

Sharmaji was surprised when young Ramesh Reddy started cultivating him, he couldn't figure out why. The younger man could walk into almost any house he chose, he was very rich, and his grandfather had been a chief minister. Perhaps, mused Sharmaji it was because they had both graduated from the London School of Economics, but Ramesh didn't talk to him about London, or the India Club, or the pub downstairs. He just sat there in front, mentioned what was in that day's newspaper, asked him if he had visited some restaurant or other, and then after hanging about for a couple hours would abruptly get up and leave. It was most odd. It wasn't sex. Sharmaji didn't have a young daughter, or any presentable young woman in his staff Ramesh could be attracted to. Then, he had an awful thought. Perhaps, the bugger worked for the Intelligence Bureau, but no, that couldn't be it, he was just too rich. But he would watch the fellow carefully to learn what he was up to.

Days passed, with Ramesh Reddy dropping in on a regular basis, exchanging inanities hours on end and then leaving. Sharmaji got used to the visitations. Then one day, Ramesh insisted that Sharmaji should come out for lunch at his Club. Sharmaji hated to say no, especially when it was a chance to mix with people he normally wouldn't meet. Anyway, the young fellow seemed to be itching to say something, so he wound up for the day, and set off for a leisurely lunch.

Over coffee, Ramesh, who had been strangely silent throughout the meal, looked up and said. "I have something important to say to you, Sharmaji. You see, I dream of you often."

"What? What do you mean you dream of me?" asked Sharmaji in some agitation, for he had been genuinely scared of homosexual approaches since his schooldays. "What sort of dreams? And how do you know it is me?"

Ramesh Reddy leaned back and closed his eyes. "It's not what you think," he said at last. "I have very strange dreams. Been going on for over a year now. I dreamt of you very clearly, even before I met you, it seemed to mean something, just meeting you in the dreams and chatting, foolishly, ordinarily, you know? Then, one day I saw your picture in the papers, and suddenly I thought I should meet you to find out why... but the meaningless dreams keep happening."

Sharmaji didn't know what to say. He said everyone dreamt all sorts of things they couldn't remember, and joked about constipation.

"But the point is I remember everything, every *meaningless* thing vividly," said Ramesh. "And why you? Do you ... have dreamt of me?" Sharmaji shook his head.

After some desultory talk they parted. A few weeks later, Sharmaji who hadn't seen Ramesh Reddy since that odd lunch, got an urgent call from him, asking him, *insisting*, he join Ramesh at the Club for another lunch. Again, the younger man was silent till they were drinking coffee.

“ I better tell you everything,” said Ramesh, after a visible internal struggle. “ To tell the truth, I really never know when dreams end and reality begins – well, in some cases I can tell even during a dream, especially when I dream I am a dog! But even then I am not sure I am not, you know?” he ended pathetically.

Sharmaji was aghast. He moved over protectively to a nearer chair. “ Ramesh, you must get proper medical advice, you know, psychiatric advice? It happens to more people than we realize, and I am sure these things can be cured...”

“ I am not sure, I want to be cured,” said Ramesh looking up unseeingly at the ceiling. “ I am very happy in my dreams, even when I turn into a dog, especially when I am a dog. I dream I am in my grandfather’s village, in his house, and I sit on his bed, in his room on the top floor, with my haunches drawn up, and my forearms out, like a dog, you know? And I can feel the bristles on my neck rise as I look over all those forty acres, as he used to. And then I see someone far away not working, and I leap down the stairs on all fours with a growl and race after the fellow barking; or sometimes it is a young dark girl, whose thighs glisten in the sunlight, and I leap up and lick her navel.”

So, it was about sex after all. Did he have a regular girl friend? Did he visit brothels? Did his people not want to get him married, what was the problem? It was unusual for a man of his age, from his class that too, to remain unmarried to the daughter of some other rich Reddy. Sharmaji started to probe. Ramesh shook off his queries impatiently.

“ Oh, there is talk of marriage all the time, only I have put it all off, till I can get to the bottom of these dreams. I don’t want any poor girl to find out she has married a madman, don’t you see?” He looked away in silence for a bit. “ But I don’t feel mad, at any time, just different. And it is lovely being an animal, and free to do what you want to do on the spur of the moment. Once, I pushed a girl down in the mud of the fields and mounted her, only they all rushed to pull me off, and you were there too, holding on to my tail. You know what they said? ‘ Poor fellow, he is only an animal. Better than his grandfather who was insatiable, and would hurt and humiliate all poor women!’ When I woke up next morning, I was in his bed in the village, and I felt people were giving me strange stares for the next few days when I was there. Did I do anything, with any woman, or was it all just a dream, and I am being hyper-sensitive? But it couldn’t be real, for you were there in the dream! It’s worrying, you know, not knowing what is dream and what is reality.”

Sharmaji wondered if stories about the past, about his family, upset him. “ Not at all!” said Ramesh cheerfully. “ Grandfather was a stud! I always heard he made it up to them financially, they were poor, you know, and money always helps. And most probably he gave them a thrill of their lifetimes – look at their husbands, thin weak fellows, who most probably could do it only once, weakly, ha, ha! No, I was wondering if it is some sort of message from the Great Beyond, you know, from Grandfather himself? But where do you come into all this? You must hold some sort of key to my dreams.”

That lunch also left both of them dissatisfied, and Sharmaji worried on his way back whether he should not try and contact the boy’s family, but decided it really was none of his business.

A couple of months passed without any further calls from Ramesh. Then, one afternoon he turned up in a new fast white Mercedes. “ Sharmaji, let’s go for a spin in my new car!” he said cheerfully. “ It’s fast, smooth, and safe. Come, *yaar!* It’s a beautiful day!” Sharmaji had a small boy’s fascination for fast expensive cars, and was easily persuaded. Ramesh drove with expert ease; the car seat felt luxurious, as he weaved his way out of the city traffic on to a clear country road, and then happily accelerated. The car ate up the miles with smooth, effortless ease, and Ramesh was particularly chatty and informative about many of the car’s performance characteristics. As the shades of evening started to fall fast, Sharmaji suggested it was time they turned back home.

“ Sharmaji, forgive me for my simple ruse,” said Ramesh without showing any remorse, “ but we are going to my Grandfather’s village. I want you to see his house, we will spend the night there, and maybe you will also get a dream there that will clear up all this mystery once and for all.”

Ramesh cheerfully countered every one of Sharmaji’s objections, said the night in the country would do him good, he had an excellent cook, and a sophisticated bar, and of course Sharmaji had stayed away from home several times, all he had to do was call his wife and say he was away on work, and oh, come on, he could do this for a friend?

Sharmaji was stiff from sitting still for a couple of hours when they reached the spacious landlord’s house standing within its own large walled courtyard, and he was glad of the hot water drawn ready for his bath. These rich young men were all spoilt brats, he mused as he towed himself and gazed out over the darkening acres that stretched out to the horizon. The cook was indeed an expert, and everyone of the fifteen dishes or so was a masterpiece of his art. When Ramesh had mentioned a bar, Sharmaji had expected a couple of bottles of Scotch at best, but he was happily amazed when his host pulled out several bottles of French red wine.

They talked, and drank, and laughed long after the cook had gone to bed, then with some stupid jokes about dirty dreams went off to their rooms. Within a few minutes of getting between soft perfumed cotton sheets, Sharmaji seemed to sink down, down into the deep mattress, into velvety, black sleep. How long he slept happily and dreamlessly, he couldn’t tell, but a low growl outside his door woke him up instantly. He got up and peeked out, and saw Ramesh, half-man, half-dog, flit down the steps on all fours. Fearing for his friend, he flew down after him, negotiating the last flight of stairs with ease, with just a touch of his hand on the banisters. Ramesh was already out in the dark night racing through the fields, and Sharmaji leapt after him. He spied him on a far bund under some tall eucalyptus trees heading for the open road. God! In his condition he could get run over by any truck! Sharmaji ran as he had never run before, leaping over ditches, and through thick bushes, with a sureness of foot that came from a desperate haste to save his friend. At last he jumped on to the open road. The trucks thundered past, their glaring headlights blinding him. He tried to see where Ramesh was, and wandered towards the crown of the road. The cleaner of a truck opened his side door to shout a warning at him, but that very door smacked into him, tumbling him into the ditch.

When he awoke next morning, he had a terrific headache. The cook silently brought him some hot coffee, and a cold towel to wrap round his head. After some time, he got up gingerly and took a very hot bath, which eased the pain in his head, and enabled him to totter down for breakfast. As he was eating his *idlis*, the farm manager came and sat down beside him. He was an old thin fellow, with a permanent worried look, but his message was grave. Ramesh *babu* had gone out for a midnight walk, as he often did, and was hit by a truck, nothing very bad, just a bump on the head from an open side door, even as the truck was braking to a halt. He had been taken to hospital, had regained consciousness, and the doctor had pronounced him out of danger. Ramesh *babu* would like to see Sharmaji, whenever it was convenient, to thank him for warning him in time about the open door, added the farm manager with a quizzical look.