



All at Sea

.....Chastened, I contemplated my brush with death

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We were in the 11th standard then at Sainik School, Kazhakootam. Yielding to our periodic entreaties, T.P. Ramachandan (TPR), our house master, sought the principal's permission for a bicycle-hike to Kovalam, the world-famous seaside resort, for all of us.

Sunday, November 11, 1979, was D-Day. On its eve, 15 of us trooped out to Kazhakootam to hire bicycles. Thereafter, the cycling gurus among us gave the amateurs among us a crash course in marathon cycling.

On Sunday, TPR mustered us just after daybreak, wished us ball and bliss, and then told us that Mr Mani, a young teacher who had just joined the staff, would chaperon us. We threw sidelong glances at each other: Will Mr Mani be a killjoy? We regarded him like an interloper, despite his geniality, throughout the 20-kilometre ride.

No sooner had we reached Kovalam than we stretched and stirred to expel the fatigue. Kovalam is innately endowed with a serene sea, shallow seabed and splendid seashore, which have made it a veritable Shangri-La. Her seductive seascape beckoned us irresistibly. In no time, we were frolicking and splashing water on each other with abandon.

Before long, the adept swimmers among us ventured into deeper sea but non-swimmers like myself confined ourselves to waist-deep water. Monotony ensued, and it incited me to turn adventurous. With lemming-like lunacy, I incrementally tiptoed into deeper water, until its level came up to my neck. As I admired my spunk, a whopping wave shacked me; I lost my footing and capsized.

When I essayed to recoup underwater, the ebbing wave swept me farther into the sea. I wriggled, surfaced and bellowed an SOS, gulping a gallon of brine as I sank. An almighty heave had me resurfacing again, but I could only flail my arms. Submerged, with neither foothold nor breathing space, I was fast losing the tussle to save myself. The fear of drowning made me cower like a staked lamb that sighted a pouncing tiger. And I espied, through the aqueous blur, a four-limbed form swooping on me. He hauled me, with the dexterity of a lifeguard, till I was on my feet in waist-high sea. Gasping acutely, shamefacedly, I gawked at him. He patted me on the shoulder.

Chastened, spitting seawater, I trudged onwards with my tail between my legs. Sprawled on the beach, I then reflected on my escape by a hair's breadth from a certain watery grave. I vowed to learn swimming and then got up, to profusely thank my rescuer — the supposed interloper.