

The Pick-up

Ben Antao

Martin Rice flashes another anxious look behind—the audio equipment and spotlights bundled inside the backseats. He’s turned the radio off. The wind’s whistling and the snow’s blowing hard. The clock shows 11:45 pm. As he approaches Finch Avenue, his attention turns towards a frantic waving to his right. He slows down but the car skids forward. He looks over. “I’ll be damned.”

Is that Chris Bick? What on earth is he doing there for Christ sake? Waiting for the Senlac bus? Doesn’t he know the Senlac route shuts down at eleven-thirty? Martin puts the car into reverse and gently pulls back to the bus shelter.

Chris, hatless and hunched over, hands in pockets, approaches the passenger side. Martin rolls down the window. “Well, I’ll be damned, had a gut feeling it was you. Get in. You’re not gonna get a bus now.”

Chris’ eyes reflect anxiety. “I need a favor,” he says and peers at the backseat.

“Get in and tell me about it.”

“Look behind. There’s a sick old lady who needs a ride to the hospital.”

“But there’s only room for one.”

“I can see that. Well, take her to the hospital. I’ll manage somehow.”

“And who’s that other woman?”

“I don’t know.”

Martin stares at the other woman. Hmm...where have I seen her before? She looks vaguely familiar.

“Martin, I know what you’re thinking, but the old woman’s need is greater than either of us. Come on, do both of us a favor. Take her to the hospital.”

You a mind reader as well? Never mind! Martin continues to stare trying to remember. Hmm...“Let me come out.” He turns off the ignition. The wind’s howling, but the snowfall has lightened.

“Thank you, young man,” says the old lady as if already expecting a ride. “I really appreciate it, I’m sick...I called a cab but all the cabs are out, said the dispatcher. I’ve high fever. Here touch my head. The hospital’s not too far, just a couple of miles.”

“It’s not that,” says Martin observing the young woman. “I wish I could take all of you.”

The young woman smiles at him.

The old lady pulls a face as if she’s seen this scene before, as if life doesn’t change for older women. Her pitiful eyes darting to and fro rest on Martin who looks as if in a quandary himself.

I want to help you, lady, he wants to tell her, but I also wanna help ... He’s unable to decide.

“Come on, Martin, do me a favor,” says Chris correctly sensing the reason for his friend’s hesitancy. “It’s only a couple of miles.”

“A coupla miles? North York General is at Sheppard and Leslie, at least eight miles.”

“Not that hospital—Branson hospital,” says the lady.

“But Branson is no longer a full hospital; it’s for minor stuff like tests and bandages.”

“Don’t you worry about that, young man. They’ll take me. Can’t you see I’m sick?”

Martin glances at the young woman to whom he’s now attracted, as if she’s the one he’s been dreaming about all these years. And when the woman returns his look, her complexion softens and glows as if he’s the one.

A tense moment ensues. “Okay, here are the keys, you take her to the hospital,” he tells Chris.

“Whoa! Sure you want to do this, buddy?” Chris Bick looks at the young woman with a touch of appreciation.

“Sure, no problem.”

“Thank you, son, God bless you,” says the lady and cautiously follows Chris to the car.

“That’s an awfully kind thing you did, Mister.”

“The name is Martin, think nothing of it.” He rubs his hands, then puts on his gloves. He’s staring at the road.

After a short silence, she says, “I still say it was mighty kind of you to do what you did.”

Now he turns and gazes at her in that way some people do while trying to recall some indelible impression.

“May I ask you a question?”

“Go ahead, ask.”

“What made you do it?”

“You really want to know?”

“Of course, I do.”

“It’s a long story.”

“I’m interested.”

Martin reflects for a moment. “It happened a few years ago at the Knights of Columbus meeting. After the meeting we usually have snacks and drinks. That night I had a Scotch too many for I was mad at the archbishop of Toronto for something.” He stops to ask, “Have you heard of the Knights of Columbus?”

“Can’t say I have.”

“It’s a Catholic men’s organization; we raise funds for the poor and do charity work.”

“I’m Protestant,” she says.

“Won’t hold that against you. I respect all faiths.” He pauses as she giggles. “Anyway, I was one of the last to leave that night. Apparently, Chris Bick was following me. On Bayview Avenue just before John Street, he pulled up along side and waved me to pull over into the parking lot. I was feeling high and obeyed his command. Later he drove me home.”

Seeing that Martin’s gaze is far off in the distance, she remains silent.

“The next day I called Chris and thanked him for saving my life. You know what he said? ‘We all fall into temptation and sin sometimes.’ Imagine that! I’ve never forgotten it. If I ever get a chance to return the favor, I’ll grab it with both hands, I said to myself.”

She smiles with obvious understanding. “So you came through tonight.”

“No, not really!”

“Don’t be so modest.”

“It’s him that came through tonight. Just like him to think of his neighbor first.”

“How do you mean?”

“I’d stopped to pick him up, but instead of getting in he asked me a favor. He wanted me to take the lady to the hospital. It was his idea.”

“But it was what you wanted to do, was it not?” she asks ingenuously. “I mean it was also your intention to help the lady.”

Martin looks away. “I don’t know,” he says, although he knows.

“As I said, it was terribly kind of you. You helped your friend as well as the lady. That’s how I see it.”

“Perhaps you’re right, but I wonder though.”

“Why, is something bothering you, Martin?”

Hearing her utter his name suddenly makes him feel special, like someone who’s loved and wanted. Perhaps she may be right about him. And at that moment he decides to make his own feelings known. For a long second he looks into her eyes for confirmation. Then he reaches for his cell phone.

“I’m gonna call a cab and take you home.”

“I’d like that,” she says.