

COORG

- A state of mind



Animesh Anand

Where the universe makes you feel like an inconsequential speck in the grand scheme of things.....

COORG

By Animesh Anand

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*“I could a tale unfold whose lightest word
Would harrow up thy soul, freeze thy young blood,
Make thy two eyes, like stars, start from their spheres,
Thy knotted and combined locks to part
And each particular hair to stand on end”*

--- Act1, Scene 5 of Hamlet

The tale of Honey Valley, Coorg and 6 friends

*To Lord, and to everyone who'll read this saga:
in parts, by parts OR for parts*

Merci.

*'Tis with our judgments as our watches, none
Go just alike, yet each believes his own
In poets as true genius is but rare
True taste as seldom is the critic share
Both must alike from Heaven derive their light,
These born to judge as well as those to write
Let such teach others who themselves excel,
And censure freely, who have written well
Authors are partial to their wit, 'tis true
But are not critics to their judgment too?*

~An Essay on Criticism (A. Pope)

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&

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Preface

The more attentive we are as we travel and the more reflective afterwards, it is more likely that our travel experiences will enhance our sense of self and purpose.

I started this travelogue as a tribute to my friends, but by the end, this has become something which is most important to me. A part of me feels proud with my effort.

This started when we were just back from the trip to Honey Valley, Coorg. An idea came into my consciousness. It sat there and blocked all other thoughts from flowing. I knew this was going to bother me until I completed it.

It took some time, and a lot of reading. For I've had so many irritating moments of not knowing how to explain something because of scarcity of words. In this duration, I reconnected with my old habit of reading and somewhere all of my readings are reflected in the pages that follow.

I've tried to mention as many sources that inspired me in the bibliography. Most of the ideas have been adopted in spirit, some in words and few in their totality. It was a difficult but an ineluctable choice considering the limited amount of time. This preface, in itself, is inspired by an online blog on channelizing oneself.

In the process, I followed the emotions to the core, went through the thoughts and memories that were connected to the feeling and took the time to travel through my thoughts. Once 'in the zone', every thought just came to me, which when blended with literary jewels of prodigious writers, has produced this small effort of being.

Accepting the humble opinion that this could be written much better with a jugglery of words, I would request everyone to come forward with their suggestions of improvement.

- Animesh

Introduction

Located amidst mountains, dense forests, mist kissed coffee plantations, verdant valleys and challenging treks, Coorg (Kodagu) is the place to be for nature lovers and adventure enthusiasts alike. This travelogue, painted in the backdrop of this unearthly part of cosmos, is a reflection of eternal memories one experiences in these ethereal setup.

These memories might not be confined to an individual; neither do they belong to a single group of friends who visited the valley. Instead, the memoir bespeaks the characteristically human nature to travel and aims to communicate with any thoughtful traveler - humble, curious and accepting.

The book revolves around the protagonist Saumyak, who visited the resort of Honey Valley with his friends, his perception of things and points of view. He, being a part of larger scheme of things started by his friend Nikhil, takes a backseat at times allowing the narration to proceed at its own pace with Nikhil or other member of the group at the lead.

I believe there will come moments in this saga when reference to certain adventures will give you the Columbus or Crusoe thrill of discovery. Travel is all about changing our perceptions as we go along the road, and sharing it once we are back. This is a similar attempt to contribute to the upward spiral of living and growing, returning home inspired each time.

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Prologue

15th August

Saumyak was charging his mobile on the platform while waiting for the Bangalore Link Express at Kulem railway station when his phone rang. He had just finished the tiring trek of more than 5 hours to Doodhsagar. The trek was planned only the previous afternoon. Within 24 hours he was out of his cozy bed in Bangalore, had travelled for more than 17 hours by bus, train and on foot to soak himself at one of the most beautiful waterfalls in India, the Doodhsagar Falls. Playful, pleading waterfall draped over the cliff at two ends and slid over the rocks in milky white avatar to channel into one forceful stream before plunging into the valley. Further ahead, an hour journey on the engine of goods train had brought him to Kulem, where he could board the returning train to Bangalore. His priority, now, was to get back within the warmth of his blanket before the next morning. His mobile flashed – Nikhil Calling.

“कहाँ है बे च.....”

“कहीं नहीं भाई रेल की पटरियों पर जिन्दगी ढूँढता हुआ एक अदद खुबसूरत प्रपात के दर्शन कर अब what next की किंकर्तव्यविमूढ़ता में जी रहे हैं | बताओ इस नाचीज को कैसे याद किया?”

“भ....., अकेले अकेले ? अच्छा ये बता दशहरा के long weekend पर honey valley चलेगा?”

The Big Ben struck one in his head. “Honey Valley” - He remembered the discussion he had with Rahul Bhai, the previous year; of the fireflies illuminating whole forest across the ravine, of the pregnant silence in the night and of honey-valley sickness that people suffered for months after returning from the place. As Rahul Bhai had put it, Honey Valley was a place one would never come back from. Even though the physical existence might return to the city, a part of the eternal soul will be lost behind wandering amongst jungles.

Who could refuse to this offer, that too in such a good company? Saumyak and Nikhil's last trip to Hampi was an experience that never fails to amaze anyone who listens to the tales. Moreover, long weekends came so rarely, to Saumyak, it seemed absurd to waste at home, following the daily chores of the city life. There were his father's loaded orders to minimize the random travels out of the city. But these suggestions were seldom obeyed.

“Of course bhai. Deal”

“Ok, 3 rooms booked”

“These many? How fat have you become? Already transcending walls?”

“Sharmaji, Prachi and one of her friends are also visiting.”

His hesitant, introvert self took over for a brief moment till it was overcome by the newly inquisitive, neo-liberal counterpart. The plan was hurriedly confirmed. Any further planning for the same could wait. Right then, all that Saumyak was troubled about, was to reach back to Bangalore. He had little or no food since lunch, the previous day. In order to plan for the days in the future, he needed to make it to his home by the next day's lunch.

Difficulties test people. At times, kill them too. But anything that does not kill, makes one stronger.

He indeed made it back to Bangalore before 5, the next morning. And soon, he was bundled in the warmth of the blanket, comfortably asleep. Everything else could wait.

The Beginning at the End

‘अरे यार’, she exclaimed, with an extra second for the yaaaaaar.

‘क्या हुआ ?’ he turned, worried.

‘कुछ नहीं भोकाली मार रहे थे !’. Giggles... ‘HeeHeeHee’.

Smiles spread across the lips. Everyone laughed one last time.

As soon as the car started, Saumyak felt the sinking feeling deep within his heart. In a few minutes, the car had sped off. He stood at the gate as if glued, where he was, and watched the car turn right at the bend. Rumbling of the engine softened in the distance into something that was half a sigh. The car’s horn could be heard till it turned away in next couple of bends. Saumyak’s face changed colors and emotions till it became inscrutable. The honey filled days from the valley were finally over.

What Young India Wants

Young India Fellowship

Prachi and her friend were together since YIF (Young India Fellowship program, a precursor to Asoka University).

‘The YIF brings together 200 emerging leaders from around India in a one- year residential post-graduate program in Delhi. It helps the candidate open their mind to a rich and diverse set of subjects and perspectives, delivered by some of the finest teachers of the generation from around the world. In this cross-flow of ideas and inspired learning, the participants are encouraged and mentored to discover their own self, to understand their personal values, strengths and aspirations, and creates a process for them to build a broad life-plan that will align who they are with what they do in life. It accepts graduates from arts, science, engineering or commerce, and helps them get to where they want to go!’ – Saumyak knew from its website.

YIF – where creativity achieves the scales of Mt. Everest, and an inclusive smartness induces a sense of confidence to everyone around. In short, YIF makes one believe in a parallel stream of education in India - very much needed, and recently, genuinely appreciated. He was looking forward to meeting the Young Indian prodigies. It could prove a stepping stone in his unending quest for knowledge that he had been pursuing lately.

An uncouth Bihari, lacking the elaborate flourish and grandeur in vogue, had decided to embark on a trip with few of India’s best and most creative students one could meet. The only way to satiate his autodidactic self was interacting with people from different fields and of varied life experience. Confidence comes with years of practice and a know-how of life. Befriending new people always works leaps and bounds towards unveiling the new vistas of perception in the otherwise unidirectional life.

Nikhil was an illustrious example for the same, right in front of his eyes.

Namma Bengaluru

1st October

Bittersweet October - the mellow, messy, leaf-kicking, perfect pause between the opposing miseries of summer and winter, had set in.

“ Oye! Get a pack of playing cards with you” Nikhil bellowed at the other end of the phone. 5 packs of card were packed.

“ Oye! Keep some cash with you” Nikhil demanded. Saumyak stacked the cash in different bags and some in the purse. His old habit to be prepared for worst situations had taught him the technique.

“ Oye! Reach the bus stop in time” Nikhil ordered. Saumyak was there well within time and much before them.

Half an hour later, he could see them at a distance, Nikhil towering above everyone in the group. Saumyak embraced his long lost brother with open arms and kicked him in the stomach, falsely but with gusto. Then he hung to Sharmaji, his beard unshaven for more than 5 months now. It imparted a serious look to his already philosophic personality.

“Why so serious Sharmaji?” Saumyak chipped in a question, patting him familiarly at his back. “*Bas yun hi*”, Sharmaji answered with a haughty indifference. He always had crisp answers up his sleeves.

It was the time for introduction with guests of honor. They had flown in that very morning, crossing 7 states for this trip. He knew Prachi quite well, though he was meeting her for the first time, credits to Nikhil. She was a cute little girl with an infectious sweet smile. Her innocent charm spread happiness all around. Hints of the travel from Delhi to Bangalore showed on her face, but there was a peace in her demeanor. She had a ‘feminine’ touch to her personality without trying too hard, dressed up keeping it minimal yet chic at the same time. With Nikhil around, she could just close her eyes and trust him to handle the situation. Trust and love completed her charming personality. The right combination of wit, humor, responsibility,

adoration, love and inner beauty; she reminded him of his younger cousin sister, currently preparing for boards but who never ceases to dream of dance. Well, these would be discussed later in days and years to come.

Nikhil then introduced Saumyak to the other gorgeous lady.

“Hi, I’m Somya”. She protruded confidence, obviously knew her stuff right.

“Hi. Saumyak here” Was his name clear enough or did it look like he repeated her name? He bit his tongue in confusion and tried to make up for the awkward situation. “It’s Saumyakkkk”, that made things clearer.

Saumyak was no interpreter of personalities, yet his mind raced miles in those few minutes that he stood there conversing with the impressive, beautiful and elegant lady. She looked charming and wore a navy blue pullover. She knew fashion but wasn’t obsessive about it, her specs revealed. Her unhurried measured steps and the way she held her head high while walking expressed a remarkable self-assurance. Her smile was infectious as well. She was cheerful and diligent, and discussed fun things excitedly; something that made her even more special. Conversations became chat, irrespective of how nervous Saumyak was, because Somya was a wonderful raconteur with a wealth of anecdotes, observations and opinions, the natural traits of backpackers on journey.

The group was varied and interesting. This trip was surely poised to be fun.

The bus was late and no one had any clue as to its whereabouts. The enquiry could help them only with the platform number. Saumyak and Nikhil tried by turns. But all they could decipher from the Kannada suggestion was ‘vandu’, Kannada for ‘One’ – the platform number. Hoping that the bus wouldn’t leave without them from any other platform they kept waiting in a circle. With a number of factors in play, interesting complex equations were developing with these many variables around. Sharmaji was his usual self and so was Nikhil. Sharmaji kept to himself until directly spoken to, whereas Nikhil had an expert opinion on everything. The real icebreaker was played by Saumyak, though inadvertently. His innocent mistake of comparing Talacauvery with Himalayas, on the mail thread during the initial planning of the trip, was to prove very costly. Unconditional apologies weren’t good enough for Sharmaji. Half an hour of grilling would have continued further, had the bus not arrived as his savior.

Next few minutes were chaos. People approached Nikhil with their tickets for verification, mistaking him for the conductor due to his all khaki dress – the khaki shirt was a gift from Sharmaji, the light brown trousers from Prachi and the Quechua trekking boots, which he had bought the same day, were a treat to himself. The original conductor demanded Saumyak

to produce the ticket with his right hand and made him step on the bus with his right leg, first. Then there were a number of trials for the optimal inclination of the seat which allowed Saumyak to be comfortable, and at the same time, furnished enough leg space for Nikhil. Finally, they started off. No one had even the slightest inkling that it was going to be a humdinger of a journey.

Sleep was unavoidable as the curtains were drawn. Sharmaji found solace on Saumyak's shoulders, who was drifting to sleep himself. He was dreaming, or was it real. He had unclear memories of Somya fumbling with the wrapper of the bottle of drinking water and of Nikhil in discussion with the driver a number of times. Next, it was Prachi. She was drinking a Nariyal-Pani in the middle of the night, in the middle of the road, in the middle of nowhere. He would surely have been dreaming.

Land of Igguthappa

“ಕೊನೆಯ ಸ್ಟಾಪ್, Koneya stāp (Last Stop)”, shouted the conductor at the top of his voice.

It was 5 in the morning when they alighted from the bus at Virajpet, still half-asleep. A hot steaming cup of tea was the need for the moment. They didn't have to look around much. It was right in front of them, the lone shop across the road was serving early morning tea to all the passersby. Sweaters and Shawls came into action. Sharmaji's sharp eyes noticed a peculiar detail about the shawl that the ladies wrapped around, in turns. It donned a different color for each one of them. A full fledged discussion around a theory of inbuilt cognitive intelligence of the shawl reflected a glimpse of everyone's resolve to scale new heights in '*bakwas*'. Everyone laughed their hearts out with this resolution. Though it was still dark, the laughter lighted up the shop. Quite a number of people had gathered at the stall for the early morning tea. The tea arrived, with much of a fanfare, but without any taste. It was more of boiled water with raw milk, heated with the tea leaves used for umpteenth time. Disappointed, they decided to hit the road at the earliest.

Few attempts to hire an auto led to nothing. The resort attendant, on call, suggested them to board the bus at 6:30 AM. Everyone enjoyed yet another round of Nariyal-Pani, rejoicing the tender coconut carved from within it as the first light of the dawn broke. Fresh bunch of stale jokes lit up along with the light in the sky as they trudged along on a walk to the private bus station, along the winding road rich with a fresh hilly aroma. The road rose up to the clock tower before it turned left for the station in a sharp descent.

In the very first few hours everyone got comfortable with the virtues and vices of each other. Seemingly, the girls didn't have any of the latter. It was established that Saumyak and Nikhil were the English illiterate but the girls found their witty Hindi humor interesting. All of it came up when Sharmaji took leave for *Laghusanka*, spoken in a manner which reflected his sense of the detached humor. The same was affirmed, in its full might, with time. They made themselves comfortable on the last rows of the bus. At exact 6:30, the bus started, but not before Sharmaji had relieved himself of the small doubt.

The bus thundered through the path. They slowly took cognizance of the shakiness of the rickety bus. Every single seat of bus was supported by strings and every fissure filled in by tape. It should also be put as neat, for no effort was spared to tape-up everything. The same strings and tapes also blocked the glasses from falling out. The bus made a periodical screeching sound with every break applied by the driver as he drove through the uphill road while the conductor peacefully hid behind the day's newspaper.

Forty-five minutes later, amongst a series of speculation about the story of the grand war between flowers that took place in the villages all along the road, they were nearing Honey Valley. These were the Dhatura plants, a part of abundant flora, adorning the hills and dales of Coorg. The war must have taken its toll on the flower community, for many of them were milky white, probably the war widows. Next stretch of road brought back the joy with same big flowers, in varied hues, hanging like a bell from the branches that swished past the bus. Myriad of colors donned the trees as multicolored petals peeped out from behind their greener friends. The entire valley was replete with fog, the atmosphere magnificently wet, dewy and wonderful.

They went through the clouds up to the Kabbinakad junction. A jeep from Honey Valley was waiting for the group. Before the group could take the ride any further, everyone once again needed to relieve themselves of any petty doubts that they had. In the next 15 min, the jeep was rumbling through steep uphill climbs that passed along a dense forest on one side and deep stretch of picturesque ravine on the other. It felt like autumn and winter in sweet embrace, holding perpetual sway, and the very air, so cool and fresh, seemed imbued with life and health. Halfway to the resort they came across a magnificent water fall, milky-white water streaming down from the top of opposite peak, over stones in a step-wise fashion. The sound of water washing over the rocks and splattering around was a melody, a sweet medley blended with the sounds from the rainforest. As the luck would have it, it was one of the only two times Saumyak could lay his eyes on the beauty that adorned this junction. The jeep, next, took a left, veered onto a rocky terrain, and crossed a pair of grey, wide-eyed donkeys at the Chingara homestay before rushing through a much steeper climb to reach the Honey Valley.

Honey Valley – “4,250 ft Above Shopping Malls, City Streets, Bill Boards, Cable TV, 9-5, the Rat Race, Rush Hour, Deadlines, Traffic Jams, the Daily Grind, and the Keeping Up With” – their tagline says it all. People usually visit it to hike – enjoy nature up, close and personal, or to get away from the city life with its constant bombardment of sense stimuli. Nature is splendid in its magnanimous abundance and flawless simplicity.

Lucky for the tourists, Honey Valley brings out only this particular aspect of nature. But even there, though sustaining a very fragile and perfectly balanced biodiversity, there are several complex and precariously balanced forces of nature that may escape the naked, untrained eyes. The valley still looks untouched but underneath this pristine beauty lies a grave tragedy. The

disappearance of bees from honey valley is an example of one such hidden complexity. Not too long ago, this heart of the south-west Kodagu rainforest used to be the largest honey producer in South-East Asia. But a chance virus wiped out the resident bee population.

This crisis deflected attention to something more than honey — the bountiful nature that produced it. Birdwatchers and backpackers soon realized that there's more to Kodagu than Madikeri.

Honey Valley offers rooms in various tiered structure, both geographically and economically. The rooms, in Somya's exact term, were '*cute*'. Pottery red walls on the exteriors match perfectly with the structure of the hut overlaid with baked tiles. The cute small simple rooms with two small beds had a table to complete the whole set of furniture. And then there was a small glass panel in the roof, allowing enough light for the room to be illuminated. The pista green walls reflected lights for better illumination, creating a beautiful hue for one to rest in. As the group later came to know, the resort used to be self sufficient with hydro electricity that it produced. But the latest surge of mobiles and laptops and the humane urge to remain connected to the world had compelled them to use Gensets for fail proof electricity round the clock. Yet, they provided only a single electric port in each room, an intelligent strategy to keep a check on the electricity wastage.

The group dumped their bags in one of the rooms they were allotted and went around for a look, only to find themselves amidst the magnificent rainforests and a lush green coffee estate, a natural environment that was both soothing and sublime, and was emphasized by the silence of the rainforests. The group had yet not come to terms with the feeling of being in a jungle. It was only when a leech got the good of Sharmaji's little toe and a small baby scorpion fell off the roof of the dining hall, right upon Somya's neatly tied hair and slipped onto the table right in front of everyone's naked eyes, that it struck them. To usher away any confusion, Ajit's indifferent attitude and suggestion to treat a scorpion bite with turmeric powder confirmed that this trip was going to be a real *JUNGLEE* one. Ajit is the son of the owner of Honey Valley and takes care of the most of the operation for visitors.

All meals at Honey Valley are vegetarian and served as buffet at specific timings. Non-vegetarian items can be ordered in advance. They had their first breakfast around 9 in the morning. The breakfast was delicious, so much that they couldn't restrain themselves from enjoying a fully fledged feast. Hungry since the last night, the group let themselves loose on the local pineapple jam and awesomely smooth butter. It tasted like ambrosia. For the next two days, they were the most consumed items. Toasts with jam or butter were complemented by a cup of homegrown coffee. In addition, the Set-Dosa and Idlis combined with the irresistible chutney and crunchy Chana Salad, made the whole dining experience memorable.

Kashmir of South

Coorg is surely a trekker's paradise, and Honey Valley its capital, with strategically significant location and fantastically planned itinerary. Honey Valley (4250 ft.) serves as a base camp for the Mt. Thadiyandamol Trek (5730 ft), but that takes almost a full day and requires a guide if one wants to spend the night back in the valley. The small treks around Honey Valley present a marvelous opportunity for young people, travelling independently, to gain some trekking experience. While attempting the same, a number of people have been reportedly rescued after they lost the way, under the veil of darkness as the night fell suddenly, and wandered off into the thicker vegetation.

Nikhil and his friends weren't prepared for such expedition the very first morning. Curious though, the group started a leisurely walk over an ascending trail, hoping to gain some height for a clearer, panoramic view of the valley. The colorful flowers and variegated leaves manifested a beauty so fascinating, that it could only have been painted by the Creator on the cosmic canvas. A plant that really caught their attention was the one with red leaves. From a distance, those small red cymes of leaves looked like flowers and their yellow buds look liked the insides of a flower. The boys failed to blink, their conscious spellbound by the nature. Strikingly colored leaves lay on the way, dropped freshly during the rains of last night. The artist in the girls seized the opportunity at once, collecting them for a catalogue that might come true someday. At the same time, they did not pluck any single leaf or flower from the trees.

After a handful, correctly speaking, four handfuls of leaves and flowers, they noticed that the road was still ascending. No opening was in sight up till where they could see on the straight road. The slope was now steeper and the overnight rains had made the mud slippery. It was then decided that the girls would head back, as they had put on their 'not for trek' sleepers and weren't prepared for this first part of trek. Few hours of rest would rejuvenate them for the next round of exploration. The chirpy ladies turned away, chatting enthusiastically, probably discussing their plans for the collection. The boys trudged on.

Half km ahead was a junction with a dry pit at the center. Numerous paths started in various directions from where they stood. The track, right opposite to the one they came from, went downhill- not an interesting choice for the moment. There were a couple of spiraling trails

which would take them back in the same direction, but on a higher elevation. There were a few jeep trails, but they lacked the invitation which the pristine jungles, on the south of the junction, promised. One had to crane for a view of the ridge behind the tree tops. There was a guy sitting at mouth of the jungle. Attempts to ask for directions revealed that he couldn't hear or speak. Obviously, he was good with signs. They later came to know him to be one of the attendants at Honey Valley, quite helpful and understanding. Appreciating his spirit of suggestion, they started for the ridge on the south through the dense wilderness, oblivious to the future, as to whether the path would lead them to their intended destination. The trail was a wild one, could be traversed only on foot. Light faded as the trees slowly closed in. They kept walking through the thick avenue of rosewood and figs. The ground was strewn with discolored, disfigured fruits and leaves. One could hardly see the sky; sunlight streamed through sporadic gaps overhead. Nikhil got hold of a piece of a branch which came handy to figure out the topography before stepping upon it. Their ears became abnormally sensitive. The silence was complete, with occasional rustle of leaves catching immediate attention. They walked noiselessly, slowly, suppressing any urge to talk, lest it disturbed the fauna in their almost meditative calm. Still, half an hour into the jungle, it came alive with the shrill whistling sounds of insects all around. Strangely, the high pitched frequency did not devoid the jungle of any of its stillness and the charm. On the contrary, it added to its exoticism. Nature has its own weird ways.

After crossing over mud sludge, rotten branches and slippery roots, the boys came to a clearing at an altitude which allowed them to gaze at the enormity of what they had achieved in the last hour. And yet half of the peak remained to be scaled. The hill overlooked another one at a distance further south with a playful, thin stream of water gurgling down its steep slopes, draping the hills before plunging into the valley below. The view was so stunning, Shah Jahan's quote for Kashmir was the first thing that came to Saumyak's conscious, and truly so.

“गर फिरदौस-ए-जमीनस्त, हमीनस्त-ओ-हमीनस्त-ओ-हमीनस्त”

If there's heaven anywhere on earth, it's here, it's here, and it's here.

It was nearing noon. To make it back to the resort in time after conquering the peak, they had to keep moving. Unconsciously, they followed a gentle imperceptible curve, as the track cunningly branched away from them and ended up on the steep slopes of the northern side of the ridge, overlooking Honey Valley. The climb shifted from trailed jungle path to unmarked bushes and the steep ridge offered no confidence to the young climbers. Their nerves quivered with the strain. Sharmaji took charge, dug through the bushes on to non existence pathways to lead the group right to the top of the hill. They stopped only an hour later, after achieving a feat which seemed a distant dream an hour ago. Traversing ridge after ridge, they came at the topmost point.

The view from hilltop itself was exalting, above the clouds with fleeting glimpses of the Kodagu valley in a distance. And there was Thadiyandamol, the highest peak in Coorg, standing tall to their west. For centuries, it had been the lone sentinel, towering over lesser peaks and serving as a landmark to seafarers. Extensive forests clothed every mountain range almost up to the summit. Even the highest quality of print would be grossly inadequate to capture the awe-inspiring scenery.

The achievement called for a few clicks and what better than to unfold a flag for the winners pose. The boys tried to send out jubilant messages to the girls down in the valley, with a double intention to transmit the information about them being safe. But the ladies' phones weren't reachable.

The mobiles were switched off and put on charge, while the ladies enjoyed a recharging nap.*

After treating their eyes with the fruits of the hard work they put in, the boys started back, this time on a relatively easier trail downhill. The boys never lost the track of main trail all the way down to the valley. By the time they reached their rooms, more than 3 hours had passed away and the girls were ready after a bath. Rejuvenated with the trip, the boys decided for quick bath in turns. They were surprised to find hot water available for usage.

The water was heated in a boiler tank, burning firewood fed beneath the boiler, at the back of the bathroom. The mouth of the tank was in the bathroom which, when uncovered, filled it with steam within no time - an innovative technique to enjoy the steam bath amongst the cold hills of Kodagu. The smell of the burning firewood mixed with the steam, the spicy aroma of the hills and the scented breeze, created an experience at par with what any nature spa could promise back in the city.

While one of them went for the bath, the discussion ensued as to how the water warmed over wood is much softer than water boiled in the geyser or over fossil fuels. '*Bakwas*' was scaling new height.

* Later, the girls discussed that they had almost imagined the boys to be shrieking out loudly from atop the hill. But, alas! It's the cell phones they were trying to reach. It almost makes one realise how even in a completely pristine and natural setting, technology is very much a part of our lives.

'Thamma'

Nikhil and Saumyak went for a stroll down the road after a heavy lunch - heavy because they couldn't stop overeating the irresistible beetroot sabji and divine ghee which enhanced the taste of delightful cuisines. Somya and Prachi went to request for a jeep to assist Somya's brother Anant, who was about to arrive at the foothills at Kabinakkad junction in sometime. Ultimately, it was decided that the jeep, already at the junction, will wait for Anant to arrive and bring him up to the resort. Anant was coming from Mangalore, where he was pursuing BE in Electronics and Instrumentation at Manipal College. He had travelled all the way in KSRTC local bus to Madikeri and from there on in the rickety bus to Kabinakkad.

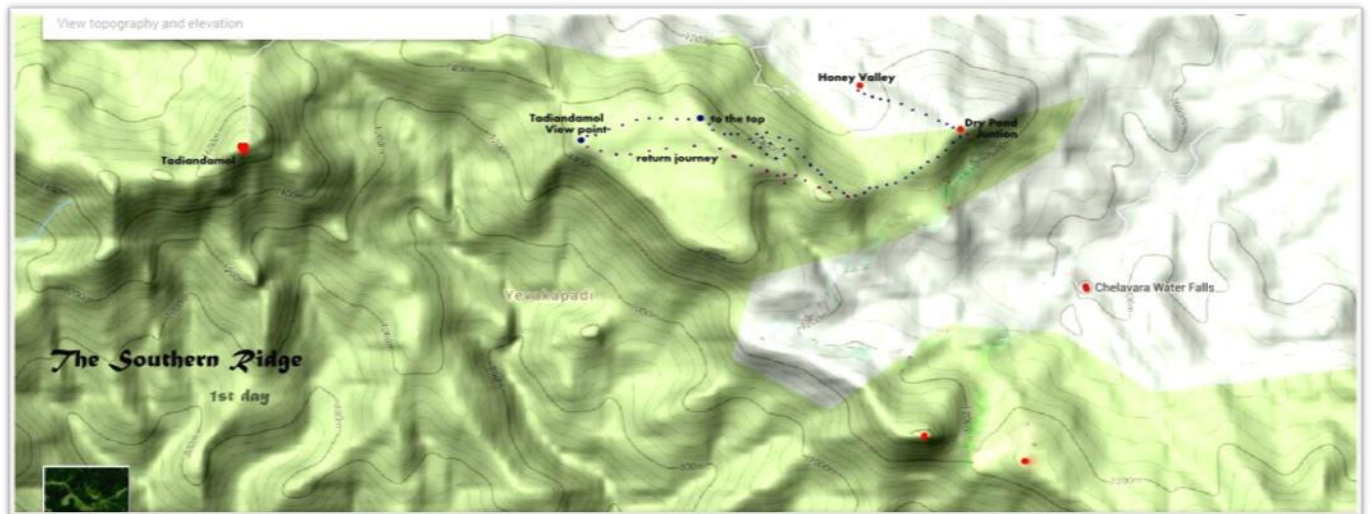
While Saumyak and Nikhil waited at the small stream beside the road, they heard the jeep approaching. Speculating that Anant might be in there, they called out his name. A young lad peeped out. Thumbs-up, and the jeep was gone. The group was now complete. They followed it on foot.

Anant had his lunch while the introductions were done. A boy in early 20s, he was smart, witty and frank. These inherent qualities helped him acclimatize with the group quickly. Being younger to everyone, he became their favorite in no time. The day had been tiring so far; add to it exhaustion of travel of the night before and you get five people tired to their bones. A peaceful sleep was most welcome.

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It was late by the time Nikhil woke Saumyak up for the dinner. Half asleep they made it to the dining hall to eat whatever they could lay their hands upon. The steaming hot cup of tea was welcomed heartily. As the sleep slowly drifted away, night became clearer. As the evening deepened, the level of discussion grew intense. Sharmaji entertained with a session of book reading, eventually ending up in multi-dimensional discussions on varied topics ranging from Somya's financial expertise to Sharmaji's discourse on instrumentation, targeted mainly at enlightening Anant. A stroll in the chilling night was agreed upon sportingly. A group wandered off on the undulating paths of the resort to finally halt at a junction, trying to recognize the sweet

fragrance filling up the air. The night wore a distinctive deafening silence, interrupted only by croak of toads. The dark sky was illuminated by none but the lone Moon. Here, on this auspicious occasion the girls were introduced to the greatest movie of all time -- MithunDa in and as Gunda. Everyone consented to retire before the laughter grew loud enough to warrant, as Sharmaji put it, a flying chappal out of the thin air. It was “Shabba Khair” for the night.



Hirudinea

We are particularly drawn to nature not for the sake of the health, but because it's an escape from human anthill, from the human competition and our own dramas. That's why we like to be in contact with something that is non human. That's why we enjoy looking at glaciers and oceans and like contemplating what earth looks like from beyond. Coorg with its spectacular visual treat of emerald green hills, lush forests, serpentine streams and myriad colorful blooms, provided Saumyak and his friends the much needed respite from the hectic city life.

The travel and adventures of the previous day took their toll on most of the group. Everyone decided to duck the early morning plans of trekking. They woke late and got ready in parts, few before the breakfast and the rest after that. The breakfast was equally exquisite as the last day. Novel combinations of Idlis with jams tasted interestingly good. The pineapple jam left behind a beautiful aftertaste. It was unanimously decided to go for a trek together. Nikhil procured a guide book to discuss on the numerous trek opportunities around Honey Valley. A medium trek was chosen. Within the next hour they were ready in comfortable clothing; loose tops with pajamas, cool t-shirts and three quarters, kurta with jeans. Nikhil still wore his favorite khaki gift attire. Shoes were strung tight to keep away the expected leeches. For lunch, picnic-pack meals were provided by Honey Valley, specially prepared for trekking purposes. It consisted of loafs of bread, boiled eggs and tomato and cucumber, along with a knife to slice them for sandwiches. Packets of biscuits and jam were also put in. With few bottles of drinking water they were set for the day's expedition.

-----X-----X-----

The group started on the old path, climbing to the south just beyond the coffee plantation. An elderly couple stood at the fork, offering free odomos paste to the trekkers. The fact was they had a odomos-tube malfunction and it had spewed all its content within their bag. In order to wipe it clean, they had come up this philanthropic idea, which benefitted Nikhil's group enormously. Saumyak was trailing behind, finishing off some important task with his brother in the States over phone, lest it was too late in the night there. By the time he reached the site of action, everyone was done with the chore.

“Free Odomos. Do you need some?”, the elderly couple still needed a small bit of help.

“*Tho’r’a sa*”. Saumyak blurted out, in the same tone that he was conversing with his brother. Laughter rang aloud. He smiled back sheepishly and went ahead with applying the remaining cream all over ankles, up to his calf muscles and the bare, exposed arms.

The light mood helped the group keep up the pace till they came to the first fork. Two roads diverged in a wood; they took the one less traveled by, and that made all the difference. They never reached the dry pond. Treading over the moss-covered parapet of the fallen trunks, they came face to face with dreads of the trek. Nikhil got himself a branch once again, but soon, it became clear that everyone was going to need a smaller one for themselves. The mire, with minimal sunlight and abundance of littered leaves, was the breeding ground for variety of crawlers and creepers. Vegetation thickened as they proceeded and so did the leeches. In the first 20 minutes, they had already crossed over poisonous scorpions and heard a snake slithering through the leaves – well it sounded so. These lands were abundant with cobras, Saumyak himself had come face to face with one in his last visit to Coorg. But these could be avoided with a constant vigil, so weren’t that serious a threat.

Their principal concerns were the unavoidable leeches that thronged the moist mud. The horror of a leech is that they do their crawling-on-the-body completely unbeknownst to the victim. When they dine, they need to attach themselves to the humans. So they secrete some special, wormy superglue to stay stuck to the skin. They only leave behind a sickening calling card that they had visited. Or one would never know they’d been there or that they’d drank their blood.

Saumyak tried to assess the situation quickly - Anant with 3 quarter short was least affected and so was Nikhil with boots for shoes. Saumyak soon folded his pajama up to his knees, denying any leech a chance to hang on to it. The strategy also helped to identify any leech clinging to the shoes and drive them off before they could get to the skin. But, Somya and Sharmaji weren’t that lucky, with a number of leeches managing to jump up past their sneaker, and sock. It was a feast of blood. One reached almost a foot above Somya’s ankle, all the while under the cover of her thick blue jeans. Though she couldn’t see, she felt something working its awful, slimy way up her leg. She disposed the thought off, presuming it to be an illusion. It was only when it dribbled off like a thick gob of spit sliding down a sleeping invalid’s chin, that she knew that it was all real. Prachi escaped leeches’ wrath with sheer vigil, leeching them out every few minutes before they could have their way.

They kept moving on. That’s what human species are infamous for- stubborn, never giving up.

The path opened up on a jeep trail, yet there was no respite from leeches. An attempt to take an offbeat route on steep slopes towards west couldn't succeed due to the dense vegetation. It was relatively drier up there, but the path was untraceable. The jungle had grown dead silent once again. They caught every noise their feet made, with the slightest variation. The small twigs crackled and the leaves swished as they stepped over them. The shoes landed with a thud on occasional patches of bare land. Pish-pish-pat-crack-swish-pit-pat-swish-ssssh..... They stopped, looked around for the slithering reptile, and when they failed to detect it, they wished to be back on the jeep track. The group continued through slushy mud and blood thirsty leeches on the jeep track, which rounded along the hills' base from west to north on a downhill trend. A score of stops later, for leeching out potential blood suckers, they came to relatively drier grounds with lighter vegetation. The road suddenly dropped very steeply, but gave the much needed respite from the havoc of the last hour. People made the most out of it. The focus was now able to shift towards appreciating the flora and fauna around. Funny - how the personal tragedy affects the individual's approach to the appreciation of the beauty of the world.

Moving ahead, once the group found better grounds and the peace of mind, the rich flora and fauna appeared fascinating. The spiders weaving glittering webs that sparkled in the sunlight streaming through the leaves, the butterflies with white and blue and yellow and orange patches on their black wings, the red slug with orangish tint, the snails which rounded themselves into balls as they felt feet approaching, the dragon-flies that hummed above their head - kaleidoscopic nature presented itself in all possible hues and features.

The red flower bunches with red stems, whorled leaves, green, yellow, red and black berries, aromatic pure white jasmine-like flowers, few Coorg roses in their rustic simplicity, the *Gloriosa Superba* with its flaming corolla, the *Melastoma Malabarican* with its strange looking ribbed leaves and splendid mauve colored flowers, and the *Ardisia Humilis*, with translucent rose-colored flowers that look as if they had been cut out of a rare cornelian; these and many other flowering shrubs and herbs greeted the eye here.¹ As the jungle thinned around them, they tried their best to recognize the trees around them. *Bastard Sago* was the favorite to the eyes, but its name eluded the mind at that moment. *Areca Palm* occasionally kept it company, and their foliage, blended with the dense crown of the stately mango or jack tree. They could also look at the paddy fields in a distance, their boundaries maintained by banana groves alongside the coffee estates.

Once the mood was set, the cheery lot geared back into the '*bakwas*' mood. Half an hour of discussion ensued on the cow dung lying at peace on the track, since the last day. The dried crust confirmed so. It was bisected, trisected, gifted and ran around with. Finally, and thankfully, it was thrown away. Two of them were busy procuring some sports news of their interest. Saumyak was enthusiastic with India's eleventh gold in Asiad, whereas Anant was sad as he couldn't lay his eyes or ears upon news for Japanese Grand prix trials. His frowned brows

straightened half an hour later when he heard about his favorite, Hamilton, being the victor. He felt at ease. Despite all these enthusiasm, they were now feeling a bit hungry.

Around 4 hours after they had started from Honey Valley, the group was back at Kabinakkad junction. As the hunger grew unbearable, they grabbed a quick bite of Malabar parathas at the small dhaba round the corner, enjoying the brightly decorated buses and cars driving past them. It reminded them, it was Vijayadashmi. The 10 days long festivities of Dussehra would come to an end all across India. But little did it matter to all of them, then.

Roaming leisurely on the Madikeri- Virajpet road, they came across a quiet, peaceful field with a Peepal tree at the center. Two cows, tied to its roots, were intently grazing the lush green grasses at one end. There was small hand pump at the mouth of field. Few splashes of cold water helped them wash off some of their fatigue. The spot around the tree was worth absorbing, with vast stretches of verdant paddy fields and dark tall hills towering over them as a beautiful back ground. For the next hour and half, all of them had an experience of lifetime- resting in the Peepal's shade, spending time caressing the innocent cows and chatting with the cute kids hanging around. The kids offered guavas to everyone in celebration of the new friendship. In turn, Akshay and his friend, the sweet kids with cute faces, went back with packet of biscuits from Prachi and Somya. Still, this kind gesture of the adults stood paled in comparison to the loving welcome the kids offered to the complete strangers.

Soon after, the sky darkened. Igguthappa, Deva of the four lands, had smiled. Along with him, he had brought rain all the way from God's own country down south. The amplified sounds of a rainforest at a distance came alive. There couldn't be better climax to all the proceedings, other than an irresistibly inviting rain. Far from the polluted city, the air was freshened up with a soft petrichor. Saumyak could not help himself but soak in the heartening drizzle. After Saumyak it was Somya's turn to enjoy God's blessing- refreshingly rejuvenating and remarkably memorable rains. The group had their picnic lunch under the shed at opposite corner of the field. The weather called for music. Individuals played songs of their choices, "Chappa Chappa Charkha Chale" being an instant hit with everyone. Nikhil and Sharmaji had a small walk down to the paddy fields before everyone decided it was high time to get back to Honey Valley.

¹ Saumyak searched out these names later on internet.

Lost

They had a liking for the wrong trails; they took yet another wrong one within 15 min of the ascent. The energy levels were running a bit low, legs made lesser noise treading heavily on the leaves along the rocky paths. Saumyak alarmed everyone of this being a wrong turn, his sense of direction guiding him that they were drifting away from Honey valley. It was already past 4 in the evening and was not advisable to look for new roads. They were discussing their options, still on move, when they came across a small flower orchid with hundreds of butterflies fluttering around. Every butterfly was a vibrant, artistically expressive depiction of a colorful life with stunning wing patterns and unique behavioral characteristics. The brilliantly colored flora was bound to attract their varied species. These delicate creatures in turn would spread the pollen and help the rainforest thrive. The hue left everyone wide-eyed, wanting more of nature's display of richness. After few exclamation of wonder and '*cuteness*' of the situation, the group decided to turn back and retrace the correct path, but without Saumyak and Sharmaji.

Having come this far, both of them decided to explore the jungle ahead for next half an hour, in search of any path that could reconnect them to the designated old one. In case they couldn't reach to a discernible conclusion by 5 o'clock, they would turn back to make it to the Kabbinakad junction before nightfall. The group split. It was a race now.

Saumyak and Sharmaji re-entered the kingdom of leeches, this time more careful. A noise emanating from the stream somewhere ahead guided them. After following it for long, it dawned upon them; the rivulet was winding along the trail all the time. The road still kept turning away from the expected direction, crossing through coffee plantation before entering the denser trees with tangled thorny underwood and creepers. Favored by the constantly moist atmosphere, the stems of many of the trees were speckled with lichens, or covered with rare orchids, mosses, and other parasites. The right turn took them across the torrent ahead, over the fallen logs, on a zigzag path to a big house in the middle of nowhere, a much needed stopover for the tired lads. They came across a man sleeping in the veranda. Upon enquiring for Honey Valley, both the boys were relieved to be pointed to the beaten path, down the hill towards west. A bottle of water was thankfully gulped down in no time. They took leave from the cheerful compassionate family to get to the track before it grew dark. The remaining part of the trail was much more scenic. Curving along a deep trench, running over small hedges and lastly crossing over a fence to merge onto the road to honey valley, just beyond the stream where Saumyak and Nikhil had been waiting for Anant the other day.

Both of them raced to the stream, took their clothes off and went under the icy-cold water in the small fall at the end of the stream. Before that, they did confirm with Nikhil of their whereabouts. The other group was resting at Chingara homestay, nursing Somya's two fresh leech bites and discussing life in these mountains with the manager. They would still take more than 15 minutes to reach up to the stream. The window was good enough for the two boys, already at the falls to wash away weariness of the intriguing day with fresh cold water of the tributary of Kaveri. They sat there, water rushing over their body, spreading the feeling of oneness with nature. They were dressed and ready by the time the rest of the group joined them. Rejuvenated and rekindled, they traversed the remaining path to Honey Valley barefooted. The day's expedition came to an end, but not before it had left an indelible mark on everyone.



And Found

Back at Honey Valley two plates of onion pakodas and french fries with steaming cup of coffee brought life back to everyone. Fresh round of emotional discussion gained momentum at the snacks table. This time it revolved mostly around understanding everyone's life at their respective jobs and their choices in life. People came to term with Sharmaji's paradox of having deep knowledge at electronics but working as a Software Administrator in Accenture. Somya was back at MBA job with Genpact after YIF, but she did have a complete new perception to the job and life after her stint with YIF. Anant was the one still away from the tensions of the daily life, peacefully awaiting placements at college. Nikhil was happy with Xilinx, while Prachi was busy preparing for higher studies at Oxford or Cambridge. As of Saumyak, he had no plans for future, yet. Probably, he was still learning on experiences of life and surely, with a lifetime of experience on this trip itself. Over the years, his own experiences, people he observed, and situations that made an impression upon him would filter subtly into the stories he planned to write.

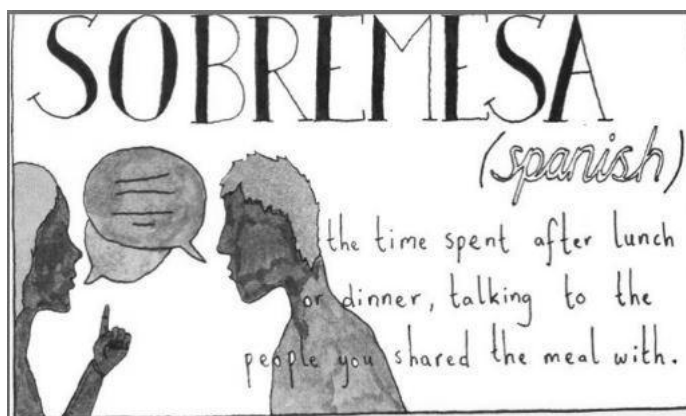
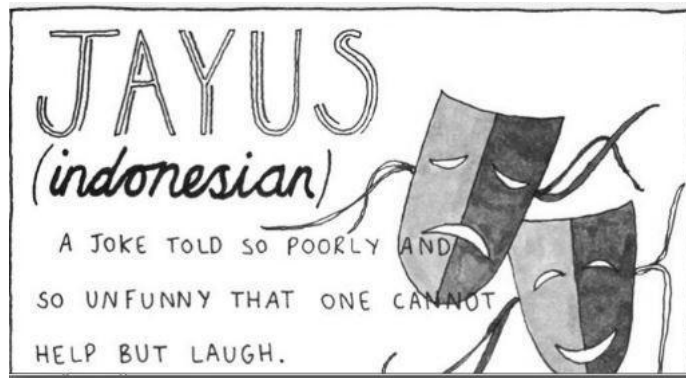
The group sat around a table in one corner for the light dinner. They waited on the last tea of the day while discussing personal interests and hobbies. Art hogged the limelight; Music, to be particular. Nikhil, Somya and Saumyak were the listeners to the discussion between Sharmaji, Anant and Prachi on the English genre - bands, both Indian and western, songs from Beatles to Metallica and music events around the country. After an enthusiastic debate on the 70s rock and 90s jazz, the group narrowed down to 90s pop of India. Songs of Rehman, Alisha Chinoy, Phalguni Pathak and Euphoria, reminiscent of the childhood, brought back nostalgia. The frenzy about Altaf Raja and Himesh were fondly remembered.

Everyone in the valley was asleep. The chill of the night was slowly creeping in the dining hall. Lone bulb dangling over their table looked ghostly.

On this eventful night, the group crossed the frontiers of heterogeneity and entered the realm of harmonious companionship. Saumyak's new explanation of a *parallel universe* in Bihar, added a full storey to already multistoried level of the '*bakwas*'. They talked, joyfully, of Somya's Punjaaaaabi accent, and Saumyak's '*cute*' Bihari accent of 'R' instead of 'D' with an extra second of emphasis towards the end of the word. It was more of a curious, informative, fun filled query rather than a judgmental decision which was common with accents. A new dimension of friendship came into existence, where everyone pulled legs of the other, but at the

same time accepted them in their entirety. The individuals, now, understood each other much better than they did two days ago. The group had developed a bond, they had *found* the truth of each other, the beautiful truth that hides somewhere in the day to day struggle of life. The truth of an individual's traits, in one sense, is reflected in his choice of music. To rightly guess and play the favorite songs of other members in the group, proved this intimacy, the bond of hearts and souls. For an outsider, it would have been impossible to guess that most of them were completely unacquainted a couple of days back.

The night ended with unsuccessful guess for the second nostalgic hit from the band Junoon. Prachi was confident there were two, to which Sharmaji responded with a '*kuchh bhi!*'. Somya had a similar claim for Rahat Fateh Ali Khan in the movie Kalyug. After a bit of investigation and digging around, she gracefully accepted that she was mistaken. She might have been wrong but her grace had won the day.



Enjoying the Jayus AT Sobremesa

The Last Lunch

The group had planned a quieter last day in the valley. It was a pleasant Saturday morning and the sun was unwrapping itself with ease. Everyone woke up late; Sharmaji was first to wake up. By the time he was back from his morning stroll, Saumyak was up. Together, they idled away their time reading books in the warmth of the sun, peeking from behind a veil of mist. The valley was coming back to life. Birds chirped and toads croaked, the trees swayed with the breeze. Soon, Nikhil and Somya were up and ready for breakfast. All of them enjoyed watching the birds that flocked the valley. Waking up Prachi was tough nut to crack. Five unsuccessful attempts and they gave up on her.

Once Nikhil got to the dining hall, the freshly prepared malabar parathas formed a foolproof idea in his mind. Prachi, being an ardent lover of malabar parathas, would never miss any chance to enjoy them in authentic Kodavu setup. In the next five minutes, Nikhil was back with Prachi on his heels. The birds were chirping at their peak. Somya was still laughing at Saumyak's further description of Bihar's *parallel universe*. Sharmaji was busy with 'Hitchhikers Guide to Galaxy' while Anant was still asleep. It was a beautiful morning.

'Let's take a stroll to the waterfall down the path', Saumyak suggested. Everyone joined him.

They came upon groves of orange, lime, guava, rose apple, pomegranate, and clumps of plantain trees, all of which thrive remarkably well. The rocky, muddy patch of road started as soon as they crossed the boundaries of Honey Valley. Everyone grew conscious, and rightly so. They instantly became conscious of the thirsty bloodsucker leeches, ready for their breakfast. Already traumatized by the last day's events, Sharmaji and Somya decided to quit before the situation turned uglier. The fact, that none of them had their shoes on, made it much easier for them to decide. A 180-degree turn and back they climbed. Few of them had started feeling weary sensation beneath the sandal straps. Paying little heed to the urgency of the situation, they kept pressing on till they reached the huts. Surprise awaited them.

Of course, Anant was up, but that wasn't the surprise. The surprise presented itself when Somya took off her sandals to find a thick leech stuck on the outer side of right feet, just beyond the small finger. She could see that rotten thing wallowing in her blood, squirming with pleasure, getting fat and juicy. In general, if pulled out while it's still pigging out, it leaves behind an

awful smudge of black-red blood which takes a long time to clot. Everyone suggested letting it fall off by itself. At that moment the attendant, from the jungle trek of the first day, happened to come around. He understood the situation pretty quickly, and with one swipe of his hand, pulled the leech forcefully away. Blood spurted out. There was blood everywhere- on his hand, on the leech, on Somya's foot, on the chair, and on the floor. Blood, blood everywhere. Newspaper and tissues were of no help. It just didn't stop. Leech had left his calling card mark on Somya's foot and a tragic one in her memories.

They learnt, later, that particular breed of leech was infamous for attaching to human skin and sucking blood for hours. That's why, the attendant pulled it off right away. But the damage was already done. The blood oozing out from the wound subsided only after two hours. Somya rested for most of the time, her legs put up on the chair to reduce the flow of blood to the feet. People moved around, read books, exchanged videos and discussed images. Philosophies were discussed and nations conquered. Environmental problems were solved and unimaginable feats were achieved within those 2 hours. Somya added a potpourri of thoughts to the idea of '*bakwas*' until it was time to get some food.

The lunch was laid down on buffet table, a sort of a Smorgasbord of local cuisines. Local Kodavu delicacies are genuinely a travelers' delight. They enjoyed their *last* lunch at Honey Valley, comprising tangy mango curry, smoking red beetroot sabji, and numerous items of varied flavors: some sweet, some salty, slightly spicy; to their fullest. *Last*, because by the same time the next day, they would have left, headed back to the hustle bustle of the city life.

The description, on its length and artistic nature proves in itself the amount of lunch the group enjoyed. Over the lunch, another discussion ensued - Books of choice and places in India one would love to settle in. Saumyak was thankful no one pointed him out for answering this question. Mountains were an obvious favorite. But Sharmaji's answer, which was, in reality, a cross question for a comparison between peace and amenities, left the final conclusion elusive.

It was also decided to hire a jeep for Nalknad palace. This was later changed to the sunset point at the Chomakunda Hill. They had exactly one hour to get ready before the jeep arrived. Prachi decided to stay back to finish off with some of the applications she was working on, for the higher colleges. The remaining 5 hurried with the preparations.

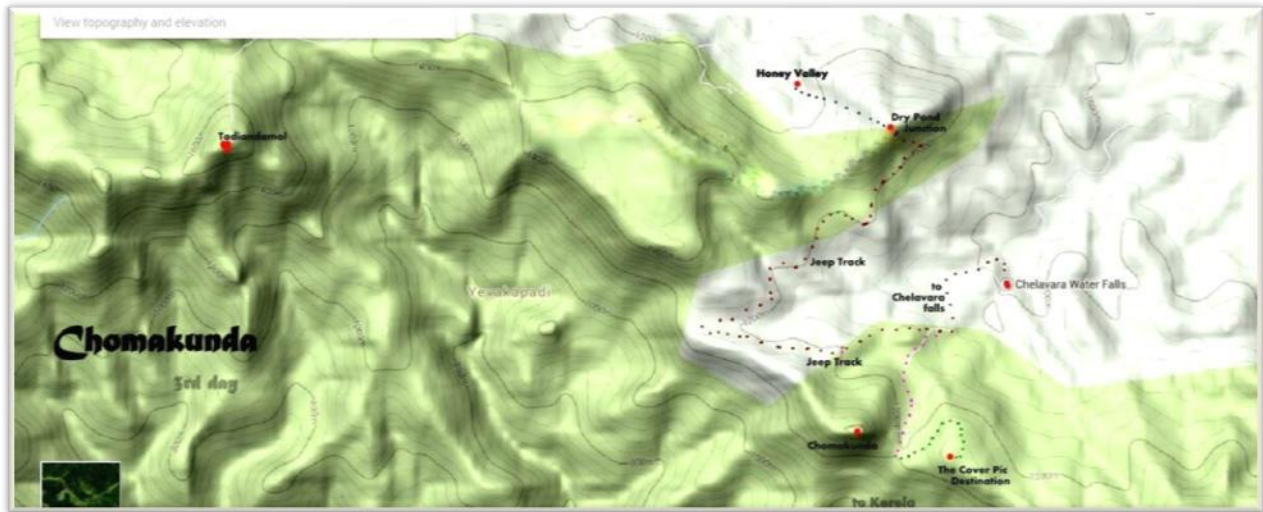
Scotland of India

It rained heavily during the lunch, but by 4 o'clock the rain had turned into a light drizzle. While boys were getting ready, Somya enjoyed having her pictures clicked with the blue umbrella. Anant had a black one and the rest counted on Mother Nature to save her blessing of love for sometime till it was dark. By the time the jeep arrived they were ready with the umbrella and torches. The driver, Swamy, was a cheerful fellow. He answered all the questions thrown at him by Somya and Nikhil related to life around the coffee plantations. He told them that he used to work in Bangalore, but moved back to the village as there were ample opportunities right by his home. He generally drove vehicles from coffee plantations, transporting the goods around. They were 3 brothers. One of his brothers worked in a software company in Bangalore and the youngest one was pursuing engineering in Mangalore. This conversation painted a lively picture of developing India.

Swamy introduced them to a majestic forest tree, the *Lepurandra Saccidora*. It flowers in October, in very peculiar catkins something like a common mulberry. The fruit is in size and shape like a small fig, covered with a beautiful purple-colored down. The people of Coorg manufacture very curious sacks from the bark. A branch is cut corresponding to the length and diameter of the sack wanted. It is soaked a little, and then beaten with clubs until the liber separates from the wood. This done, the sack formed of the bark is turned inside out and pulled down close to the extremity, where the wood is cut off, leaving a thin piece to form the bottom of the sack. These sacks were formerly much used for carrying rice; some of them may be seen in the Mysore Museum.

They travelled for more than an hour. It was a bumpy ride over the rocks, crossing a number of jungles on the edge of hills one after the other, alternately coming to open spaces before entering into another, denser one. Access to this large landscape, helped them look upon Coorg with the eye of a forester, discovering invaluable treasures of timber trees and their produce, scattered all over the province. Festoons of wild pepper, the gigantic creeper which in turn supported the more slender herbaceous vines of *convolvulus* and *ipomoea*, stretched from tree to tree in the most fantastic interlacing, and gorgeously decorated the grand timber trees verdant with their foliage and many-hued flowers. It was the deciduous part of jungles, noted for the excellence of their timber or other useful qualities, beautiful and sweet scented flowers. They went past a volleyball court, a couple of lonely houses amidst misty coffee plantations; small

streams and dams adding to the charm of the perfection of beauty in the poetical fancy of the Coorg bard.



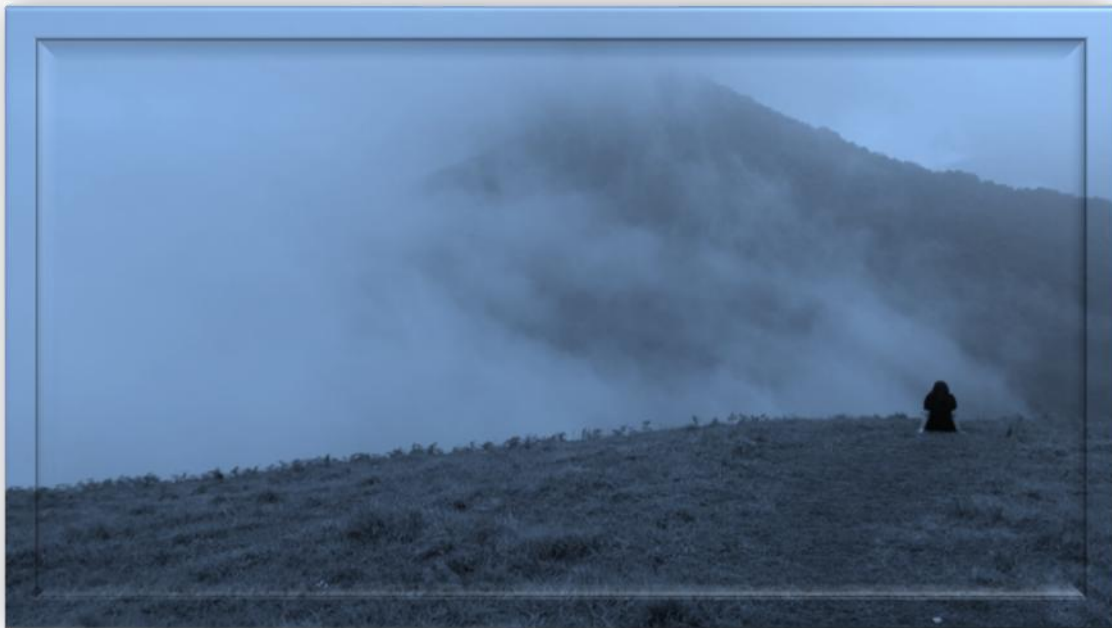
The jeep-ride/trek to Chelavara/Chomakunda

Chomakund is on the border between Karnataka and Kerala in the districts of Kodagu and Kannur, respectively, a part of a hill range that consists of the better renowned Chelavara, only two kilometers away. Chelavara falls are at the base of Chomakund Hill, a small detour from the established route to the sunset point. With more than an hour for the sun to set, they parked the vehicle on the road and followed other tourists to the falls. After an easy climb and narrow and very steep descent, the path ended on bare rocks. The rock standing to the right presented a stunning view. An imposing, monolithic cliff, approximately 70 feet high, was being washed with two different streams of water plunging down after crossing through the coffee plantations on their way. Chelavara falls is also called *Embepare* in Kodava Takk due to the resemblance of the rock at the falls to Tortoise. The roar of water gushing through the crevices on to the lush green coffee fields ahead, drowned away all other sounds, making the place, though full of people, calm and peaceful. Nikhil and Sharmaji went on to explore a corner right beneath the waterfall and Saumyak followed suit - a wrong move. Though they had a wonderful, enduring view from that vantage point, they slipped into water while climbing down the steep rocks moistened by splatter. Bit embarrassed, and lot more wet, they made it back across the pool without any further mishaps. Few selfies, poses and pictures of 'Somya playing with the water' were clicked hastily to make it back to the jeep in time. The daylight was fading. Five minutes later, the jeep was on its way to the last stop a couple of kilometers ahead.

About half an hour before the day was about to end, progressing into a cold dark night, the group started the climb on the grassy slope of the Chomakund. While coming from Chelavara falls, the jeep took them to the pond right between the Chomakund on the left and Kabbe hills on

the right. It was easy to differentiate the two - Kabbe is enveloped by a set of thick trees that somehow leave the peak barren and bare, while Chomakund is open, meadow-like grassland which thrive in the monsoons. The trail began at the base of the hill and was easy to traverse without any guide.

The climb was a cakewalk compared to what they had already been through, in the last two days. Slippery mud couldn't dampen their spirits. They ran to the top stepping on coarse blades of grass, at least few of them did. Nikhil and Sharmaji soon disappeared amongst the clouds that engulfed the entire range. Anant was waiting far ahead from Saumyak and Somya. Somya was a tad dull than her usual energetic self. Traumatized of the leeches, she didn't trust the grasses, and the mud made it difficult for her to continue at a high pace without slipping. Halfway to the top, she was tired to her bones, yet was trying her best to keep pace on pure zeal. Saumyak talked her through the rest of the climb, discussing the scenic beauty that lay all around. Lost in the stupendous display of nature's bounty, he fell victim to 3 leeches that had slowly crept up to his ankles. The sun glazed on their back, emerging out of the clouds to bestow a golden hue to the peaks. The view was astounding, though short lived. The Valley was bathed in gold before the silvery clouds came rushing in.



After ten minutes of climb and all the '*bakwas*' by Saumyak and Somya, they were at the highest point. They had to wade through the knee long grasses as they neared the top. The hills stretched infinitely further towards the south-east. As and when the clouds dispersed, one could see the ranges far ahead to the core of Brahmagiri Forest Reserve. Towards the south-west, the undulating topography, carpeted in green covered with a misty veil, between the alternate ranges of Chelavara ended up somewhere in Kerala. They could only get a glimpse before the mist veiled their sight. The Kabbe hills, towering over the rest, wore a white cloak and disappeared from view. After coming to terms with the insignificance of humans compared to the mighty mountains, they captured few memories in the mobiles to relive them, sometime later. The scenery was breathtaking beautiful; mystically divine. Grasses merged into clouds at the horizon to create a heavenly experience. Everyone stood still, stopped the sound from their feet; drenching themselves in the shower of nature's beauty.

Somya was busy shuffling her lush long strands, warding off the wind trying to play with her hair. That mild sunshine glowed like a liquid chocolate off her skin, dimming those eyelids embracing the tranquility of the moment. It was here that she quoted the cover quote about being the inconsequential speck in the grand scheme of things. There was a pure poetry in her glorious existence.

On the way back, Somya's right knee hurt. Saumyak grabbed the chance to show off his excellence and experience by suggesting few corrective measures as to step on rocks and use grassy patches. Ironical, for he himself had a condition with his knees and Somya had a trekking experience in the Himalayas. She decided to let him feel privileged while she smiled under the blanket of darkness that had spread quickly in the last few minutes. By the time they were back to the jeep, it was pitch dark. The trip back to the Honey Valley between the dead silent and dark jungle was an unforgettable experience. To add to the memories, hanging out from the back of the jeep, feeling the burst of fresh air on the face as the jeep cruised through the jungle, peering through the way ahead, bathed in yellow jeep headlight and ducking as a low branch brushed along, made this part of the trip as good as any trek on foot.

They were back to the Honey Valley well before dinner.

Phas Gaye re Raanjhanaa

In the next hour, fresh after a steaming bath, everyone finished their dinner amongst the hullabaloo of dozens of children and their parents, visiting Honey Valley in a large group the same weekend. The dinner was a quick affair, for there were people waiting for tables all over the resort – leaning against the walls in verandah, sitting on the benches under a clear sky in garden and racing up and down the stairs to the dining hall. It was a chaotic crowd with kids bolting through doors onto unsuspecting arriviers and the toddlers throwing tantrums at their parents. Before the commotion could get to their nerves, Nikhil's group left for quieter ground.

It's a mother's apocalypse if her child doesn't call her for two days in a row. The world is a sweet little place when at peace. None of them wanted the world to go upside down in case of their mom getting worried or anxious. Taking out some time from the crazy holiday mood, everyone called their parents, talked to their friends in the city and emptied their minds with anything that could come between them and the tranquility of the night. Clouds were now hovering over the gardens. Unfortunately, Prachi tumbled over a ditch in the darkness; but thankfully, was unhurt.

By the time everyone settled in their seats in the quieter gardens, lit dimly by the moonlight streaming across a thin veil of silvery clouds, the discussion had, once again, shifted to accents. Everyone laughed their hearts out over 'घोरा सरक पर सरपट सरपट दौरता है', to which Saumyak and Nikhil, sportingly, added many more anecdotes. Next in line were the 'सेब वाला स, षटकोण वाला स, शलजम वाला स' and few age old yet interesting tongue twisters of 'कच्चा पापड़ पक्का पापड़', 'She sells, sea shells on the sea shore'. The group enjoyed the search for a twister in every general sentence. Once they plunged into the pool of childhood memories, it took them back to schools, novels, hindi, and अलंकार. Languages merged and knowledge triumphed. The comparisons of यमक with syllepsis, अनुप्रास with alliteration and अतिशयोक्ति with hyperbole were enlightening. Personal achievements, marks from board results, JEE and IITs, CAT, DU, YIF and Pune's educational culture were discussed in detail.

The '*bakwas*' had undergone a transition and achieved a distinguished maturity. The group then shared their knowledge of novels and novelists from Hindi and English. Dinkar,

Nirala, O’Henry and Dickens were discussed in the same breath and were listened to with a reverence. It ended up with everyone unanimously agreeing to the fact that ‘शेखर – एक जीवनी’ by अज्ञेय was the best literary piece of work. Interestingly, no one had read it.

It was getting really cold outside. The mist had surreptitiously made its way over the sleepy plants of the garden. Dhatura flowers had opened up into a huge bell-like shape, vindicating their christening as Angel’s Trumpet and Moonflower. The noise from dining hall had subsided, prompting them to move back into the dining hall. Cards were on the table and for the next hour the group was busy bluffing each other. Anant was most excited and Sharmaji joined unwillingly. To everyone’s joy, with timely doses of intellectual PJs and cunning moves, the game kept everyone engaged to its best. Switching gears after the first round was won by the true conman Saumyak, they decided to give a try to dumb-charades.

Prachi, Saumyak and Sharmaji formed a team to which the team of Nikhil, Somya and Anant was an equal competitor. Sharmaji was an instant hit with his choice of movies unheard by anyone, including his team mates. He shared the basics of dumb-charades with all, putting to display his profound hold on the game. Soon, the room was alive with speculation, symbolic gestures and ridiculous names. Several rounds of movies with weird names from Hollywood and Bollywood were fun to play. Some of the superbly difficult names thrown in were ‘Thelma and Louise’, ‘Donnie Darko’, and ‘Rumble on the Bronx’ - most of them logically cogitated by Sharmaji. The three movies, which left behind an inerasable memory, deserve a discussion here.

The first one was ‘Raanjhanaa’, suggested by Nikhil and enacted by Prachi. Memorable because, Saumyak guessed it within seconds, with Prachi’s simple dance gesture of stretched hands holding on to the towel over the shoulder. His having viewed the epic saga of love based in Banaras - his alma-mater, twenty-one times, helped.

The next was ‘Phas Gaye Re Obama’. Once again superbly enacted by Prachi, but made into hell of a joyride for the opposition team by Saumyak and Sharmaji. They made a disaster of the prediction. A full drama sequence had to be enacted by Prachi which lasted for around half an hour. The prediction rode through the tough terrains of Vishnu-Buddha-BodhGaya- to arrive at the last word ‘GAYA’. Next, the lady with the basket - fruits in the basket- in hindi – fal, ‘FA’ which in turn when connected to her leg stuck in the chair gave the first word ‘PHAS,’ no idea how did they get to ‘RE’ but getting to OBAMA is a complete story in itself for some other time. By the time it ended, the participants were exhausted and Anant was already out of breath. Nikhil and Somya were rolling on the floor with laughter, clutching their stomachs post a non-stop comedy show of 20 minutes.

'Prometheus' was another interesting and a real difficult one, enacted by Ananth, walked through by Prachi and proposed, obviously, by the undisputed king of dumb-charades, Sharmaji. They travelled ages through the Greek mythology to arrive at it. Saumyak and Somya sat clueless through the whole episode.

Fulfilled to the core, stomach aching with laughter, they retired for the day.

Buddham Sharanam Gachchami

The next two days were a blur. Ajit, with his peculiar sense of humor, suggested how clicking a photo captures a part of the soul of the person being clicked. Nonetheless, his family posed for a sweet photo with the whole group before they took leave. The group had purchased number of chocolates and jam as a reminder to share with friends and families back in the city. Nikhil enjoyed the ride downhill hanging out from the jeep this time. They had a second and the last view of the beautiful Chingara waterfall. Saumyak promised himself to visit it the very next time he comes to Honey Valley. At Kabinakkad junction they boarded the Tata Ventura, booked last night by Nikhil, and rode to Madikeri.

At the Madikeri bus stop, it was an emotional send off for Anant. With loads of loves and blessings from all the elders and wishes for his placement season, he slowly disappeared into the crowd, waving a goodbye. The group started for the Golden temple at Bylakuppe.

Coming from the cold hills of Coorg, the temperatures back in the town felt burning hot. En route Bylakuppe, Saumyak enjoyed a siesta while the others discussed the days in Honey Valley, cherishing the fresh memories etched in their minds. Few hours before the sunset, they reached Namdroling Monastery (Golden Temple).

Bylakuppe is the Tibetan Refugee resettlement, location of “Lugsum Samdupling” (established in 1961) and “Dickyi Larsoe” (established in 1969), in the west of Mysore district. The Golden Temple in Bylakuppe, Karnataka, is a home for thousands of Tibetans living in exile and a center for Tibetan Buddhism in South India.

Stepping inside the temple felt like walking into another world, and the noisy streets of South India suddenly seemed to be very far away. Three beautiful golden Buddha statues each of 40 Feet namely **Padmasambhava**, **Buddha** and **Amitayus** looked down at visitors above the altar.

The walls were adorned with colorful paintings depicting gods and demons from Tibetan Buddhist mythology. The altar was decorated with flowers, candles and incense, and small birds nesting between the golden statues flew happily around the temple. It was a majestic sight with landscaped gardens all around.

Trying exquisite Tibetan cuisines at the canteen within the monastery campus was a different, interesting experience. Girls spent some (read more than some) time shopping for souvenirs. The wall paintings in the temple contained a world of stories within themselves, requiring much more time than they had, to be discussed in detail. The group left the monastery wondering if the inverted conical structures hanging from the overhangs of window were beehives. Somehow they scampered within the small window of time and managed to reach back Madikeri under heavy rain. While the ladies shopped and Nikhil helped them with the difficult task of decision making, Saumyak strutted through the streets in search of working ATM. He finally found one. The group had a heavy dinner at Fort Mercara, lots more of intellectual '*bakwas*'. Here Somya became fascinated with the engineering lingo, particularly the word '*bhokali*'. Mesmerized by the varied implications and usage of this tacit word, she practiced real hard during whole of dinner, to get the basics right for its usage.

After killing as much time as possible in the restaurant, they arrived at the bus stop an hour in advance, than the scheduled departure for Bangalore. While they waited for the bus, Nikhil, in his useful playful self, joked with Saumyak. Saumyak was tired to hell with the day's adventure and just wanted some peace. He lost control of himself for a fraction of second. A flood of emotion swept him off his feet, resentment and rage. Hardly knowing what he was doing, he snapped at Nikhil. But the next moment his feet grew cold, refusing to move. As he came back to his senses, he felt ashamed of his manner. An awkward silence followed.

Sometimes being a friend means mastering the art of timing. There is a time for silence. A time to let go and allow people to hurl themselves into their own destiny. And a time to prepare for picking up the pieces when it's all over. Nikhil picked up the pieces quickly, progressing with a normal chat without any reference to what preceded the moment. It took some time for Saumyak, a walk around the bus stop and few sorry messages to his dear friend over Whatsapp to get rid of the guilt. Finally, and happily, they were all settled in their seats in bus, ready to start the last leg of the journey to Bangalore.

The bus rolled for Bangalore. They had a lot in common to discuss as their fathers were in banking sectors. While Somya described the life up to FMS, of six cities and eight schools, Saumyak shared his stories of Kota, revolving around his friendship with Nikhil. Somya had held her own in every conversation she's involved in during the trip, and came out as a well-spoken conservationist who believed that there's nothing sexier in this world than an intellectual conversation. Saumyak also proclaimed his love for writing, promising to pen down the journey of last five days elaborately at the earliest.

He sat there talking incessantly to her. Even against the faint orange light streaming periodically through the veiled window, as the bus crossed the light poles, the contours of her face were obvious. A speck of mole, just below the end of her left eye, gave her a serious look.

And the beauty spot on the lower left cheek near left ear lobe, concealed by a strand of silky hair, was adorable. He would have carried on for eternity, had Somya not dozed off, tired to the core with the adventures in Coorg. Saumyak kept awake whole of the journey, mulling over the trip that was.

Alvida

Early next morning, they camped for the day at Saumyak's house. He got ready for the day while the rest of them took a refreshing nap before starting for MTR and ending up in South Thindi for a fulfilling breakfast. It started with 2 Nariyal Panis, included several rounds of delicious dosas, ravishing rava idlis and vada, pongal and many more dishes which were topped with a cup of filter coffee at the end.

Next few hours raced away while they were busy shopping at the Decathlon for the trek-that-might-be. Saumyak made the most of the idle time riding the space-scooter for a bliss experienced primarily by the innocent kids. If only this could be the time machine, he would have re-lived the last 5 days in a loop, all over again, and again.

Back to BTM, a cup of ginger/lemon/elaichi/masala tea at Disney Bakery marked an end to the eating spree that they had been upon since last Thursday, in style. No matter however hard he tried, the time had found wings. It flew while they celebrated Nikhil's birthday on roof-top, clicked more selfies and practiced '*bhokali*'.

Nikhil and Saumyak hugged each other, a heartfelt, thankful hug at the conclusion of the trip, while the cab waited at the doorsteps. All of them climbed down the stairs. Prachi got into the car and waved goodbye. Nikhil took the seat by the driver, while Somya opened the rear door at the other side.

‘अरे यार’, she exclaimed, with an extra second for the yaaaaaar.

‘क्या हुआ?’ Saumyak turned, worried.

‘कुछ नहीं भोकाली मार रहे थे!’ Mischievous Giggles... ‘HeeHeeHee’.

Smiles spread across the lips. They laughed one last time. As Saumyak was about to shut the car's doors, she shook her head as if to revive herself of the pain of leaving behind a basketful of memories, then gave a sigh and laughed. It all happened too fast.

As soon as the car started, Saumyak felt the sinking feeling deep within his heart. In a few minutes, the car sped off; but not before he caught her stealing a last glance at him. He stood at the gate as if glued, where he was, and watched the car turn right at the bend.

Rumbling of the engine softened in the distance into something that was half a sigh. The car's horn could be heard till it turned away in next couple of bends. Saumyak's face changed colors and emotions till it became inscrutable. The honey filled days from the valley were finally over.

Epilogue

“Hey Hi”, she replied over the phone.

Saumyak had called her right at 11:55, to avoid the flurry of calls she would be flooded with at exact 12.

“Hi, Many Many Happy Returns of the Day”, he wished her. It was her birthday.

“Thanks ji, aur batao what’s up?”.

“Kuchh Khaas nahi, just working on your gift.” He was sorry he couldn’t finish it in time, but then he promised to send out the introductions that very day and the complete memoir by the weekend. The phone calls had started pouring in.

“Yeah sure, So sweet yaaaaar. Chal, Catch you later.”

He went back to the memoir - titled it COORG. Nothing could’ve explained it better than Sharmaji’s rendition of his most famous one liner - “Coorg is a state of mind”.

Thirty days later, including a number of sleepless nights, Saumyak finally fell off to sleep with peace for the first time, content at heart and a person of many new experiences with friends whom he might never meet again, but surely won't forget ever, at least within this lifetime.

He had kept his part of the promise.

Glossary

Sharmaji	Advaita Sharma, popularly nicknamed as Sharmaji for his philosophical outlook
Namma	Ours
Bas Yun Hi	Sharmaji's reply, often used to avoid answering a question specifically
Igguthappa	Lord of Rains, worshipped in Kodagu district
Bakwas	a nonsensical talk, here, enjoyed purposefully, coined by Nikhil
Laghushanka	euphemism for toilet
Cute	an expression of wow, used equivocally in all situations by Somya
Thamma	younger brother
Shabba Khair	Good Night
Hirudinea	leech
Parallel universe	explanation to everything unusual being a usual thing in Bihar, Saumyak being witness to them
Kuchh bhi	Shamaji's expression of indifference
Kodava Takk	language in a part of Kodagu district
Padmasambhava	Guru Rinpoche, a literary character of Buddhism
Amitayus	Buddha of eternal life, merit, and wisdom
Bhokali	signifies the excellence in a certain field, normally in off-hand fields
Thindi	food

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