

Sharmaji's wife whispered to him hoarsely in the semi-privacy of their bedroom that she didn't like 'the white she-buffalo,' in fact, never had when she first heard of her, and now was sure she didn't trust her. Never mind how much she smiled, or said in a faked Punjabi way, 'Mummiji, how beautiful your sari is,' or 'Mummiji, you must teach me how to cook such delicious Indian food for Ashok.' She was not 'her Mummy,' she was poor Ashok's mother, and this tragic marriage would surely kill her soon. Why couldn't he have married her brother's daughter, Deepti? A beautiful respectful girl, who was herself a computer expert; she hadn't asked him to marry a village girl. Deepti would have made him happy, there would already be a grandson, and she would never tyrannize over him like this huge, 'white she-buffalo.'

Sharmaji didn't care for Margaret either, but for different reasons. She was three inches taller than himself, for one reason, and muscular like a man, and, he was sure, much stronger than Ashok. She was out every morning by six, with the hedges still wet with dew, her bare white thighs flashing in the rising dawn, and her hard buttocks encased in tight black shorts pumping behind her as she ran, her blonde pony-tail swinging from side to side. His neighbours must already be sniggering at him, *him, Vedavyas Sharma*. Not that she was attractive, how could anyone so big-boned be attractive? Apart from her repulsive muscles, though her face was always rose-petal soft, it never took on a golden oily sheen, which lit up a woman's face like her diamond nose-ring, and sent his pulse racing, even at his age. But it was poor misguided Ashok who would have to live out this tragedy, that is, if it lasted. At first he had not thought anything of it when Ashok kept writing about this American girl from Buffalo, who was his research partner – in fact his wife had started calling her laughingly the 'white she-buffalo' – and later when he read between the lines, he had chuckled stupidly, thinking Ashok was only sowing his wild oats, but he never, ever, thought his son would be so stupid as to marry an American woman. And now here they were, spending their first Christmas together with him in India.

Margaret was back from her run, and sat in a low cane chair in front of him, her sweaty thighs crossed, drinking a mug of hot coffee. "Dad! I have been here now, what, eight days? And I have not seen one person out running. And with all the oily food you eat here, it is a one-way street to a heart attack. Even Ashok doesn't want to run. OK, he is in good health, but boy, will he lose it fast, if he doesn't shape up every morning. Ashok! Ashok! For crying out loud, it's seven already! Get up! Now, Ashok!"

Well, that's what came of marrying American women, they bully you in front of their father-in-law. Ashok came out of their room in his *dhoti*, grinning sheepishly, wiping his face with a towel, the black stubble of his beard still unshaven. "Meg, remember this is my holiday?" said Ashok on his way to the kitchen to beg a cup of coffee from his mother. "I am regressing, Meg, and let me, after seven bloody hard years working for Simon Legree. And four more days and it's over!"

"I thought you both worked in Cal-Tech; what has happened? Has Ashok lost his job?" asked Sharmaji in alarm.

“Dad! You are such a dude,” said Margaret laughing, and rose to kiss his cheek. “I think I will go help Mom in the kitchen. I do want to learn how to make those crisp *dosas*, and I will, even if it kills me!”

Sharmaji, suppressing an uncharitable wish, got up with a sigh, and made his way to his own bathroom, for a thoughtful shit and a bath. As he sat long on the toilet, he reviewed the scene, and came once again to the regretful conclusion that there was nothing he could do. The real problem would come if there were children before the break-up. It would kill Ashok; when too late he would bitterly regret his fascination for white skin. At least he could have married someone small, and docile, as they showed in films these days; but then he himself had been unlucky in his own marriage – but then it had been the fault of that scheming uncle of his – but Ashok had fallen into this trap of his own free will, there was no uncle to make his life miserable.

As Ashok drove them both to the Gymkhana courts, he kept looking sideways at his son. Yes, Ashok had changed, in many ways. He seemed to be bigger, and maybe thanks to Margaret, he had developed hard biceps that popped out of his tee-shirt sleeves. He was very confident nowadays, not at all like the shy lad he had seen off in tears so long ago at the airport. He spoke easily to anybody, in that nasal American way, which to start with, Sharmaji found intimidating.

“Well, Dad! I know neither you nor Mom care for Meg,” said Ashok with a wide grin, negotiating round a herd of buffaloes in conference. “We laugh about it at night when we are alone. Meg thinks you are both cute. And our first son will be named Bison, just to tease Mom!” Ashok was laughing happily to Sharmaji’s consternation. So, his wife had not been so secretive after all in her whisperings. He tried to bluster his way out.

“Dad, we don’t mind, honestly. Meg is one in a million. She’s seen some hard times, and back home you know, the whole world is there, living next door, falling in love, marrying, divorcing, you see it all. And don’t worry, Dad! We’re never, ever, going to divorce, and if we do, we will do it like friends, OK?”

There was nothing Sharmaji could say to this son of his, who was no longer like the boy he had brought up, who was, let’s face it, no longer an Indian. He had not wanted to face this truth that had been presented to him in a myriad ways in the past, but which he had shied away from seeing. His son was no longer an Indian. He ate his mother’s cooking, but Sharmaji knew instinctively that Ashok no longer relished it; in fact Margaret liked it much more. Ashok was ‘just regressing,’ as he himself had said, just for two weeks, to recollect a part of his life now definitely an historic past, glimpsed like a myth. He moved about his hometown warily like a man in a strange jungle. He smiled at, got up to help, fetched things for, all the elders he had grown up among, but Sharmaji knew it was just a time-bound ritual. They were all strangers to Ashok now, though, incredibly Margaret was busily making new friends with all of them, taking down addresses in earnest, figuring out if she knew any of their descendents back in the States, offering to carry pickles, parcels, and letters back to them. Margaret cared about Indians; Ashok no longer did.

They were in the club, where Ashok had first learned to play tennis. Ramesh Gangadhar, the star tennis player of the club and one of the richest men in the city, had taken an interest in the boy and had coached him personally, everyday, every morning from six to eight. Sharmaji had been very proud that he could give his son the chances in life he himself never had, and always swelled with satisfaction at seeing his son play tennis and mix in such high circles. For his son's sake, he had accepted with dignity the slighting way the high and mighty Ramesh Gangadhar treated him. And now, he had come with Ashok to watch the Club Tennis finals between the still 'evergreen' Ramesh and his own son, who had returned in time for the tournament. Mr. Gangadhar had been very complimentary at the way Ashok had developed his game in the States, improving his serve and his two-handed backhand shots. Now that Sharmaji had come to be respected as an NGO leader, he even unbent enough to address him politely, and offer a seat beside him to watch the matches.

All the club '*koihais*' were there, reminiscing about the good old days, re-telling known anecdotes for the umpteenth time, berating the government for its corruption, laughing at how they had fiddled their income-tax returns all legally, and fussing over their tea. Ashok was a great lad, earning, y'know, a hundred thousand bucks, bucks not rupees, and Ramesh was one of their own. It would be a hard fought contest between the Older and the Younger Titan. But it wasn't to be. Ashok's shots were flawless; his service powerful, and his placing had that egotistical Gangadhar running all over the court, panting like a grampus. A few claps fell away into silence when Ashok won the first set 6-0. A few well-meaning, and hurt-assuaging pieces of advice were shouted across from the pavilion. "Ramesh, old chap, change that racket, it's half-an-ounce too heavy for this weather," or "sand your palms, old chap," or "Bearer! Take that bottle of lemonade for Ramesh Sahib, *jaldi*." Of course, to show fairness all round, the members did murmur, "Well played, Ashok, damn good form!" Sharmaji was inwardly very happy; Ashok, his son, was humiliating that ass Gangadhar; this was payback time for all the snide insults he had heaped on Sharmaji.

The second set started after ten minutes of the club marker massaging oil into Gangadhar's knees. The first game Ashok won as easily as he had the others. In the second game, after a couple of deuces, he broke his opponent's serve, Ramesh already panting with the strain, and wiping his eyes with his sweatbands. Ashok started the third game two up in the second set, and served an ace. Then as he was stretching up to serve for the second point, he let out a loud cry and fell to the ground, obviously in great pain. Ramesh Gangadhar was over the net like a shot and beside Ashok before anyone else. He, the marker, and a couple of others helped Ashok back to the pavilion. Even after fifteen minutes of hot-water fomentation, and liberal use of the club's standard pain-relieving embrocation, Ashok was hardly able to stand on one leg. He regretfully conceded the match to Ramesh, who refused to accept it at first, saying that he had been beaten fair and square. But the best of three sets had not been completed and the umpire, one of the club's oldest members, held that they could not use their own discretion in the matter, the match was Ramesh's. Sharmaji then set off in his car in a flurry of worry, with his son, the runners-up plaque, and shouted good wishes trailing behind him, to find a doctor.

After a couple of hours spent X-raying his son's leg, and pain-relieving treatment, he and Ashok in a wheel-chair were escorted into the orthopedist's room by two nurses.

"There's nothing to be alarmed about," said the doctor slowly and unconvincingly. "There is nothing organically wrong with that leg. No bones broken, no torn ligaments. It must have been a severe cramp. This is a very dry climate, and I always advice athletes to drink a lot of water. One loses water without one's knowledge; and then it catches up with you, during a match, as has just happened, when you are already under strain..." The doctor seemed to lose interest in the whole business and concentrated on his fingernails. Satisfied with their condition, he lifted his head and said with some impatience, "You should be OK for the journey home, in fact you should be OK by the evening. If there's any problem tomorrow, come back and let's look at you again."

Sharmaji was very relieved, but was still disappointed that his son had not given Ramesh Gangadhar the thrashing he deserved. He helped him carefully into the lift of his apartment building, and with an affectionate arm round his son, helped him to bed, telling his wife testily that it was only a sprain, and she should get some coffee and *upma* ready for their son. Without waiting to be further questioned by Margaret, who had stepped out to buy some things, he went to his office to answer some letters. He was much later getting back than expected, and he was just reaching the lift back home, when Ashok came bounding down the stairs, with a whistle. Seeing his father, he came to a dead stop with a guilty look, and then without a word, limped out.

Later that evening, when Sharmaji was alone with his son, sitting in the verandah of his flat, drinking a pint of cold beer, he asked simply, "You were not really hurt in the Club, were you?"

Ashok was silent for a bit. "No, Dad! I wasn't. I didn't realize how much better I was, or how much Ramesh had aged. If I had beaten him six-love, six-love, it would have humiliated him, Dad. He was my guru, Dad, he taught me tennis, and how could I do that to him in front of his friends, in his own Club, where he had been president three times? I couldn't live with myself, Dad, if I did that. I thought of hitting the ball out of court a few times, but that would have been condescending, and he would have known like a shot."

Sharmaji looked at his son silently, speculatively.

"I know he wasn't always nice to you, Dad," said Ashok looking down, "but that's because of the way his set of people are brought up – he's quite decent really, deep down."

"So, there's still some Indian left in you," said Sharmaji slowly.

His son smiled affectionately at him, in a sheepish way. "Oh, I am Indian all right, deep down," he said.