

Allyson was a raw-boned young woman, with a long smiling face which most times showed white teeth to match her size. She loved to work all day from dawn to dusk with her hands, handling by choice the heaviest jobs, pushing back wispy brown hair to assure Sharmaji that she was fine, couldn't be better, just loved it here, and she better get on with the job or it would never be done. Ally, 'the Aussie Volly,' as she laughingly called herself, had read a glowing report about Sharmaji in an Australian newspaper that did a series of Op-Eds on development projects that would change the next century, and had decided to be a volunteer at his Rural Centre during summer break.

Sharmaji was long accustomed to foreign volunteers breezing through his campus, and spending most of their week or so there making unreasonable requests for medicines that could only be obtained in North America, or trying to reorganize everything to everyone's distress. But Allyson was very different. She was not only physically stronger than all his helpers, but amazingly loved to work hard, moving manure, building walls, cleaning latrines, planting vegetables faster than a whole row of women, and for relaxation building a large fish pond, or chicken coop. She never fell ill, was not scared of cobras, actually catching one with a forked stick to show Sharmaji how the fangs operated, saying lightly to his horror that many Australian snakes were far more dangerous than a mere cobra. She played with all the little children whenever she could, and cleaned their noses, or washed them if she felt they needed a clean-up. She assured the mothers that their children were far better behaved, and responsible for each other, than the primary class she taught back home in Brisbane.

Within two weeks everyone was used to this strange woman waking them up before cockcrow with her horsy laugh, and some of the staff even began to get energized by her sheer example. Even the regular slackers worked away fifteen minutes at a time, before relaxing with several cups of tea, their duty done to their satisfaction. Sharmaji watched all this from a safe distance; he was glad she was bringing discipline into the group, but carefully never volunteered himself to pitch in, as all the official paperwork, the bane of his life as he explained to her over lunch, kept him indoors in his unit, fretting to get out and work, work with his body for the people. Allyson understood, squeezed his arm sympathetically, and carried on. The women began to take a quiet liking for her, and would form a circle round her at night after dinner to talk many things over. Allyson was remarkably communicative, with her hands and the few simple English words she would use clearly, and she quickly picked up key words in Hindi and Telugu as well. As a primary school teacher she used symbols quite a lot and this mode of communication, and the patient attitude that goes with it, she explained, had helped her be quite at home, whether on the high Andes or up river on the Blue Nile.

So, it was a considerable shock to everybody when this paragon of strength, good humour and conspicuous self-reliance was brought to her guest room on a stretcher groaning in pain. Two afternoons earlier an agitated cyclist had informed an alarmed Sharmaji that Allyson Memsahib was lying by the roadside semi-conscious after an accident. She had been hit by a truck or bus, which had driven off at high speed, but luckily villagers had heard the screech of the accident and run quickly to her aid. Ramulamma as the most qualified person on campus had been rushed to the scene in a jeep. She had found the tight-lipped Allyson thrown on the shoulder of the road, bathed in the powdery dust that had cushioned her fall. Clearly a fast-moving vehicle had come wide round the bend and brushed against her before she or the driver could

sense the danger. It was lucky for Allyson that she had not been run over, and lucky for her that she had suffered no head injuries. Her right thigh bone was cleared fractured, and a couple of ribs had cracked, Ramulamma guessed, as she had helped lift her carefully to the back of the jeep. She and two other village women had held the wounded Allyson on their laps, and though the driver drove the jeep as carefully as he could, the journey to the district hospital was agony, more for Ramulamma, for Allyson had passed out most of the way.

Sharmaji had been at the hospital awaiting them, having liberally greased every palm. The Civil Surgeon himself, a good man, had hustled in later, and informed a worried Sharmaji that there was nothing to worry about, the patient was a strong and sensible young person, the leg and the ribs had been stabilized, the wounds cleaned and anti-tetanus shots given, and Sharma should bring around some strengthening chicken soup. Allyson herself had complained little, and when she could smiled reassuringly at Ramulamma who rarely left her bedside. When the cast had been applied over the leg and the ribs securely bandaged she had insisted on being moved immediately to her own room on campus. Ramulamma and a ward boy had accompanied her back in the hospital ambulance, and though she uttered not a sound when they hit potholes along the ill-kept road, her mouth had tightened in wide white ridges most of the way.

The twenty or so women from the village, who waited on the verandah with sari ends clenched anxiously between their teeth, were not allowed to disturb Allyson in any way the evening of her return, but were allowed in next morning at Allyson's request. Everyone loudly bemoaned the accident, wondered what evil-eye had made this happen to their good Allyamma, if a foreign dorasani could not be safe, who could be, and how all drivers were rash and drunk and ill-behaved most of the times. No one's life was safe, that was for sure, look what had happened to Allyamma, just standing by the roadside, not even crossing it, and this fellow just hit her from behind, and drove on, as if she were a chicken or goat, and not the kindest, most good-hearted dorasani amma anyone had seen, not like some of the others, always complaining, and showing their white thighs, as if everyone was a husband, everyone knew white dorasanis had no morals, one remembered so many instances... but not our Allyamma, who was always modest, more than most of our daughters, it must be said, and now look what had befallen such a person, and who could be safe from now on?

The tirade was broken into by the entry of Sub-Inspector Prasad Rao, who had come to interview the accident victim and fill out a challan following the First Information Report already filed at the 'station' by Sharmaji's assistant. He shoed most of them out of the room and sat down comfortably on a chair placed respectfully for him by Ramulamma.

"If you don't mind answering a few simple questions, Madam," he said ponderously, "I'll complete our investigation. What I have recorded so far is only hearsay evidence, so it is important I record your evidence at the first opportunity. It will not take more than a few minutes."

"Oh, I don't mind, you can ask me all you want," said Allyson easily, who had been listening to her women friends with a slight smile, propped up on a pile of pillows that Ramulamma had arranged for her.

The Inspector looked officiously at the document in his hand. Then, after shaking off a few drops of ink from his fountain pen to get it going, he looked goggled-eyed at her and said: “Do you recollect anything at all about the accident?”

“Oh, everything, quite clearly,” said Allyson. “It was a nice sunny day so I thought I would go round the village and take some pictures. You see I teach primary school back home in Australia – in Brisbane, it is a big city, tropical like here.” She paused to give Prasad Rao time to write.

“Taking photographs,” murmured the inspector to himself writing, and looked up. “Yes, I wanted to show my young friends where I had been during the summer. I educate myself traveling, and I want my students to learn what a friendly place the world is from an early age.” She laughed, and cut it short in a cough of pain. “Friendly except when you meet an unfriendly person, as I had the misfortune to do.”

The inspector leaned forward vigorously. “You know this person? This driver of this vehicle?”

“No, no, never even got a glimpse of him. But we did meet in a sort of way, didn’t we? Well, there was this beautiful spot by the bend of the road, the green fields, the red-tiled houses in the distance, the clumps of bananas, and egrets flying over the ponds, I just had to take a picture. I was standing at the very edge of the road, with my back to it, when he hit me. He was very fast and took the corner wide, I guess, at that speed, if I hadn’t taken a step to the side, he would have killed me.”

Prasad Rao slowly wrote it all down, and breathed heavily. “Victim’s back to road,” he said to himself. “So, Madam, you saw nothing else that can help us identify the guilty party. But I assure you we will make our enquiries, the case will be kept open and sooner or later we will make the arrest even after you have safely gone home. By God’s grace, you have been spared a worse accident.” He sighed heavily and rose to his feet.

“But, Inspector, I can help you identify the driver. I noted down the number.”

Prasad Rao sat down so heavily that the chair creaked in protest. “Madam, you had your back to the road. You were caught unawares, and hit a terrific blow – by God’s grace you lived – you could not have seen the number!” said the Inspector trying to reason it out.

“I wasn’t facing the road, sure, when it hit me, but as I went down I saw the back of the car. It was a white SUV and the number was 8295! I memorized it. I always tell my children to memorize car numbers, and I will tell them how useful it’s been in catching a criminal. He didn’t even stop, can you believe that!”

After asking her to repeat her statement three times slowly, Prasad Rao wrote it down, showed it to her, got her to sign, and left ponderously.

They did not see the inspector for the next ten days or so. Ramulamma attended on Allyson and noted with quiet satisfaction that her patient’s strong constitution was helping her make a quick recovery without any complications. Though her ribs were sore and painful, Allyson insisted on coming out on makeshift crutches to sit in the community kitchen with the women. Seeing that Allyson could very well manage to

look after herself, Ramulamma made a few visits to her pregnant patients. All seemed to be well. She then remembered that she had almost nothing at home, and hurried to the Friday market to buy a week's rations of rice and dal, some vegetables, turmeric, and a packet of salt. Her purchases finished she was turning for home before it got dark, when she saw fresh betel-leaves being unpacked from under a wet gunny sack and went over to squat beside Narsamma to buy some. Narsamma always had good stories to tell, relishing the gossip as much as her own betel-leaves in her red-stained mouth. Already a few men had gathered by the roadside to buy the leaves, but even as she haggled and gave them the glistening leaf bundles shaking out the water, she deftly rolled a paan for Ramulamma with nut powder, chunam, and a spot of Golkund to make the betel leaves astringent-sweet.

Having discussed the world for fifteen minutes, Ramulamma was preparing to leave with her purchases and her fresh betel leaves wrapped in a wet cloth when a big car pulled up right beside them, and a hoarse voice commanded arrogantly: "Osye! Woman! Give me ten bundles for my party tonight!" And a stream of thick betel-nut juice flew out of the car window and down Ramulamma's blouse, between her breasts.

Gopal Reddy's bloated face, eyes hidden behind elongated dark glasses, looked down at them. "What stupid women!" he said testily. "You don't even know where to sit! If you sit under my car, how do you expect me to see you?"

Ramulamma said nothing. She took a piece of torn newspaper, and as carefully as possible wiped his spit off her body, while Gopal Reddy looked unblinkingly down her blouse as she did so. As she threw away the paper, she looked up at him and said evenly: "Dirt comes from dirt."

"Ayye! Control your words, Woman! Or I will squirt something really dirty into you!" said Gopal Reddy, moving his arm like a piston, as he took the bundle of betel leaves from Narsamma and tossed it into the car beside him. A group of loafers sitting by the toddy shop laughed salaciously. Gopal Reddy tossed money into Narsamma's basket, winked at the men and drove off in style.

Ramulamma said nothing as she watched the back of his car disappear. Their enmity was of a few years' standing. This Gopal Reddy was not a rich man, but he was very well connected. A distant cousin was even a junior minister. So, he had got a good start as on-site manager of a construction company in Hyderabad, building suburban housing parks for the rich. But customers who were willing to pay a high price also demanded quality construction for their homes, and after repeated complaints of shoddy workmanship and inferior quality, he was quietly eased out, but without a scandal. After spending a few months back in his village with riotous friends, Gopal Reddy started a thrift and credit organization for the poor, with the support of his minister cousin. Ramulamma had been one of his first and best members. She paid for her share of the capital and savings deposits on time. She mobilized members, she took charge of a lead Self Help Group, whose success was skillfully advertised by Gopal Reddy. Several newspapers carried photos of the minister, Gopal Reddy and Ramulamma standing together at a credit group meeting. By the second year, Ramulamma started to have doubts, and Gopal Saru never had time to clear them. Repayments would be made on time but entered a few weeks late into books, due to 'overwork.' Then those in the know said that money could always be 'bought' at a price without joining the society, but if profits were generated the women never got to see the colour of that money. When questions were raised by the women, Ramulamma

could find no answers, and openly voiced everyone's doubts in the general assembly. Gopal Saru did not like that at all. He scolded them, said he was ready to walk out, there he was trying to help these stupid women and they were raising their voice against him, their benefactor, did they not remember what his grandfather would have done? They begged forgiveness but stuck adamantly to their questions. Abuse, beatings, even rape and murder was a way of life they were accustomed to, but money was another matter all together. Ramulamma spoke to a Dalit journalist who was nosing around; the matter was then reported on TV, the Collector paid a visit, and in no time at all Gopal Reddy's organization was closed down, and money repaid to the women. That was sufficient reason for Gopal Reddy to hate Ramulamma, even though he fell on his feet right away and got appointed as the manager of a sugar factory owned by an old uncle, the good natured Jawahar Reddy. When poor women talked among themselves they said surely he would destroy his uncle, that good man, who had been a freedom fighter, was fair to his workers, and wrote nationalist poetry everyone could recite.

Ramulamma went home that evening without nursing any grudge. Yes, she had been spat upon, that was the worst he could do. Just ten years ago a Harijan woman sticking up for her rights might have been punished in a far more brutal way. It was a pity her nice blue blouse had been spoilt. That red stain would not go, however much she washed it, and she hated to wear shabby discoloured clothes. But that did not bother her as much as something she had missed in that encounter, something she should have recognized instinctively, something that was a clue to something else much bigger than her ego.

The next morning all such thoughts were blown out of her head by the arrival of the DIG at Sharmaji's office. Sitting outside on the verandah, she learnt that Allyson's innocent call home to assure her family that she was really all right had made big time evening news on Australian channels. A Counsellor from the High Commission in New Delhi had raised the matter with the Chief Minister and asked if the hit and run culprit had been apprehended. This incident, for which somehow the DIG seemed to hold Sharmaji directly responsible, had occurred at the worst possible time when AusAid was jointly funding a preliminary environmental survey and clearance for one of the largest dam projects designed.

"What confidence would the Australians have that we have the capacity to rehabilitate five hundred thousand displaced people when our government cannot even catch someone who knocks down an Australian volunteer!" had shouted the harassed Chief Minister. "This stupid girl and this stupid incident can block the funds we are expecting from the Asian Development Bank, let alone Australian grants. We will have to scrounge for money wherever we can. I am putting on hold that new Police Headquarters plan for a start, I may even auction that land to some hotelier!" The Director General of Police while speaking to the DIG with frozen politeness had made it plain that he expected the matter to be cleared up and the culprit behind bars within a week, with a suggestion thrown in apropos nothing that the terrorist infested jungles to the north also required the presence of a DIG, and he was turning the matter over in his mind.

Sharmaji could offer both sympathy and tea, an offer turned down testily by the DIG who was impatient to see Miss Allyson. Sharmaji anxiously led the way to the Foreigner Guest Room, with Ramulamma tagging along unobtrusively behind. Once

inside, the DIG suddenly changed from being a threatening police officer into a suave gentleman, who patted Allyson's unhurt hand, sat down beside her and said in dulcet tones how much he and the government regretted the incident, how much they valued her presence, how she reminded him of India's great heroines like... like...he turned around for inspiration, and Sharmaji said 'Rani of Jhansi,' yes, like Rani of Jhansi. The world was built by great women, and he was in the presence of one.

Sub-Inspector Prasad Rao burst into the room, panting with the effort, and saluted his chief, with clamorous stamping of his boots.

"Fool!" hissed his superior, seething with anger. "Don't you see you are in the sick room of a lady and not on a parade ground!" By the end of the sentence his anger at his incompetent subordinate had raised his voice into a quivering shout. The DIG drew himself to his full height. "Why have you not made any arrests! Why? Ten days have gone by, and you have been sleeping!"

Prasad Rao had seen many angry superiors in his day, and knew how to defend himself stolidly. He held out the FIR register he had brought in readiness.

"The miscreant was driving a car of unknown foreign make, according to the victim, who was in a state of shock. I radioed headquarters, and was informed such a vehicle is unknown in India. Sir!"

It was the DIG's turn to look bewildered, and he turned to Allyson for help, who said she had said no such thing. Prasad Rao referred triumphantly to the report in his file which had been signed by Allyson.

"See, Sir! Victim declared she recognized a Yesuwe as the vehicle that hit her. This foreign make car is unknown in India." Then a little confidentially he added: "Sir, she was in shock, and perhaps saw here in our village some make of Australian design in delirium. This is known to happen in accidents, especially with ladies."

Allyson laughed. "I said a S-U-V. You know a Sports Utility Vehicle! It was a white SUV."

"Victim was attempting to mislead police," commented Prasad Rao dourly.

"Idiot! She was doing no such thing!" stormed the DIG. "Why can't you understand plain English? Why am I surrounded by fools? What about that vehicle number she mentions in her statement?"

Prasad Rao could have taken umbrage, he subtly indicated he could have, but in the interest of discipline he let this outburst pass, and inclined his head patiently as with a child.

"I have left no stone unturned, Sir!" said Prasad Rao defiantly. "Enquiries were instituted. The number mentioned by her does not belong to any registered vehicle. I have confirmation from central police data source here, Sir!" He held out a computerized slip. "Sir! Lady in question was in a state of shock. I was on the spot. Mr. Sharma can verify."

“Well, she could have been wrong about one or two digits. You know that happens. Ask them to come up with nearest combinations of numbers with reference to SUVs – you understand – in our State, any white Pajero, Tavera, Safari, Qualis, Sumo – you understand?” asked the DIG irritably. “ Now get busy, Prasad Rao, I want answers, and I want them now!”

He turned to Allyson who was quietly shaking her head. “ Dear lady, don’t fret, your first duty to us is to get well. I may look like a policeman, but you know one thing, I always wanted to be a doctor, deep inside! Get well, for your family’s sake, for our sake! I have brought down a case of Foster’s Beer for you! You know? I too would rather fight than switch! Ha! Ha!”

Allyson shook her head and said simply: “ I am not mistaken about the number. It was 8295.” He nodded sympathetically, and eased himself out, glowered at Prasad Rao, who looked stolidly away, and left for his camp quarters to sooth himself with a stiff whisky and soda.

The next few days were passed without any new clues emerging. Punctually every morning, the DIG appeared at Allyson’s doorway carrying a large bouquet of flowers. Not only had the case of Fosters been delivered to her but also jars of Australian Vegemite, and tins of Australian Kraft Cheese, and New Zealand lamb. The third day he proudly brought her a bottle Yellow Tail merlot snatched at the airport from a businessman returning from Sydney.

Allyson was awed by all this attention. “I hope he hasn’t got the hots for me,” she said wonderingly to Ramulamma, who though not understanding the words knew what was meant. “ For I know I can’t abide to touch him!”

People who has seen the DIG threaten Sub-Inspector Prasad Rao with every punishment short of execution would have been surprised at the conviviality that existed between them the third evening at the DIG’s camp quarters. The senior man saw off the inspector at the door, laughingly slapping him on the back.

“You are very cunning rascal, Prasad,” said the DIG, chuckling. “You will go far, but mind you tell me everything! Well, if it’s fixed, it’s fixed, I don’t want to know more. I am happy to be rid of this mess, I can tell you. I’ll call the CM tonight and give him the good news.” Prasad Rao saluted, looking down his nose in modest self-deprecation.

The next morning at consultation hour round Allyson’s bed, while the DIG was going through the motions of calling up different patrol units who might have sighted a white rashly driven vehicle, Prasad Rao came in smartly, and gave a thundering salute as usual.

“Miscreant has been arrested, Sir!” he bellowed, stamping his boots in another salute. “ I have a full signed confession here, Sir! Miscreant drove a small truck, Madam,” he added looking patronizingly at Allyson, “not SUV, though very like, with white tail-board, looks very like SUV, I was myself confused, Sir! Miscreant smuggling liquor from Goa, Sir, used many false numbers to throw us off the scent, but at last in your custody, Sir!”

The DIG looked alternately surprised, confused and at last gratified. "Prasad Rao, that is sterling work!" he said handsomely. "You have wrapped up the case with the efficiency I expect from every officer under my command. I promise you this action of yours will not go un-noticed!"

Sharmaji looked bewildered but happy, while Allyson looked only bewildered, and a slight unusual frown began to gather between her brows. Suddenly, Ramulamma pushed her way into the circle, clutching an old large mud-spattered sheet of cardboard which had 'Literacy Class' written at the top in big blue letters.

"Village Women Telugu Literacy Class, Madam," she said proudly in English, grinning like an idiot.

"Yes, I know," replied Allyson, nodding in some confusion.

"Teach English Telugu Numbers, Madam," continued Ramulamma unconcerned that the police were making to throw her out of the room. "Look Numbers, Madam!" She pointed to four numbers pasted on the board.

Allyson's eyes lit up. "Yes, those are the numbers, 8295, the numbers of the SUV that hit me!"

Ramulamma wiped a wet cloth over the numbers clearing away the dirt. They looked similar but quite different. "Telugu Numbers, Madam," said Ramulamma comfortingly. "English Numbers below!" and tore off each piece of paper to reveal a new set of numbers underneath, 4728.

There was an electric stillness in the room. Before anyone else could speak, Ramulamma continued in idiot fashion. "Sugar factory Sumo, Madam, 4728, use Telugu numbers. Jawahar Reddy garu, Pedda Pedda Saru, Madam. Honour Telugu language, Madam!"

Prakash Rao gave her a long look, his eyes ink-black and expressionless. She looked modestly at her feet. The DIG came to a quick decision. "You know this man, Prasad Rao?" It was a rhetorical question, more a flat statement.

"Sir..." started Prasad Rao, gulping, and then stopped to choose his words, but Ramulamma was in full helpful flow. "Gopal Reddy garu Manager," she said softly and clearly, her eyes still downcast.

"Arrest him! No! You stay here," said the DIG rapidly. "I want you to stay here and guard Miss Allyson, you understand?"

"Sir!" said Prasad Rao without emotion, but with another silent glance at Ramulamma.

The DIG was on the phone. "I want to speak to the SP – yes – yes – Sunil? Good. I want you to personally arrest this Gopal Reddy, manager at the sugar factory. You know the Australian hit and run case? Good. No, not for rash and drunken driving. Arrest him for attempted murder under section 307! Got that? Good. This bastard had given me ulcers and I want to give him a few. Call me when he is in your custody. Good."



The DIG and his entourage had left in a flurry of activity. Miss Allyson was again alone, resting in her bed. Ramulamma had gone back to the kitchen to fix her lunch. Prasad Rao sat on his chair in the verandah and acknowledged with a smile that his superior was a brilliant man. It was far better this way, who else could have thought of this solution, in the blink of an eye, so to speak. Prasad Rao had been neatly prevented from making another blunder or embarrassing his friend. Sure, Gopal Reddy, my fine cock on the wall, would be made to suffer a little, but it was not safe to annoy a DIG, one that too under pressure from the CM. The boss had convinced this Miss Ally that the driver of the car would be punished to the maximum, but she would not know, could not know, that a case of attempted murder would fall flat in court, and the public prosecutor would listen to some harsh strictures from the bench. Very clever, surely the boss knew of those connections... and a day would come when Ramulamma would get what was coming to her.

That lady was quite contentedly preparing lunch for her friend. With a secret smile she thought of the days when she herself attended literacy classes conducted by that funny old Sastri garu. He had amazed them all by showing how similar the 'English' numbers were to the Telugu ones, and made them laugh by telling them that the uneducated English when they first learned to read and write mixed up our numbers and have never got it straight since then. For what she had done retribution might come; even if she did nothing, she had every reason to fear the worst at any time. For the moment, though, she was content, and Gopal Reddy had been repaid for spitting on her.