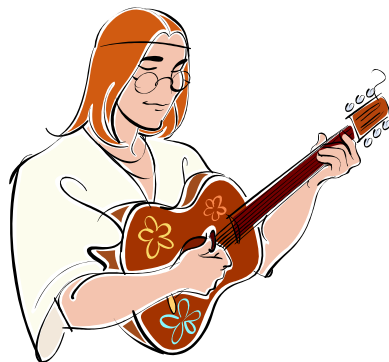


Life in a small hut located inside a wooded area close to a lake, at a height of approximately 7000 feet above mean sea level sans the so-called basic modern-day amenities like electricity, gas stove to cook, mobile phone and the ubiquitous computer certainly has its nicer moments.

I am in Berijam, 21 km south of a hill station called Kodaikanaal in Tamil Nadu. Its thick green cover is engulfed by mists where one can't light a solitary matchstick without official permission as it can start a forest fire.

Located a little before the halfway point at the edge of a disused road that leads to a mountain village called Kavunji, close to a picturesque lake, I am at peace with the world.

The lake used to be a swamp some 100 years ago. When the British created Kodaikanaal they converted it into a lake, planted pine trees around it and probably a few seeds of several poison mushrooms known to grow only in the British Isles other than here. One of them can give a “high” higher than LSD.



My reason for being here is different.

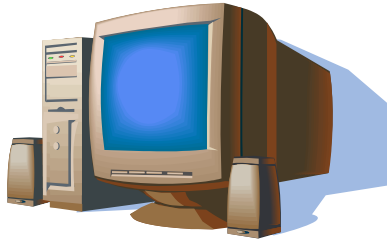
Berijam is nearer to heaven than the plains and feels like it.

When I had first read about this southern Shangri-La on the net, I thought the guy who praised these sylvan surroundings was a fruitcake.

I was then a dandy, middle-class keyboard potato living in a posh, tastefully furnished, four-bedroom duplex flat in Adyar, south Chennai.

Till three weeks ago, I needed the computer's alarm to resurrect from my daily slumber, its soft, pre-recorded music to cajole me into alertness, its keyboard and screen to read *The Hindu*, *The New York Times*, *National Geographic*, *Times Literary Supplement*, despatches from *Reuters*, *Bloomberg* etc., keep an eye on my portfolio of shares – all for the price of zilch, its VOIP facilities to do inane voice-chat with my girlfriends before beginning to discuss work with my colleagues in the US at night and finally write my three 500 word columns which could be on varying subjects as poetry, prehistoric pottery, pigeons' homing behavioural patterns and pulp fiction.

My computer even regulated my air-conditioner and perfected the percolator brewed coffee from Columbian beans.



In other words, it was my lifeline.

On my 30th birthday, during a fine afternoon, I came across Ayesha on the net.

Her comments on my writings and pictures syndicated by my employers in the US to global websites were intelligently incisive.

We exchanged emails.

“I don’t believe in webcams, Rahul. I will remain as beautiful as your imagination,” she said in a poetic opening gambit sounding, as sexy as Britney Spears of yore, when both of us trusted each other enough to do voice chat a day later.

“A visual is better than a thousand words,” I offered in response.

“If that was so, Homer couldn’t have composed the Iliad and the Odyssey. Their imagery is so beautiful that only a person without ordinary vision but with a divine sight could have written them.”

“His blindness is a topic of global debate,” I argued.

“Here is something...I will key it in a moment,” she said.



Twenty one seconds later, my screen showed the lines.

*“Let it be a topographical map*

*Where dots are mountains of two mountain ranges*

*And the space between is where a river rages,*

*Cutting a gulf of longing, long and deep.*

*Or, let it be a circuit, wires hot*

*With logic whose bright voltage seeks to span*

*Enjambed lines of poetry...”*

“Wonderful lines,” I said.

“They are by David Simpson, a poet born blind who was also a mainframe computer programmer for Verizon. Now he lives a retired life in Philadelphia, USA.”

*“Why disturb dry dirt around*

*Sully your clothes*

*And sneeze in protest*

*When all you need is to excavate*

*Into the mortal existence*

*Comprehend the self*

*And conquer the universe... ”*

I typed as the words occurred to me and waited for her reaction.

“That is profound philosophy. Who wrote these and when?” She asked excitedly.

“I just did. And I am not blind.”

“Wow!”

“However, I can quote two Indian personalities – both born blind and better than poor old me. Whose words will you want to read first – the medieval maestro or the modern musician?”

“The first one, please...”

“Here goes...”

*Heed not my faults Lord*

*You perceive all as equals*

*Ferry me across the ocean of existence*

*Iron serves believers and butchers alike*

*But the philosopher’s stone morphs*

*A base gashing glaive into gold...*



These were words from Soordas, one of the greatest blind bard-saints who lived during the period of Emperor Akbar, the only secular Mughal who didn't force the mother of his crown prince to convert from Hinduism to Islam. At the age of 87, in 1586, Soordas is believed to have merged into the idol of Lord Krishna in the temple at Mathura. The translation is by yours truly from the archaic original Hindi version.”

“What is a glaive?”

“According to the Oxford Dictionary, it is a sword. Are you ready for the living legend now?”

“Go ahead, Rahul!”

*“Never before*

*More than today*

*Have I experienced*

*Such bliss*

*So pleasant and sweet*

*Is this moment*

*In my life*

*Is it mere coincidence*

*Or destiny*

*That we met today?”*

“Are you making this up, Rahul?”

“These are the immortal lines written in 1976 for a Hindi movie “*Chit Chor*” by Ravindra Jain that launched his career – not only as a lyric writer, but also as a music composer par excellence. He was born blind in 1944.”

And so it went on for three more days during which I created at least sixteen sonnets and quoted countless others.

Ayesha was ecstatic.

“You have a way with the words twisting them into dry wit and haunting melancholy,” she remarked on our fourth date in cyberspace.

I was a veteran of twenty nine broken relationships in Chennai.

Yet, I was in love.

Ayesha had looked at my writings dispassionately, understood them with an insight which had eluded all my earlier female admirers. Sometimes, she interpreted my poetry and prose with a perception completely different from mine. Their logic enchanted me.

Without thinking twice, I then breathlessly uttered five original lines that changed my life.

*“Your past is of no consequence  
Your present is my reason to live  
Let us blend together  
In an eternal relationship  
Beyond cycles of life, death and ether...”*



My computer's speakers suddenly hummed static.  
Ayesha had disconnected.

No matter how hard I tried night and day for the next two weeks, I couldn't locate her in any chat room. Dozens of emails sent to her went unanswered.

I was distraught.

The sight of food sickened me. I stopped shaving because I was scared that I would slit my neck and bleed to death. I didn't dare to sleep as nightmares woke me up every ten minutes in a cold sweat. I became a mumbling wreck. My bosses in the US sent me three memos when shorn of legalese meant "perform or else..."

Though my immediate family comprising my teenaged sister Kamala and aged, widowed mother Lakshmi didn't fathom the actual reason for the abrupt change, they noticed the danger signals.

Ravi – my nerd pal who helps cops to solve cyber-crimes arrived upon hearing that collectors of credit card dues visited my home despite my sizeable bank balance. I had forgotten to mail the cheques.

He sipped coffee prepared by Kamala who was talking very animatedly, expressing her agony as my mother wiped copious tears with the tip of her sari.

"Rahul keeps surfing the net like a man possessed without food or sleep. He doesn't work, that is for sure. His room – the origin of soft music, is spreading a

sepulchral silence here! Take him out for a drink or to a shrink before he goes stark, staring mad!”

As a result, Ravi frog-marched me to a bar and began a subtle interrogation.



After half a mug of beer, I blurted out the truth.

“We were chatting like soul mates and then she suddenly vanished without a word. It is killing me,” I said eventually in a choked voice.

“You are going soft in the head! She could be a Muslim terrorist from anywhere between Tasmania, Timbuktu or Tucson! Perhaps she is as old as your dead grandmother with a never-ageing voice like that of Asha Bhonsle!”

This angered me.

“Don’t feed me that crap, you bloody cynic. I overheard numbers by Raageshwari, Alisha Chinai, Kishore Kumar, Sonu Nigam and the sputter of a three-wheeler in the background when she chatted. And once she said, ‘mom’s mad at me because I didn’t buy sanitary napkins despite my being close to my periods.’ And your contorted mind equates her with my grandmother!”

“Perhaps she is a divorcee with four noisy kids!”

“At least, I didn’t hear any though we chatted for hours together.”

“It is perfectly possible that she is either engaged or somebody’s wife who only liked your writings.”

Ravi was playing the devil’s advocate infuriatingly.

But it set me thinking.

“You find her for me. I will try to forget her if she says so. But I want to hear her voice just once more. Maybe, the sadness will make a better man out of me.”

After another hour of harangue, Ravi relented.

“Forward the chat history and all her ids. Let me see what I can do,” he said carefully.

That night some fink sent an email threatening to kill our Prime Minister.

Being the best in the business in India, Ravi was contacted by some secret cell that handled such matters. He was awake all night and flew to New Delhi the next morning. Despite lack of sleep, by afternoon, he had not only found the origin of that hoax email which resulted in the cops arresting the nut in faraway Guwahati, but also traced Ayesha's her location with the help of the computer's IP address.



“Ayesha, E216, Dream Apartments, Seven Bungalows, Andheri West, Mumbai 400061...is all I got. Need to know more. Wait till I come back,” Ravi's SMS said.

Ravi was a geek alright, but, his telegraphic messages were always in correct syntax and without ambiguity.

Instead of heeding his advice, I began surfing the net, read every entry on that district in northwest Mumbai, harassed the trunk enquiry section of Chennai Telephones and located an old girlfriend Samantha who had married and settled down in India's financial capital. Worse, I called her. Though her husband was

away on tour, her doubting mother-in-law lifted the phone. Identifying myself as her daughter-in-law's twice removed cousin James, I spun a yarn that one Peter Rodrigues – supposed to be my father and Samantha's distant uncle – had suffered a fatal heart attack today and that his funeral was to be held a day later.

Since I used an alias that had always fooled her mother, Samantha realised who it was and talked to me in a hushed whisper after her mom-in-law left the room.

“Rahul, you are mad! You know it is 10-45 at night and I am pregnant. What is it now?”

When I revealed the real reason, Samantha called me a pig. However, she did her best – perhaps for old times' sake, but, got nowhere.

“If you are really so smitten by her, why don't you send her your contact details with one of those nice lovey-dovey poems that sent me into a tizzy in the past? Who knows? She may even respond,” Samantha finally said half an hour later, in a helpful, albeit sleepy voice.

It was a good idea, even if it came from an ex.

Thoroughly excited, I appended my name, mobile number and a picture to a poem I had just written imploring her to love me ever after, took a printout, inserted it into an envelope, wrote Ayesha's address in block letters and decided to send it pronto.

Reaching the all-night office of a courier company near the Meenambakkam airport, I invented a story that I was sending the hard copy of a quotation to a colleague who might lose her job if it didn't reach her before noon the next day.

Surprisingly, a young, plump, female clerk was on duty. She sported a "T" shirt with the legend "Fifth Ace" in bold print across her chest.

"I can't guarantee that the consignment will reach on time. You still will have to pay the cost including the late fee amounting to a steep Rs.600 – a nice, useful sum. You seem to be driving a *Ford Fiesta*. I am sure there is a computer at home. Email is better than snail-mail," she said in a voice that reminded me of a Hindi actress called Bindu who always played a vamp.

"My desktop at home crashed due to a sudden surge of electricity."

"I can lend you my laptop."

"Our office computers in Mumbai were hit by "*killjoy*" – a new virus which also spread to my colleague's home desktop. An email sent to an affected machine – even if the worm is quarantined, might mutate and boomerang on you." I lied through my teeth, pretending not to notice her leering, suggestive expression.

She didn't give up.

“Your colleague must be having a yahoo, Hotmail or some other web based id. You can scan your hard copy here, copy it into my pen-drive and send it in less than five minutes as an attachment. You can even call her from my mobile if you are not carrying yours, free of charge. She can take a printout from a cybercafé in the morning. And then there is one more thing. I will be off duty in another 10 minutes. I know a place nearby which serves Bacardi in an air-conditioned bedroom with ice, chilled mineral water and Pepsi. The landlord is a resourceful sod who keeps the cops happy. It is a real steal of a deal for Rs.500. You send the mail, have fun and save Rs.100! I have an excellent lap, a good top, and a fantastic collection of X-rated videos in my laptop. Good pun, no?” she asked with a wink leaving nothing to chance and tried to imitate a Mae West smile. Instead she ended up looking as amiable as a sex-starved bear.



“Heard of Peter Rodrigues, baby?”

“Is he one of your pals?”

“Peter took over as one of the global vice-presidents of your company at 4 pm today in Singapore. Further, he has a financial interest in the tender documents inside this envelope and also happens to be my possessive homosexual partner. His plane will be landing in another 30 minutes,” I said with an appropriate mournful look using the name for a second time that night with deadly precision.

Adversity always brought the best sarcasm out of me.

Three minutes later, knowing my packet would reach its address certainly, I was driving home humming my stag party lyrics that usually made my raunchy friends laugh out loud.

*“I am falling in love with a stranger*

*I still don’t know who I am after*

*Could be your old flame, mister*

*Maiden, married, divorcee, no matter... ”*

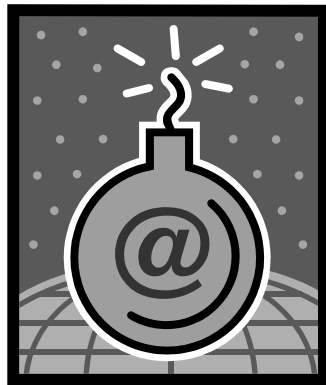
My letter brought me grief the next day exactly at 3-31 pm.

“You, f....son of a b....” an angry, loud, slurring baritone voice in my mobile almost deafened me.

“Who is this?”

“You really want to know you fu....mo....fu....?”

“Mister, perhaps you are mistaking me for somebody else.”



When he spat out my name and number, I was stunned.

“Why are you swearing at me?” I asked presuming the caller was the relative of an ex-girlfriend.

“Your corny love letter was delivered at my bloody home, just now, that’s why. And you have addressed someone called Ayesha! Who the hell is she?”

Did Ravi goof up?

“Probably my secretary wrote an incorrect address,” I said pompously.

“Well, in that case, give me your correct, complete address.”

“I never do that – especially to someone whose mouth needs 20 litres of liquid detergent to be cleaned,” I snapped.

“I will make it my business to find you and pay a big *“Supari”* to have you eliminated!”

Then I heard Ayesha’s voice in the background.

“You are drunk and crazy. You can’t...”

The line went dead.

A chill went up my spine. “Supari” killings were the livelihoods of desperados from the Mumbai underworld. Was Ayesha someone’s moll? Tracing a mobile number would be child’s play. Without thinking of the consequences of my stupid deed, I had endangered not only myself but also my kid sister and aged mother. I shouldn’t have listened to Samantha and sent that letter in such a tearing hurry! I ought to have waited till Ravi’s return.

My hand shook as I dialled his number.

“The number you have dialled is either out of coverage area...”

Bloody hell! Ravi could be in the basement of a secret office in New Delhi, decoding the HDD confiscated from some crazy coot.

My mobile rang and again.

It was a different Mumbai cell phone number.

Trembling with fear, expecting an announcement of the time and method of my painful death, I answered it, not knowing what else to do.

“Hello!”

“Mr Patrick?”

It was a man’s voice I did not recognise.

I had used that alias to hoodwink another girl’s mother. Was it her husband? Why did all my ex-girlfriends have to relocate to Mumbai?

“Yes.”

“Speak here please...”

“Hello son, this is Mrs Susie Francis, Samantha’s mother-in-law.”

I let out a sigh of relief. But why was she calling me Patrick? I had called myself something different yesterday night, for God’s sake!

“Hello auntie!”

“I am awfully sorry to disturb you. Didn’t you say your name was Patrick? I am awfully poor with unfamiliar first names. Samantha visited her gynaecologist today morning who opined that she may experience pre-natal complications. She wants a second opinion. Now that her mother isn’t alive...”

“My father is being laid to rest tomorrow, auntie. There are guests at home. Is it anything urgent?”

I had better things to do than talking to an old blabbering hag.

“Yes, it is. Samantha’s father, Mr Fernandes, I am sure you know, had suffered a heart attack three months ago. Praise the Lord, he survived. Samantha doesn’t want her father to strain himself by attending your father’s funeral tomorrow. So she wants to....”

“But...”

“Oh, I forgot to tell you. She called me on my son’s mobile as I was getting into the auto-rickshaw to return home. I must say it is a very useful instrument...”

I was ready to climb a wall.

“Where is Samantha now?”

“That is what I am coming to. You see, Samantha met your common friend today. For the life of me, I don’t understand as to how you befriended a Mumbai based girl. What was her name now? Please excuse my memory because I am 79 years old now. Thank God she sent me your number by SMS. Else I wouldn’t have remembered it. A kind man helped me to retrieve it.”



I desisted from swearing at her with a great effort.

“For instance, I don’t remember being introduced to your family during Samantha and John’s wedding. But Samantha said you knew this Muslim girl very well and enquired about her even yesterday night, despite your bereavement. They are both on a flight to Chennai now. She wants you to send a private taxi to pick them up.”

The nickel dropped.

“Then I must telephone the car rental ask them to rush a driver to the airport,” I heard myself saying. “The traffic is pretty heavy because of the flyovers that are coming up along the way.”

“Convey my condolences to your mother. Okay...bye, bye.” She rang off.

There was no way Ayesha could be on that flight because I had heard her a moment ago.

What kind of stunt was the silly pregnant cow trying to pull?

“Where are you off to, Rahul?”

My mother’s question interrupted my dash towards the door.

“I have to pick up Sam...”

“Who is Sam?”

“He is an old friend who migrated to M...Mombasa.”

“Where is that?”

“It used to be on the eastern coast of Kenya. With revolutions taking place every hour in Africa these days, the port city could have become the capital of a new yam and cassava republic during the last fifteen minutes,” I replied.

Mom took it seriously.

“We don’t have a direct flight from here to South Africa even now. Was your friend evacuated due to a war or something?”



At that precise moment, Kamala returned from college with a knapsack slung on her back like a school student.

“Sam is coming via Mumbai with his pregnant Muslim wife to attend her father’s funeral tomorrow. I have to give them a lift home,” I said hurriedly.

“You seem to have strange friends, Rahul! Someone called Sam with a Muslim wife!” Kamala knew about some of my capers because I had tried to pull a fast one on her classmates’ elder sisters some two months back and was probably trying to find out the real reason.

“We call him Sam but sometimes we pronounce it Sham because his full name is Shamir,” I said.

“If someone corrupted my name like that I would have hit her with a heavy boulder,” Kamala said combatively.

“Shamir is a Jewish name. It means precious stone,” I quipped and rushed out as I didn’t want to tell her that I used to have another girlfriend called Shamira – also Jewish – the feminine version of the same name. She had taught me all about her religion during our dates. One day she had seen me with Samantha and it resulted in fisticuffs between the two. That resulted in Samantha’s marriage, migration to Mumbai and current pregnancy. God only knew where Shamira was. Not in Mumbai, I hoped, inching forward in the fender to fender traffic towards Guindy enroute to the airport.

The flights from Mumbai and New Delhi arrived within five minutes of each other as the latter was two hours late.

Ravi knew Samantha and spotted her as both of them waited for their luggage.

I did not expect my former girlfriend to rat on our last night's conversation during small talk with Ravi.

But she did.

Emerging from the arrival gate together pushing a trolley, Samantha yelled her familiar greeting, "You are a pig, Rahul!"

She, however, had other things to say.

Handing over a compact disc to me, Samantha began her soliloquy.



"This has a list of all my relatives. One of my dead uncles, who had a fetish about the family tree, keyed all

details into a computer a few days before he kicked the bucket. Do your Peter Rodrigues act and find out whether some male in this list dropped dead yesterday. If everyone is alive, call all the parishes you can recall, get the name of a corpse that will be buried tomorrow even as you copy this into your comp at home. Update that file with its details, burn it into another CD, punctually call me around noon tomorrow and deliver it before evening. I need a good back up story for this trip because I am also supposed to be attending your so-called father's funeral. My mother-in-law will forget your name, but I may have to give my husband John some explanation. For good measure, I will badger him with enough information about my non-existent prenatal complication and mention the burial as an aside. Since he is in London, John will keep the conversation short and may not even remember the details. But I can't take a chance with my married life because of your stupid, lovelorn phone call yesterday night," Samantha said as I weaved my car through heavy traffic taking the diagonal left exit from the highway's St Thomas Mount junction.

Ravi had probably deduced by now that I had done something silly. He was silent.

"But why did you spin a yarn about Ayesha to your mother-in-law?"

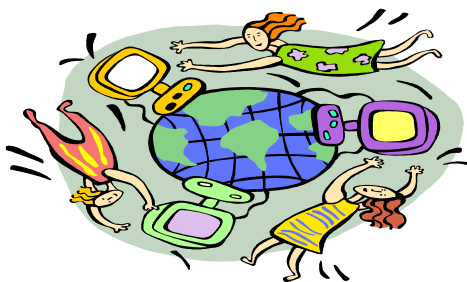
“How else could I have made you come to the airport, Rahul? You thought that I had some news about Ayesha didn’t you?”

“To be honest, I thought you would indeed,” I said lamely.

“You were always a clever cad. You are right. I talked to my good friend Archana – who does television shows and lives in the in the next building, today. She said there is no one in the neighbourhood called Ayesha. Some female with an alias jilted you Rahul. You asked for it and deserve it.”

“You flew to tell me this?”

“Well, I have another reason too. My father, at his age, is in love with an internet acquaintance. I have come to drill some sense into him and prevent the possibility of acquiring a strange woman as my new mother whose funeral I have no wish to attend in the near future or fight with her for my ancestral property. If I recall, it was you who put pa into the habit of chatting on the net. So it is only fair that you drove me home to Perambur and help me avoid the atrocious taxi charges. Remind me to send you the bill for the airfare.”



An hour later, I was nursing a stiff drink in Ravi's small, neat bungalow in Anna Nagar where he lived alone.

I narrated all the details to him – including the bit about Ayesha's brief comment during the terrifying phone conversation.

Ravi chided me for my foolishness but calmed down soon and analysed the situation logically.

“Usually these gangster types only threaten movie stars or top businessmen. Murder has gone out of fashion for them these days. But, you can never be sure. Hell hath not known the ire of a cuckolded squire. But then, you said, he hadn't heard of Ayesha. Could he have faked it?”

“He was swearing like a slurring sailor in a north Indian accent and seemed incapable of faking anything.”

“Give me his mobile number. I will do some digging through my sources in Mumbai police's ATS.”

“What is that?”



“The Anti-Terrorist Squad is notorious after the recently released Hindi flick called Shootout...something became a runaway hit. I will try to keep you out of the loop, but if it comes to the crunch, I may have to disclose your identity. Mind you, it is a double-edged sword. Either the whole thing maybe ignored or you may get a hole in the head if the person I contact is on the take.”

“You are scaring me, Ravi.”

“You will be better off scared than fatally scarred, lover-boy!”

The next day, after performing Samantha’s errands, I reformatted my computer. I had backups of all my downloaded music, creative work and official files anyway. Then, I posted “ignore” notices to my links to Ayesha in all the chat rooms. With Ravi’s help, besides surrendering my mobile number, I got it transferred to one of his trusted young eager beaver cop friends. The measures didn’t amount to much, but were some kind of insurances for the time being. At night, I called my office and told them I had suffered a nervous breakdown due to stress and was taking a break for three months under medical advice. The guys made the usual sympathetic noises and granted me leave at half pay. My late father had left me enough money to live off the fat of the land unless I blew it up on high stakes gambling for the next five years. Cash was no problem for me anyway because I had saved quite a bit. Finally

when I let it slip that I might be trekking in the wild with my Nikon D40X SLR camera, in an area infested by bison and leopards, my boss offered to bear all expenses plus US\$200 per published picture.

As all this was going on, I continuously thought about Ayesha.

She was an enigma that would remain in my mind forever.

I surrendered my BSNL telephone connection and got a new line from a private operator with better downloading speed. By any chance if the goons traced my land-line they would be told that it was no longer in use. Another little dead end for them.

I lied to my mother and Kamala that I was going on an assignment to the Himalayas to do a series of photo-essays. Presuming I had cottoned on to new girl and was going on a sin-vacation, they felt relieved. As far they were concerned, things were back to square “A” and therefore, hunky-dory.

Only Ravi knew the real reason and that my destination was Berijam where there was no phone, no computer and no nothing.

“I want to be away from everything Ravi, because of two reasons. Firstly I should not be traceable by any means and secondly the cold wilderness may act as a balm to my loneliness.”

“You must call me every day,” he said out of concern.



“Don’t bust a gut if I miss a day. I understand that the climate deteriorates quickly up the hills and I may find it difficult to come down from the upper reaches because of fog,” I told him upon arriving at Kodaikanaal two days later after a 7-hour journey – partly by plane till the temple town of Madurai under an

assumed name and the rest by a private taxi whose fare was paid in cash.

It took me two days to convince the forest ranger Kasinathan to allow me build a small log cabin in the forest. Generosity on my part resulted in his assistants' endeavour to erect the lair. My sleeping bag kept me warm at nights when I dreamed of Ayesha after polishing off a pint of vodka every night. The forest guards replenished my supply at black market prices and supplied food whenever I felt like eating which was just once a day. Else, I roamed aimlessly taking pictures of wildlife, several views of the lake, sunrise, sunset and shafts of light filtering through the canopy of trees imagining seeing Ayesha in every ray of brightness.



I called Ravi two days later.

After ticking me off for not keeping in touch, he announced, “You are home and dry, lover-boy. The guy who called you is one “Mac Macho Singh” or MMS for short. He has played a villain’s sidekick in exactly 19 “C” grade Hindi movies and is rumoured to be a pimp.

When the Mumbai police confronted him, he was ready to piss ice,” Ravi said.

The digression from the main issue – the identity of Ayesha was maddening me.

“A Sikh family of three from Punjab stayed in this MMS goon’s flat hoping that their daughter with a master’s degree in computer applications from Punjab University would marry MMS and also act in Bollywood television soaps to quench their greedy thirst. One night the drunken MMS suddenly made a pass at her and a big quarrel ensued.”

“Don’t raise my hackles, Ravi. Come to the point,” I said impatiently.

“Patience is a virtue, lover-boy! The girl reportedly stomped out of the house with just the clothes on her back. During the next 16 days, MMS moved heaven and earth to find her whereabouts after chasing the rest of her family away to Punjab. And then MMS received a letter addressed to someone he had never heard of. As he was drinking since morning, something snapped inside him. He began abusing you on the phone. At that moment, the girl who had escaped from his flat walked in through the open door to collect her stuff, heard the last sentence – the empty threat, presumed it was meant for her as the guy’s match-box sized mobile was hidden from her view and reacted innocently. She was your Ayesha.”

The realisation made me numb.



I paid scant attention to Ravi's further logical explanations about her buying the computer for that slob giving an assumed name and the residence address of MMS, several other details about our chats the exact moment of MMS's lecherous behaviour and her sudden disconnection to hide her discomfiture.

“But, why didn't she answer my emails?”

“Probably, she was totally broke, managed to get a refuge in some friend's PG digs and landed a job in some company that prohibited exchanges of personal emails. That can be one set of explanations. Once she gets some of her confidence back and earns some money she may resume the relationship.” Ravi was dismissive of the whole issue.

“Where is she now?”



“Frankly I don’t know. She could be in Mumbai, returned to Punjab or gone somewhere else in search of a job. My ATS contacts who took up the case when they thought there was a terrorist angle have discarded it like a rotten tomato when it was not. Anyway who would want to baby sit a Bollywood pimp? They are a dime a dozen. Besides, when a shady lawyer started

doing his rounds to ‘defend’ MMS, my friends made themselves scarce by going away on leave.”

“What was her real name?”

“I have no clue. MMS has clammed up since the arrival of his advocate. But I will find it out. These things can’t be done in a hurry. The flip side is that you should take my tip and forget her because her behaviour will be unpredictable after the minor trauma.”



I returned to my cabin three hours later, carrying two bottles of vodka and polished both of them off.

I had decided to live the life of a recluse for some time.

That was 56 hours ago.

“Wake up, Rahul. Even if you don’t, I need my morning cup of tea. We need to walk 2 km to get it!”

“Let me sleep some more, Harpreet,” I mumbled.

My 12-hour long angel-like beautiful companion, who had undertaken a 2-day long journey spending her last rupee all on what seemed like a hopeless trip and trekked 23 km to find me after convincing Ravi did not betray the slightest hint of discomfort from the strenuous trip and the chilly weather despite the fact that she wore clothes meant for the plains.

“That is my name, alright. But I like the nom-de-plume Ayesha better,” she said as I pulled her towards me.

