



## The Misandrist from the Blue Mountains

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The biggest mistake that Radhika committed was she did not understand the implications of falling in love with a married man. She had no idea what is to love until she fell in love Belliappa.

When Belliappa's late evening visits to her home in Apukadu became frequent, her parents - Nanjan and Hallamma - showed resentment. In fact, they were encouraging. There was reason behind.

Radhika is a misandrist, an aberration which took long for her parents to realize. Being attracted to opposite sex, would be in best interest of civilization, it is simply the nature and way of thing.

Nanjan had known Belliappa for quite some time, he was the district librarian in the Nilgiris library. The locals in Ooty knew Belliappa. His wife Charanya had gone to her native village Thanganad for confinement, during the brief period the friendship evolved.

What made Radhika hate men nobody had clue. The subject of marriage got her terribly annoyed, she managed to ward it off every time it was opened. Radhika not inclined to marry, it placed her parents in jeopardy.

School friends around Appukady were married and gone off to live with their husbands. Consequently, Radhika had no friends left. She could not gel with any who married into her village. In the beginning it was alright, soon Radhika felt that she was gradually getting isolated in a community in which she used to be the fulcrum. Spinsterhood invited pity in a society where being married is considered the acme of perfection. Radhika's childhood friends returned home during festivals, could not offer relief her from boredom, their mindset had changed with new responsibilities. Friends developed their own priorities, Radhika had no place in them.

In this situation Radhika found the ambience of the library a haven although it was thronged by men, footfalls by women far and few. However, once she entered the realm of books, the presence of men was okay. The dramatis persona of the stories included men; the gender bias vanished under the

quilt. She adored the fictional heroes but frowned upon the real ones in life.

Nanjan expected a literate like Belliappa to drive sense into Radhika. Hallamma would entertain Belliappa by serving him tea and the traditional *Varkies* or potato *Bondas* of which Radhika was infinitely fond of. Later the mother would leave the two alone and recede into the back-quarters, not out of discretion, but to encourage her daughter to get used to being in men's company.

Apukadu being in remote hill, folks were unaware that therapy was available for treating the disorder in her personality. Those streams of medical science were unheard of. A person observed to be in psychiatrist's ward became object of derision. Instead, Hallamma had taken Radhika to a gynecologist to solve the problem. Nothing wrong was found, her ability to receive a man was confirmed.

The shelves in the library were loaded predominantly with pulp fiction, Belliappa initiated Radhika into Tamil classics. Jayakanthan, Kalki and the likes. She took to classics like fish to water. He procured the type of books Radhika liked.

Belliappa would allow her attend the librarian's desk during afternoons. At that hour only the students from local colleges visited. He taught her how to lend books and to collect fines for the late return. The students were fascinated by Radhika. It boosted her ego no end. It made all the difference. Falling in love is 80 percent ego, 20 percent circumstances. There is no love where there is no incentive for ego.

Belliappa did not bother himself as to why she abhorred men, the satisfaction in making her comfortable in his own proximity made his day. All this was going on during which span Radhika's heart was falling in love towards to the librarian. She would narrate the incidences in the library to her mom. Hallamma could not fathom what was happening, though the mother continued to encourage.

Belliappa, in his late thirties and yet to become a father, eagerly awaited baby's arrival. The foundation of his intimacy with Radhika strengthened by discussing the unborn. Radhika's zest caught on, they discussed how the child would be raised. They assumed the child would be a girl. Belliappa confided that the need for a male heir was not a compulsion in view of him being landless.

Belliappa had confided he does not own any land or tea garden like Radhika's parents. In the hills people's worth is measured by the tea or vegetable garden they owned, a governmental job in the municipality payroll did not mean much.

As the day of Charanya's labor neared, anxiety built. Their mind was focused on the baby's arrival.

Around this time Hallamma broached the subject of marriage again, the mother assumed the thawing of the misandrist nature in her daughter would open new avenue. Radhika's resistance level remained unabated but the anger she exhibited before had tapered down. Hallamma was pleasantly surprised when Radhika agreed for the probable prospects to see her. It made Nanjan happy, that night he coughed less during sleep. But Radhika laid down a condition, that the grooms are to be of Belliappa's age.

This did not deter Hallamma, for many probable alliances would fit easily. Unmarried bachelors, the unfortunate brothers who had to wait to marry off their sisters. The community considered Radhika a prime rose, a symbol of purity. Avoiding the company of men until one marries was considered a virtue. The disposition Radhika held towards men was not exposed during the mandatory parley with the probable grooms. She had never been an open book, even Belliappa who managed to pave a road into her mind could not understand her.

Radhika studied only in girls' schools, had no male siblings to interact with. The house in the scantily populated Apukadu was a tucked away place in a leeward slope where no one strayed. It was abutting the tea plantation which Hallamma inherited. All the eleven acres would have to be managed by Radhika after the parent's demise. Nanjan was as it was suffering from acute Tuberculosis; it led to frequent hospitalization. Fortunately, Hallamma was adept at handling the garden laborers, looking after the tea garden did not require much attention. Hallamma had to participate in the tea auctions, she was intuitive, could manage to compete with other tea planters, mostly men. She could secure better price for her produce.

Hallamma yearned to get Radhika to witness the auctions, get eventually groomed for future. It would be the only source of Radhika's livelihood after the parents were dead. Radhika refused forthrightly citing the presence of men. Besides Hallamma was also worried about Radhika missing her classes in school. Hallamma hoped Radhika would one day be able to secure a seat in the Agriculture University in Coimbatore. Hallamma dreamed of Radhika being posted in Ooty as the District Agriculture officer. Such were the mother's seeds of aspirations, but the seeds showed little signs of sprouting.

Belliappa tried to probe why Radhika was averse to men, soon he recognized the hopelessness of the situation. Is it because of lack of exposure to men? Were there any bad incidents in her past? Dealing with robust planters was not easy. Radhika withdrew to her rabbit hole whenever he tried to pry. He could not cross the barrier.

Belliappa inquired if the father was domineering, which could be the trigger. Radhika answered that her dad was a docile man and submissive for he came from a poor family. Neither arrogant nor imposing. He did not suggest that Radhika takes consultation with a psychiatrist. In the villages psychiatry is

practiced more as a religious ritual than as science. Belliappa gave up, he had his own plate full with news of Charanya going into depression.

Shortly, news reached that Belliappa's wife's given birth to a girl baby, Radhika was overjoyed and wanted to celebrate. But Belliappa left immediately to greet the newborn. She later learnt from the library office that Belliappa had gone on long leave.

He visited Radhika home two weeks later with a box of sweets. She had stayed at home the whole day; she had no interest in visiting the library when Belliappa was not present. She began to miss Belliappa without realizing she was.

By the time Belliappa returned, he had turned into a different person, Radhika felt a certain pride overwhelming his erstwhile honeyed behavior. She noticed in him slice of bloated ego in his demeanor. They continued to meet between the time the baby was born and Charanya was to join Belliappa in Ooty with the baby.

Hallamma as usual served refreshments to the two, she was in hurry that day. Said she needed to go to the Ooty market. She grumbled she had a list of groceries to procure including baking soda. It's used for making the bondas fluff up.

Nanjan admitted in the TB ward was convalescing. Hallamma had to take on her husband's responsibility; said it with dreary eyed pride. Radhika saw her off till the gate while Belliappa remained restless. Hallamma hinted that she would be visiting the marriage broker on her way back. It's a sick story every time, visiting the marriage broker, the betel chewing woman of the old guard who didn't know a thing about what made current generation of girls consent.

Hallamma's wrinkles in her tattooed forehead made her look ugly in a kind of way. The tattoo above the eyebrows used to be a beautiful tigress before Hallamma aged. Designed arches over the prowling tigress appeared like a insignia. These

tattoos were compulsory for Badaga women; the tattoo was not meant to beautify but make them unattractive when they fled to hills fearing rampage of marauders from the plains. The tradition had continued. Radhika wore no tattoo on foreheads; nobody wore tattoos anymore.

Mom whispered the prospective groom was the Assistant Prof in the men's college, aged 45 owning twenty-one acres of tea plantation. Said that Prof was keen on marrying a girl with temperament to read books and equipping herself, Hallamma said looking into Radhika's eyes. Radhika felt a bit of pride, all that the suitors were worried about whether the wife can make love well, cook and dance. Good looks were relegated to the backstage as long as the libido was good.

Radhika was quick to admonish her expressing fear that heavy downpour is about, and what was her need to hang around with the broker. Hallamma had her own set of concerns, that after her time how Radhika would handle the ropes of the tea business, particularly the auctions. Radhika's distrust of the gender is not going to feed her in future. If the mother can get Radhika married to a tea planter, he would take care.

Radhika assured herself that she would bear children one day, she would have only one child, not more, she'd resolved. Her body and heart ached for a baby, but how it would happen, she had no clue. Once she gave birth, she knew how she to bring the child up, education would be the primary focus. If the child was good in sports or singing, she would encourage, provide necessary support in that stream. Radhika herself did not receive support from her parents, she always nurtured the grouse.

Nanjan's been in the government hospital sanitorium since the previous Monday, Hallamma wanted to send her husband mutton curry to speed up recovery. Nanjan, a weakling, believed girls need not participate in sports, that sports are reserved for men. Ooty folks are crazy about playing football,

the sport was limited to menfolk. The discrimination might have planted hatred, added to it Hallamma explaining how she was being treated in the auction all. Men planters ganging up to prevent her from securing better price for her produce. Despite that the price was always good, it kept the family going. Radhika kept the accounts, and she was privy to the happenings in the auction hall through her friend's dad who dropped in to give Hallamma the insight and briefing of behind the screen activities.

Radhika watched her mom disappear over the brow of the hill. The eucalyptus trees made whizzing noise; the air was choppy. Belliappa had followed Radhika to the gate, hardly twenty feet from the door. This is the first time the two of them were to be together alone. Trust built over a period of seven months given them the room.

Belliappa stood close behind, that kind of proximity had never been there. His hand inadvertently touched the small of Radhika; Radhika doubted if it was intentional, he'd seldom exhibited inclinations of similar nature earlier.

Blood gushed into her brain like a river down the gorge after a cloud burst; it was as if thousand hammers striking her nerves with angels of mallet. Instinct instructed her to push the hand away, but she didn't, she wanted to go through the pleasure it was giving. She could not fathom what it was or why it was happening, she had not experienced that kind of excitement.

Belliappa's object was to get past her with intent to return to his house in jail hill. He lived in a row house overlooking the racecourse. The house had no proper provision to dry the washed clothes. The babe's clothes need to be washed once the babe arrives; there would be soiled clothes. Charanya had left him instructions to do something about it while moving to her parent's place. It had escaped his attention since he was preoccupied with Radhika, he was worried.

“I must get going; babe is coming home tomorrow with baby’s mother.”

Radhika noted he referred Charanya as the baby’s ‘mother’. Not as wife or by the name. Do relationships change, Radhika rarely discussed Belliappa’s personal life or his wife, she knew he was married and that was it. Discussions were confined to books and authors.

Her blood froze, “Why so soon?”

“I won’t be able to come anymore.”

She was severely hurt but relieved. the relationship wasn’t heading anywhere albeit the newfound experience. She was old enough to foresee it would be irretraceable if she went ahead during those private moments.

He retracted his hand upon realizing it had touched her sensitive parts. He’d never experienced anything like this whenever he touched Charanya, Charanya used to work in a vegetable farm before he married, her farmer’s skin weather beaten, cold, rough and felt like reptile.

Radhika did not feel repulsive; she wanted it to continue. Her breasts hardened; goose pimples rose and took long to subside. Her mind tried to grasp the enormity of what Belliappa just mentioned. The euphoria drained out. She looked over her shoulder, he was still there about a foot from her. The conversations between them had always been face to face. Even while having tea in the snack shop in the hospital road.

A seed from the eucalyptus tree fell, it and slid under her cleavage as if it was destiny, Belliappa was embarrassed.

“Came to say bye. I have work to do.”, he said.

What he said did not make sense; Radhika’s innocence helped in shielding her from feeling insulted.

“Let me help”, she offered.

She'd never visited his house, not even once, it had never occurred to her. He never invited. His house wasn't far from the district library. She wasn't pleading, but it sounded like that.

“That won't be possible, not anymore”. His words had the tone of finality. Radhika did not respond, when the cord of relationship is severed, the need for explanations is redundant. She did not feel jealous. Jealousy is wasteful emotion. Instead, she was confused, knew not being able to enjoy his company would hurt.

Belliappa put both hands in front of his chest in a manner of bidding goodbye. He could sense the tension mounting. Radhika did not want to be cloistered indoors after all this, wanted fresh air.

Mother would take another hour to return, what good will come of meeting the matrimony broker who promised a groom owning twenty acres and teaching in college. God knows what subject. What good would come of it except she would have access to plenty of books if she were to marry.

Mom would be bringing mutton, she left instructions to peel onions and garlic. Radhika intended to carry mutton curry to her dad the next day. Radhika usually waited on her dad at the sanatorium until he finished his meal. Then she would head towards the library. Dad's diet in the hospital included mutton every day, he needed additional supplement. Mutton is part of the cure for TB. The doctors were planning to move Nanjan to drier climate in the plains for quicker recovery.

She didn't know whether she would be visiting the library anymore. A sudden sweep of strong breeze disheveled her unoiled tresses; she put her hand behind to clasp it. She'd shampooed her hair, the fragrance brought memories of their happy days. She felt the pang.

Belliappa wasn't relishing the turn the conversation was taking. He sensed that Radhika wanted him to stay and resented it out of guilt.

Belliappa indulged in excuses, said, "It might pour shortly".

"Belliappa Sir, let me carry an umbrella." In a long time, she had not addressed him as Sir.

"You aren't coming." Belliappa said politely but forthrightly.

She did not look up.

"Walk you until the main road, it isn't going to hurt?", she asked. Both felt the anxiety creeping into the final moments of parting, now that parting loomed inevitable. She'd decided not to visit the district library again, but needed books to keep herself occupied, the days would be unemployed.

She went in to pick up the umbrella. The umbrella was green with images of dark leaves. She locked the house, tugged at the lock out of habit.

Belliappa waited, his eyes darting between the outbound road and her. He could not decipher his feelings towards Radhika as much as she could not. The thought of separation made his heart pound; it was good while the love lasted. His one hand rested on the gate while the other kept pinching the blue bells rolling over the fence, an expression of fear that the goodbye is forever: it was also his hope.

Two blue robins chirring over the rooftop escaped his attention, they were perched on the lone Silver Oak, the branch spreading over Radhika's rooftop. Blue robins are not endemic to western ghats, but they are spotted during mating season, the presence would invariably catch the eyes of locals. The Silver oak seemed out of place among the bevy of Eucalyptus. Silver Oaks are grown at intervals in tea plantations to prevent soil erosion, branches are normally trimmed to enable sunlight fall over the tea shrubs, seldom

offers birds shelter in tea gardens. This silver oak provided haven for the migrants.

Belliappa cannot pursue the relationship beyond, the librarian was matured to understand. He did not know if Radhika understood. He regretted why it ever started. He tried to convince himself it was only a friendship, mere acquaintance brought about by his profession. Charanya is not the kind of woman who is likely to overlook husband's indiscretions.

Belliappa's eyes and ears would have to be refocused on his family, he must concentrate on the profession again, patrons were beginning to complain.

Radhika inserted her hands into the sleeves of her jerkin, her attempt to zip up failed midway, the place below her bosom where she could not see even after stooping down. The evening air was biting cold, her hands felt numb. She looked up for help not forthcoming from Belliappa, though he could not avert his gaze under her blouse.

Radhika was enamored, her emotions hit new high, she wanted him to hug her, even touch her breasts. It was the moment of epiphany, what good a man can do. The dusk was gradually giving way to darkness, bright lights from the houses across the hills blinked. The wind made the jerkin blow up like a balloon, Radhika kept ironing it with her hands.

Belliappa whispered, "Better get back into the house". She was afraid of Belliappa recognizing her emotions. She had let her guard down, but she didn't want him to notice, but she wanted him to take advantage. She melted into his arms like condensed milk over a bowl of cut fruits. She knew it would be for the first and last time. The embrace felt good, being with a man was not so bad, she thought. She looked up her face displaying multiple shades of virgin innocence.

Above the curly hair over Belliappa's earlobes, Radhika spotted the pair of blue robins; her eyes never miss anything. The birds were content in their world of love. It was a lovely

sight observing their togetherness. Where guilt or reproaches have no room.

Radhika didn't pay heed to Belliappa. They moved slowly in the direction of the main road in total silence. Radhika held the lapel of jerkin close to her chest with one hand while swinging the other. It brought her warmth about which the librarian drew comfort. Both trying to guess what exactly was going on in the other's head.

Upon reaching the main road, they looked at each other. A town bus was passing; the engine made a racket negotiating the steep curve. The sound ricocheted from the hill across creating the effect as if it was an aircraft flying close over the Blue Mountains. It was the same bus that he'd been taking everyday home. Observing him the driver slowed, Belliappa didn't board. It surprised Radhika, for a moment a spark of hope gruelled in her head brought back to earth by the driver's gesture of sounding a short breezy horn. More a query why the man didn't board, the old Bedford with the bulgy nose carried on leaving the librarian to his business.

"Intending to walk back", Belliappa said.

"Thought you were in a hurry", Radhika mocked without demanding explanations.

"I know."

"Maybe I would say yes to mom."

Belliappa raised one eyebrow. He felt his energy draining from body and flowing into the Ooty lake which has already reached the point of dirtiness that it cannot be begrimed anymore. Not all the rains, not all the cloud-bursts can redeem.

Radhika on her part, did not know this when the 'thing' started. Love is a 'thing' which cannot be expressed by any other certain term. A thing that is 80% ego and now turning 100 % topsy turvy.

Love is like climbing Jacob's ladder in the middle of ravines in thickly wooded forest. If the top end of the rope catches fire the only way to survive is by swinging to another and hanging on hoping the rope would survive.

"A college Professor would have library in his house?" she asked. The question was brutally abrupt.

Belliappa took the jab rubbing his chin, the one-day old growth roughed his palm. Did he sense a threat? He closed his eyes to seek answer; he had got used spending the evenings in Radhika's company. Now he found he could do little other than to take a call where the decision had already been cast.

"Got to iron the clothes". He might as well get used to ironing clothes.

Radhika watched him walk away as if he didn't care. Until the mist engulfed him, it was as if the mist was waiting to ambush. He walked with the typical gait of hill folks while clearing gradient slopes. He neither looked back nor waved. That is the least he could have done thought Radhika.

The sky rumbled; tiny raindrops pelleted her face. She looked up to face the shower, letting go the lapel. At last, she remembered to put away the Eucalyptus seed lodged between the cups of her brassiere. The bloody thing.

## **Saranyan BV**

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Saranyan is Bangalore based poet and short story writer having published many of his work in print as well as on-line magazines. He loves the works of Raymond Carver and thinks short story as a genre is here to stay as long as the writers live up to the challenge.

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