself.

Now this would have seemed a fairly normal conversation not warranting the degree of security afore mentioned but what followed revealed its necessity.

She had met through the university's CPI a Christian boy with whom she had fallen in love. As she was a Hindu it would have taken a firm commitment on both their parts to ignore the strictures of their respective communities. It does happen but usually at the expense of rejection of both families and this was the sticking point, not for her, but for him.

I could see the emotional trauma rising as she related how they agreed to finish their relationship - one of husband and wife - on graduation. The small head was once more checking the surrounding area - obviously this was a great secret.

This was all building up to something and it finally came in the form of a question - did I ever consider marrying an Indian woman?

There was certainly no need on my behalf to lie and I told her that I had often considered marrying an Indian woman for in my opinion they are beautiful, intelligent and in the most part loyal and filled with integrity. Only, there was a problem, and one shared by every single Indian woman I had ever met.

I played this out - waiting for her to enquire what it was. It was my turn to look for interlopers to our conversation - thus building the right tension for my revelation.

Her eyes were wide with innocence the mouth slightly open with anticipation when I finally revealed the great flaw: Indian women all had families. You didn't marry a woman in India you married their entire family.

She laughed out loud and kicked her little legs against the sea wall with glee for she knew it was only too true.

The next day things took a bad turn at the hotel. Vantu had found out that Valerie was only charging me half price and he accosted me on this matter. After demanding full payment he stormed off, but this, was just the beginning. Valerie in a loud voice behind me asked me to come through to the living area behind the reception desk. She didn't wait so I was forced to follow. I was barely acquainted with the room when I became acquainted with the full form of her naked body as she dropped her nightdress as she entered the bedroom next door. Vantu, entered stage left through the garden door, in what was reminiscent of a Brian Rix farce. Seeing the nightdress he picked it up looking first to me then to Valerie now parading naked in and out of vision.

I groaned while Vantu moaned before he exploded into violent threats. I was in no mood for these shenanigans and told him he was being played for a fool but that I would no longer be party to any of it.

I left, packed and walked outside all to the accompaniment of slamming doors and screaming voices. I hit the road just as Maureen was passing. An emergency brake and a quick u-turn was all it took for me to be rescued.

We entered the Government Tourist Lodge's magnificent garden just as I finished relating the story. Telling me to remain where I was she quickly returned with a key and drove me to the far end of this old colonial left over. She even opened the door and showed me inside. I threw my badly packed bag on the bed and raved on about the preceding affair. Maureen stood in the doorway making only one comment at the end of my rant. She thought Valerie was a very silly women. I was forced to correct her by suggesting that Valerie was in fact, a very dangerous woman.

Maureen wobbled her head Indian style in affirmation and then surprised me by offering to take me to a beauty spot someway down the coast, and, for free. This was a means of paying compensation, for she took the responsibility of my bad experience on herself as she had recommended the hotel in the first place. Saying she would pick me up at 4 the next day she left without payment only reminding me not to forget to sign the register.

We arrived by means of a dirt road through a deserted area of sand dunes into a car park that was little more than a bulldozed area on the beach. The single stallholder was already packing up and the only other vehicles were another tuk-tuk and an old Ambassador.

She said if I hurried out along the point I would get a good view of the sun setting over a small temple on an island just off the coast. I did her bidding and would have enjoyed the ambience the landscape offered, but my mind was elsewhere. The transformation of Varkala and the disagreeable confrontation with its undertones of colliding cultures had upset my natural equilibrium. I was grumpy, and, there was something else, something that I couldn't quite put my finger on.

Instead of returning to the car park I set off along the deserted beach hoping a brisk walk with the waves breaking over my feet would do the trick. What trick you may well ask? Well, the trick of breaking my mind set of course, and, of course, so it transpired but not in anyway that I could have foreseen with my mind distracted as it was.

I was suddenly showered by water and before I had time to ascertain the cause, the cause past me at speed. Her skirts held up showing her shapely legs, her giggling laughter and just say discernable in the twilight a mischievous expression on her face, Maureen was acting just like a child wanting to be pursued. I was now confronted by a person I had not seen before and when I didn't take up her challenge she waited until I was nearly up to her and repeated the exercise by kicking water from the shallow return of a breaking wave. If the trick had not been brokered on a first take it certainly was on a second and I gave chase with the entire thrill associated with it. I was not to catch this quarry. The 20 years I gave her and her obvious physical prowess more than made up for the shortness of her legs. By the time I arrived at the rocky outcrop that enclosed the beach she was already at its pinnacle and observing her surroundings in detail.

The rocks were smooth and still warm. A natural hollow invited me to use it as a reclining chair and once ensconced I lay back and gazed up at a peerless sky. A moonless night and an onshore breeze presented a billion stars in timeless wonder. Such was the clarity of the air with no light pollution that our home the milky-way galaxy was laid bare.

She dropped down beside me - a shadow. Gazing as one I pointed out the spiral arms and our position two thirds from the

galactic centre where a giant black hole of some 20 million
suns was acting as an axel on which we spun.

Raising my arm I pointed out a dark patch just off the
galactic plane - hard to see at first but once recognized
impossible to miss. This I told her was a gap through to the
earliest era of our universe - a place of profound attention
to cosmologists.

'Do you ever think we are on a ball of rock?' She said, 'Stuck
like flies to its surface and might we not fall off and fall
into the sky.'

'Fall through the gap into infinity.' I chanced.

'To fall forever, and not care.'

In silence we fell into silence.

Then breaking the mystic spell I went to say ... but a tiny hand
came over my mouth and she said, 'Of this we cannot speak.'

Soon the tiny hand was replaced by a tiny mouth and searching
tongue.

Soon her loose garments lay next to mine while my body formed
a bridge across the hollow and she, crab like, hung beneath
trying to rub me out of existence with her pelvic movement.

Here - There was to be no rivers of blood.

And where - Happiness was but a warm gun.