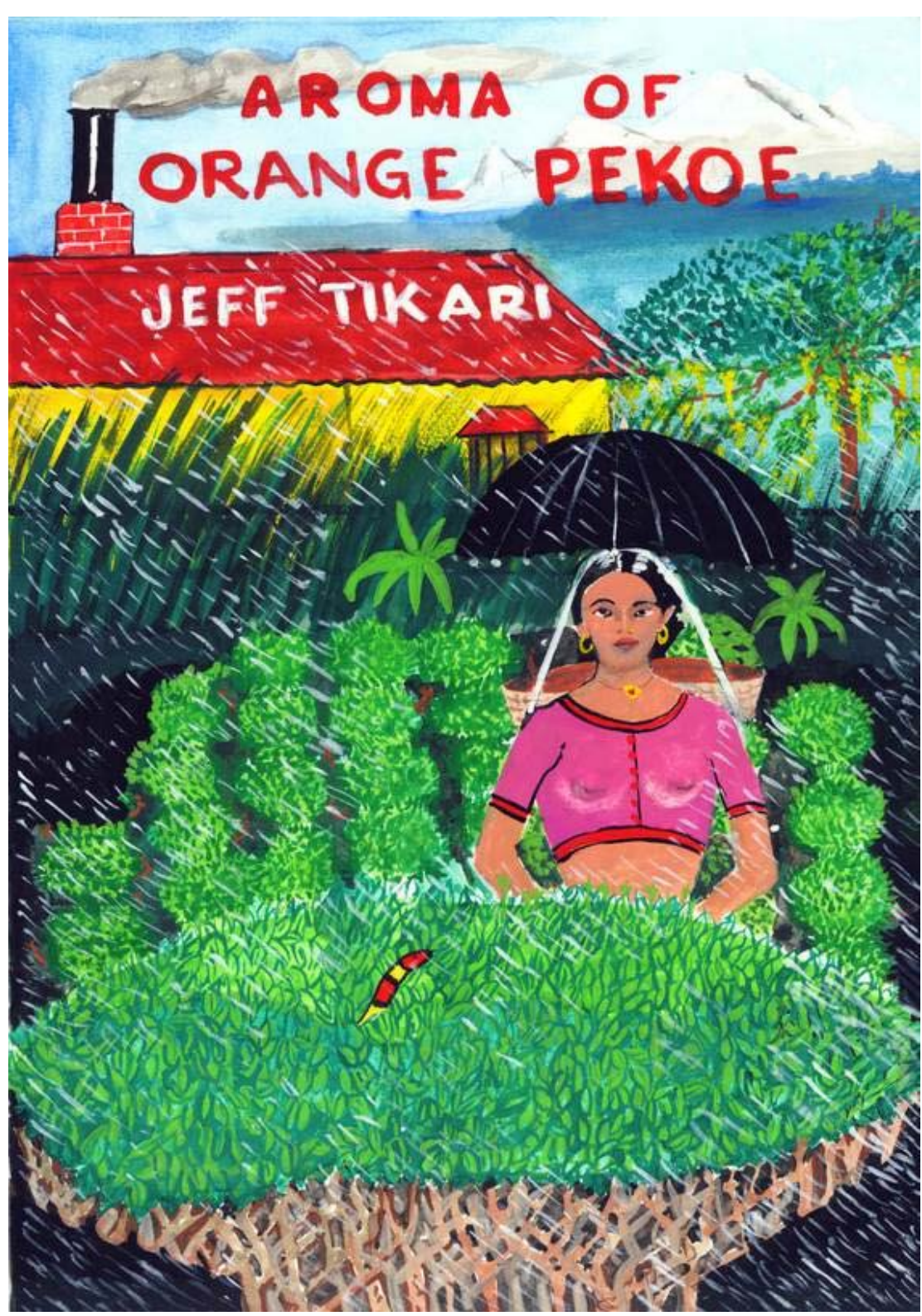


AROMA OF ORANGE PEKOE

JEFF TIKARI



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Sketches by Mohie Tikari, Calcutta

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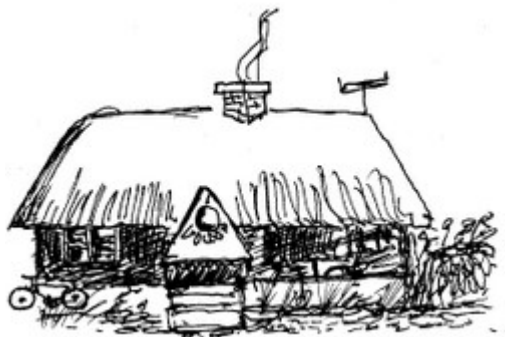
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About the Author: Jeff Tikari worked on tea plantations in northern India for twenty years, from 1959 to 1977 and on coffee and tea plantations in the Highlands of Papua New Guinea for fifteen years. He now resides, with his wife, on the outskirts of Delhi where he runs a Homeopathic clinic and from where he does all his writing.

His first book on spiritualism and philosophy: ‘The Future Intelligence’ was published in the year 2000. He has also had short articles & stories published in magazines around India: Elle, Delhi Press, Vanity, etc. in the USA, Diabolic Publications, Chiaroscuro, Sealy Publications Secret Attic, etc. in Canada, Horizon, and short story anthologies in the UK. He has self published a book, ‘Masala Tales & Random Thoughts’.

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Introduction

These are stories, snippets from the day to day life of tea and coffee planters. They are mainly my stories – I spent thirty three years serving in tea and coffee plantations in India and Papua New Guinea: from 1959 to 1992.

I say mainly my stories because I have also included amusing stories told at the bar in tea clubs, usually late at night, with slurred words, halting speech, and good humor – a close and

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genial time when the true character of a tale is revealed.

Planters lived a simple life and so the stories are simple and from the heart. They lived a hard life which too is revealed in the telling. They made their own entertainment – cut off and living in far flung estates in large plantation bungalows staffed with a retinue of servants – no TVs only radios with weak signals over-laden with static; they entertained and kept sane by visiting, partying, and dancing. “Some nights I rode to the club,” said Ome Anand, “the advantage being that if I got too sozzled I lay on the neck of my horse that unerringly, got me home.” Furtive, short, love affairs blossomed here and there – with a ground swell of well healed, healthy, young bachelors, it was only but inevitable.

Hunting was taken up by many and tennis, cricket, football, etc. was played by all. Managers insisted that youngsters visit the club and play games, “Keeps them out of mischief,” they said. Young Assistant Managers were not allowed to

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marry during their first tenure (usually three years) and so formed strong friendships, visiting each other regularly. Club nights were very popular and allowed an outlet to the loneliness of living by ones self.

A good salary, generous accommodation including extensive flower and vegetable gardens, with a number of servants thrown in made an ideal situation where a young executive might like to bring home a bride. Not being allowed to marry during the first tenure turned some into keen hunters, sportsmen, and keener club revelers; others, to escape the loneliness of living alone, had women visiting; and whilst some temporarily kept 'garden women', others retained their women for years, and still some married them – especially when children were born.

Dr Graham's School in Kalimpong (India) is an excellent establishment that, in those days, looked after ex-pat planters' children that were either born out of wedlock or children that were adopted, as well as children of expat planters. The

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medium of instruction was English and most children who graduated from this excellent institute have done well in life.

In the spring of 1977 I traveled by Air India to Sydney – to the Company headquarters of tea and coffee plantations in the Highlands of Papua New Guinea where I was seeking a position. I was interviewed by the Managing Director in Sydney to ascertain my suitability for the job. Steven Rich was a busy Director and was at a Board Meeting when I arrived at the appointed hour. On being told of my arrival he rushed out and shook my hand. Australians, generally dress more casually than their British counterparts...Steven was dressed in jeans and matching jacket. I, being brought up more formally, wore a three piece suit. I think, in his mind Steven had allotted five minutes for the interview, at the end of which I could sense I had made a favourable impression.

Steven's last question to me was addressed in a serious tone of voice:

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‘Jeff,’ he asked, ‘do you drink?’

The question threw me, but I had to be truthful.

‘From way back, Sir.’ I replied

‘Right, my friend,’ he smiled. ‘You are on the next flight to Port Moresby (Papua New Guinea). And he rushed back to his meeting.’

When some months later I met him on the plantation in the Western Highlands (Bunum Wo) and asked him how he would have reacted if, that morning in Sydney, I had said I did not drink? His reply was swift, ‘I would put you on the first plane back to India. For, you see my friend, this is a small community of ex-pats here and you have to get along together. Anyone who does not drink would stick out like a sore thumb. Anyway, Sandy Fraser knew you in India and said you liked your drink as much as the next person.’

Working on Bunum Wo was akin to work in India and yet not the same. Tea and coffee were grown on the same plantation and parallel factories

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for manufacture were maintained. When the tea fields were in full production, coffee harvest was at its lowest. This suited the plantation well for labour could be switched between the two works. Clubs were not plantation clubs, as in India, but catered to the general public and were situated in small towns. These clubs were open every day of the week whereas Tea clubs in India operated mostly three days a week.

It took me a while to learn Pisin, the language of the Highlands. But having to speak it every day soon made me fluent. *Enough to past muster.*



Chapter 1

Resurgence of Hope

During the 50s and 60s, Jamair did sterling service transporting people and goods to the many remote grass airstrips that dotted North Bengal: a lifeline for the many tea plantations that lay well beyond the reach of rail lines. Plantation companies of the area put together resources to support and maintain these strips where the versatile Dakotas landed bringing factory engine parts, cement, office useables, and other essential goods so vital for the running of a plantation. The arrival of the Dakotas spread especial cheer as

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they carried bread, butter, cheese, bacon, ham, and cakes from Calcutta for managers and their families living in those isolated regions.

*

My destination that day was to the foothills of the mighty Himalayas and into the heart of the Tea Plantation area in north-eastern India, two thousand miles from Calcutta.

I landed at Grassmore (Dooars) in a Jamair twin prop World War-2 vintage Dakota (DC – 3) early on the morning of the thirteenth day of March (*that too a Friday!*) in the year 1959. The flight had originated from a hanger at Dum Dum Airport (Calcutta) at three in the morning (*morning indeed, it was pitch dark!*). I was attired in a brown suit (*a lot of us arrived wearing suits*) having boarded the flight straight from a farewell party. Inside the bare, hollow of a DC-3 cabin there were only a few makeshift strapped-down seats for passengers and I was seated in one behind a load of cargo that shifted ominously (*holy shit!*) with

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every bump in spite of it being tied down with a heavy rope net.

*

Back in Calcutta I was congratulated roundly by friends for having landed a plum job as a tea planter in a British company that paid the princely sum of Rs 650 per month as basic pay – a large sum it was considered in those days as starting pay for a youngster: I was in my twenty-first year, fresh out of college (*and rearing to go*).

*

Tota driver, driving a rattley old Ford truck that belched more smoke than a steam locomotive, met me at Grassmore airfield. He kept me waiting (*tingling with anticipation*) an eternity whilst he collected 'cold stores' for the senior staff – I later learnt what an important lifeline those 'cold stores' from Calcutta were for us.

I waited in the shade cast by the awning of the building that served as the Terminus: a crudely plastered brick shed, whitewashed and roofed with corrugated iron sheets, *truly rudimentary*. I could

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see a tea plantation across a narrow macadam road: tea bushes trimmed flat formed a green carpet that stretched away into the distance rolling with the undulating terrain, an *amazing sight!* A four feet high barbed wire fence separated it from the airstrip. A batch of colorfully draped women were picking green tea leaves and putting handfuls into conical baskets they carried slung on their backs. Children – bare feet (*and some bare everything*) lined the fence staring at the 'Iron Bird' that was disgorging hessian covered packages of all sizes. Through the trees and at a distance I could see a mesmerizing sight of the massive Himalayas – hazy, blue, and serene in the distance.

Tota emerged - buttonless shirt flapping around his khaki shorts- and we headed for the truck. We traveled on a dirt road that skirted a tea garden (Grassmore Tea Estate, I learned later) and proceeded towards the mountains stirring up clouds of dust and trailing belching smoke that blanketed the fresh smell of lush green tea fields.

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We drove over an iron grid built across the road (a cattle trap) the rattle of which sounded like a locomotive going over a bridge - we had now entered Bhogotpore Tea Estate of Dooars Tea Company. A company that belonged to the King William House Group of Companies, registered in London and managed by Gillanders Arbuthnot & Co. Ltd. of Calcutta- *it sounded so grand.*

On our way to the main office, we passed 'labour lines' where dogs ran out barking and chasing after the truck; past a football field at the edge of which stood a plantation school: a whitewashed large shed-like structure. We continued and soon two tall factory chimneys came into view exuding wispy grey smoke.

We had arrived at the Bhogotpore tea factory and offices - my destination. *Whew!* Tota stopped here and I descended brushing dust off my new suit and looked around at my surroundings. Bhogotpore factory was large and spread out with many open outbuildings (Chungs) to house the

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green leaf from the tea fields. A chain link fence towered seven feet around the factory and offices.

Daya Sehgal (senior Assistant Manager) 'tall, dark and handsome' wore an open necked shirt and shorts. He grinned widely when he saw me alight from the smoke belching truck in a suit (*it was only later that I learned what an incongruous sight I had cut in a suit – but what the hell!*). He shook my hand in welcome and turned to Tota, "Take the Chota Sahib to the AG Division bungalow," he then addressed me, "I'll pick you up in an hour, when you have settled in... and put on shorts and a half-sleeved shirt... save the suit for Hogmanay," he said with a twinkle in his eye.

Any thoughts I had of a swanky first-impression evaporated rapidly.

*

I had schooled in Darjeeling: the winter hill station capital of Bengal during the erstwhile British Raj. Darjeeling is also the prime 'quality tea' area of India - and so I did not make any stupid comments about the tea fields as I believe many new comers

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did. However, the leafy, lightly canopied shade trees towering over the Tea looked magnificent in their whitewashed stockings (tree trunks were white washed with lime and ‘Gammexene’ from the ground to a height of four feet to keep soil borne weevils at bay) – there were no shade trees on the steeply sloping high altitude Darjeeling plantations, but I held my tongue.

*

Bhogotpore Tea Estate lies at the foothills of the Bhutan and Kalimpong range. The Ghatia River that flows two hundred feet below in a steep gorge demarcates the plantation's eastern boundary. Many a night, in later years, would I stand at the edge of this natural demarcation gazing across the valley at the glimmering lights of Ghatia Tea Estate on the other edge of the chasm, and up the valley at the shimmering lights of mystical Bhutan.

*

That first night at the Nagrakata club (a brick building, glazed windows, polished wooden floors, and red corrugated iron roof – most clubs were

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built this way) I was greeted like a conquering hero by all the Dooars Tea Co. staff. I was overwhelmed – at last, I was appreciated for my flair and style. *Yipee!*

But alas, it was not so!

My appointment had removed the anxiety the company executive staff had been suffering under...the rumor was that the Dooars Tea Company may be on the dreaded 'Sale List' and my appointment allayed those fears. Two crushing blows to my ego in twelve hours took away something from the euphoria of landing a 'plum job' at age twenty-one. But I salvaged some of my deserting ego that night by drubbing all and sundry at the billiard table. "You have obviously had a wicked upbringing," commented a senior manager - scuttling any progress I had made with my fragile dignity.

All youngsters get a certain amount of leg pull on first joining. A senior manager, that night, hopped onto the bar and held a full glass of whisky against the ceiling, "Get me a billiard cue, lad," he

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said to me; I promptly obliged. "Now see if you can hold the glass pressed tightly against the ceiling with the cue".

Gosh, of course I can, I thought to myself waiting for the next move in the game. *Does the 'old fogey' think I can't hold the glass against the ceiling?* The manager hopped off the bar and joined his cronies in conversation at the far end. I looked around...all seemed to have lost interest in the game – I was left holding the cue supporting the glass against the ceiling twelve feet above me.

"Hey, what do I do next?" I said to Daya who was closest to me. He shrugged and looked away.

I had been had! *Gulp, gulp.* I could see amused looks thrown my way from the Senior Managers' end of the bar. You bloody cad, I said to my self – you've been taken! But I was young and agile and a fair cricketer – I could easily catch the glass once I discarded the billiard cue – I would wipe the amused smiles off the faces of the

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perpetrators – they had chosen the wrong guy – They did not know how facile Jeff Tikari was.

I smiled confidently at the amused onlookers – they would soon be eating crow. I flung the cue away and very easily caught the descending glass...*but they had won!*

I was covered with Scotch whisky that dripped off my hair into my shirt collar and into my eyes.

Loud hoots indicated I was now accepted and was a good sport. Alec Hayward, my manager: a big built Scot, bushy eye-browed, and ruddy complexioned, put his arms around my shoulder and I knew I was the actual winner.

To be hugged by the senior most Manager of the Company within fourteen hours of arriving at ones first job was something not many could boast of. My dignity, which was unobtrusively slinking out the side door, returned.



Chapter 2

A Planting Episode

Tea Planters, in those days, were a wild lot. 'We drink hard and work hard' was what one would hear them say. And it was true. A planter was up before 6 o'clock and quite often knocked off after 8 p.m. If one's name happened to be on the roster to help at night in the factory, then getting home at 2 or 3 a.m. after closing the factory was normal. Mind you, most Managers would allow one the concession to report late in the morning for having worked at night - at least Alec Hayward, my

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Manager, did (planting season excepted – one still had to turn up for planting at the crack of dawn).

When I joined Bhogotpore in March, it was near the end of the planting season and 'tipping' (the season's first picking of tea leaves) in the pruned tea had commenced. The factory produced 'Legg cut' teas and so production started soon after the first field 'weighment' (there was no withering of the fresh leaf in this system of manufacture). The "Legg Cut" system of manufacture has been discarded now, and today Dooars plantations produce a variety of Rotorvane and CTC type teas (the small sized black tea leaf that throws strong, dark liquors). Some plantations make the long leaf Orthodox tea at the start of the season, known as 'the second flush' period. The first flush is the long stems of tea that rise from the pruned bush; this is level picked, usually to a height of six to eight inches above the pruned mark. The tertiary shoots that emerge from these stems are the second flush teas and are the season's best...*loaded with catechins: EGCG... go look it up.*

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My name was added to the factory roster for 'night duty' so I would 'learn the ropes' quickly and become a productive member of the Managerial Staff. Juniors were adjudged by the Manager to ascertain their capability of assuming Managerialship of a plantation in the distant future...and very distant, indeed, it looked at that time.

At five in the morning, in the darkness before dawn, I heard Tota Driver drive up to my bungalow (in the oldest truck there was on the plantation – a blotchy dragon-green Ford) to pick me up for 'planting'. I would be up and ready after finishing the last sip from my cup of tea – I had ample time to do so for I could hear the truck (two kilometres away) groaning and wheezing along, climbing its way to my bungalow – I had no transport of my own. The Company would only give me an advance to buy a transport after I had successfully completed six months of probation.

'Planting' is the expression employed to describe the planting of young tea saplings from a

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nursery to fields where they would grow and produce young succulent leaves for the next fifty or sixty years. 'Planting' commences before dawn – in the cool of very early mornings – and continues until about 10 o'clock when the sun is too hot for the tender plants.

Daya Sehgal met me at the planting field and tutored me on what to keep 'an eye out for':

No short cuts to finish early, he said.

'Dhurmush' (compact) the soil thoroughly to ensure no air pockets are left inside.

Ensure planting lines are straight!

It would be years before we realized that too much 'dhurmush' was bad for the plants and that if a plant was a few centimetres out of line it hardly mattered as every plant grew in its own way and within a few years the tea plant would cover the entire ground anyway.

Plantations are set a target area for new planting each year along with a schedule for uprooting of old unproductive tea. These tasks had to be completed during the 'cold weather' before

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the main plucking of tea commenced, for then all hands would be required to bring in the harvest.

Daya usually left me to complete the 'planting' for the day and went off to attend other works on the plantation. I remained to finish off planting and caught a lift on Tota's groaning dragon to my bungalow for breakfast and to savour the 'cold stores' from Calcutta.

That night it was my turn for factory duty. "Pop in after tea – about six-thirtyish. There isn't much leaf so the factory will close early," I was assured.

I walked down from the outer A.G. Division bungalow to the factory at six thirty p.m. Daya dropped in later, to give me support and show me the different machines used in the manufacture of tea. The Legg Cut machine was actually a tobacco cutter, adapted to slicing tea leaves. A tea-rolling table is one which bruises and twists the leaves, and a tea drying machine dries the finely cut leaves to produce the characteristic black tea – then all that was required was to sort it

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into different grades by size and pack it into tea chests which would be loaded on to trucks that hauled it to distant Calcutta warehouses to be auctioned to the highest bidder or shipped to even more distant London for auctioning.

"You don't have to do much," he said. "Just the fact that you are here will ensure things get done properly." He left then (leaving a trail of 'Old Spice' aftershave) to go to a nearby plantation to enjoy drinks, dinner, and no doubt, a lot of dancing (*wish I could go too – I looked longingly at his receding back*).

The green leaf processing and drying finished before midnight, but by the time the washing and cleaning of the factory was completed, it was 2 a.m. I trudged home and, it seemed, had just got into bed when I heard Tota's pet monster wheezing its way to pick me up for 'planting'. That morning I had to drag myself out of bed – Tota had to squeeze the rubber bulb horn to hurry me along. Anyway, I consoled myself, I

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would get a full night's sleep that night, as I had no night factory duty for another two days.

The day was rough and interminable – I was not my sprightly self, though by late afternoon I was better. Around six thirty in the evening when we were preparing to call it a day, Arun Majumdar, the Assistant on the other out garden, Kurthi, approached me to ask a favour: "Hey, Jeff," he said. He was shortish, heavier than I was and wore glasses. "Could you do my factory duty tonight and I'll do yours the day after... please?" I felt I was in no position to refuse any favours to my seniors and readily agreed, *actually reluctantly agreed*.

That night/morning after I had closed the factory, I plodded home, dead beat and tired, to hit bed at about the same time as on the previous occasion. The Factory Babu had urged me to go home at around 11 p.m. telling me no sahibs stayed around all night – but I had been warned about theft of tea at night and elected to 'pay my entire pound of flesh'.

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I dreamed that night of a smoke belching dragon coming to get me; I dreamt of Tota, grinning with large teeth bared, repeatedly pumping the rubber bulb horn...but it was, blessedly, all a dream... the bungalow night chowkidar's loud and repeated banging on the bedroom door awakened me with a start – it had been no dream...I stumbled out of bed...*holy shit*.

Tota started the truck and was on the point of departing without me. I rushed unsteadily to the window and hollered, "Wait, wait for me." I threw some water on my face and squeezed toothpaste into my mouth. I took the 'chung bungalow' steps down three at a time.

I know how resilient we were at age twenty-one. Though the body needs more rest at that age, we can force it to keep performing almost non-stop.

By the end of work that evening, I was feeling quite bushed and longingly looked forward to nine hours of blissful dreamless slumber.

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But...it was not to be! Oh, sweet Lord!
Fate was testing me! I couldn't believe it!

At break-off time, 6.30 pm, Daya wiggled a
finger at me.

"Yes, Daya?" I said tremulously.

"Arun and I are invited out to dinner
tonight. Would you do my factory duty
tonight...?" I gaped at him, tongue tied and
stunned (*holy shit again!*).

"What's the matter, won't you do it?" he
asked when he saw me hesitate.

"No, no...I mean yes, of course I'll do it. I
was thinking of something else. You both go
ahead; I'll look after the factory."(*What was I
saying? Did that sound convincing? Couldn't they
see my brain was already in slumber mode?*)

I stumbled home at 2 a.m. after finishing;
weaving and lurching like a drunk – my mind
blank, my eyes drooping shut, the beam from my
torch red and fading.

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That morning at 'planting' I nearly fell – I had nodded off standing; leaning on my walking stick, *shutting my eyes for a moment was heaven.*

Daya walked up to me: "Have you been drinking?" he pulled off my dark glasses.

"Why are your eyes so red? Are you okay?"

And I told him everything.

"You silly bugger, why didn't you tell me before?"

"I didn't want to sound like a wimp, making excuses." I said.

"You bloody fool, take the day off and go and sleep. Don't worry about Alec, I'll cover for you. And you don't have 'Factory Duties' for a week – we'll look after that."

Bye-bye, smoke belching dragon, you can no longer haunt me!!



Chapter 3

Nagrakata Club

Life in Tea Clubs revolved mainly around the bar and occasionally around the dance floor. There was usually a billiards (pool) table, a library, and, tucked away in the back, a card room. Outdoor activities included tennis, golf, cricket, and football. In some clubs, squash and polo were also available. The Tea Clubs had a system of signing

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chits for drinks ordered - no payment was required. At the end of the month, a bill arrived with all the signed chits enclosed to support the sum charged. The club's Honorary Treasurer would hand these bills out to members on a club night – he was usually considerate enough to wait until members had had a few drinks ‘under their belt’ and were in a ‘devil may care’ mood: some envelopes were dauntingly thick and receiving them at the start of the evening would certainly be a dampener.

For the first month I was not allowed to sign at the club - not for any reason other than the restriction put on me by Daya Sehgal: "You are not bloody signing in the club for a month. We shall take care of all your drinks." he said in his deep voice. To say I was grateful would be inadequate; I was proud to belong to such a community. Daya had passed this along to the other senior planters who, if they saw me signing, would step up, grab the chit, and tear it up. I lived in bliss for a month.

The following month I did my best to pay all back for their generosity. I ordered drinks for

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all those who had looked after me and I would not accept a drink-for-drink return. I am an impressionable person and now delighted in returning, with interest, the goodness and decency shown to me during my first month.

My club bill at the end of the month was thicker than the library books I had borrowed and the amount of the bill far exceeded my monthly pay slip. I offered part payment to the Honorary Treasurer at the club office. The Treasurer was a Scottish senior Manager. He looked at me over his half moon glasses, "Dona stert yer young career with IOU chits, me lad. The club doesna accept part payment, but in this instance I shall make yer an exception," he smiled to temper the harsh words. "Be careful how ye spend yer mooney and avoid a spendthrift lifestyle. It's easy fer a young lad to slide into debt."

"Thanks," I mumbled. I wish I had paid more heed to his wise words; but at that age, wise words were just the ramblings of an old grouch. *I retreated hastily.*

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At about this period, Koko Das joined Tea and came to a neighbouring plantation, Chengmari. A tallish, well built lad who had worked as a gravedigger in the UK. Koko was as wild as they come. I remember one night at the club, after all had departed, even the bar boy had gone home after lining up drinks for us. Koko, with mischief in his mind, pulled the Bridge Card Table under a ceiling fan, clambered up and bent the fan blades downwards – pointing them all to the floor. He then proceeded to do that to every fan in the hall. We encouraged him and laughed uproariously.

Of course, the club committee found out who the culprits were and we got our just rewards. The Committee saw us one at a time and lectured us on how young responsible executives should behave. "Any youthful zest should be deployed on the football field and not vented on club property." We were let off with a warning. I think, behind the scene, Cuckoo Madhok, the senior resident doctor's wife, interceded on our behalf and softened the committee's ire – for the committee

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was of the opinion that a suitable communication should be forwarded to the Company Head Office informing them of the misdemeanor.



Chapter 4

My Billet

I was allotted a two bed roomed ‘chung’ bungalow – which means the bungalow was built raised on stilts – cars could usually be parked under the bungalow. The roof of the bungalow had corrugated sheets painted green or red; the rooms inside had false ceilings made of ply board – similar to those used to make tea chests. These ceilings sheltered rats, bats, vermin, and the odd snake which at times fell through on to the floor of

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the living area below causing the occupants to retreat very hastily from the room.

Basic furniture was provided in these bachelor bungalows: chairs, both wooden straight backed ones and round deep and comfortable cane ones which were mainly used on the large open veranda where breakfast was laid out each morning and tea in the late afternoons. The bungalow also boasted a sturdy wooden dining table; a wooden sofa set with cane net weaving on the back and seats; dark varnished wardrobes with solid wooden doors stood tall in the bedrooms...probably carpentered at the turn of the century; the bathrooms had full sized enameled “Shanks” tubs, washbasins and toilets...no soft furnishings – which meant no curtains, carpets or cushions – except I had three little hanky sized cushions in the sitting room. A new recruit was expected to buy his own curtains, carpets, etc.

‘Tea’ bungalows also came with a lawn, flower garden, and a vegetable garden at the back. A couple of malis are employed through the year

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to look after the flowers and to ensure the sahib's kitchen had a supply of fresh green home grown vegetables.

After my splurge at the bar at the end of my first month, I was flat broke! There was no money to indulge in the luxury of curtains and durries. To a young bachelor, this inconvenience was not a worry. I pasted old newspapers on the bathroom windows and was quite content. Content, that is until Daya visited my bungalow ...he was horrified!

"Where are the curtains?" he glared at me from his six-foot plus height. "As an executive staff member, you are expected to maintain a standard becoming of your position in the Company."

"Well, Daya, you know...the club bill..." I said hesitatingly.

"Shut up!" he interrupted. "Who told you to behave like a bloody Maharaja at the club? I am sending across my spare set of curtains. Get the

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local tailor to alter them to fit your windows and doors," he said and departed.

I was bowled over by his generosity and large heartedness.



Chapter 5

Field work

After early morning 'planting' was over and after a hearty breakfast of eggs, sausages, bacon, toast, marmalade, and orange juice, *yum!* (All received via Jamair from Calcutta) one did a full days work on the field. I was shown how tender tealeaves should be plucked...the proper way to do so and what to avoid.

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"Don't let them stuff too much in their fists, for then the leaf is damaged, fermentation starts and 'heat buildup' ruins the quality."

I spent a large part of the day with the plucking women. An old Nepali woman (ear rings, nose rings, a bright blouse, and strong perfumed hair oil) took special care to show me how to pluck properly and speedily. I practiced plucking with her for many weeks. A young saucy girl with flashing eyes invited me to pluck with her, but (alas!) I desisted. She flashed those come hither looks every day, but my resolution held (*what a shame!*). She even started plucking next to the old Nepali woman – I was always aware of her and of her budding femininity...I was also aware of the others watching me out of the corners of their eyes to see if I would succumb. After six weeks of learning I felt confident enough to show my hand at plucking in the Men's' section,

There was immediate interest. Many stopped to see how the new sahib was plucking. At the end of the week, I had passed muster – for they

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nodded their heads and said I had learnt well. By the end of the year, I was plucking almost as fast as the fastest puckers and I saw respect in their eyes... *needless to say my chest puffed out and I went one hat size larger.*

I noticed that only the best leaf pickers had the confidence to volunteer to teach me the intricacies of good fast plucking. The old Nepali woman had nimble fingers and though she was not the fastest, she was very good – the quality of leaf in her plucking basket was well above average standard: most of it was undamaged and lay fresh and green in the basket. She was conscientious and kept the leaf fluffed-up in her basket.

In those days Dooars plantations produced ‘Legg-cut’ teas which threw strong, dark liquors but the brew lacked aroma and was inferior to the quality of Assam Teas. Doors production fetched a lower price at the London Auctions and was used as filler to give body to the finer packets of Assam teas on the shop shelves.

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As a consequence the plantation plucked for quantity and shoots of four and five leaves with a bud was what the Management 'hokum' was to the leaf pickers. At the start and end of the season when leaf growth was not as prolific, the plucking round was extended to a nine day cycle from the seven day cycle during the season. It was only later when the 'Legg Cut' system was abandoned and CTC, Rotorvane, and Orthodox types of manufacture were adopted that quality production gained more value in the Dooars.

At close of the season, sometime in November, all picking of leaf stops and the tea bushes are pruned down to a manageable height for the next season. Hooked pruning knives are used to cut the tea. To master the technique of cleanly cutting hard wood that is the thickness of ones thumb requires a lot of practice and technique.

Again, I went to the same old Nepali woman who could cut through a bush cleanly and seemingly without effort. 'Flashy eyes' was there

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too and pouted her disappointment every time I looked at her.

The old woman showed me the technique which lay in the angle of the knife head. It should be below your wrist and a follow through with an upward flick of the wrist at the end of the swing. Properly pruned bushes will have all the cuts slanting inwards towards the centre of the bush. "Just cut a little section at a time," she told me, "enough to allow your knife to have a follow through swing."

I learnt from her and she made it so easy – ‘Flashy eyes’ was now pruning at the other end of the field. Perhaps she thought her indifference would attract me, but more likely her people had given her a talking to. I will admit, though, that by the end of the season we had made a number of long range eye fixes – 50 yards long.

Before the old woman taught me pruning, I would wake up early so no one would be around, and practice hacking at a tea bush...making a complete mess. I would get my field Supervisor to

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tidy up my atrocious handiwork before the labour arrived on the scene.

By the end of the pruning season, once again, I was confident enough to prune in the male section; and once again, they were impressed and nodded their approval. I had learnt well – my teacher was patient and good. I rewarded her as best I could...with a couple of saris (brightly colored ones that she preferred) a comb and a bottle of hair oil (strongly perfumed).She gave me a creased smile, pressed my arm and put her joined palms to her head. I patted her back.



Chapter 6

Siesta Time

Daya was very popular in the Nagrakata area and was invited to a lot of parties. I, being new, did not know many people. Daya soon changed all that: He took me along to every party he was invited to. In this way I soon got to know a lot of planters and their wives and more importantly my evenings were mostly taken care of – not that I didn't like

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reading library books from the club, armloads of which I took home.

*

A long lunch break was allowed to planters. After all, most days one awoke before sunrise and worked until sundown. I was not used to a 'lie back' after lunch and instead, frequently crossed a dry nullah on foot and trudged to Daya's bungalow. He would be having his afternoon siesta in his bedroom upstairs and had allowed me to play his radiogram in his downstairs sitting room (at low volume) for the next two hours. I put on a stack of LPs (Dean Martin, Frank Sinatra Peggy Lee, etc.) and picked a book from his book shelf and settle in one of his very comfortable armchairs to read and listen to some lovely soothing music.

This became routine with me. I had no music at home and listening to these LPs was a very pleasant way to pass the afternoons. When Daya woke up he would come down and we would have a cup of tea together after which Daya would take me as far as the factory in his car. I would

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then catch a lift on any Company vehicle that was going towards the outer AG division, which was my workplace.

One day it had been drizzling all morning and let up only at lunch time. I decided to walk to Daya's bungalow through the slush. The nullah now had some water flowing through it and I had to jump from rock to rock to cross it. When I got to Daya's place, I shucked my work shoes off outside so as not to track up the red polished veranda floor. I followed my usual routine and put on the radiogram.

Two hours later Daya came down in his stockinged feet smelling of toothpaste. We both had a hot cup of fresh plantation tea. When it was time to leave Daya shouted for the new bearer he had temporarily employed, to fetch his work boots – the regular bearer had gone to a wedding. The new man brought his mud encrusted boots on the tea tray that had a beautiful organdie tray cloth...now ruined with the mud.

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On seeing Daya's shocked look, the man explained that he had been instructed, by the old hand, to never carry anything in his hands to the Manager Sahib every article must be taken on a tray. He had merely followed instructions.



Chapter 7

Plantation - Field Routine

After I had worked for two months as a Field Assistant, I felt the need for some form of conveyance. At this time, a young British planter, Neil Golan, on Hope Tea Estate resigned and offered me his Lambretta 48cc. auto-cycle at a very reasonable price. I would have loved to buy it off him, but where was the money? Yet I looked

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over the little bike with longing – it would be such a convenience in my work.

I spent a large part of my working day walking...to get me from one work place to another I had to walk. To cover a thousand acre plantation takes a lot of walking everyday. Well, I would have to keep walking for another four months, for on completing six months I would become eligible for a loan from the Company to purchase a car...what luxury!

Kusang Lama, a Sherpa from Darjeeling, short and heavily built (like most Sherpas) and with a most pleasing smile, joined my employ as a bearer/house boy at this time. He was experienced and had worked in other bungalows and so knew the work routine. Over the years, he had salted away a sum of money, which he asked me to hold as deposit in the company safe. My Manager agreed and gave him a receipt as proof of his deposit, and that was that...or was it?

I could not ask the Company for a loan as yet...I had not completed my probation period, and

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anyway the company didn't allow loans to purchase bikes. But, I could ask my bearer to forward a loan to me that I would return with interest. I could then buy the auto-cycle.

Kusang agreed readily and grinned companionly; he would not hear of accepting interest, but fetched the money from the office safe...and that is how I became mobile!

The little bike took me everywhere and speedily. My work efficiency improved! I could get to the remotest corners in minutes instead of hours that it took me previously. I became a veritable pest for the workers now, for they did not know when I would appear and how many times a day I would visit to check on work.

Kusang was happy. He did not like to see the Sahib walking all day in the sun and rain. I was happy with my newfound mobility...but my dog (a spaniel) was sad. No longer could I take him to work – the auto cycle was too rapid for him to keep up with. Some days when the auto broke down, I would walk and take him with me. He

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would bound along happily, rushing in and out from under tea bushes. I wondered if he prayed that my bike stayed in the workshop forever.

*

One evening, after a particularly hard day at work, I climbed the Chung bungalow steps and slumped into the cane chair on the veranda. My shoes were muddy and wet and I pulled them off and checked my feet for leeches. Kusang brought out the tea tray with sardine and lettuce sandwiches. After pouring me a cup of tea, he usually faded unobtrusively back inside. But that evening he stood there and fidgeted. I could tell he had something on his mind.

"Yes, what is it, Kusang?"

"Well, Sir...if I may suggest...after a days work there is nothing. You are lonely."

Well, here it comes, I thought to myself, I shall just have to tell him firmly that I do not want a local woman. How does he dare presume to intrude into my private life?

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"Sir, why don't you buy a radio? I will pay for it and you can then listen to music that you are so fond of. In time you can return the money."

What a splendid idea! What a splendid fellow! I was delighted.

My loneliness was now interspersed with bursts of static and some ecstatic music.

Kusang, you miracle worker!



Chapter 8

Jaldhaka Forest Reserve

Bhogotpore Tea Estate in the Nagrakata district of West Bengal is six kilometres from the Jaldhaka (Jaldapara) Forest Reserve that spreads over some two hundred square kilometres. This unspoilt reserve has an amazing variety of wild life and birds: elephants, rhinos, tigers, panthers, gaurs, sambars, chitals, pigs, and a large population of smaller animals. The most striking birds were the

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Malabar hornbills, the many varieties of jungle fowl, pheasants, and the large owls and hawks – the little ones like the scarlet minivets, the steel blue sunbirds, and golden orioles were delightful flashes of color against the green forest background.

Hunting in this reserve forest was allowed to those that held a licence. A Shooting Licence allowed one tiger, two leopards, six chital deer, and an unlimited number of pigs, per annum.

I had now worked on Bhogotpore for approximately a year. The company granted me a loan to purchase a car and my father presented me with a double barreled rifle: a .450/400 beautifully crafted by W.J Jeffries, of Birmingham.

I now visited the reserve as often as I could get away from work, my trusted rifle always by my side. I would pull out the front lower seat of my Ambassador car, place it so I could sit and use the car's front as a backrest. The forest ambience, the smells, the sounds, and bird song were very soothing: all the irritation and tension of work

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flowed gently away. I poured coffee from a flask into its screw top plastic cover and settled down with a Wills Navy cut cigarette to gaze down the long stretch of forest road.

A sambar or a one horned rhino crossing the road would have me scrambling for my binoculars. I often took a pig back to the plantation and distributed it amongst the bungalow staff and my friends. I kept a prime cut for myself and trash pieces for the dog.

Loading a pig into the boot of the Ambassador was tricky. If it were a large pig, I would have to drive to the forest village to pick up a couple of men to help me. The monetary reward I handed out got me known and popular in the village.

One morning a man from the village arrived at my plantation looking for 'Chota Sahib'...that's me! A tiger had killed his young bull he related with pathos in his voice and tears in his eyes. This was the second animal it had killed, the loss of which had destituted him. He would

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have to hire bullocks to plough his land...and hiring anything was, generally beyond his means. He was afraid his prized milch cow may well appear on the marauders menu next.

My new manager, Laurie Ginger (a keen hunter himself) gave me the day off to visit the village and set up a *machan* over the 'kill'. I took my trusted 'Man Friday' who also was, at crucial times, my financier, Kusang Lama along to help me.

We were led by the villagers to the 'kill' which lay, swamped with blowflies, in a lantana thicket. The tigress (its pugmarks suggested it was a female) had not eaten much. This could be a good sign indicating she would be hungry and may well come early to her 'kill'. On the other hand, if she had been disturbed, she would be very careful and may sit for hours in a nearby thicket to insure all was clear. It was my turn for 'factory duty' that night and so I hoped the tigress would come early, hopefully at sundown...for the forest became quiet

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well before sunset when the road and drain maintenance squad left at 4 p.m.

I supervised the construction of the *machan*, making sure the leafy branches, used as camouflage, were of the same variety as the tree on which the hide was constructed. I ensured no axe cut marks showed and all seemed in order. I left with my bearer, telling the villagers I would be back before dusk.

I sent a note across to Daya Sehgal, asking him to stand in for me at the factory should I be late. I would ideally have liked to skin the tigress that very night, for the pelt comes off cleaner and easier when the body is still warm. Unfortunately, I would have to leave it until the early hours of the next morning for I would have to be back in the factory as soon as I could to relieve Daya. Tomorrow I could wrap the pelt in polythene, cover it with hessian, and send it by Jamair to Calcutta. My brother there could then redirect the parcel to Van Ingen (taxidermists) in Mysore for curing and head mounting.

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I checked my rifle, broke open a new case of ammo, and clamped my five-cell torch over the twin barrels adjusting it to shine exactly where the rifle sight pointed. I strapped my hunting knife to my belt and was ready. Kusang would accompany me and sit behind me. We smeared 'Odomos' - a mosquito repellent - on ourselves and headed for the forest. Odomos would mask our human scent from the tigress.

We were early and I used the time to acquaint myself with the location of the kill vis-à-vis our tree-hide whilst Kusang clambered up the tree and let down a rope to winch up the rifle, torch, the bag containing coffee, and Odomos, etc. I climbed up, got into the hide, and practiced throwing the rifle up to my shoulder to check that it pointed, each time, at the bloated carcass of the young bull.

I had two 465 grain soft nosed bullets resting in the breech of my Jeffries & Jeffries double barreled rifle; the safety catch was eased off so there would be no click when I wanted to

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use the weapon and Kusang received last minute instructions: if he heard anything he was to gently touch my back. All was ready and now we sat waiting.

We could not see the setting sun as it hid behind miles of tall deciduous forest trees: lali, odhar, the silk cotton, teak, siris, and many other species. Dusk was gently gathering and throwing a soft blanket over the trees. Soon the birds quietened; the trumpeting call of the jungle cockerels was heard no more and the flies from the carcass departed - they would have laid their 'maggoty' eggs by now. The insect chorus tentatively tried a few screechy notes and soon picked up confidence to fill the night silence with their nocturnal mating clamor.

We waited. *I prayed the tiger would make an early appearance.*

A few mosquitoes, with bloodsucking intensions, made power dives at our faces, but left us alone when the Odomos scrambled their scenting powers. Fireflies came out making a

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flashing entrance into the blackness around; their brilliant fire-dance eased the stress of the vigil.

We waited. *And I prayed.*

The luminous hands of my watch showed an hour had gently slid by. I would have loved a sip of hot coffee, but that sadly would have to wait until after the conclusion of the shoot.

An owl hooted nearby answered by the chattering call of its mate. There was a slight lightening of the sky to the east; the moon would soon rise making the scene a picture setting. I wore a rough crown of leaves on my head to disguise the shape of a human head. Tigers have very sharp night sight and so I sat low in the hide.

I heard a swish – a large body brushing against a bush. I cocked my head to the side of the sound and waited...there it was again, quite distinctly. A little later, the tigress exhaled – I heard a soft rush of air to my right. It was circling the 'kill'.

We waited: tense and alert.

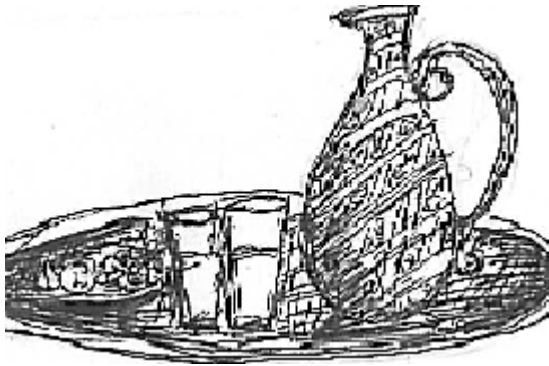
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I would wait until it started eating – the noise of its eating and loud cracking of bones would cover any sound I made in getting into position. We waited...on tenterhooks - the tension was palpable.

There was a sudden explosion of sound...the din of water falling from a great height that rent the quiet of the night. It came from behind me. In the stillness the sound was shatteringly loud. I heard the tigress cough and rush into the forest... the chance had gone!

I switched on the torch; Kusang sat with his back to me peeing onto the undergrowth below; the stream fell on some large wild cane leaves that amplified the sound many fold. The realization that a tigress was so close had unnerved him.

I cursed my oversight: I had overlooked taking along an empty beer bottle for just such an emergency!



Chapter 9

Revelry

All planters looked forward to Hogmanay night and New Years Eve. Tuxedo/Dinner Jackets would be brought out of mothballs aired and pressed for the big night. We would brush up our skills at tying bow ties by practicing tying it on our thighs. Those who used 'ready made' bows were subjected to embarrassing ridicule during the club evening. Members of the Masonic Lodge were a ready source of advice, for they had to wear bow ties

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every month to their meetings (I too became a Mason later in my career, joining the Bhramaputra Lodge at Thakurbari in the Tezpur area).

Some senior planters, Doc Madhok, and others proposed that we 'follow the leader' that New Years Eve. This entailed that a person would visit one of the bungalows, have a drink, and leave followed, in his own car, by the person visited. The two cars would then visit the next bungalow and a third car would join the convoy and so on. The convoy would finally assemble at our club and proceed to Mal Club (some thirty miles away) where a band from Darjeeling was in attendance.

We started for Mal Club in high spirits – each had his bottle of Scotch and water mix from which he swigged through the long drive.

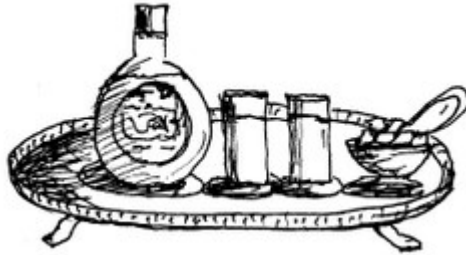
As we drove along through the Jaldhaka forest, the length of the convoy became smaller and shorter. Cars were swerving off and stopping by the edge of the forest road – the drivers too inebriated and sleepy to drive any further.

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Our grand plan to arrive in an impressive convoy was reduced to four cars quietly parking in the shadows of the 'rain trees' at the club. To questions of, "Where are the rest of you fellows from Nagrakata?" we could only answer hesitantly, "They will come...."

And come they did – all before midnight, rejuvenated now by the short kip – they sang lustily and danced the Scottish 'Highland Fling' at the entrance. The crowd was on its feet cheering, applauding, and joining in.

Nagrakata 'chaps' had retained their reputation as a bunch of high spirited revelers.



Chapter 10

A Night at Nagrakata Club

Donald McKenzie – known popularly as Big Mac – was a giant of a man: perhaps six foot five or six inches with a broad and powerful build; a Scot who had spent many years in India. Mild of character – like most big people are – he kept out of drunken brawls. Sozzled planters, arrogant and belligerent, confronted him in the club rearing for a fight with the biggest bloke around. Donald

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usually merely brushed them aside and continued his conversation with his friends.

There was one shortish Indian planter supporting a large impressive mustache who often, when well inebriated, challenged Donald to 'come out and settle the score like men outside the club'. Donald usually ignored such antagonists whose actions, in their inebriated state, fuelled their egos even further till other planters pulled such challengers away from Donald and cooled them down.

One Sunday evening, after a full day of drinking beer and pink gins, our friend with the handle-bar moustache swaggered up to Donald and threw out his usual challenge. On this occasion he would not be sidetracked and kept hassling Donald. After a period of this belligerent intrusion, Donald was fed up and turned to this quarrel-making intruder, caught him by the front of his collar, lifted him off his feet and shoved and threw him across and over the bar. Our friend sailed across the bar and out the back window to land on

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the lawn adjoining the tennis courts. Stunned and shaken he sat there completely disoriented and confused – eyes blinking, expression vacant. For a while, I am sure, he did not know where he was and what had happened to him. A mild form of concussion and temporary amnesia I suspect. It could have been much worse as he was somewhat stout and ungainly.

He was easily persuaded to go home. How he drove I can't imagine!

Another evening at the Nagrakata club we (the Assistant Managers) were standing and drinking at the end of the bar after a Wednesday's afternoon tennis. The Managers were in a group further along the bar. Donald was there drinking his favourite 'pink gins' and talking to his cronies.

In our group there was also George Clayton: a junior Engineer Assistant, of Eurasian extraction, who was great company to be with. As the evening wore on with light banter and 'leg pulling', we noticed George distracted and

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listening into the conversation between Donald and his friends.

“Hey, George,” someone from our group said, “which conversation are you listening to?”

“No, men!” said George, “They are not saying nice things about Anglo-Indians.”

“Forget it, George,” we said, “Who cares what they say?”

But George kept bending his ears and listening to the conversation of the adjoining group. He dropped out of our discussion and stood halfway between the two groups – listening mostly to them. Donald was slurring slightly and stood hunched over the bar...which came slightly below his mid waist.

Suddenly George strode off a few steps and picked up a cane chair which he carried unobtrusively back to the bar. He hesitated a few moments and then lifted the chair high in the air and struck a full blow with it to Donald’s slouching back. He quickly dropped the chair and

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shot out the club through the side door which opened behind Donald's back.

Donald spilt a little of his 'pink gin'. He slowly placed the glass back on the bar and deliberately turned around, standing to his full six feet ten inches – or so it seemed at that moment.

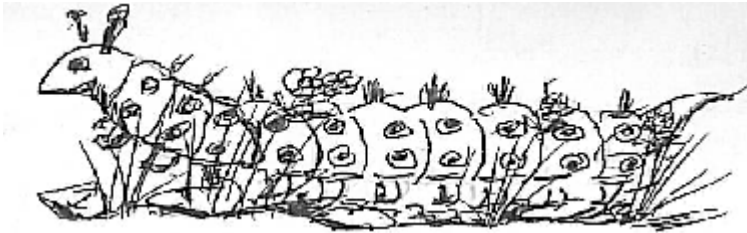
He looked around his head nodding unsteadily.

“Who did that?” he demanded in his deep voice eying us through his bushy brows. He hadn't seen anyone behind him. We put on the most innocent look we could muster and shrugged in unison. Donald looked around a bit more and decided to let it go and turned back to his cronies all of whom were leaning on the bar and had their backs to the area behind the bar and therefore never saw George do his dastardly act.

After fifteen or twenty minutes with nothing happening, George stuck his head through the door and surveyed the bar. We motioned for him to come on in. No one had seen him. George came in gingerly and joined the group.

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We couldn't contain our laughter. The way George had swung that chair and then scooted bent over as if he were hiding behind some bushes was hilarious. He had taken a big gamble. Had Donald seen him, one can only imagine the consequences. Hitting a senior Manager with a chair could put his job in jeopardy. Of course, Donald would not let that happen. A club incident would remain within the four walls – that was the code!



Chapter 11

Tasati Tea Estate

I was transferred to Tasati Tea Estate in the Dalgaon area of Dooars. I had almost completed three years of service and could wed at the completion of three years. I was entitled to three month's leave – ample time to marry and honeymoon.

Tasati Tea Estate is a thousand acre plantation that lies on either side of the main road that runs through Dalgaon to Alipur Duar and

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onwards. The Empire of India & Ceylon Tea Co. Ltd. owned the plantation, managed in India by Gillanders Arbuthnot & Co. Ltd. at Calcutta – a business house that also owned The Darjeeling Hill Railway in those halcyon days.

Tasati is flat and featureless; its eastern boundary demarcated by a winding shallow river, whilst the south-eastern boundary abuts upon a small thick forest. An interesting forest comprising deciduous and evergreens, well stocked with pig, deer, the odd leopard, porcupine, the wild cat (Katas), and many other small animals. As it is tucked behind a large tea plantation (Tasati), the forest remains largely undiscovered by the local Planter hunters and so retains its stock of wild animals some of which make their way across a nullah into the plantations that borders the forest. Nightlong barking of 'labour line' pariah dogs warn all that a leopard is on the prowl looking to pick up easy prey.

David Gibbs was the manager of Tasati. He resided in a large bungalow with his wife and two

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dogs of indeterminate pedigree. David was a lanky, loose boned individual of few words. He ran a 'tight ship' and expected unquestioned compliance. During work, his piercing look would intimidate those from his labour force who picked up courage to approach him looking for favours. If this stare did not work, David would deploy his next weapon: a short clipped, "Kya mungta hai," said not as a question, but barked out as, "piss off, you bugger." Should the person be intrepid enough to withstand these intimidations and state what he had come to say, David would bring out his last and most telling weapon...he would pretend deafness, shrug his shoulders and walk away saying, "Nai samajta hai."

*

I returned off leave with a young bride, Narbada, who hails from the Kulu valley of the Himalayas. She was fascinated with tea plantations and had never seen one before. We lived in a bungalow known as Neel Kothi: a delightful two bed roomed bungalow with a large sitting room and a separate

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dining room. The kitchen stood detached some twenty feet away and was connected by a covered passageway. The bungalow was cited away from the other houses of the plantation and stood on the estates eastern boundary some 200 yards from the meandering sandy river mentioned earlier.

The approach to the river from the bungalow led across a short expanse of grass and scrub - which when cleared created a scenic picnic spot where my wife and I often had our evening tea laid out. The view from the veranda took in the river and miles of paddy fields stretching way away. Full moon nights were a special treat, for the moon rose from behind clumps of bamboos on the far horizon, and lit up the river with shimmering irradiance in the gathering dusk... an idyllic setting for a newly wed couple.

I had two Dachshunds at the time (carried over from my bachelor days) which were very attached to me. If work was close to the bungalow, they would follow me out and rush about chasing rats and other rodents in the field. At night they

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would both jump on to my bed and cuddle up at my feet...a habit my new bride effectively discouraged, making them sleep in their own little dog beds placed at the corner of the room. As long as the bedroom lights were on they would both lie on their stomachs in their beds and fix me with the most heart wrenching sad looks. My heart went out to them, but I suppose my wife was right: dogs should not be allowed free run of our bed.

One morning when I returned from work for breakfast I saw both dogs had bite marks on their legs and body. I assumed they had been in a fight with the local line dogs and so got the plantation Doctor Babu to medicate and dress their wounds.

All went well and the wounds healed swiftly. However, a few days later both dogs began behaving strangely. I again sent for the Doctor Babu and when he approached the dogs they started growling and rushing at him – most strange, for they were friendly dogs and were friendly towards him. The doctor advised that I

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chain them and observe them – he feared it could be rabies and the previous wounds could have been inflicted by a carrier jackal. To cut a sad story short, both dogs died within a day of each other. I was heartbroken and desolate with the loss.

But that wasn't the end of the sad episode. Both my wife and I had to take fourteen anti rabies shots each in our stomachs. My wife was delicate and suffered from the pain and lumps that were formed by the injections. I was worried and prayed that the prophylactic procedure did not cause a reaction which could be very severe. I read, in the Chief Medical Officer's journals that the reaction could, in isolated cases, even be lethal and appear up to seven years later.

The Lord has seen fit to spare us both and now that episode is forty five years behind us.



Chapter 12

An Unequal encounter

A leopard from the forest next to Tasati was becoming a menace. It was picking up dogs and goats from the labour lines at night. Drum beating and yelling at odd hours of the night would not only frighten the leopard away, but would awaken and alert the executive staff housed a kilometre away. To make matters worse, the leopard took to lying, during the day, under tea bushes that formed

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a continuous cover for acres on end. Its presence disrupted work in that area for the leopard would emit a rattling growl when unaware tea plucking women got too close, causing complete mayhem. The 'puckers' rushed out on to the road screaming and running all the way back to the safety of the 'labour lines'. We would then have to drive the leopard away by shouting and chucking stones. Work would be disrupted for hours.

At close of work, when the work force departed to the factory to weigh the days green leaf and when all was quiet, the leopard took to roaming the internal plantation roads. Its strolls, in the cool evening air, took it past the Manager's bungalow where it undoubtedly eyed the fattened dogs. The dogs would bring the house down with their barking.

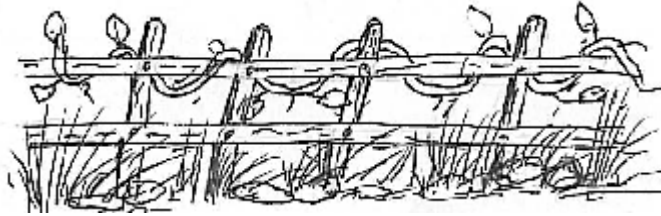
My Manager, David Gibbs, came up to me one day at work and asked if I could do something about the leopard before it made a meal of his dogs. He was aware of my keenness as a young hunter and aware of the weapons I owned to

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pursue the sport. So I took to driving around the lonely roads at dusk hoping to meet up with the marauder.

A week later we met up! It was an unequal match for the .450/.400 bullet weighing 465 grains, projected at over 2000 ft/per sec. and packing a punch of 4100 ft/lbs/sq.inch, tore into the leopard throwing it clean off its feet and bundling it in a heap...it had not stood a chance. The split nosed bullet had entered its hind quarters, as it galloped away from me, and had traveled through the stomach and mushroomed in its chest: expending its entire force within the leopard with devastating results that killed it instantaneously.

David was pleased; his dogs were safe. I was delighted I had bagged a trophy that measured over seven feet – the largest I had bagged so far...a beautiful specimen that still carried its gleaming winter coat.



Chapter 13

The Garden Babu

The marriage season was upon us and the Garden Babu's daughter was to be married to a boy in the Binaguri area twenty odd kilometres from Tasati. The Babu asked me at work if the Manager would allow the Company truck to transport his marriage party to Binaguri on Saturday night and on the following Sunday as the truck would not be involved in plantation work. There was no way I

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could form an opinion on this as it would depend entirely on the mood the Manager was in.

I was present when at the close of day the 'Garden Babu', (short, thickset, a ready smile, and pan stained teeth) reminded David Gibbs for the use of the truck for the wedding that he had spoken to him about. David was standing in front of the open plantation safe – a very inopportune moment, I thought, to ask of a favour. The conversation went something like this:

"I spoke to you about the truck, Sir. Can I take it for two nights?"

"Eh, what's that?" David was bending and peering into the safe.

"The truck, Sir..." the Garden Babu rocked on his feet.

"What about the truck, Babu? What are you blathering about?" David was still bending, but looked around, annoyance showing in his eyes and voice.

"The truck, Sir, for the wedding." The Babu was rubbing his hands in embarrassment.

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"What wedding? Speak up, Babu!" David was hiding his face in the safe – I think he knew well what wedding. He was pretending deafness – not an auspicious sign. This went on for the next few minutes with David pretending complete amnesia by now. He finally accepted that he had been approached about the truck and the conversation now went thus:

"You can not have the truck for two nights, Babu, one night only!"

The Babu scratched his head and thought about this. He had better take what he was being allowed. The Manager was quite capable of doing a complete u-turn and cancelling the sanction altogether.

"Okay, Sir, but can I have it too-night?" It was a Saturday.

"No, Babu, I told you one night only!"

"Yes, yes, Sir, but can I get it for too-night?" His pronunciation of 'tonight' sounded like two night.

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"No, Babu, no, no, no! ONE night only!"

David knew exactly what was being said.

"Yes, Sir, I understand, but can I have it for too-night?"

"You are annoying me now Babu, Go away!"

David slammed the safe door shut and twisted the key in the lock. I thought I had better intercede and stepped forward. David turned to me and let his left eyelid drop in a wink. I understood. David was having his way of fun. Unfortunately he had reduced his faithful Garden Babu, who had worked with him for a number of years, to a nervous, stammering wreck. David strode out of the office – back ramrod straight, leaving the Babu standing stunned in the middle of his office. I followed David out.

"Let him have the truck for two nights," he whispered to me and jumped into his jeep and left.

Though soft hearted, David did not want to seem a pushover.

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Chapter 14

A Leopard Strangled

*~This incident took place on my neighbouring
plantation, Dalgaon.*

Bidhan Mookherji, a short, slim, bespectacled, young man, and Prafulla (Prof for short) Chaudhury were posted with Stanley as their Manager, at Dalgaon Tea Estate analogous to Tasati, where I was.

The two plantations being adjacent occasioned instances when work on the two estates

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were in the same area, separated only by a common fence. I idled away many a happy moment chatting with my friends across the fence. We would banteringly denigrate each others' work standards, "Shocking supervision!" we threw at each other.

Before I married, many were the nights when I enjoyed Prof's hospitality. He was tallish, robust, with big expressive eyes and a large, generous heart. He would more often than not crack open a bottle of whisky and toss the cap out the window - indicating that the bottle would have to be consumed before departing. We would pull off our shoes, sprawl on the carpet, and get down to the serious business of drinking. Neither of us could ever remember the point of the conversation we had so vociferously expounded during the drunken night.

Next morning I would consciously contrive to not meet David at the work place – the plantation was so large and the work scheduled in so many areas, that I could achieve this, at least

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over the pre lunch period. I will admit that on the odd occasion when I had no escape route, David would corner me, look searchingly at me, "Been on the tiles, have you, lad?" His amused look needed no answer: 'Youngsters will be youngsters', I read in his eyes. He liked youngsters with spunk and I don't think I disappointed him.

Prof's greeting was quite in contrast at the club outing. He stood a head above me, and in the loudest voice with a smirk of humour said:

"You are a f---ing piss-head, mate."

"And you are not, Prof?"

"Ha, ha, ha!" he turned to a members at the bar, "Did you hear what this junior 'pip squeak' just said?" He was very popular and four years my senior. Indulgent smiles all around said they knew the rapport Prof and I had.

Stanley, the manager of Dalgaon Tea Estate, was to leave the plantation in charge of Prof for a day whilst he attended a meeting at the salubrious heights of Darjeeling. However, on the eve of his

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departure he got word that a leopard was seen in a section of tea.

This animal was regularly raiding the labour lines, picking up dogs and goats and had been doing this for some months now. Stanley decided to have a go at bagging it and so rid the plantation of a menace and procure himself a trophy. He picked up Prof and Bidhan in his jeep and proceeded to the area where the leopard had been sighted. They used a large torch to scan the area.

Leopards are naturally curious and this one was no different; it stood on his hind legs to peek over the tea bushes; every time the beam of the torch flashed into its eyes, it ducked, but soon appeared in another spot. This hide-and-seek went on for a while and Stan decided to abandon the shoot when suddenly he spotted it again – quite close this time and it held its curiosity long enough for Stanley to take a shot at it with his Springfield .318 rifle. The leopard disappeared, but all were certain the bullet had found its mark. This situation

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left Stan in a spot. Looking for the leopard would entail crawling under the tea bushes with a torch – a procedure that is highly dangerous especially with a wounded beast. And Stan was due to leave for Darjeeling early next morning.

Stan would have to miss the meeting. But his Company had instructed him to attend the meeting. Prof and Bidhan came to his rescue: they would follow up the leopard in the morning they assured Stan. Relieved, Stan handed over his rifle to Prof instructing him to gather a large body of men and dogs to drive the leopard out. Stan had no way of knowing the bizarre events that would take place the following morning.

Bidhan tells the story as follows:

“A large body of men with bamboo staves, bows and arrows and dogs gathered at the tea section next morning and with loud shouts, claps, and beating of staves on the ground proceeded to drive the leopard out towards where Prof and I stood. Prof had Stan's rifle and I stood in support next to

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him with a slim walking-stick sword. The leopard was spotted scuttling between tea bushes and loud full-throated yelling greeted each sighting.

Prof and I were drawn into the tea section as people pointed once here thence there to indicate where the animal was sighted. Patches of blood showed Stan had hit him and we hoped he was now weak with loss of blood. Prof penetrated deeper into the tea section and I followed.

Suddenly the leopard stood on its hind legs right in front of Prof – just a large tea bush separated Prof from the snarling jaws of the angry leopard. Then in one rush the leopard was on top of the tea bush and Prof was thrown backwards landing below the bush; the rifle slipped from his grip and landed a few feet away. The leopard was trying to maul Prof, pushing its head through the foliage. Prof lay on his back petrified; his left arm raised, trying to ward off the attack.

I saw immediately that Prof needed rescuing; the leopard's jaw was reaching closer and closer for Prof's throat. I rushed up and with

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force thrust my sword at the leopard's side. To my horror, I saw the flimsy blade bend over in a 'U'. The leopard looked over its shoulder at me and growled menacingly.

I had but a few moments to do something – the rush of adrenalin had numbed my natural fright. I stepped behind the leopard, pushed my arm under its neck and had it in a 'Nelson's Grip'. I then straightened upright, pulling the leopard off Prof whilst squeezing its neck with all my panic enforced strength. I was screaming at the top of my voice – what, I know not.

Prof scrambled up, his arm bleeding profusely, and found the rifle. A labourer behind me, who had dived under some tea bushes, now gathered courage and came to my rescue. He swung down with his bamboo stave aiming for the leopards head and hit me squarely on my head. I swooned but kept my grip. Another brave fool shot an arrow that fortunately, went past my face.

'Stop them, Prof!' I screamed shaking with terror.

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Prof was trying to find an angle where if he fired a shot the bullet would not pass through the leopard and then pass through me as well.

The leopard was weakening rapidly. The loss of blood and the squeezing shut of its air passage was making it limp. Its attempts to maul me were slowing – it couldn't get its front paws far enough behind its head to injure me.

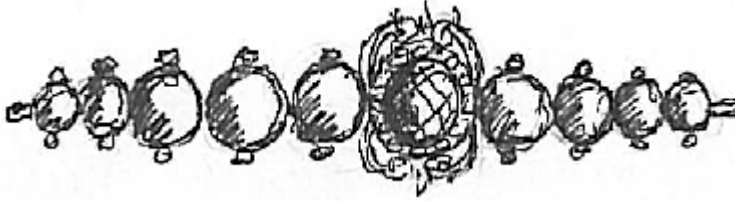
Suddenly the leopard slumped. The weight of its body threw us both to the ground. I snatched my arm from under its neck and fell backwards.

But the Leopard was dead!

The air in its lungs came out in a rattle when I pulled my arm releasing its windpipe. The leopard had been physically choked to death after being weakened with loss of blood all night. The bullet from Stan's rifle had broken its jaw - which had saved Prof from a severe mauling. In spite of a broken jaw the leopard had inflicted deep lacerations to Prof's arm with its paws”

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When I met Bidhan and Prof a few hours after the incident, the two heroes were posing obligingly for photos, smelling strongly of tincture of iodine. Prof's entire arm was bandaged and he declared, with pride, that his Bengali friend had saved his life. "But for Bidhan," he announced looking fondly at his saviour. "I would have been *dead meat*, man!"



Chapter 15

A Night of Power Failure

The Power had gone off late in the evening and stayed that way all night.

Our story starts at pre-dawn next day.

The sky was clear with the monsoon having departed. ‘Cold weather’ was setting in. All plucking of tea leaves was over for the season and the tea bushes were being pruned and their frames scrubbed with copper fungicide and soda to

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remove moss, lichen and ready them for the next season. The factory lay dismantled for the yearly end-of-season overhaul. All executive staff was expected to help the 'Field Assistant' at the planting site.

There was a seasonal nip in the air at this time of the year and when Proffulla (Prof) Chaudhury looked out of his bathroom window, whilst brushing his teeth, he saw there was a ground mist gently swirling across the back-yard. It was 5.30 a.m. and the mist wouldn't lift until sun-up.

Prof was the 'Factory Assistant' and was up earlier than usual for he had instructed that the main Prime-Mover be kept running in the factory for bungalow electricity. The little Lister that usually ran all night was awaiting parts from Calcutta which were being shipped through Jamair.

As night lights would no longer be required in the emerging day, Prof planned to hop across to the factory and instruct the engine driver to douse

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the 125 H.P Crossley Prime-mover which was chewing up huge amounts of light diesel fuel.

His red Triumph motorcycle started promptly and he roared off to the factory He was glad he had put on a light sweater, for the temperature at this hour had a brisk chill and the wind factor was making his eyes water. His grouchy Scottish Manager would approve Profs' diligence in saving the Company's money and the plantation's budget with his adroitness in putting off the main engine at first light.

Prof told the 'Kal Walla' (engine driver) to kill the engine at dawn and to clean the Engine Room and make sure the overhead tank was fully loaded with diesel before he left. Prof then proceeded to the 'planting' site.

He lit a cigarette and made small talk with the 'field Assistant' to pass the time whilst keeping an eye on the planting progress. By 6.30 a.m. the sun was dissipating the mist and it became slightly warmer. It was a Saturday and they discussed the movie that would be shown at the club that night.

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The Club boasted a 35mm projector now and some coloured movies were being screened.

A crowd of jungle babblers appeared and babbled and screeched, jumping around picking up small insects from the area that had already been planted. The two young executives idly watched their antics. From the corner of their eyes they saw a jeep rushing to the planting site, throwing up clouds of dust. It was the Manager's jeep.

The young executives ignored the birds now and got busy shouting orders and looking busy. The jeep skidded to a halt and the Manager got out somewhat agitatedly. He strode across the ploughed field and headed towards the work area.

“Chaudhury” he shouted, still some distance away. “Chaudhury!” he repeated closing the distance.

“Yes, Doughy?”. Prof acknowledged, striding forward to meet him.

“Look at this, Chaudhury” he said pushing his face forward and slapping the right side of his face. “Just look at this!”

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Prof didn't know what to make of it. "I see it, Dough, but what is it?"

"Can't you see the beard, Chaudhury, feel it!"

"Yes. Sir. I see it."

"And do you see this other cheek, Chaudhury?"

"Yes, it's shaven clean."

"Why do you think, me'lad, I would shave only the one cheek?"

Prof stood dumbfounded "I...I..." he didn't know what to say. The Manager's glare held him tongue tied.

"Hahn, hahn?" he demanded shaking his head up and down. "Tell me."

"I...I don't know, Doughy."

"Well...you put the power off, didn't you lad? How do I use my electric shaver without power, lad? I was only half done when the f***** power died!"

Christ! He uses an electric shaver!

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“Right, Sir.” He said backing away towards his bike. “I will have it on again in a jiffy.”

Prof straddled his bike and speed of to the factory. There he sent for the ‘Kal Walla’ (who had already gone home and was asleep and turned up sleepy eyed and disheveled). Prof got him to jack up the 125 HP Prime-Mover.

The line shafts shrieked and picked up speed – the sub shafts rattled at top speed. Prof switched on a drum roller and a few other machines to give the powerful engine some load so the revs would not *hunt* without resistance.

Passers - bye would hear the sound of the full factory running and assume ‘manufacture’ had commenced. No one would *imagine* that the massive factory was running so the Burra Sahib would have power to *shave the other cheek!*



Chapter 16

Standing on the Corner

I was transferred back to the Nagrakata area in 1963 - to Ghatia Tea Estate's upper bungalow...the lights of which I had gazed upon from across the valley when posted at Bhogotpore Tea Estate.

Ghatia's upper bungalow is perhaps, the prettiest and most scenically situated bungalow in all of Dooars. It is built at the very edge of a steep cliff that falls rapidly and steeply down to the Ghatia

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river over two hundred feet below. The beautifully designed two bed roomed bungalow faces the mighty Himalayas that rise in folds to over seven thousand feet. On the left lies the Ghatia valley – already mentioned - on the right stands a largish bamboo area with tall bamboos (Bum-bans) that sway gently in the breeze. During sunset, the towering bamboos seem to brush the sky with changing hues of pink and red. A vegetable garden at the rear of the bungalow abuts a large thatchbari. In this sanctuary live an assorted variety of small animals and jungle birds.

At the end of day, as the afternoon light softens, wild cacophonies of jungle birdcalls emerge from the tall grassland. The males of the partridge family seek the highest white-ant hill to warble their roosting stand. The red jungle fowl crows to beckon its family to herd for the nightlong roost, whilst the smaller birds keep up a constant chatter and twitter in the thick boundary hedge next to the bungalow. All these nature

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sounds make the evening 'cuppa', taken on the veranda, a very enjoyable and soothing moment.

The thatchbari is also a stopgap refuge for the odd leopard or two that take up temporary residence there. They announced their presence at night with loud 'sawing' calls that resound around the bungalow. For food, these leopards catch hares and porcupines that have burrows throughout the thatchbari; but these small animals are not enough to allay a leopard's appetite and so it picks up a dog, a goat, or a calf from the labour lines around the plantation. That, sadly, is how man and animal come into conflict.

The Labour reports these losses to the Management and their regular complaints compel the Management staff to take up arms against these animals.

In those days, tea plantations were surrounded by wild uninhabited areas covered with thorny lantana that afforded lying up havens to small village leopards. Leopards are smaller than their forest cousins, the panther, and hide in these

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thickets around labour lines. Leopards very rarely injure humans. When there is an incident, it is always humans who are hunting it with bows and arrows or have cornered it and put it on a defensive fight for survival.

A leopard, in the upper garden, where I lived, was picking up a goat or dog very regularly and I was requested to eliminate it. A chance occurred when a goat was killed in the daytime on the other side of the bamboo bari (bamboo plantation), 100 yards from my bungalow.

I inspected the kill – it lay just within a row of Tea across a narrow road that separated the Tea from the bamboos. The goat was killed that morning and the leopard had not had a chance to eat any of it. The leopard was probably lying up in the thatchbari behind my bungalow, waiting for nightfall.

There were no nearby trees I could sit up in; and in any case, even if there were a tree, I would not be able to see the kill that lay under the thick foliage of tea bushes. The only choice I had

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was to sit inside a large drain that ran along on the other side of the road. I would also have to pull the goat out on to the road and peg it down strongly so the leopard would not be able to pull it back under the tea before I got a shot at it. I had plenty of time to make the preparations.

Keith Turner, the senior Manager of the estate, let me off early from afternoon office paper work. Dileep Mookherjee, the Assistant Manager who looked after the Lower Division, expressed a wish to sit up with me for the leopard. I was amazed, as he had never shown any interest in hunting. In fact, he was mortally scared of any animal larger than a kitten. Anyway, he had volunteered and I took him up on his offer. He accompanied me to my bungalow. My houseboy, Kusang, had already done the necessary work: he had pulled the goat out on to the road and tied it down with long bamboo stakes driven into the ground. We covered the stakes by laying the body of the goat over it. All was in readiness.

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We had a cup of tea in my bungalow and I prepared the rifle and torches, etc. My wife looked a bit apprehensive when she learnt we would be sitting in a large drain, but wished us luck and we trudged off walking the 200 yards to be in position well before dark. The hide was ready and we lowered ourselves into the drain and pulled earlier prepared branches over to cover the top, leaving a small view hole for me.

We sat still and waited. A mosquito repellent helped to ward off the blood thirsty pests and additionally masked our human scent. As pre-dusk darkness spread gently over the area, a wild jungle fowl, heading for the bamboos to roost, walked past us a few feet away – it did not discover us, which was good, we were hidden well.

Darkness gathered; one moment we could make out the grey outlines of the goat and the tea bushes beyond and the next it was completely black. We waited straining our ears for any sounds that would be out of place. We heard faint music

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wafted across the night air – my wife was listening to the radio. The night sounds of insects filled the gloom. A nightjar fluttered overhead and settled on the road a few feet from us. Soon its "tonk, tonk" call was loud in our ears.

Suddenly the nightjar startled us by fluttering noisily away in flight – something had disturbed it...the leopard? My heart rate picked up. I squeezed Dileep's thigh – the leopard was close. I had my thumb on the light switch and held my breath. Any moment the leopard would be on the goat.

There was a loud wrenching sound and commotion. I switched on the torch...the goat was not there. With one mighty heave, the leopard had pulled the goat within the tea rows. The nine-inch long bamboo staves lay uprooted under the first row of tea.

The alert jungle fowl had not detected us; the nightjar with its acute night sight had not detected us, but the leopard with its superior powers of observation and smell, had!

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Had I lost the combat? I was not ready to 'throw in the towel'. I had a plan. I asked Dileep to take a torch and walk to the bungalow – making his departure noisy by singing loudly to deceive the leopard into thinking we had departed. I would remain behind hoping the leopard would now assume all was clear and would approach the kill again.

Dileep, slim built, glasses, always smiling, and with no experience of hunting at all, thought I had 'lost my marbles'

"What?" he said, eyes looking wild and unbelieving in the torchlight, "are you mad? You expect me to walk unarmed to your bungalow with a wild, hungry leopard in the vicinity?"

To convince a person to do what he thinks is total madness in the extreme, is difficult at most times, but to do so in whispers is almost impossible. "Trust me...I have experience...would I suggest this unless I knew it was perfectly safe?" Were some of the whispered words I used to

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assure him. Of course, a hard shove in the direction of the bungalow left him with no option.

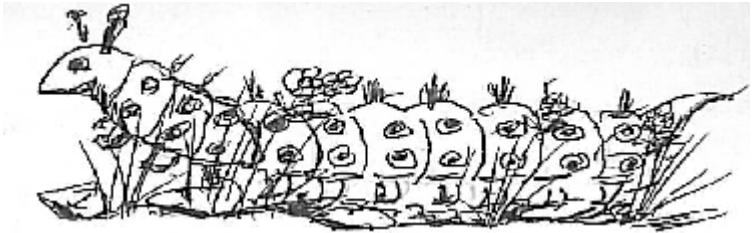
Dileep stamped his feet flashed the torch light at every bush and bamboo clump and departed. First, squeakily and tremulously then full throated and loudly, Dileep sang:

'Standing on... the c...corner

'Watching all... the g...girls go by...'

And then I heard him run...still singing in a high pitched undulating squeak.

My uncontainable outburst of laughter ruined my chances with the leopard.



Chapter 17

Planters Drink Hard

Ghatia upper bungalow holds a special place in my heart. Not only is it scenically placed, but is placed on a plantation that is blessed with an amenable labour force: when other plantations suffered a labour strike, Ghatia labour worked normally. Sethi Sardar, a popular and powerful Nepali Sardar who lived in Bhutan beyond the Upper Garden, ensured that Ghatia labour there was not affected.

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Being posted to the Upper Garden allowed me a fairly free hand at work and a lot of freedom to make decisions as I held charge of the division. The Manager's bungalow was on the lower main division... a long way away; and because of the distance, the Manager made very infrequent visits to the Upper Division- which fact vested in me a stature of authority and allowed me independence with the labour force, which not many junior Assistant Managers experienced.

The fact that my wife had a baby and I became the father of a baby boy whilst posted there endeared my sojourn at Ghatia with happy reminiscences.

Dalabar, a private Company forest paradise, was part of the Upper Division. This was a delightful little virgin forest of deciduous trees of varied species: Simul, Siris, the Dalbergias, flowering Cassias, and some wild fig, Gular, Peepul, and many other berry bearing trees that attracted birds. A riotous clamour of birds would indicate which tree was with berries. Green

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pigeons, hill mynas, parakeets, bulbuls and other fruit eating birds would visit when berries appeared, and jungle fowl and pheasants would feed on fallen berries.

I took advantage of this period to bag a game bird or two using my BSA, bolt action .22 rifle and so kept my refrigerator stocked with delicately flavoured meats – an envy of visiting friends.

Often, on weekends, we would gather at my bungalow. There was Duncan Nag, a tall muscularly built lad, with a large repertoire of limericks and clever songs; Alope Mookerjee, of medium height, friendly, and mad keen on jazz; and Mike Bentinck, thin, tall, happy and smiling - son of a vicar in England. I was the only married member in the group.

I had bought a Kashmir carpet from a traveling salesman and proudly displayed it on the sitting room floor. It was a thick white carpet upon which we all sprawled; the record player would be switched on and drinks brought out, mainly Bhutan

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rum from across the border (a kilometer's walk from my bungalow). I would, in Prof's style, remove the bottle top and fling it out the window...a boozy night lay in wait.

My wife, Narbada, being large with our first baby would quietly slip into the bedroom. She didn't have much in common with the drinking crowd bent on getting pissed and singing along, rather tunelessly, to Ella Fitzgerald's scatting.

By the time the party wound up, the sky would begin to lighten – fortifying the saying that planters drink hard and work hard. Anyone who saw us at that moment would certainly agree we drank hard...

In time, Alope came to live in the lower garden's main division bungalow. My wife gave birth to a baby boy (which turned the spare bedroom into a nursery) and Keith Turner, my Manager, retired to the UK. Before he left, he had a garage sale for stuff he did not want to cart back to the UK. I bought a gravy jug and a beautiful casserole on the lid of which was engraved a rather

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artistic 'T' which was also the first letter of my surname.

Dalip Singh took over as the Manager. An ex army Sikh person, thin, tall, and like all new incumbents, very keen.

We were young in those days, days when bonhomie and camaraderie came easy. Days also that were carefree - the responsibility and cares of running a plantation were the Managers' lot. When one was full of energy and enthusiasm the world was an apple, the future was way beyond the horizon and only the present was pertinent.

Into this idyllic world came the company's Transfer List. This document declared where each personnel of the Company would be located for the next two or three years. Assistant Managers who had not been moved in the last few years expected the inevitability of a shift, but 'where to' was decided in camera at the hallowed Board Room of the Calcutta Office.

Rumours would trickle through from Calcutta that the 'List' was in preparation and we

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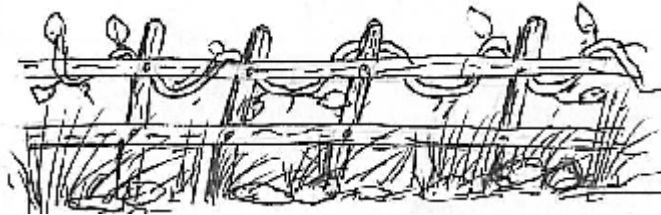
would wait anxiously. We wondered whether we would be sent to a better plantation... would we land up with one of the popular Managers or would we stay where we were.

I was transferred to Napuk Tea Estate in far away, Sonari, Assam. It would wrench me from my circle of friends and dispatch me to an unknown world. I accepted this with mixed feelings. I would miss my friends; but Assam planters, I was told, received large yearly bonuses – a fact one could not sneeze at – especially now that I had a budding family.

My friends congratulated me. I would be better off monetarily. But what would happen to scattin' with Dave Brubeck and beating on the table to the rhythm of Take Five. Would I ever forget the version of 'Souvenirs' Duncan sang in his baritone voice..."I packed my bag and left, leaving half my wife in bed; and the other half I call 'my souvenirs'..."

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I departed for Assam; my memories of Dooars
were my souvenirs.



Chapter 18

South Bank – Sonari (Assam)

I arrived at Napuk Tea Estate ingloriously by train, rather than by car in which mode of transport I had departed Dooars for Assam. How this came about, I shall relate as we proceed.

Napuk Tea Estate was unlike any plantation I had seen. In some areas tea was planted on little hillocks – deep nullahs separated every hillock. Labour crossed from one hillock to the other over suspended bamboo bridges.

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The plantation was separated from Nagaland by a dense and green forest of tall trees that towered over heavy impenetrable undergrowth of bush ferns and lianas that climbed skywards to find sunlight. Varied wildlife abounded here. The ubiquitous leopard had a safe haven in this thick forest from where it made marauding excursions into the plantation labour lines in search of dogs, domestic pigs and other delectables. Bird life was abundant and I saw the Imperial Green pigeon (Parguma) for the first time here. The black partridge and the red jungle fowl often came out to catch the sun and scratch in the young tea areas adjoining the forest. Lapwings (Did-you-do-its) would call hysterically at all times of night and day, bursting into raucous chorus, dipping and diving senselessly and without provocation – even a lizard and certainly a mongoose would trigger exciting flying and circling aloft with loud piercing calls.

The Manager of Napuk was Proshotom (Shoto) Malhotra: thin, tall and a veritable

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workaholic. He was kind hearted, mild, and very understanding and trusting. He was a person who saw the good side of every colleague and friend. Shoto lived in the Burra bungalow with his charming wife and three children. My family and I lived in the Assistant's bungalow four hundred yards away on the same ridge. Both bungalows are cited on a high ridge that overlooks the tea factory, part of the Sonari Club golf course, and some of the labour lines.

The Sonari Club being situated on Napuk's land was conveniently at hand. The club membership stood at eight members and their wives, but the club boasted three tennis courts, a swimming pool, a 'nine hole' golf course, a billiard room, a card room, and a library. Movies were screened every Saturday night (TVs had not come to India in those innocent days).

In a small club, members become very close to each other for each has to do ones bit to keep the club functional. Many 'dances' were organised to attract planters from other districts for

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entertainment and to boost bar sales to keep the club liquid.

My journey to Assam (Napuk) was undertaken by road in my blue Ambassador car with Narbada, our baby boy, Vikram, and an ayah. I carried in the car only necessities I would need to cater for a baby. The rest of my luggage would follow later by truck.

It was a harrowing drive – the National Highway was interspersed with long stretches of very bad road surfaces, so bad that we traveled at the speed of a bullock-cart. Then happily the road would improve to what a National Highway should be like: broad, well surfaced and smooth. It was on one of these stretches that I had an unfortunate accident.

The villages along the highway are pushed well back so that speeding vehicles are not surprised by cattle and other animals or humans crossing the road. In spite of this a little girl – perhaps five years old – shot across the road in

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front of my speeding car and was hit. Crowds collected and the Police was sent for. The Inspector seemed quite surprised that the gathered crowd had not manhandled and assaulted me. This I put down to my experience in dealing with thousands of labourers on tea plantations.

At the police station, details of my driving licence were recorded and then I was free to go. I was however, asked to return the following week to compensate the father for the loss of his little daughter (though the Officer-in-Charge blamed the father for leaving an unattended child by the expressway), and to collect my car which I had to leave behind, for the impact with the girl had damaged the radiator and caused a leak. I thus completed the rest of the journey by train. And that is how my family and I turned up by rail.

When I returned the following week, the Police Officer had had my car repaired at the local workshop. After paying for the repairs and after compensating the father (the Officer-in-charge interceded and brought down the huge

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compensation demand to a mere fifteen hundred rupees, saying the father should receive nothing, for the accident was caused by his neglect.) I was on my way once again and reached Napuk by nightfall to a very worried wife.

I was looking after the Tea field at Napuk and Shankar Chaudhury was in charge of the factory. A die-hard bachelor, always neatly turned out with hair brushed back – not a single strand out of place, a short person with a cutting sense of humour. After work, I would often stroll across to his bungalow (a hundred yards from the office). We would have tea on the veranda and afterwards a peg or two of Honeydew brandy before I climbed the steep road to my bungalow. Shankar was generous in his habits and would always ask me to stay for dinner, which at times I would not accept; as my wife would wait for dinner with me (mobile phones were unheard of then). Most times when Shankar sent for his cook to ask what he had prepared for dinner, the answer would be, 'miss meat pie' (mince). Shankar would laughingly

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remark that it was certainly 'miss' meat as the cook always missed out something.



Chapter 19

Thakurbari

A tea planters' life is regularly interrupted by transfers. This time I was sent to the North Bank to Sessa – across the Brahmaputra, but still in Assam.

Sessa Tea Estate lies in the Thakurbari sub-district of Assam, sixty kilometres from Tezpur. To the north of the plantation rose the massive Himalayas forming the boundary between India and China.

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Sessa also lies on the ‘take off’ path of the Air Force’s fighter planes. With the result that the roar of the after burners of these powerful war machines, shook the whole bungalow through the day and at times at night too.

My daughter, Vidya, was a little child in those days and during the Air Force’s night sorties the roar of the after burner would awaken her and send her scurrying to our bedroom and into our bed.

*

The Borelli River was a popular picnic place for Planters that lived in the Thakurbari area. Its wide white sandy beach was ideally suited to bonfires and family picnics. The spot was hedged on both sides of the river with deep forests. The spot was miles away from any village, thus according privacy, serenity, and exclusivity.

Picnic programmes were finalized on Saturday nights after movies at the Thakurbari Club. Those willing to participate carried lunch,

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beer, fishing tackle, etc. and assembled at the riverside on Sundays.

We would attempt fishing, but after a few beers, abandon it – I suppose merry making and loud laughter does not make for good fishing. All the fish had to do was to wait and soon the leftover lunch would be tipped into the river affording them a Sunday feast – no doubt, the fish knew this...the wiley buggers.

After lunch most of the families left, but some of the more enterprising ones stayed on. We dragged and piled logs of driftwood to make a picnic bonfire over which we made tea. Straw mats, durries, and car seats were spread on the sand to sit around the fire.

When the sun slipped below the forested mountain ridge, a subtle transformation took place: bottles of rum and whisky appeared; ice pails were passed around and the sound of ice clinking in a glass created an atmosphere of pleasure and bonhomie. Jokes and sounds of merrymaking now reverberated through the forest – which was just as

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well, for the forest was alive with Indian bison and families of elephants that could stray into the picnic area but for the noise we made.

Some revelers – and I am afraid myself included – stayed on till daybreak if the following day was a holiday. Through the morning river mist we could make out the forms of alert deer cautiously approaching the river's edge for water. The elephants – when they came – walked soundlessly with trunks held high to check the air. We talked in whispers, sipped from mugs of hot tea, and watched this wonderful nature show. The cars parked on the sand and the twirling smoke from the fire cautioned their curiosity and kept them at a safe distance.

I had brought along a young pilot officer from the Air Force who was keen to join the picnic. He, however, lost all interest in the merrymaking after the first few drinks and curled up under a blanket. As he had come with me, he was dependent for transportation back home and per force had to stay on until I left.

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Through the night we kept nudging him awake, offering him a drink – the whisky we were drinking was his canteen stuff, anyway.

“No, no, no!” he expostulated. “Just let me sleep.”

When we finally prepared to leave, at sun up, and shook him awake, he sat up bleary eyed.

“You bloody Planters are mad...totally bonkers. You all kept me awake all night with your out of tune singing...or screeching, your ridiculous bloody juvenile jokes, and senseless loud laughter. What’s with you lot?”

“Yeah. Really?” I intervened. “And what about you lot? You scream across our bungalows in your jet fighters at all hours of the night...every fifteen minutes at times and shake the whole family awake with the thunder of the after burners...we don’t complain do we? This is just sweet revenge, sweetheart!”

And we all laughed.

“It’s work, yar, sometimes we have to do night sorties.”

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“And what do you think this is? It’s relaxation from work tension, Yar. Sometimes we have to do it too!”



Chapter 20

Muttrapore Tea Estate.

In northern Assam, in the Sonari area and at the foot of the Naga Hills, lies Muttrapore Tea Estate: over a thousand acre plantation straddling the arterial road from Jorhat to Digboi. On the south of the plantation is a forested area next to which lies new young tea recently planted on cleared virgin forest soil.

I was transferred here after doing a three year stint at Napuk. Muttrapore is about three

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kilometres from Napuk and so moving there was accomplished quite rapidly. I made three trips in my Ambassador car. The first trip entailed carrying all the pots and pans required in the kitchen. In the second trip the car was piled high with bed sheets, curtains and various linen items – table cloths, towels, etc. The last trip transported my wife and children and, of course, the ayah. The heavier stuff was brought over by the Company truck.

The Manager of Muttrapore was a Scottish 'die hard' bachelor called Macintosh (Mac) – thick horn-rimmed glasses, a heavy structure, thin legs, and a dry sense of humour, a sample of which you will get to read further on.

Nazira was the closest airfield to us and cold stores from Calcutta landed there and were kept in a storeroom (under refrigeration) awaiting collection by various plantations.

The tea planting season was upon us and the planting schedule on Muttrapore had slipped behind. To complete the programme, I – as Field Assistant Manager – requisitioned every transport

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on the plantation to 'planting' duty. This meant every tractor and truck owned by the Estate would report to the tea nursery area at 4 a.m. to carry saplings to the planting field. They would be free to return to their usual duties after 'planting' – usually by 10 a.m. This plan worked well and we made good progress. Then one evening, I was jolted out of my complacency: initially I was shocked, but then I saw the humorous side of it. The story did the rounds of the district, setting all laughing at the club. The incident happened as follows.

At days end all tractor and truck drivers would gather in front of the office to receive instructions for the coming morning's duties. I was caught up in paper work inside the office that evening and when I came out, I saw the drivers dispersing to go home. Mac and the Factory Assistant, Shankar, were standing on the veranda and I assumed they had told the drivers to press on with 'planting' duty as usual.

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Just to confirm this, I shouted to the retreating body of drivers that work would be as usual tomorrow morning at 4 am. The senior driver, Jalal, who drove the only truck on the plantation, stopped and turned back. He came up to me – I was standing next to Mac – and said, rather impertinently, that he would not be going to 'planting' work tomorrow. I glanced at Mac who I saw was looking at this development with his usual amused smirk, a cigarette perpetually held between his fingers. He was a content, happy person, and enjoyed seeing how one solved these little hiccups.

"And why won't you be going to 'planting' duty tomorrow?" I asked, bristling a bit at the impertinence.

"Because the Burra Sahib wants me to go to Nazira to pick up his butter!"

"What butter...? What garbage, man!" I glanced again at Mac. He looked even more amused, his eyes twinkled mischievously. He said nothing, but looked at the driver and then at me as the conversation switched from one to the other.

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The Manager, obviously, wanted to see how I handled this, I thought to myself, and turned to the driver.

"Rubbish! You go to planting as usual and at ten o'clock you can go to Nazira to pick up the Burra Sahib's butter!" I said with what dignity I could muster.

The driver looked at the Burra Sahib for confirmation.

Mac turned to Shanker – on his other side – and said archly and with theatrical poise, head held high, nose in the air. "Shankar, ask our friend here," and he indicated me with a tilt of his head, "ask him what is more important...the Manager's butter or 'planting'?"

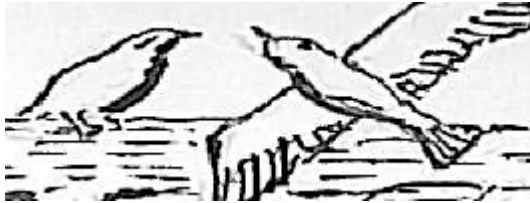
Shankar turned to me, pulled himself erect to his full five feet three inches and said with feigned dignity, "The Managers butter, of course... dummy!"

"Right!" I said to the driver, "The Burra Sahibs butter! Off you go! "

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The Three and a half ton truck, with its full complement of jugalis (driver's helpers) took off to Nazira the following morning – a sixty kilometre round trip – to fetch the Manager's pound of butter in time for his breakfast.

How could I dream of denying the Manager his toast with Anchor butter? Rather unthoughtful of me.



Chapter 21

Lohagarh

After leaving the services of the King William House Group, I joined Bloomfield Tea Co and was posted to a most delightful plantation at the foothill of the Darjeeling Range called Lohagarh.

Lohagarh Tea Plantation is about twenty kilometres from Siliguri and separated from Nepal by a boulder-strewn river. This green stretch of verdant tea abounds with visiting wild life and exotic birds, but sadly, lies plumb across an

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'elephant trail' and so suffers periodically from elephant depredations. No permanent road connects to Lohagarh; in parts, there is not even a trail and one has to negotiate across a wide, dry riverbed to connect to a dirt track on the other side. Between this river and the one on the Nepal border, lies luxuriant Lohagarh.

During a cloudburst, this tenuous road connection is temporarily severed and one has to wait on the riverbank for the brown rushing waters to recede – which it does quite rapidly. A new track is marked out by the tyre impressions of the first vehicle crossing the damp oozing sand.

In 1975, I was the Manager of this tea plantation of a thousand odd acres and lived in a large white bungalow with my wife and a five-year-old daughter who had not started formal schooling as yet. The bungalow was built on a rise, a hundred yards from the start of a steep mossy climb to the top of the first ridge about two thousand feet, whence one could see the forested ridges rising higher and higher and receding into

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the misty distance of the Himalayan and Darjeeling range. The air at this height was distinctly crisper and carried the heady aroma of pine.

My two sons were in boarding school at St. Joseph's College in Darjeeling and were happily nearby. At weekends, I would drive up the tight wooded mountain road to visit them and ease back at dusk on Sunday.

Lohagarh was not connected with State Electricity and so electricity was only available when the factory was manufacturing tea and generating its own power. However, we could crank up a standby generator for bungalow use and switch it off after dinner. At other times, we used kerosene lamps and gas lamps. It was quieter without the hum of the generator and soft lights blend into the natural quietness and soft sounds of the forest.

Whenever we visited the club for tennis we headed back home as soon as it turned dark; this was to avoid getting caught by wild elephants that

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would mill around the narrow track near the dry riverbed – one would assume this was their favourite milling place. However, one night my wife and I were late coming home and stopped the car on the main road before the turnoff to the plantation: shirtless men were running too and fro with flaming torches, beating drums and shouting. On enquiry, I learned that a large herd of marauding elephants had raided their grain crops and the excited men were now chasing the herd across the river towards Nepal.

"They are moving towards the river," the men said, "and will likely turn towards Lohagarh!"

I hopped into the Jeep and headed towards my plantation as fast as the rough roads would allow. I did not cherish the idea of interception by an agitated herd of large pachyderms.

We reached without incident. Whisky and soda on the veranda with subdued lighting let the tension flow blissfully away.

On the drive home, every large bush that loomed up in the periphery of the headlights

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looked like an elephant, heightening anxiety and tension. We were home, but the night was young, none could have imagined the incidents that would unfold before sunup.

Unlike the programmes we today witness on wildlife TV channels that show unprovoked herds of elephants living in unthreatened peace in their natural habitats, these elephants around Lohagarh, were agitated and provoked; pursued by villagers with crackers, drums, and flaming torches. The herd's self-preservation instincts were honed to 'hair trigger' reactions that made their behaviour unpredictable and dangerous.

That night, after a tender, succulent roast chicken and tossed green salad dinner, we turned in. The generator was doused and the house glowed in the gentle light of kerosene lamps hanging in the veranda. Night birds and insect sounds heightened the peaceful tranquility of the night and we quickly fell into restful slumber.

I was jolted awake at about 2.30 a.m. with a screaming commotion and loud drum beating

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coming from the ‘labour lines’ at the bottom of the hill. I pulled on trousers and sweater, grabbed my rifle, and ran out to the jeep. I could see a big leaping fire in the distance – one of the labour houses was ablaze and the tall flames colored the sky red. Sparks rose to a great height on hot thermals.

When I reached the lines, half naked men came running towards the jeep lights. All were very agitated; women were crying and children screaming. I selected one of the senior Sirdars to tell me the story – which he did with clamoring interjections from the excited and gesticulating crowd.

It transpired that the herd of elephants, chased by the downstream villagers four hours ago, had indeed turned towards Lohagarh. They crashed through the flimsy barbed wire perimeter fencing of the plantation and ploughed through the Labour Lines – smashing houses and anything that obstructed their way. Two men, side swept off the path by the elephants, were seriously injured, and

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one unfortunate whom the elephants threw in the air, landed on the apex of a house on his back and died there of a shattered spine. His broken body lay draped on the apex; his family stood below, wailing and beating their chests in grief.

That particular ‘labour line’ was thoughtlessly constructed in the path of the elephants’ *migration route* and some incident always took place when the elephants passed that way. To stay the elephants’ migratory walk, wide deep drains were dug, but they came through anyway. It delayed their entrance into the plantation, but could not prevent it.

Elephants often visit plantations that are on the edge of heavy forests. The trespass would be discovered in the morning when bent and uprooted fencing and star pickets were in evidence. Often they visited Labour Lines looking for food in the vegetable patches. Laupani or Haria is a great favourite with them.

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Haria is a rice beer made by tea garden laborers. It is made with rice, water and wild hops, put in large earthen pots and left to ferment for a fortnight. The smell is distinctive and strong and carries a long way in the night air. Elephants are known to break into the thatch and bamboo houses where Haria is fermenting and funnel up the entire contents in one large draught – after which, they silently fade away. Any damage caused is in getting to the vessel with the Haria and some damage to houses they rub against on their way out.

Mostly, though undisturbed and unchallenged, the elephants lived in harmony in the forests around the plantations.



Chapter 22

The Misty Heights of Papua New Guinea.

Whilst at Lohagarh I received a job offer from Papua New Guinea to join their coffee and tea plantations. The pay offered was much in excess of what I was presently receiving – I decided to join and resigned my job at Lohagarh.

Procuring a Passport in those days (1977) was a daunting job. But dogged persistence paid

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off and seven months later my family and I were ready to fly. We traveled via Hong Kong, arriving at Sydney in the morning hours and were put up by the Company at the Travel Lodge hotel there. Tea and Coffee plantations of Papua New Guinea that I was interested in had their head offices in Sydney.

Next morning, at the appointed hour, when I visited the Company office, I was informed that the Managing Director (Mr. Stephen Rich) was at a meeting, but would come out to meet me. He came out and we shook hands. I related, in short, my 'tea experience' and was told that the present General Manager of the plantation I was due to join was Sandy Frazer who had worked in Tea in India – I knew him.

Stephen then looked me in the eye and asked me, "Tell me, Jeff, do you drink?"

I hesitated and then looked him in the eye too and answered, "Yes, Sir, I do - from way back."

"The job is yours." He smiled. "Pick up your air ticket from the front desk – you fly

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tomorrow. All the best to you and your family. I hope you enjoy Bunum Wo Plantation."

*

Thus began my fifteen years at Bunum Wo – all of which I enjoyed.

Some months later, when Stephen Rich visited the plantation, I asked him what he would have said if I had told him that I did not drink.

"Put you on the next plane back to India, mate" he said matter of factly. "Sandy Frazer had told me you drink – so a denial would make you a liar. And, secondly, Bunum Wo is a small close community. A non-drinking person would 'stick out like a sore thumb'"



Chapter 23

Bunum Wo Plantation

Sandy Fraser picked us up from the airport at Mt. Hagen and drove us to Bunum Wo Plantation in the Western Highlands – this is the heart of the tea area in Papua New Guinea. Bunum Wo plantation lies in an almost flat valley known as the Wahgi Valley. Mountain ranges run parallel on the northern and southern sides of this fertile valley that comprises a deep volcanic soil interspersed

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with areas of rich peat overlays. Rain fall here is regular as clockwork falling every evening and most times continuing through the night soaking the valley with an abundant average rainfall of 2000 mm. per annum. The mean altitude of the valley ranges between 5000 and 6000 feet, thus blessing the area with a most pleasant climate through the year. The prime tea and coffee plantations lie here.

Plantation bungalows are adequately large and roomy, built of commercial ply board with wooden structures and covered with corrugated galvanized sheets. Because of the regular rainfall, large galvanized tanks collect rainwater off the roof which is the only source of washing and drinking water.

Only one house-boy was provided and one gardener to do outside work – a big difference from the hoards of servants on Indian plantations. But these boys were strong and muscular and got the work done efficiently. However, we did have to do a fair bit of the work ourselves.

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Banz Club was in town and was the club all ex-pats of the area went to - it was not unlike a Tea Club of India. It had a tennis court, swimming pool and a barbeque area. Inside there was a pool table, a library a dance floor and, of course, the bar.

The bar was the most striking feature inside the club. The top was made of solid, heavy gnarled redwood that curved and ran to the very back of the club - an impressive piece of furniture.

That first night at the club, I found myself standing next to a large Kiwi – beer gut and all – who was fairly guzzling down San Miguel's. We got talking...one thing led to another and before I knew it, we were drinking drink-for-drink and were on a competition to see who would fall down first...how silly of me, and that too on the first night!

There was no way I could keep up with the pace he was setting – he was ripping open a can and finishing it in a few gulps. I opted for bourbon – I would have a peg to every can he drank. He agreed.

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We drew a lot of interest from members who were curious to see whether the new Indian would stand up to one of the heaviest drinkers in the Banz Club.

We stood clinking glass to beer can, "Skol!" and down it went. I saw he went oftener to the loo.

"Hey! You are getting rid of a lot of alcohol before it can mess with your head."

"So who stopped you from drinking beer, mate?" he shot back.

The few Kiwis in the club that night cheered for Brian. The two Indians there rooted for me.

I don't know who won. I don't know how it ended. But I know I was carried to the car and poured into the back seat – my head rested in Narbada's lap.

I guess I'll chalk up one to the Kiwi –Brian.



Chapter 24

Club Memorabilia

The tea clubs in India followed the British ways, traditions, and customs, the Clubs in Papua New Guinea adopted the Australian way.

Melbourne Cup day, on the first Tuesday in November, was a big race day in Australia and was also celebrated in pockets of PNG. We would gather at the Banz Club on that day and lay bets on horses that ran in far away Melbourne. Roast chicken and Champagne was the luncheon menu

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and all-in-all a very pleasant day would be had by all.

An auction was usually held after lunch to raise money for the local charities. Members and their families would bring items to be auctioned: cakes, breads, fruits, miniature tea chests, coffee, and articles purchased locally.

The auction was held after lunch when members were generously flushed with bonhomie and copious helpings of Champagne and beer. These auctions were traditionally, very successful. Those that had not participated in the auction during the day were – towards the end – competing loudly to register their offers so they would not be seen to be uncharitable.

As items on offer dwindled, tail-enders became desperate to make a purchase. Outrageous amounts were offered for a simple few leftovers: Three passion fruit tomatoes fetched a hundred dollars. An ordinary umbrella fetched the same amount, and so did a clutch of hen's eggs.

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Whilst the rest went home, some stayed back to extend the pleasurable day into the night.

I and my wife were amongst the few that stayed behind. All were in a good mood and it seemed a shame to cut short such a pleasurable day.

Chris, a big built Australian guy from Mt. Hagen, was enjoying the conversation where we were all laughing a lot. He kept interrupting a story I was relating...

"Shut up Chris, for the love of Christ." I shouted at him and he kept quiet for a while. But I knew he would interrupt again...his expression of wicked enjoyment indicated that.

And, of course he did. "Shut up Bitch! This is my story." I shouted at him and he laughed uproariously.

After a while he called out to me, "Hey, Jeff, come here." He was standing at the edge of the dance floor. I hopped off my barstool and went over, "Yeah, what?"

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He lounged and grabbed me in a bear hug; my arms were pinned by my side. He heaved me up until my head was higher than his. He then let me slide down until my face was level to his. And before I could react, he had clamped his mouth over mine in a big slobbery wet kiss – sucking my mouth into his.

He left me spluttering and spitting and wiping my mouth on both my sleeves. The club burst into loud, long drawn, eye watering laughter.

Chris had had his revenge!

Narbada looked at me in a disgusting way, “*Chee...* kissing men!”

“What?...What is that?...Excuse me, but did it look like I was kissing anybody? Jesus, could I help it?”

And she dragged me off home.



Chapter 25

Road to Goroka

Of the livestock the locals keep in Papua New Guinea, a pig is the most valuable. It is used as bride price; the numbers possessed indicate the wealth of the tribe; its meat is the most sought after; and when a pig's mother is missing, the piglet is suckled by the women. Its death at the hands of another man can cause tribal warfare.

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The Company I worked for had coffee plantations over a hundred kilometres away in the Eastern Highlands. The General Manager would make frequent trips eastwards to visit these plantations. Large sections of the road were unsealed in those days, making the journey hazardous, tiring, and slow.

Tea and coffee produce their crops at different times of the year; which allows the Management to shift Labour between the tea and coffee fields. In our case it meant transporting them back and forth between the Western and Eastern Highlands.

The Labour consisted largely of men who had not worked before on plantations and thus required a lot of training and disciplining. Some of them had never traveled in a truck before and their thrill and wide eyed wonder on being transported was a revelation to watch.

Unfortunately they had no concept of speed and so if something fell out of their hands on to the road from a speeding truck, they would quite

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happily hop off the truck to fetch it. The Highlands people are thickset and strong and so a couple of dozen summersaults would do them no harm. The onlookers in the truck would scream themselves hoarse with laughter – never having seen a grown man do full stretch summersaults with such rapidity.

There was an occasion when a local driver was transporting labourers between the two plantations. The vehicle was an old tipper truck and its tipper lever was faulty. Midway between the two plantations, the tipper tray lifted offloading seventy labourers on to the road. The onlookers claim that never will anyone ever see a sight of seventy careening labourers, cart wheeling and spinning head over heels after a speeding truck.

On his way back after dropping off some labourers at the coffee plantation at Goroka, David Blackly – the then General Manager – had the misfortune of running over a pig with his truck and killing it. He barely had time to lean out of the window to assess

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the damage, when he saw villagers dashing towards him brandishing staves and bush-knives. To be caught in such a situation would be rife with danger to life and limb. David wisely took off as fast as he could, heading for the Western Highlands and home.

But that was hardly the end of the unfortunate affair. The road in that section, winds along the base of the rocky highland mountains which are dotted with villages. David could hear a high pitched yodeling call given out from vantage points, from village to village along the way. In some places he could see villagers rushing down the mountainside to intercept him. But he managed to keep just ahead of the yodeled call to arms.

The road then veers away from the mountains and David could pick up speed and make it home safely.

But his truck had been recognized.

A couple of days later a contingent of men arrived claiming compensation for the loss of the pig. The situation was now different. David was in

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his area...surrounded with his men and labourers – the contingent of men were outnumbered and subdued. But David knew he would have to pay a just compensation – not the outrageous demand of a hundred thousand dollars – but yet a reasonable and somewhat generous figure, for he would have to travel that road often again.



Chapter 26

The Omen

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Life of a Planter involves mainly outdoor work: looking after and supervising the tending of acres and acres of tea and coffee fields. The tea picking labour in Papua New Guinea are mostly local casual labour: short stocky men, physically muscular; their women: stodgy and strong...a very simple people, but a vein of inherent violence runs through their build-up and apparently imbues in them a senseless destructive trait. Tribal warfare has coloured their basic attitudes in life. Amongst their arsenal of weapons of warfare, fire plays a major role of incineration and destruction.

*

After a tiring day's work, I relaxed on the veranda of my spacious bungalow with a peg of my favourite libation, bourbon. It was evening and the air carried the smell of magnolias and the subtle aroma of the nearby tea fields. The fireplace in the sitting room would soon be lit and I could move indoors. I took a long deep breath and gazed languidly at the reddening sunset. The roosting sounds of the birds chirping in the trees around the

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bungalow soothed the tiredness of an arduous day.

Night was gathering and gently closing the day.

Hearing the deep resonant notes of an owl, I stepped to the edge of the veranda and looked up into the branches of a Casuarina tree, I espied a Brown Owl, bobbing its head and looking around with its large grey and yellow eyes, hooting a deep, 'Hoo, hoo'...some people consider the hooting of an owl at sunset inauspicious.

"Shoo it away!" said my wife coming on to the veranda from within, "it brings bad luck!"

I turned and smiled at her "You don't believe that, do you?" But she wasn't looking at me, her eyes were widening with alarm and confusion. *Jeez, what's she seen now.* "What is it?" I asked, seeing her agitation. She pointed into the distance, "look!" she said. "What is that flame?" I turned and stared horrified. The fire appeared to be within the boundary of the plantation; I adjudged the plantation 'Trade Store' to be on fire.

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I jumped into my Nissan SUV and raced down the hill to investigate. By the time I neared the store, the canned preserves in the store started to explode like muffled bombs. Soon the air was heavy with the smell of roasting meat preserves and tinned fish. I had to stop at some distance: the exploding cans could be dangerous.

*

On investigation, the following turn of events were narrated to me: after work in the field, a group of labourers decided to have a little 'get together'. They lit a bonfire and sat singing and passing cans of San Miguel beer around from mouth to mouth. Just after twilight, a band of men approached the revelers; they were travelers, they said, and had come across to warm themselves before proceeding to Kimel, a plantation a few kilometres down the road. The visitors were made welcome and beer was shared with them as well.

Soon, thereafter, one of the visitors picked up a burning stave off the fire and threatened the store keeper with it asking him to open the store to

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them. The store keeper refused and a scuffle ensued. Out of sheer cussedness the intruders set fire to the store and decamped.

I was aghast at the sheer pointlessness of the destruction. No one had gained by this wanton action. My wife's warning lurked at the back of my mind.

Had the hooting of an innocent owl foretold the fiery end of the Trade Store? Or was the beautiful, but fiery sunset an omen?



Chapter 27

A Puzzling Encounter

*~The following are stories related to me by
friends.*

*(Based on a true story from the tea plantations of
South India.)*

Names have been changed

Gopinath had always been an awkward lad. He was short and plump and his thick glasses were always slipping off one ear and down his nose. He sweated profusely and usually wore a hassled

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expression - needless to say he was the butt of all pranks.

Wild elephants were a plenty in the hilly Nilgiri and Munnar regions of South India and so driving at night could be hazardous. One was advised to be alert on sharp bends for on the other side one could encounter a herd of elephants - not a pleasant experience when riding a two-wheeler as provided to young assistant managers of tea plantations.

Gopinath heard tales of encounters with elephants; one involved two local villagers on a stormy night. The wind was so strong that the rain was slashing horizontally at the two. They made progress by holding their umbrellas directly in front of their faces, bending low and proceeding like two old men. Suddenly their progress was halted – their umbrellas had encountered an obstruction; they pushed, but the resistance was strong. On lifting their umbrellas they realized the points of their umbrellas were poking the side of a

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large elephant that was gazing at their antics. The pair was lucky to flee unhurt!

Jaswant was tall and slim with a ready smile and magnetic charm... everything Gopinath would like to be. He resented Jaswant's easy affability and demeanour; he could effortlessly speed past Gopinath on the rough tea plantation roads where Gopinath had difficulty retaining his balance. In fact, all his planter colleagues sped past him regularly, which irked Gopinath and put his pecking order in jeopardy.

One night at a friends party Gopinath confronted Jaswant: "Why do you always speed past me, what pleasure does it give you?" he looked ridiculously belligerent and drunk.

"I don't calculatingly drive past you, Gopinath; I ride at my speed and you at yours. You are naturally careful, which I admire, and I am a bit reckless. I would, any day, exchange my reckless ways for your stability."

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“Please, have the good manners to not patronise me. All I get are put-downs and platitudes from all and sundry.”

“I’m really sorry, Gopinath, I have no intention to patronise you or to put you down. Please understand me; I have nothing at all against you.”

Gopinath turned away and stalked off.

That night, after the party, the usual happened: all sped off in different directions leaving Gopinath to follow. Jaswant lived a few miles beyond Gopinath’s plantation and, therefore, the two took the same road. Gopinath did his best to keep up with Jaswant, but he slowly pulled away. Gopinath followed, concentrating furiously and peering ahead in the beam of his headlight. Suddenly Gopinath saw a red light in the distance. Could it be Jaswant’s rear light? Was he, actually catching up to Jaswant? Yes, he decided, it was Jaswant’s rear light and he was slowing. Gopinath was going to roar past him and the thought made his blood rush. He put on a little more speed.

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Gopinath was now overtaking Jaswant who had slowed to a crawl. The rush of wind was in his ears. As he passed Jaswant, he thought he saw him making some hand actions. Ha, ha! He is trying to stop me. He obviously, cannot accept defeat - a bad sport! These flamboyant chaps are like that: full of themselves. Gopinath looked back over his shoulder, raised his fist in a winner's salute, and jerked it back down shouting, "YES!" into the darkness.

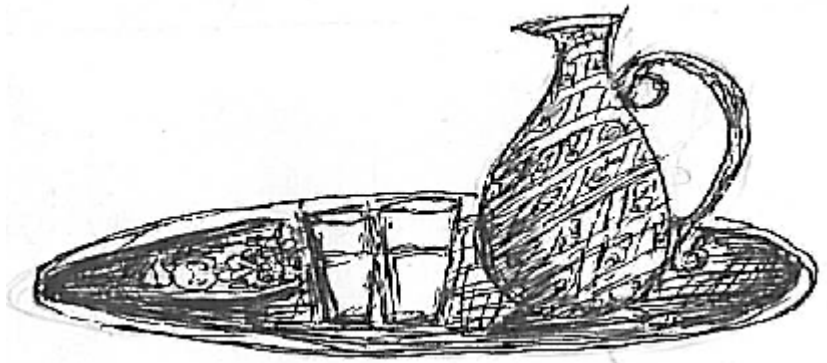
As Gopinath faced forward, he crashed into something soft. He flew over the handle bar and crashed headlong into some more soft substance. He ended up sitting on the road, his glasses askew, and 'cheek to jowl' with a large elephant. In one action and before the elephant could recover, Gopinath had swept up his bike, mounted it, and sped down the road past a stricken Jaswant who was staring agape at what had taken place.

The elephant now recovered, peered down the road, spotted Jaswant, and gave chase. Jaswant

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cursed, swung his bike around and sped down the road with the elephant in hot pursuit.

The wind carried Gopinath's loud guffaws across the stillness of the night – round one was to him!



Chapter 28

Postprandial Peg

A story based on the life of tea planters in the verdant sub-Himalayan region of West Bengal (India) circa 1960

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Before the mid 1970s, there were no TVs on tea plantations. Reading of club library books or listening to the radio were the normal leisure pursuits after a hard day in the field.

The filching of their treasured Dry Sack Sherry was of immediate concern; for it was imported, expensive, and of infrequent availability. Purloining of their Indian whiskey, in comparison, would tantamount to a minor irritation.

Ajit and Pratap were young Assistant Managers working on neighbouring tea plantations. Each worked on a thousand acre 'Garden' (as planters referred to the plantations), which were owned by British overseas companies. A thousand acres was considered a viable size, anything larger was unwieldy and had to be split into two 'Divisions'; whereas smaller plantations suffered cash-flow problems when the 'Tea Market' was low.

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The young men were lean and athletic and scraped the 5 feet 11 inches bar in stockinged feet. They were lightly muscled and wore their hair, in what was considered the 'in-look': shoulder length and loose. Both were popular in the community and exhibited a simple sense of fun and humour.

Being bachelors left them with not much to do at the close of day. Their options for the evening were limited: they could drive to the nearest suburban town and watch an outdated Indian movie (and consequently get bitten raw by bugs – not an appealing prospect), or visit other bachelors and down some pegs of their favourite libation. Their cherished scenario was to be invited to drinks and dinner by a young married couple. With a lady around, the two friends were at their charming best; the evenings were pleasant, the food delightful, and the atmosphere homely and cheerful.

However, those invitations were sadly like the proverbial blue moon. Weekends were fine, for one usually took part in sports at the Planters Club,

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got slurring drunk at the bar, danced like leering wolves, and flirted outrageously with the wives of the 'senior' planters who enjoyed the young company.

The evenings after work on weekdays were like being marooned on a lonely island. From the options available to bachelors, Ajit and Pratap chose to add company to the 'lonely island' by visiting each other every second day. The evenings were then pleasurable. Ajit had a radiogram: a sleek highly polished wooden cabinet with shelves on the left for long playing records and a Philips record player on the right – this made a compelling reason to meet at his bungalow. Pratap drove across in the Company jeep in the graying dusk with his bottle of Red Knight Indian whisky; they would drink and argue until dinnertime. Dinner was unerringly western fare: steaming soup followed by a meat roast, buttered mashed potatoes, and thick brown sauce to top it all. The meal ended usually with a not too firm caramel custard for desert. A bottle of sherry would then be

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fished out of the glass fronted cabinet to end the evening with their usual postprandial peg and cigars from South India.

Saturdays were movie nights at the Planters Club where one saw an outdated English film (black & white usually) and afterwards gathered at the bar to discuss and argue on any subject at hand.

When married planters left with their memsahibs, conversation turned more colourful: talents of bachelor friends and their prowesses with the opposite sex were roundly debated, derided or ridiculed; swear words became more the norm than the exception.

Later, much later, in the wee hours, when only a drunk could understand the drooling slur of another drunk, they left, staggering to their jeeps or Ambassador cars, slumped into the driver's seat and drunkenly lurched away – only Managers had personal chauffeurs.

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Sundays were recuperating and nursing-hangover mornings. Aspirins, Paracetamols and eggnog concoctions were consumed to salve a throbbing head. By lunchtime, there was a gathering at the club to down that hair-of-the-dog peg, usually pink gins or beer. The vigorous types sweated it out on the tennis court or the golf course and quaffed bottles of beer afterwards. But soon one felt the weekend slip away and it was back home to face the grind at the crack of dawn the next morning.

This pleasant way of meeting and enjoying long (otherwise lonely) weekday evenings that the friends devised became a routine treasured by both; if one friend postponed these evening get-togethers, the other would banteringly ask whether the errant partner was finding the present company boring or had found solace in the arms of the local bazaar women: big bosomed, garlic breath, mustard oil on the skin, and strong aromatic oil on the head.

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The planting community looks forward to the onset of 'cold weather'. The climate is pleasant, works at a minimum, and club activities at their peak. All picking of tea leaves is over and the factories are dismantled for the yearly overhaul. This is the festive season: a season of parties, fêtes and club sport championships (tennis, golf and some indoor games). It is a season when planters travel far and wide to other districts to join in the revelries offered in those clubs. A club-hosted dinner is part of the function. Each club also has its yearly do replete with a live string band from Shillong to enliven the occasion.

Ajit and Pratap awaited this season of festivities like parched amphibians to the onset of the monsoons. Teenage daughters of planters: fresh faced, fun loving, and chaperoned by their proud parent's would be back on cold-weather vacations from school and college vitalizing club evenings. Bachelor planters would have 'fling' affairs with the pretty young things that would last the length

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of the college vocation – for who knew by the time the next college break comes, the enamoured planter could be hundreds of miles away, transferred to another plantation.

*

The mood change in the friends was discernable. Their banter was easier, lighter, and drinking heavier. Their prized bottle of sherry too appeared to take on a joviality of its own, for it emptied itself faster and quicker.

They questioned the bungalow night watchman as to how the level of their favourite tittle was dwindling so alarmingly? He scratched his head then his crotch and straight-facedly claimed to be a teetotaler. The house bearer too looked shiftily around, and claimed ignorance though admitting that when he did have an occasional drink, it was always haria / lau pani – the local plantation brewed hooch.

The two young executives were not happy with the excuses they were being offered and so, over the following weeks, hatched a plan to expose

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the culprit. They conspired to almost finish the sherry that night and fill it up to the half way mark with their own urine. They rubbed their hands in glee in anticipation, for this would surely expose the secret toper.

When next they met they eagerly checked the adulterated bottle of sherry: the level had gone down by a good peg and a half.

The friends were stunned. “Let’s not say anything yet,” they decided; “let us see what happens tomorrow”. The following night the bottle was a further large peg down.

“Impossible!” said Ajit. “Do you mean some idiot can’t tell the difference between Old Sack Sherry and our piss?”

This called for a thorough investigation.

The servants were summoned to the sitting room. They stood in a scraggly line – all six of them, some in Company Uniform and others in shorts, all were apprehensive and fidgety. This was a serious matter – to be summoned together like

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this augured a grave situation. They looked at each other...there was some talk of the sahibs' whisky missing. They glanced suspiciously at the house bearer – he was known to drink every day after work.

Ajit questioned them repeatedly as to how his cherished sherry was dwindling, but received no answers or admissions.

“Come on,” bellowed Ajit. “Own up or the lot of you will be sacked from bungalow work and relegated to field work.”

The servants were shaken and nonplussed; they shifted uncomfortably and looked at each other accusingly. The young kitchen help (gangly and skinny) quaveringly piped up in a small voice, “Sahib, I... I have seen the cook opening the drink cabinet. Perhaps he should be questioned.”

The cook waddled in; fat, greasy with the Hindu holy mark smeared on his forehead. But like the others, he claimed he did not drink. “I'm a holy man, Sir, it is forbidden to me.”

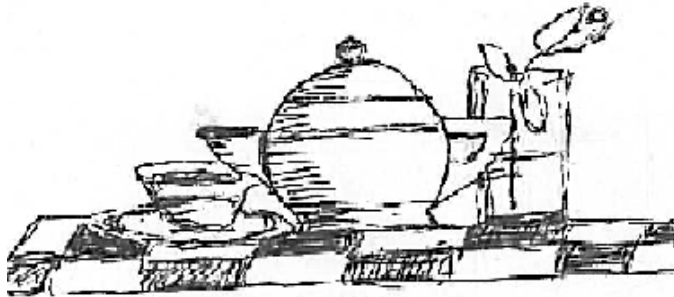
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“Who then has been drinking our sherry?” Ajit flashed the bottle for all to see, “we haven’t had a drink from this bottle in the last two nights and yet it is short by two or three large pegs?”

He glared at them fiercely to hide a chuckle that was rising in his throat; for who ever admitted to this dastardly felony would soon be throwing up on the lawn outside when he learned he had been drinking his and Pratap’s urine.

The gathered employees looked goggle-eyed at the offending bottle.

“But, Sir,” stammered the cook looking, bewildered. “I... I mean that is the sherry drink, Sir, a peg of which I put in your honors’ soup every night!”



Chapter 29

A Tea Episode

~All names are changed

Prologue

The story opens in the early 60s in the tea areas of North Bengal known as the Dooars. Most plantations had their head quarters in England. A Visiting Director, usually, visited India once a year

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during the cooler months. His itinerary, normally, required him to visit the Calcutta Managing Agents and then travel upcountry to the plantations where he would be put up by senior Managers or the Superintendent.

Indians were being employed in larger numbers at this time as Assistant Managers. Some of the Indian staff had made it to the position of Managers and Superintendents. The social fabric closely followed the British way: clubs, dances, flower-shows and other social activities that reflected the British way of life to which the Indians adapted adequately.

Tea grows and flushes in the humid climate of North East India where rains commence in March/April and strengthen to a monsoon deluge around June then continue to the middle of October when they weaken and give way to the “Cold Weather,” - as planters like to call the winter.

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This is an enjoyable time of the year – a relief from the humid and oppressive weather through the monsoons.

The story

On a spacious veranda, toast, bacon, fried eggs, and blackberry jam lay on the damask covered breakfast table. The view opened to the massive Himalayan range comprising the Darjeeling, Kalimpong, and Bhutan ranges.

Nitin loved this invigorating time of the year: the wet period was over and the 'cold weather' was beginning to make itself felt. The morning air was crisp and clear and carried the soft aromas of the flowering shrubs lovingly planted around the veranda by his wife. A sparrow hawk rode the thermals high above the valley, its plaintive calls carried in the cloudless crystalline air: "Karee, karee!"

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Urmilla, Nitin's wife, fresh, skin glowing from a hot bath - joined him at the breakfast table.

“Hello, darling, did your morning kamjari go well?” She poured him a cup of tea that was manufactured in the Estate factory at the bottom of the hill.

“Yeah, I guess,” said Nitin looking affectionately at her. “The unions are going to agitate about the Puja Bonus...buggers! These union chaps have nothing better to do.”

A turbaned, uniformed, house bearer appeared at Nitin's elbow. “There is a call, Sahib, for you from Siliguri.” He carried a cordless phone to the breakfast table.

“From Siliguri?” Nitin repeated a bit annoyed at being disturbed at breakfast. “Yeah, hello! Who is this?”

“This is Tim Saunders, Nitin. Do you remember me?”

“Tim Saunders... from the London Board?” asked Nitin, his voice now much subdued.

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“Yes, right, Nitin. Look, I’m terribly sorry to disturb you like this, but I am in a bit of a fix.”

“Yes, Sir, please tell me how I can help?” Nitin was now almost standing to attention.

“Well, you see...I actually had a few days to spare in Calcutta when somebody suggested I visit that Queen of Hill-Stations, Darjeeling. Why not? I thought to myself and without further fuss or dithering I got the Calcutta chaps to get me an air ticket to Bagdogra from where I’d take a taxi up the hill.”

Nitin was still wondering what all this had to do with him –keeping in mind he was a junior Manager. He had heard that a board director was coming out to India, but he was only supposed to visit the head office, straighten out some snags, and then head back to London.

“Well, and so I’m here,” continued the director. “That bloody earth quake last night – you probably felt it - has caused a landslide and the road to Darjeeling is blocked.”

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Nitin's mind was racing; he almost anticipated, with dread, the Directors next words. "I am just wondering, Nitin, if it's not too much of a bother, could you possibly put me up for the night."

Nitin was still finding words to say, but his mind wasn't supplying them. In a flash, his mind was looking for alternatives. He had just received his new jeep, so transport problems were out. What? What then? Why couldn't the bugger stay in one of the hotels there in Siliguri, the town next to Bagdogra?

The director's voice continued, "As you are near Siliguri, I thought you could pick me up and tomorrow morning your driver could drop me back for the afternoon flight to Calcutta. How does that sound?"

"P...perfect, Sir! I've just finished breakfast and shall be off in a jiffy. I'll pick you up at the hotel on the main Hill Cart Road."

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“What happened, darling?” asked Urmilla, “you look like you’ve just spoken to the vassal of misfortune.”

“Worse, darling, Tim Saunders...” and Nitin told her the whole story. She listened, her eyes turning larger with alarm.

“What are we going to do?” she wailed. “We don’t have proper crockery, cutlery or decent curtains in the spare room, and what do I do with all the children’s toys and paraphernalia that are strewn across the spare bed room?”

“Bundle it all up, darling, and send it to the Assistant Managers bungalow for the night. And ring up one of our friends and borrow a decent crockery set. I am sorry, darling, but I’ll have to rush. I wish I could stay and help organize things, but I shall have to rush and leave every thing to you. Do your best, darling, what else can I say? Send the kids somewhere for the night. See you for dinner.”

“English Dinner?” she asked tremulously?

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“Yes, of course. What else? Ask Sheila to lend you her cook for just the one meal.” Nitin jumped into the jeep and raced the engine. He looked across and waved to Urmilla. She was already on the phone.

The Director was in a good mood and chatted elatedly with Nitin over a Kingfisher beer. He mentioned how much he looked forward to these trips to India and how disappointed he was to miss going to Darjeeling. He had even planned a trip to Tiger Hill to view Mt. Everest. “Nitin, I don’t wish to sound uncaring or anything like that, but I seem to have this memory lapse. You know, meeting so many people in India one just gets a bit muddled at times. Tell me, Nitin, you are married, aren’t you? I feel so stupid asking you this. But I hope you will understand.”

“Yes, Sir, I am and I have two daughters: two and five years. You’ll meet them all.”

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Obviously the director was not supposed to make this halt and meet Nitin and so the head office had not briefed him on Nitin's family.

"I haven't met your wife though, have I?"

"No, Sir, I don't think so", he lied "But, as I said, you'll meet her soon."

Of course he had met her, remembered Nitin, during a cocktail party in Calcutta, and the bugger was pissed. He had taken quite a shine to her. But Nitin didn't want to embarrass the director.

"I say, Nitin, I hope I'm not putting you out too much at such short notice, or hardly any notice at all. I don't want to be a pain." The fifth bottle of beer lay slaughtered.

"Not at all, Sir, it is a pleasure," said Nitin, "an honour to have you with us. I shall be the envy of all Company Managers."

"Well, I don't know about that. But just a quiet night and I will be away first thing tomorrow morning. Sorry to impose on you like this."

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“No impositions at all, Sir. Don’t embarrass me. We’ve arranged a little party for you, just our close friends.”

Nitin realized he had got carried away. What party? He was even dreading putting up the Director.

“Hey, that’s pretty capital of you. But have you really?”

“Of course, Sir, nothing elaborate, just the people around”.

Gosh! What am I saying? What am I doing? What party? I am pissed! I’d better ring Urmi and tell her. She’ll kill me. O’ God! What’s wrong with me? But how do I get out of this?

“Hey, Urmi,” said Nitin over the phone, “this chap is expecting a party. He’s bloody mad! But what can we do? Do you think you might be able to get a few friends together? You think some of the senior blokes may condescend to come across? Urmi, I’m drunk. I told him we are having a party for him, anyway, if that doesn’t happen I am sacked for flibbing.” he slurred.

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And as happens so frequently in that area, the phone went dead.

Nitin was apprehensive on the drive back. What questions would the Director ask him? Would Nitin have the answers? Tim had just visited Calcutta where he was looking at figures and assessing performances. Nitin would have to know the right answers; there was no way he could bluff his way through.

“So, what was the crop like? Were you happy with it?” Here it comes, thought Nitin. ”Yes, Sir, I was happy with the ‘out-turn’. It was almost an all-time record crop.”

“Yes, your plantation did better than the others.”

And that was it. No more was said about the plantation throughout the trip.

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It was dark by the time Nitin turned into the bungalow. The lights were ablaze and quite a few cars were parked on the lawn. Nitin’s heart gave a leap. Urmi had done it...thank God! He had saved

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face. And then his eyes opened wide: coming down the steps was the Visiting Director of the neighbouring Estate. How had Urmi managed this? The woman was a miracle worker.

The evening was a blur of dancing and drinking. The Visiting Director and Tim Saunders were old friends and were thrilled to meet up again. Drinks flowed - where had it all come from? Dinner turned up trumps: a five- course serving ending with cheese, cream crackers and coffee.

Nitin walked around in a daze. The house looked different: the crockery; the cutlery; the beautiful tablecloth; the decoration pieces; the table lamps. Where had it all come from? He kept shaking his head in wonderment. He hadn't realized Urmilla had such organizational talents. "Wonderful, darling, wonderful." he kept whispering every time he came close to Urmilla.

Finally it was time for the guests to leave. Everybody was in a jolly mood. Urmilla and Nitin were thanked profusely. Nitin's hand was pumped by all. "Damned good show, I say."

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The driver took Tim Saunders to the Airport next morning. Before leaving, Tim gave Nitin a little present as a token of his appreciation: a Mont Blanc. Life settled down to its normal pace after that. Urmilla was kept busy writing thank you notes to all who had so generously helped-out to make the evening memorable.

On the eleventh day after the departure of the Director, a heavily sealed envelope arrived for Nitin. With curious apprehension Nitin ripped open the envelope.

“My Dear Nitin:

The Board of Directors is pleased to offer you the post of Visiting Agent for the Bengal & Upper Assam Tea Co. Ltd. The incumbency is vacant as of date and requires your confirmation of acceptance.

Your' Terms & Conditions' is attached as Annexure No. 1. You will notice it offers a

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substantial elevation in your employment status and emoluments.

I will take this opportunity to congratulate you personally. I am very impressed with your organizational abilities and enthusiasm and hope you will infuse this energy into the day-to day working of the company staff.

Please convey to Urmilla my heart felt thanks for a very enjoyable stay on your plantation.”

The letter was signed, Sincerely, Tim Saunders.

Nitin was dazed: “My God! Just looking after a Board Director could work such wonders?” He wanted to immediately ring all his friends and tell them the good news. But he waited. He allowed time to let the news sink in. He did an assessment of his performance as a Manager against the other company Managers. His plantation had certainly picked up since he had taken over. A straight out comparison of his personal achievements against those of the others

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would well nigh be impossible for Nitin rightly realized that in his mind there would be a natural bias in his favor.

He mulled over the contents of the letter and the offer all day. The office staff noticed his preoccupation and as the day wore on, his expression became grimmer. By evening when it was time to break off, Nitin wore a stern and determined look

That evening, after a steaming bath and whilst sipping his first peg of whisky, he pulled the letter out of his pocket and offered it to his wife. "What do you think of this, darling?" She unfolded the letter with a little frown. As she read the letter her frown changed to wonderment and then to plain delight. She looked up from the letter with a broad smile.

"Why? That's fantastic, darling. Yippee! Gosh how lucky!" She studied his face again. "Hey, what's the matter? Why are you so serious? Why aren't you jumping with joy?"

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He caught her by the arm and sat her down on the settee. “Listen to me carefully, darling... I can’t accept this position.”

“Oh, I see...and why ever not?” she looked at him in bewilderment. “For heaven’s sake, why not? Tell me. I don’t understand.”

“Okay, listen: Tim Saunders was here a fortnight ago. Yes?”

“Yeah, yeah, so?” she looked perplexed.

“And he was very impressed with the party. Yes?”

“So was every body else. So what then? Come on give it to me, quick.”

“He said the party was very well organized.” Urmi nodded her head, “Yes!” “Well, he thinks I organized it and he is judging my organizational skills by the smoothly organized party. Well, I will have to tell him who really did it. That it was you and you alone. You need the kudos not me. I can’t let him promote me under a false premise.”

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Urmilla felt her anger rising. “So what was all that crap you have been feeding me that you got the highest crop per hectare in the company?”

“That was no crap.”

“And that bull about you getting the highest price for your teas.”

“Hey, easy, that’s no bull.” Nitin was on the defensive.

“So are you telling me that to pull a plantation to the top position in the company doesn’t require skill and organizing? Is that what you are saying?”

“No, no, don’t get me wrong. Of course it requires skill and organizing.” Nitin conceded. “But all that considered I fear it was the party that really, really tilted the balance in my favour.”

“I see...in spite of there being no mention of the party in the letter? So what do you intend doing?”

“I have thought about it all day and have considered it from all angles. I’m afraid I shall have to regretfully decline the offer and continue

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as a lowly junior Manager.” Nitin produced a little half chuckle.

Urmilla looked into his eyes. “I’ll say this once, Nitin, and you’d better hear me good. There are deeper issues involved here than just the simple declining of an offer. My advice will be final and binding. Do you accept? ”

“Yeah, okay, shoot. I’m all ears.” Nitin saw the seriousness in Urmilla’s demeanour.

“Take the offer, Nitin, for I am not going to accept this voluntary subjugation of your EGO in my stead. This misplaced martyrdom will become the caning stick that will hang over my head for all time to come and will destroy our relationship. I can not and will not have that!”

Nitin could see the rationale in Urmilla’s assessment. He slowly nodded his head.

“Okay Urmilla.” he said. “You win; I suppose you are right – I needed your assessment.”

Urmilla smiled and offered her hand, “Congratulations Mr. Visiting Agent.”



Chapter 30

A Good Deed

~(Based on a true story in the tea plantations of north-eastern India)

Mid-rains, a period from July to October, in the Terai area of north Bengal is a spell that is humid and sultry. Rainfall is incessant and can stretch non-stop over a week when the sun will not be seen. This is the season when young tea shoots grow two to three inches in seven days and is easily the largest cropping period. Work on tea

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plantations, other than the picking of tea leaves, is suspended and rescheduled to those days when the sun shines for a few hours.

Though the heavy rain period is the 'bread and butter' season for plantations, it is a harrowing period for tea planters who are mainly soaked thru the day and have leeches squeezing into their shoes on the field; mosquitoes hound them in the evenings; and insects and bugs make the nights a misery.

Weekend club get-togethers become the only release from this oppression and are eagerly looked forward to. Mid-rains shows at the club are great hits and attended by all.

Bobby and Edna were posted at a plantation that lay thirty kilometres from Mal Bazaar club – not a great distance for planters to drive at night to attend a special dance meeting.

"Well, are we going to the club, then?" asked Bobby.

"In this rain?" Edna glanced at the window. It was raining steadily and had been raining all day

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"It's not like we have to walk, you know. My car is quite leak proof."

Edna caught the sarcasm – she'd better not argue and spoil the evening. She was looking forward to the dance and to meeting Larry, who flirted with her outrageously.

They had a leisurely soak in a steaming tub bath and dressed for the evening: she in a red dress that highlighted her auburn hair, and he in white shirt and trousers with a red tie to match his wife's dress. It was a special night at the club.

'Club attendance will probably be low,' said Edna. "This constant rain will put a lot of people off."

"I don't think so," Bobby retorted. "There isn't much in the way of entertainment in the middle of the season and a club break is always welcomed by all...or, at least by most."

Their driver was on leave so Bobby would drive their eight years old black Ford to the club.

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"I hope you won't get too drunk. Remember, you have to drive back on these kutcha roads."

"Will you stop bickering, woman; we haven't even got out of the gate, and you've started on my drinking."

At the gate they saw a plantation worker standing under an umbrella in the slashing rain. Bobby stopped his car and lowered his window a bit: "Where are you going?" he asked.

'Mal Bazaar', was the only mumbled, barely discernable words that Bobby heard over the drumming of rain drops on the car roof.

Bobby looked at Edna, "Shall we give him a lift? The poor soul looks drenched already, and Mal is a long way off."

Bobby stretched and opened the back door. "Hop in." he said.

The man hesitated, unsure of what to do.

"Come on, come on! I haven't got all night. Get inside!" he said sternly and slammed the door after him.

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"I would have thought he would be grateful that we are giving him a lift all the way to his destination in this rain. I may be wrong, but I thought I saw a not too pleased look on his face, the ungrateful bugger!"

'He probably didn't understand you, darling. He perhaps can't believe that the Burra sahib is giving him a lift in his fancy car."

Bobby glanced at the rear view mirror, "Just look at the beggar! He is sitting there huddled up and looking sourly as hell! I have a good mind to kick his skinny arse out right here."

Two hour later they were at Mal Bazaar. Bobby pulled up and opened the back door from inside.

"You go where you have to go. I and memsahib are going to the club."

The man took his time lowering himself to the road. He looked bewildered and hesitant – like as if he wanted to say something. Bobby was getting impatient:

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"Come on, move it man. Go on Jao, beat it!" And Bobby let the clutch out impatiently.

"The fellow didn't smell of alcohol, but he must be on drugs! Did you see how uncoordinated he was? Was he imagining I would take him to his in-law's house? Stupid idiot!"

Edna too noticed how reluctant the man was. Perhaps he was on something. "Don't get in a huff, darling, don't let it spoil your mood. We have an enjoyable night ahead of us."

The club was decorated with streamers and Chinese lanterns; two large Philips speakers were 'belting out' Frank Sinatra's 'Strangers in the Night', and a few had taken to the dance floor. Bobby saw Ron and headed towards him. "What are you drinking, Ron. The first drink is on me."

Bobby related the story of his Good Samaritan act and drew a lot of laughter. He also mentioned the drug angle that had come to mind.

"I'd suggest you check it out tomorrow." said Ron (a neighbouring plantation Manager). "If

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he is on drugs, you would do well to 'nip it in the bud' for once it catches on...your labour force will be neutered! This could be serious."

"No, no," interrupted Bobby. "It's probably all in my mind. The idiot was likely disoriented and in awe of the car ride. Perhaps, he fell asleep and was groggy with sleep."

"Okay, but grill him at the morning *bichar* on Monday."

'Yeah, I'll do that.'

*

Three hours later, Bobby stood bent over hugging the bar— where was Edna, he looked around and shrugged his shoulders — long as she wasn't hassling him to go home it was fine. He ordered another large Red Label with soda. If Edna were to extricate herself from Larry's embrace, she would see that Bobby was past the slurring stage and had progressed to the 'fixed smile' stage.

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The festivities were slowly winding down and members began to 'head home' in various stages of inebriation.

"Only two fights!" commented Hugh, nursing a broken arm, the result of a collision with a goal post at football – three fights would elevate the evening to a 'very good night' category.

When Edna joined him, Bobby decided it was time to negotiate the road home. He carefully stepped out into the rain. Edna kept her peace...Bobby looked pretty sozzled, she thought; anything she said now would start a shouting match in the car. He was likely to slurringly claim sobriety. He may admit being a little under the weather, but would certainly claim sobriety. She knew she would suffer a night of heavy pawing – he wouldn't be up to more - and then she would have to endure a nightlong dose of drunken loud snoring.

She had enjoyed the night: Larry had danced with her through the night; they had tangoed, waltzed, cha cha'd and...held each other

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tight during a fox-trot, and kissed lip-to-lip in a darkened area of the dance floor. She was tired now and would love to fold her legs under her on the front seat and nod off. But Bobby was lurching all over the road and she would have to keep him awake. She started to sing – Bobby loved that. He loved her clear soprano voice and so she sang elatedly. Bobby glanced around at her appreciatively. He attempted to kiss her – "Keep your eyes on the road, my love, let's get home first"; she said with resignation, thinking of what the night had in store for her.

After an interminable drive with the windscreen wipers barely winning against the constant deluge, the plantation gate loomed up and Edna inwardly thanked the Lord; another five minutes and either Edna's voice would give out or Bobby would slide off the road – his head was starting to nod and his stare through a misting windshield was becoming glassy.

After a few jabs of the horn, the Chowkidar tottered out of the gatehouse holding his hand over

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his eyes to shade them from the headlights. He fumbled with the keys and finally got the gate open.

Also standing outside was a man waiting for the gate to open. Bobby lowered his window and peered at him.

"Isn't this the chap we gave a lift to?" he asked Edna.

"Yes it is." Edna confirmed.

"Hey, you!" Bobby addressed the man. "What are you doing here? I gave you a lift to Mal Bazaar – weren't you going there?"

The man joined his palms in supplication, "Please, Sir", he wailed. "I was with my in-laws for the last two days and walked back today all the way in the rain and reached here when you took me back again. I have walked all night in the rain to get back. Please, Sir, please spare me and let me go home to my wife and children. I'm very tired now."

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Bobby sat stunned. In his bid to do 'good', he had inflicted so much pain instead.



Chapter 31

A Surge of Blood

*~Reconstruction of a story, told to me over a peg or two of
whisky*

Assam, India – circa 1960

Introduction

The setting of this story is loosely placed around the early 1950s in the tea plantations of north-eastern India. The executive staff consisted mainly of British and Scottish planters, many of whose

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family lived at 'Home' in the UK. The expatriate staff, at that period, was being largely replaced with Indian planters.

To look after the needs of the executive staff, and to maintain the sizeable bungalows and compounds a large retinue of servants were employed, some of whom were accommodated in quarters behind the bungalow.

The story

I rang the bell again – a long sustained ringing; the kind of ringing that would tell the house bearer that I was now impatient and annoyed and that he'd better drop anything he was doing and hurry to my bidding – in my senior years was I becoming demanding and crotchety?

No one answered. Nobody came. I swung my legs to the floor and padded down to the pantry in my work stockings... not a soul there – only the stale smells of a pantry. Where was he? This was unusual, for the house bearer knew the routine, at 3 pm it was my teatime: a cup of tea before I left to

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go around the plantation again. I am a stickler for time.

I looked out the grimy kitchen window – no body. There was a woman washing at the tube well. I shouted asking where everybody was; not realizing that the glass outer window was shut and the woman could not hear me. I was angry and impatient. I put my hand through the window grill and undid the latch....

The woman stood up –

She was naked to the waist...

Her figure was *stunning!*

I stood there; my blood surging; a tight feeling deep inside... forgotten was my annoyance. Her wet flimsy white underskirt outlined her young body in detail.

God almighty! I gasped.

I heard footsteps and the girl covered herself. Someone was coming. I saw the bearer come around the corner heading for the kitchen. I quickly tiptoed upstairs to my bedroom.

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Though it was not common, some Managers discreetly kept young concubine, others not so discreetly!

I was divorced, childless, and lonely. A young thing like that could get my juices flowing again – perhaps cure my creeping arthritis as well. I scratched my head thinking: they would likely call me a ‘dirty ol’ man’. Managers who had local ‘*tea garden women*’ would smile conspiratorially and likely assure me that, “It’s only but natural; nothing to feel guilty about, ol’ chap.”

I saw her a few times after that, but not at the pump – even though I crept down some afternoons hoping to catch her washing. I took to roaming the back vegetable garden that extended to the cook, bearer, and night watchmen’s houses. That way I ran into her a few times. She would join her palms and say Namaste, eyes dancing with mischief – she must know I was interested in her. I discovered she was the night watchman’s daughter, come to visit from her village in Nagaland.

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I was constantly preoccupied with her memory – this fever progressed relentlessly. I brought the subject up one evening with a Scottish planter friend at the Planters’ Club. I had imbibed a bit and was in a ‘devil-may-care’ mood.

“Hey, Malcolm,” I said. “I’d like to discuss something with you ...it's rather delicate and you may not want to speak about it. But unless I broach the subject I won’t know whether you will talk about it or not...”

“Stop blathering, mate, get on with it. If I don’t like it, I’ll tell you.”

“It’s about a woman I want to keep in my bungalow. I’m wary, though, of what others will say. I just don’t know how to go about it.”

“Well, as long as it is not my woman you want to take over...”

“Don’t be an ass, Malcolm. I’m serious.”

“If you are serious and determined and have your tongue hanging out... (I didn’t care much for that simile)... install her in your

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bungalow and be done with it. For Christ's sake don't worry about what people will say...some people just love poking their nose into other's business. You think I was worried about what people would say when I kept a local girl?"

"No, okay, but I am Indian!"

"So look around, matey, fifty percent of the Indians here who are not married have a mistress. You wouldn't know, but my woman tells me these things."

A month trundled painfully by. I was kept busy during the heavy tea-flushing season. At the back of my mind I knew I would have to tackle the girl, Malti, before she left to go back to her village. She would likely stay put during the main monsoon season, for she lived up in the Naga Hills area and the road was prone to landslides.

I got my chance, luck, break...or whatever, the following week. It was market day, which is held on 'pay day', there was no one around the bungalow... all were at the market. I saw Malti making her way to the rear houses through a side

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gate. I hurried and intercepted her. She had got used to talking to me now and smiled; a dimple appeared on both her cheeks...so attractive, *God, my poor heart!*

“Where have you been?” I asked.

“At the market.” - A naughty smile; the dimples on her cheeks had a life of their own.

“And what did you buy?” My heart is beginning to *thump*.

She showed me hair clips for her silky long black hair - naughty smile again...dimples dancing.

“I saw you bathing at the tube-well when you first arrived.” *Thump, thump, thump!* Blood rushed to my head...it boggled my brain!

She looked at me with wide unblinking eyes –

I may as well jump right in, “You were not wearing anything on top and I saw your breasts... you are beautiful,” my heart was choking with *thump, thump*.

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She blushed and attempted to run away.
But I had a hold of her hand.

“I want you to live with me – will you?”
More *thump, thump* and *blink, blink* in fevered
anticipation.

“In the big house?” she asked. So sweet, I
tell you!

“Yes. I’ll keep you like a memsahib.”
Ahem!

“Like the British sahibs keep their
women?” looks up, all innocence....

“Yes. And when you learn some English
you can come with me to the club.”

That should swing it.

Now she clung to my hand – her eyes
dreamy. She had entered a magic world in her
mind? She smiled; her large clear eyes looked into
mine. Her nod was imperceptible.

Malti was a happy soul: In six months she had
transformed my lonely life to one filled with
laughter, gaiety, fun...and she loved parties. I

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began calling some friends to my bungalow, and to give her some young company, I invited younger people too. Malti's whole demeanour changed during a party: she flitted around untiringly, picking up empty glasses, emptying out ashtrays, helping guests in any way she could, humming and smiling coquettishly ... all liked her...adored her.

I was promoted to Group Manager soon – a feather in my cap! Only, it kept me away from Malti, at times for days... and I missed her, missed her fussing, missed her endearing ways, and missed the way she'd cock her head and stare at me to get my attention. She was a breath of freshness in my stodgy life. I felt younger, her enthusiasm was fuelling rejuvenation in me, and it is true, I swear to God, my arthritis is almost gone!

I decided I would live my life with her. I would buy property in this area and live in *blissful happiness forever* – ‘and they lived happily ever after’ – wow, could that be us?

I looked for property – I had enough money stashed away, I could buy a small tea plantation –

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that would give me stability and permanence, and her... status and respectability with her clan.

*

There was a crisis: The labour had severely assaulted an Assistant Manager on one of our plantations – my presence was required. Malti was desolate and worried for my safety. We had a wet and weepy parting – she did Puja and put a vermilion mark on my forehead. She cried inconsolably, I prayed resolutely: please God look after her and me; she will not be able to live without me nor I without her.

It took ten days to resolve the trouble. The Union and Management worked out a grudging solution. Tea plucking had started again and I was able to leave. Strained and tired, I looked forward to being in Malti's consoling embrace.

She came rushing down the steps. Her smile was effulgent; she looked even more beautiful than before. I could feel my body relaxing already. Her incessant chatter soothed my tension.

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Later, lying on my back, smoking and stroking her breasts, I commented that she was putting on a bit of weight. I did not want her to become fat and ungainly. I liked her the way she was: slim and nymphet like. She giggled deliciously and snuggled up to me – she put the tip of her nose in my ear and whispered, “I’m pregnant.”

That was six months ago.

Malti complains that I work too hard, that I come back very late; she complains that I drink too much, spend most evenings with friends, and return very drunk. I snore heavily she complains and she has noticed that I am in a lot of pain these days, “Your arthritis is bad...no? See doctor...yes?”

Malti is big in her pregnancy – the eventful day is not far now. I have arranged that she will go back to her mother and have the baby. I will give her money to take care of all expenses.

Malti left on a grey rainy morning. The roads could be bad, but the jeep has 4 wheel drive.

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I began hastily to pack my personal belongings. I would leave within the week. I had resigned and the company had given me early release. I am going to an undisclosed destination...away, far away from Malti.

You see, I am one of those rare people whose sperm count is zero.

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Contributions

Doggy Tales – Straight and Curly

By Alope Mookerjee

Cakes and Curry Puffs

The Tea factory in Ghatia Tea Estate, in the Dooars, bordering Bhutan boasted of two fully functional gates – the IN and the OUT! Not to be outdone, the factory building also had two entrances; one from the drying room and the other from the rolling room.

As the ‘kamjari Saab’ I would attend the usual afternoon office for the day’s paper work and minor ‘bichars’. Through all the proceedings my tan Labrador Tippy would remain by my side.

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Having dispensed with the chores of the afternoon, I would walk down to the factory, with Tippy quietly following at heel, and enter through the drying room door. On my instruction Tippy would sit outside at the entrance and wait for me to reappear and which I invariably did from the same door. We would then walk back together to the bungalow for our ritual of evening tea in the veranda!

One balmy October evening, I entered the factory as usual and left Tippy sitting and waiting outside the drying room door. Later inside, I was engrossed in a lively and quite irrelevant conversation with the 'Kal' Saab (as the Mistry Saabs in the Dooars were known as) I forgot Tippy and left from the rolling room door and walked straight back to my bungalow.

A vintage trolley pushed by my vintage bearer came creaking out laden with the cakes and curry puffs. Over my second cup of tea and third curry puff I realized what was missing – my drooling yellow Labrador!! Shocked that she must

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still be wondering somewhere in the factory compound, I rushed to the drying room entrance where I last saw her. And there she was sitting in the same position as I had left her; now looking forlorn but still expectantly at the door!

She was delighted and all distress was forgotten. She earned an extra share of cakes and curry puffs that evening!

Tippy lived, greedy for bananas and cakes for many more years and now lies in peace under a luxuriant Mary Palmer in Borjuli, Assam.

A Spiritual Encounter

Panda came to my life courtesy Mike Whitford, my first manager in Tea when I joined Nagrakata Tea Estate. Of, apparently, Bhutia extraction, Panda was unique. A small dog yet tough and fearless; he was a wanderer and would often disappear for days particularly when labour line dogs were in season. A few months with Panda and I knew I would have to just learn to live with his wild and wacky ways.

Mike left India and Tea for good. I was transferred to Ghatia in the same district about 20 miles away. Happily, Panda seemed to settled down – no running away, no vanishing acts. Perhaps, I hoped, he had at last sowed his wild oats!

One chilly night in November, Tunu Agasey, the factory engineer of neighboring Baradighi Tea Estate, suddenly passed away leaving us all sad and shocked. George Clayton,

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the factory engineer of Nagrakata Tea Estate who now occupied the bungalow where I had earlier lived with Panda, was as sad as many of us.

A day after Tunu's death Panda disappeared yet again! A quick search around the estate did not reveal any signs of him. He had simply vanished. I was surprised as I was almost convinced that he was now a changed domesticated being.

The whole day went by without Panda. In the evening a message from the Burra Bungalow asked that I should immediately drive on to Nagrakata Tea Estate (my old plantation) to check out on a strange dog that seemed to make himself comfortable in George Clayton's bungalow.

I drove fast and reached George's place in record time. George and Lucy (his wife) were agitated and excited. The recently diseased Tunu, George said, loved dogs and often wished that he could be born a dotting planter's dog in his next life. This strange dog that looked vaguely familiar to both of

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them was no doubt Tunu paying a visit at breakfast time, they surmised. Most lovingly and as perfect hosts George and Lucy fed 'Tunu' with freshly fried eggs and bacon, French fries and buttered toasts on their best china plate! Later, a 'curry baht' lunch followed. 'Tunu' loved it all and gobbled up every morsel.

In the evening, George's Manager dropped in to see what George had been blathering about the entire day. His jaws dropped when he saw Panda sitting on the drawing room sofa, sweet contentment written all over its face. "Oh hell men!" George muttered sheepishly, "I was sure it was Tunu paying us a visit. He did want to be a planter's dog in his next life and the dog did look so familiar, right Lucy?" Lucy nodded acquiescence.

Meanwhile, on my stern command Panda jumped perkily back into my car pleased as Punch at the happy end of a wonderful day.

The Indian Cook

The aging Scotsman having spent over three decades in the tea estates of Assam was now ready to retire. The impending departure was causing new and mixed emotions alien to his characteristically ‘strong and silent’ nature. Although he was looking forward to joining his wife again after years of separate living while she lived on in UK for the sake of their school going children, he also knew that he would surely miss the wonderful quality of life that ‘tea’ provided – the genuine friends and the camaraderie, the bright sunshine and the dark clouds of the monsoons with its torrential rains, the clear blue skies of the cold weather and the evenings in front of a roaring wood fire in his sprawling bungalow cared for with clockwork precision by the several household helps; bearers, cook, paniwala, jharoowala, chowkidars and malis.

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The old Scotsman realized that he would surely need to adjust to a living, sans the servants, he was so accustomed to. Nevertheless, who would be most missed he felt was the bearer – the man who went about his daily chores with quiet efficiency while taking charge of the other servants as the ‘Sirdar’ of the household to ensure peace of mind for his master when he returned home from work. Or would it be the malis who tended the vast compound round the bungalow growing the most delicious celery and Brussels sprouts while turning the front garden into a riot of colors during those wonderful cold weather months? Nah! He suddenly realized with some surety. Whom he would dearly miss was the cook with his sublime Sunday ‘curry’ lunch that had now become almost sacrosanct with the many years of living in India. He made his decision. He would take his old faithful cook back to Scotland with him to ensure continuity of his beloved Sunday lunches.

That evening the cook was summoned and ordered to pack his bags and prepare for a long

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journey ahead. In due course they landed on a typically damp, dull and sunless morning. The old Mog cook could not imagine how one would ever wish to live more than a day under such miserably cold and dreary conditions. However, he braced himself for the worst as the money was good and his master a kind man. At last Sunday arrived. With the eager anticipation of a sumptuous luncheon ahead, the old Scotsman came in punctually at 1 PM to sit at the table. The ‘curry’ was brought in by the aproned cook to be served to his master. The lid of the dish was lifted and the old Scotsman helped himself to the rice on which he heaped a good quantity of the curry. He took in a spoonful. Aghast, he instantly wanted to throw up! The curry was simply inedible and not anywhere near what the cook produced in India. The old man was furious and wanted an explanation immediately. The cook stood respectfully at his side with his head lowered. “Sir”, he explained quietly, “in all those years in India I always did the weekly bazaar for you on

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Sundays and it was the Paniwala (cook's mate)
sir who cooked the curries for you.”