

THE *Best Life* EVER

ADITYA SHROFF



TreeShade Books



as far as
you can see

‘First left, then the second right, and you will be on the main street,’ she tells me.

I stare blankly at the speaker. Her face—glowing much more than what is perhaps permitted at such an early hour—is smiling back at me, revealing a row of extremely white, perfectly polished teeth. Her jet black hair, tied back in a braid, again too perfect for this time of the day, is fragrant with coconut oil and glistens like a snake when she moves.

So thick is her south Indian accent that I understood nothing of what she said. ‘Sorry, could you repeat that, please?’ I ask her.

My host picks up a piece of paper lying on a small table—the only piece of furniture in the room—and draws what looks like a street map. I wait patiently as she adorns it with small arrows to mark out directions.

I look around the place, waiting for her to finish the sketch. It is a small room. A white curtain separates the kitchen from the living area, which doubles up as a bedroom at night. Smoky fragrance from a hand-rolled incense stick burning in one corner engulfs the dimly lit room. It stirs in my head some vague memories from childhood.

Happy memories. Like that small temple where Nana, my grandfather, used to take me each evening. They used the same incense sticks, didn’t they?

I watch the fumes rise steadily from the burning stick, dance in the yellow light of the lantern hanging from the roof, only to coalesce peacefully into the surroundings, like they never existed. All that is left behind is the sweet perfume.

Perfume that brings Nana back to my side, hobbling with the support of his carved wooden stick towards the temple by the riverside.

In this small village, deep in the interiors of Kerala, for two hundred rupees a day, I have a mattress to sleep on, three full meals, and unlimited cups of black tea flavoured with home-grown cardamom. And to top it all, the lady of the house has promised to prepare my favourite sweet, *ela-ada*, once I am back from my run.

I first tasted *ela-ada* at a small tea shop in the marketplace. It is a rice pancake stuffed with freshly ground coconut and jaggery, and wrapped in banana leaf.

‘Name?’ I had asked, pointing at the sweets on display. In a place where nobody seems to speak more than a few words of English, I have taught myself to converse with vigorous hand gestures and a few accent-laced words. And it seems to work!

‘Elaada,’ the shopkeeper—a short, bald man, dressed only in a lungi—had replied.

‘Ellayeda,’ I repeated.

‘No,’ the shopkeeper shook his head. ‘Elaada.’

‘Elladaa?’

The shopkeeper shook his head again. ‘Ela-ada. Elaada.’

I didn’t understand what the deal was. Perhaps I couldn’t mimic the accent. However hard I tried, I kept pronouncing it wrong. Finally, after eating to my heart’s content, I had a helping of the sweet packed to take it along and show it to

my host. When I told her how much I liked it, she promised to prepare it for breakfast the following morning.

She finishes the sketch quickly, and explains it to me in broken English that I can barely comprehend. I fold up the piece of paper and tuck it into my pocket, hoping I won't need it. However, I admit with a tinge of guilt that despite calling myself an adventure enthusiast, I do feel good (and secure) having a map handy!

I tell my host I will return after approximately three hours, in time for breakfast.

'Okay... elaada... ready,' she confirms with her trademark thumbs-up and a smile. That flash of white teeth against her dark skin lingers before my eyes as I make my way across the mud-plastered porch.

As I wave to her, her face does little to hide the fact that she hasn't quite understood why I need to go running. I have no explanation. In a way, she is right. I myself have never really understood why I go running. I wonder if I ever will.

I shut the woven bamboo gate behind me and step out into the darkness of the banana plantation. Treading gently, so as to keep the stillness of the early morning air intact, I duck between rows of banana trees, feeling my way past the slippery stems towards the open. The darkness is overwhelming and I wonder if I left a bit too early. It isn't the darkness, though; it is the uncertainty resulting from the darkness that unsettles me.

I decide to walk and not run until it is bright enough to see. With every step away from the house, fear begins to grip me. In this darkness, what if I step on a snake? A crouching scorpion? What about ghosts; do they really exist? There are stories of haunted trees in dark forests...

I hear a rustle behind me. My heart jumps to my throat. I stop dead in my tracks and turn around.

Nothing.

Only unfamiliar stillness in the fields surrounding me.

I can't help but notice the mystifying heaviness lingering in the air. As if I am being watched. Or followed. Like something is being forced upon me. Something opposing my stride. Like a set of hollow eyes looking at me with bated breath through the gigantic banana leaves. My imagination meticulously conjures up exactly those demons that I am most scared of.

I almost begin to retrace my steps, but there is only pitch darkness all around. The faint light from the house that had made its way through the gap in the leaves is long gone. A shiver runs down my spine. I keep walking with small hurried steps towards the end of the field, every muscle in my body tensed up and ready to explode.

After five harrowing minutes that seem like fifty, I am out in the open. The sky has begun to brighten up. The stars are fading. Faint outlines of the tall coconut trees begin to show. Another tiny house with a lantern hanging outside appears in the distance. I heave a sigh of relief. The fear evaporates. I laugh at myself for letting the darkness get

the better of me. It is funny how the mind is scared of what cannot be seen. Simply because it cannot be seen. It is the uncertainty that is overwhelming. But sooner or later, the darkness recedes, and as always, the sun rises.



Once I get to the flat road, I break into a slow trot. The soil feels soft from the previous night's shower. There is a definite chill in the early morning breeze, and a light, grey mist hangs sleepily in the air.

The first left. Then the second right. And I am on the broad street leading up to the market. The directions are crystal clear. This is easy. I like the certainty. I jog through the sleeping marketplace. The empty street with its tarpaulin covered shops. The upturned stools and the extinguished bonfires. Not a soul in sight. It feels like the whole village suddenly decided to shut down. And I keep running through the ghost town.

Once out of the village, I take a quick look at the map. Then I turn left. I am now out of bounds; left to find my own way as the map goes no further. I should be scared. Instead, I experience an amazing sense of liberation: Running into the unknown at the break of dawn, in a land that doesn't speak my language, in a place that can hardly be called civilisation, amidst the Nilgiris! No expectations hold me back. No backpack weighs me down. Stripped down to just the bare necessities, I am a free spirit dancing in the hills, in the golden light of dawn. I breathe in the freshness of the cold morning air as I run past the nutmeg trees. A new place. An open road.



*the price
of a coconut*

Over the last twenty years, nothing about my playground has changed: the same tall trees, the same muddy trails beaten down between them, and the same canopy roof above. The place still means the world to me for I mostly run here; and so, the most sacred part of my day is spent in these coconut groves.

Nothing seems to have changed except the price of coconuts. A few years ago, each coconut fetched us four rupees; now they fetch us nine. People from the city say they buy coconuts at thirty-five rupees a piece. I wonder where the rest of the money goes!

In any case, nine rupees is a good price. Nine is a perfect number. For when a thirsty patron comes to buy a coconut for nine rupees, you sometimes get to keep ten when he doesn't have loose change. Ten rupees and a friendly chat in the shade of the trees, until he is done drinking: an amazing deal, I would say.



The sun is still lingering over the horizon at the edge of the farm as I finish my run. I pick out a large green coconut from the heap of harvested coconuts patiently waiting for the pick-up to arrive and carry them to the market. Sometimes I, too, wait for that farm truck just as intently—listening to its engine, and the sound of its wheels skidding in the mud before finding dry ground to roll on. The smell of half-burnt diesel fumes brings back pleasant memories.

When I was a young boy, I fancied luxury cars and fast sports cars. But as I grew up, I realised I liked them

only because the world liked them. I am glad I came to the realisation that nothing gladdens my heart as much as the roar of that country pick-up. Let the world say what it must, my father would always tell me. Stay true to your ways of happiness. Be proud of them. And for once, never ever forget where you came from.

Oh, how could I ever forget this coconut farm! The afternoons spent lying in the hammock; the evenings spent running between rows of coconut trees. And there isn't a better feeling in the world than to have this sweet, naturally cooled tropical elixir run down my parched, thirsty throat after a summer run! I sit on the heap of coconuts, sipping from the biggest of the lot, looking at the setting sun hanging like a giant, shining coconut from one of the trees.

And then I see them. Towards the edge of the farm, I spot two young men. One of them has climbed halfway up a tree. The other one is waiting below. I strain my eyes against the sun's rays to look. Who could it be? I look at the watch. It is past five and the workers have finished work for the day. And then it hits me: coconut thieves!

My heart starts to race. My natural instinct asks me to raise an alarm. But I realise that they will escape before somebody responds. I know what I should do. Slowly, I start creeping towards them, sprinting from tree to tree and then hiding behind a trunk to catch my breath before the next sprint. I peep from behind the trunk. One of the guys is keeping a watch, while the other is busy plucking coconuts and dropping them down to his accomplice. I feel

my blood boil. *My* coconuts. *My* farm. The fruit of years' worth of sweat and toil. How dare they steal!

I am still about a hundred metres from them. If I make even a small mistake now, I will give them more than enough room to escape. I can feel my heart thud in my ears as I creep closer. One more sprint to the next tree. Eighty metres. Still unnoticed. Phew! I feel like a crouching lion getting closer to his prey.

Sixty metres. My heart is banging against my head now. For a split second, I wonder if the lion might be equally nervous just before pouncing on the prey. I guess not. I guess he would go all out, wouldn't he? Fearless. All guns blazing. Get the prey or starve to death. And that is why most often he makes it; he gets the prey. That is what makes him the king of the jungle.

But me? No, I am a coward jackal. Fifty metres. I swear I could have wet my pants. My breathing is so loud I am scared I will be heard.

And then I am heard. And seen.

The accomplice raises an alarm and starts sprinting at lightning speed as his partner on the tree slides smoothly down, like a perfectly trained peasant who had climbed a thousand coconut trees. Or perhaps lived on one his entire life.

And I am left standing there. Too dumbstruck to react. Too nervous to even take a step. Like at the start of a difficult race, trepidation and imaginary pain paralysing the

senses; locked, jammed, legs shivering, heart exploding, the stomach so uptight I could collapse in a heap right there.

Somehow I manage to recover and find the courage to chase. Letting out a threatening cry, I erupt into a sprint. It seems like I might lose them. They have already run past the last row of coconut trees and into the adjacent farmland, their slender frames gliding away over the undulating ground, their quick unshod feet prancing effortlessly over the loose rocks.

But I am the hungry lion. Hungry and angry. Putting in the last bit of strength, I follow. Opening up my stride and sprinting, I only have one point of focus in the distance. I've got my eyes set on the prey but they are swift and agile; tough, hard-core peasant blood. Moreover, if I were running for my prey, they were running for their lives. If I fail, I would simply go back angry. But they? They didn't have the luxury of such a choice. If they failed, the consequences would be severe.

I try raising an alarm. No response. My frantic calls fade away into the open fields like the faint grassland breeze, barely making even the blades of grass rustle. The question is whether or not I will be able to hold my sprint longer than they can hold theirs. The answer seems more and more certain with every step I take. I am beginning to sink. My body is giving away. It has been almost three whole minutes of chasing them. And this, after a hot summer evening run!

But then something happens. As the second thief follows the first, jumping over the barbed wire fence in a hurry, he