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Aandhai malai (In Western Ghats)

Saranyan Bv

I fell in love with the tea estate at the outpost of humanity the moment I arrived. The hill had been named Aandhai Malai, which means Owl hill. After the two tufts like rocks that stood at the top. The tea state had no name, everybody called it Aandhai malai estate.

It was an obscure tourist spot, people hardly knew about it but recommended if they came to know. On its edge, stood a tea factory, a faded tin-shed from which smoke came out and blended into the mist.

The factory produced organic tea, out of the tea-leaves grown in the estate. It took an hour to reach, the mode of transport was only by Hamid's tractor. Loads of tea bags were getting loaded en-route. By the time I reached, sun had begun to show its golden glint, it gave

the ambience romantic air. On the way, Hamid pointed at a flat piece of grassland, said trekkers pitched tent and camped here on cold rainless nights. The stumps pegged to the ground emphasized his words.

The spot enjoyed 360degree panoramic view. Sprawling carpet of the tea garden on the West and Southwest, the two unsurmountable cliffs to the North which got the hill its name. The east was the phantasmagorical, deep, dense, uninhabitable gorge that plunged like an arrow from heaven.

To reach the factory one has to go over the brow and descend. The road ended there, it was a wild track with no tar-topping, burritoed by the weight of huge tractors.

That was the last trip for the day, Hamid said. Not much time left, he advised me to have a look at the factory as well. He said I can walk into the factory and move around, nobody would mind. But no one would talk, he said.

I began to enjoy the weather, its freshness. Lights from Madurai down in the plains blossomed as dusk closed in. I walked over the flat land and promised myself another visit when I could spend whole day in the congeniality of location. Today I had time only till the bags of the green leaf were unloaded and the ready-to-brew tea packed in cartoons were loaded. I could be back in my resort by seven, in time for a drink or two and later for the dinner at the dining hall which won't be much of an attraction.

Inside the factory office, the tea taster was brewing in a room littered with things and mixing tea liquor. He appeared bored, but invited me in with a wave of hand. The nature of his competence can be understood only by tasting and tasting. I had no interest in something which I felt cannot be understood in the span of a cramped evening.

He poured a cup of the brown liquor for me and gesticulated I need not pay for it. I accepted since the aroma was good, and remembered to thank him before sipping. My eye-brows quivered as I brought

the cup to my lips. After I finished, he rinsed the kettle and the cups in the large steel sink and prepared to leave. Before that he gathered the tea waste and dumped it inside a trash can. He signed he was leaving.

I heard a dog bark at a distance and the barks got lost in the wind.

He said in hushed tone, “These guys came six months ago and they appear to have settled down. He used a grimed spoon to point at the hollow.

It was getting dark outside, footsteps of workmen moving up and down with loads on their back was heard. The ladder was steep, the bags had to be carried to the level above where the blowers were blowing hot air. I knew the process and it did not arouse curiosity.

I asked the tea-taster if Cannabis is grown in the area, he appeared the kind who may break the silence and exchange information. He fell silent as the estate manager walked into the room. The manger suggested I could carry home the special organic tea, fresh out of the roasting table. He pointed at the white sheet where the rates were written on white full-scape paper and stuck on the wall. The rates indicated were based on unit-weight and the quality. It was a brief matrix. The offer did not impress, for me, the best tea is one in served in a cup.

The manager looked the rustic type, meant for brutal handling of the plantation workers. He waited for me to take decision, then exited without a word noticing my disinterest.

The driver hollered, said he was leaving. I got to up go. I told the tea-taster I have fallen in love with the place and would return. He told me not to wait too long, to come the very next day, he said he would take time out to show me the path that leads down the gorge below.

I looked hurriedly at him. If there was anything he wanted to convey, he'd better hurry.

The tea-taster ensured that the Manager was out of ear-shot, he held me by my sweater sleeve at the elbow and said, “The guys down there grow Cannabis. I will show the path, but it is dangerous. Those guys don’t want anyone to know what they are at.”

He noticed my confusion, he said again in whisper, “That’s from where the dog bark came.”

Dogs to warn them of intruders, perhaps.

I told him I will, and got out and hopped on the tractor. The driver had already cranked the engine, it was pleasantly warm. The tractor had no proper seat other than for the driver. Hamid adjusted and offered space in his own. I chose the top of the mud-guard, but had to hold on to the driver’s back-rest.

The Head lamp beamed. I tried to locate the path among the thickets and bushes, whatever path the tea-taster mentioned he would show. I could not locate and soon we were weaving through the tea-shrubs. At steady intervals, the silver oaks were standing like sentinels.

Growing Cannabis is banned in both Tamilnadu and Kerala, the tea-estate espoused both states, as it was part of the then Madras Province before the states were carved out. I didn’t broach the subject with Hamid, who lit a bedi and smoked under the hood of his jacket. No wild animals inhabit at this altitude and there was nothing of interest.

I hoped the dinner in the resort was good, the resort chef was no good and his vegetarian dishes were bland. I wanted the back-breaking journey ended soon.

The next day I had planned to trek up the Anamudi peak, Anamudi is abode for Nilgiri tahrs, the endangered species with no natural predators at that height. They lived a frugal life.

When the driver slowed down by the resort gate, I noticed the time was quarter past seven, most of the rooms were lit, a girl was drawing the curtain in one of the windows.

My window was on the other side overlooking the neatly curated boulevard. There would be games and dances in the lounge following banquet. Though they do not have professional disc jockeys, the music never wearied the revelers.

II

My mom died when I was twenty-two, my dad was in late seventies and already afflicted with Parkinson's. As a result, the opportunity to travel around never matured.

I had looked forward to travelling once I start earning, to earning and splurging. Wherever I went under the circumstances of having to look after my father, my movements were restricted to short tetherable radius. I had to and I returned to ensure dad's needs are met.

This had gone on for twelve years or more, the best part of my life more or less been sucked inside of dad's undomesticated house which he was infinitely fond of. For a living, I ran a stationary cum book-store in the front portion of the house. The income from it was not anything to complain about, a school was nearby and young mothers came to buy things for the wards. The place belonged to dad and I owed dad looking after.

III

Temptations always come in hideous spurt, if ponderous thoughts were to precede, reason would have prevailed. I asked Hamid if he is interested in carting me the next day too. Say morning by nine. That's when the break-fast would be over and the resort chef upon special request would be in a position to package a sandwich or two for lunch.

Hamid raised his and looked at my face lifting attention from the fare I had given. He asked if I meant nine in the morning with disbelief. He said, "Sorry sir, my first trip can start only by 11, that's

when the first load of bags would be ready. The tea-pickers start only by nine” he briefed.

“I can pay full for the full trip.” I offered. “If I start by eleven, I won’t be there before noon.”

I wanted a full day.

“Sir”, he said, “We are not allowed to use the estate road unless there is estate work. The road belong the estate, movements are restricted.”

The constraint challenged to me to somehow make it, the very next day. I touched the pocket in my jerkin to indicate money. It didn’t help. He said he would pick me up at 11 and told me to wait at the gate if I am game.

IV

Dad read newspapers or watched TV, he didn’t have much else to do, a couch in addition to the cot made his furniture. He hardly used the dressing table, the mirror has turned yellow and he didn’t care. Once in a way, he would stand at the window. It was always when school time was up, and children rang out bubbling with energy. He would hold the vertical bars like prisoners in jail and peep.

It was also his way of checking how my business is. There after he would pass urine and return to bed, it was his routine.

Children would unleash out of the school gates like river in spate, tug each other with new-found sweat, or drag of mothers to the eatery next door.

Whenever necessary, I walk by his cot, there were errands like drawing the curtains or placing the water jug on the side table. He would lie sideways achieving fetal position, his forearm bent in an angle and palm would rest on his face covering it in refutation of life. Either he was shunning reality or fearing death or both.

Often I have seen him peering at my face through the peep hole of his arm, the posture permitted. He resented my sympathy, my compassion. His eyes, tired from everything the life turned out to be looked drained but eager to get back.

His time was nearing. Perhaps I didn't do much to camouflage my sympathy. Once I stopped by to ask what he is looking at. He just nodded his head sideways. Ever after that I never looked in that direction.

I resented responsibilities; life would be easy if no responsibility rested on my shoulders.

V

Hamid dropped me at the flat land meant for the campers. I had checked out of the resort and set my things where nobody would suspect. A tea-shop owner agreed to keep, he didn't know me, he would never get back to me. I didn't want anyone to miss me or come searching.

As predicted, it was mid noon, the wind was robust, the sun tidy. My efforts to hold the hat on failed often. As a result, I did away and put it inside the small bag, warmed by the complete lunch kit handed over by the Chef with grumpy face.

The arrangement was that Hamid would pick me up at the same place in the evening, he told me to wait without fail or he would return home without me. I said fine and paid him. If I didn't return, he was to assume I had left by other means, there were to be no obligations.

For a while, I sat on the grass. The heat from Madurai was simmering, and from the fields surrounding, truncated by roads and canals. I had not banked on taking the tea-taster's help, I wanted my expedition to be private. Besides the men at the estate suffered slave mentality, it would do no good.

My plan was to make friends with the gang of Cannabis farmers and stay over for a week or two. Suddenly the dog bark rang out and echoed few times against the mountains before dying out. The sound excited me of the prospect. Here was something real.

I had a windcheater on over the sweater, was prepared for any eventuality. I walked along the road slowly rubbing my hands on the thickets. The leaves broke from the stem, emitted the overpowering smell of vegetation.

It was disappointing as I could not locate the entrance to path, I had already come into the vicinity of the factory premises. I decided to return and try my luck again. If I fail, I had no option other than checking on the tea-taster.

I noticed a granite stone in the undergrowth as if it was meant to signify something of importance. The place was denser surrounding that point, I parted the bramble, a small path led from it. The footprints had been carefully erased using warps of the bush. The craggy terrain was not far from the road.

The path abruptly seemed to delve into the gorge. My head began to spin, fear of heights is something I could never master. From then on, the descent demanded crab-like movement, foothold barely enough to keep the toes on. I was nature's trail, the risers between the steps often varied, some were longer than what my leg could cope with, the wedges hardly adequate for firm hand-grip. If there was one slip, the plunge would be permanent, no traces thereafter.

I felt hungry half way down, my stomach growled. A young tree sprang between two rock and curved up, the base gave me room to sit without holding on to something. During this brief stop-over, I pulled out my lunch bag and attempted to take a bite. My hands were shivering, my legs from exhaustion. The undertaking appeared more hazardous than what I had assumed.

Enthusiasm never let me down, I had done quite a distance by three o'clock. It never occurred to me that I could climb back. Hamid

didn't seem the type who would wait or look for me, his payment done.

I felt a sharp object on my nape and I stiffened frozen in fright. A hand searched my pockets from behind, under the shirt and inside the bag. Another hand held me by the collar.

I said weakly but in a friendly manner, "I came to buy weeds. Fresh authentic ones. We don't get it in the city." The idea was to tacitly explain away my presence and state I was a stranger.

The explanation did not convince him. He made clucking sound with his mouth, the dog barked was followed by rustle. Two men appeared in front with a dog in leash. The dog was eager to smell me, I looked into its eyes. I have a way with dogs, and so it was alright.

Till then I had not turned to look at the man behind, nor at the object that pressed into my skin. I could only sense the bad breath. The inquisition started, it was more aimed at finding out how I came to know about the den. I could not stand erect in that precarious slope, I managed to dig out and show my business card which said I am from Madras and that I run a stationary store. The chaps kept snatching the card from one another to make meaning out of that, they didn't seem to know what the card meant, but they knew it was far from connected to local forest officials or the police.

They discussed in hush, while the man who held my collar was still holding tight, the top button of my shirt had come off.

"Who told you that we have weeds?" The man standing in front asked. This was a tricky question. I didn't want to sneak, it was the tea taster. I said somebody in Chennai told me, my pal said the best grass can be got only here. This irritated the men, one of them slapped. I lost balance, the dog was smelling my face, it licked my eye-brows.

"We can't let him go back. He knows our secret now." The guy behind said. It didn't really matter whatever my bonafide. His grip got tighter and he pulled me back. I was on the verge of choking, it

brought out coughs, the sound disappeared in the wind as soon as it left my throat.

“Let us take him down. Let the Chidambaranathan decide“, the guy in front said. The dog poked its snout inside the bag and brought out a sandwich. The third chap gave the dog a hard slap. The dog whined and dropped the piece.

Then the third guy said, “We cannot let him return. The police scums would come searching.”

“Then what do we do?” the guy behind said. They could do anything with me, no one would come to know. I had left no trail.

“Let’s take him down, give him the stuff so that he can smoke to his heart’s content. He would never know what hits him.” The guy in front suggested. The other laughed. The dog put its tongue out and looked at me. Everyone seemed in agreement except the dog. The dog was interested in regaining the loaf smeared with cheese and Mayonnaise. The guys in front moved closer and gripped me by my arms. They took me down further, by then it was getting dark, the wind made hissing noise through the thick forest.

I looked forward to meeting Chidambaranathan, their gang leader or whoever he was, true negotiation would ensue, these three must be hired hoodlums who worked for the grub, smoke and the thrill.

I co-operated, offered no resistance. The dog kept sniffing at my socks as we went down until we stopped at a hut made of bamboo and thatched roof. It didn’t have a door with hinges, a jute rag hung from the bamboo shaft in front. They made me wait outside and went in to inform Chidambaranathan of my presence and my capture. A girl came out, she was very young and petite, she washed her legs collecting water from the trough and fed the dog with what appeared like boiled meat and rice. She had brought from inside a clean bowl for the purpose, I was delighted to see.

Anyone who loved dogs cannot be bad, I said and asked to be seated in the coir cot outside the hut. They obliged but I was whisked back when the leader materialized. He studied me as he would an animal

but didn't ask any questions. I told him the tractor driver would wait for me. If I don't get back, Hamid may lodge a complaint to the police about my disappearance. Everyone laughed. Chidambaranathan slapped one of the guys on the shoulder, a friendly kind of slap. The girl looked at me curiously.

They allowed me to eat the left-over sandwich while they drank their porridge. The girl served everyone and asked if I need some. I did not answer, she brought a plastic mug from inside and poured me some. I was grateful, she looked beautiful and terribly stoned. What was she doing here in the forest among these thugs, I thought. She appeared learned.

They sat in circle and began to fill the chillum, then started smoking. Including the girl although she was stoned out of her wits already. No dearth of the weed. They offered me drags as if I was part of them, they had left a place for me on the mat they sat on. I took deep drags in order to establish my credentials. It was premium quality, I took it devotedly.

Two more men joined from the forest behind hut, they too had porridge and smoked. The porridge was made of millets and I felt content and taste stayed in my mouth. Everyone was in good mood as night set in and the wind careened over our heads, nobody bothered me. I was myself stoned and was happy my plans to stay with them was taking root.

When it was time to sleep, the girl threw a blanket to me and went inside the hut. I have never looked at a girl as greedily as now. I forgot to mention the dog, which was wide awake but posed no threat now. The guys collected my valuables and left them with Chidambaranathan, well nobody introduced him, I assumed he was the leader.

Then we marched into the jungle, the gradient had tapered off and it was easy to wade through. The ravine on our left was not visible, vaguely aware of its grisly existence, I treaded carefully. Felled trees to our right and terraced cultivation amidst. The aroma of weed was all around as if it was part of mother nature and couldn't be

differentiated. Crickets chirped and the horse-flies buzzed, the usual forest things I read in books. It didn't matter if there were tigers down in the ravine or Hyenas. Neither did it worry why the guys laughed without reason. Although there was hilarity in their laugh, the sinisterism was not altogether lost.

I lay down by a pile of cannabis grass spread on a moth-faced rock for drying. The hill towered like the turrets in Gothic novels. It was dark and cavernous and headed towards the moonless sky like a tombstone. A mercury lamp at the precipice was the only sign of civilized world.

Whatever made Edgar Allen Poe write those stuff, God only can reveal in Gothic light. Some of my friends had even praised his writings without coming into contact with or viewing the eerie castles and dark susceptible alleys he described in his work.

The dog noticed a hare and ran after it with roar. One of the guys beckoned and told it to remain quiet. They didn't want trouble. The dog came and curled next to me with sense of disappointment. I could not fathom what instructions Chidambaranathan had given my mates in the jungle regarding me. What they planned to do in the thick of the night, I meditated. I put my hand over the dog's belly and the dog licked my hand. My encumbrance with the last vestiges of love. I knew if I walked away, the dog would not wake these guys. The dog may even accompany, which I considered was the pinnacle of my life. Love, ability to give and receive.

Dad lived until he was eighty-seven and reached the acute stage of fearing death. I saw it in his eyes as he lay with his hands folded over the face. It would be foolish to wait that long.

‘A early taste

Of death is

Not necessarily

A bad thing...

Words from Charles Bukowski's poem. But Bukowski lived till 64....

I masticated the joy of new-found freedom, my first trip outside the native town in years. So far my outlet has only been books, children's, adult's and within a the compound of books. I found the freedom strange, puzzling and tenuous, the freedom to take whichever route I felt life was taking. I am not afraid and ready to take the plunge.

Saranyan Bv

Saranyan Bv is poet and short-story writer, now based out of Bangalore. He came into the realm of literature by mistake, but he loves being there. His works have been published in many Indian and Asian journals. He loves the works of Raymond Carver.

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