

ARTICLE

# THE ENIGMA OF A DREAM

BY UTKARSH KASHYAP

"Alright, Shridhar, tell me honestly – what really happens to those who die? I mean, I've heard people talk about spirits and all... Is any of that true?"

Shridhar replied, "Oh! Come on, Samir! How did you fall for all that nonsense? It's all rubbish."

Was Shridhar really that certain? So certain that he didn't think twice before using the word 'rubbish'? Maybe he saw himself as just another victim of the so-called human nature- the same nature that only becomes evident when someone tries to belittle or demean the other without any solid fact or logic, without even bothering to understand the impact such words might have on the other's mind and life; how each spoken word has the power to bring profound change- not only in that person's life but also in the lives of generations to come. Yet, he believes that, just as others say whatever they please without any thought and he fails to see through their web of illusions- his own words too will be accepted thoughtlessly.

I don't know about others, but I'm certainly not one of those people. If I were to become like them, what difference would there be between me and someone dead? Perhaps he knew his words wouldn't have much impact, so he felt free to say whatever he wanted.

I ended up thinking more about Shridhar than listening to what he was actually saying.

"You're saying this only because you've never had an encounter with a spirit," Nirmal interrupted, disagreeing with Shridhar. But I don't think anyone had asked him anything. Maybe he realised that, and suddenly turned to comfort Samir, saying- "But don't worry. Just take care of him for these thirteen days well enough, and then let him be free."

What? Let him be free? Had Samir somehow imprisoned his father's spirit? He wasn't such a terrible person and even if he had mistakenly been so cruel, he now wishes to free his father's spirit, and he can do so right this moment. What sense does it make to torment him for thirteen days before setting him free? (If I seem as naive as I appear here, then the one trying to explain these things to me should be equally convincing. And if that doesn't happen, then perhaps either I am not as naive as I appear, or no one truly has any grasp of these airy, baseless beliefs.)

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My facetious thoughts seemed to travel from my mind to my face, dissolving into the atmosphere, and Samir could clearly see this little journey unfolding in my expressions. Anyway, what happened next was not what I feared, but what was simply obvious.

"Tarun, tell me, what's your take on all this?" Samir asked me while deforming the cot. Shridhar and Nirmal's answers didn't satisfy him. Was he expecting something from me? I would have to break that expectation. "I don't know," I replied.

Was that all? Yes, that was it.

For me, it seemed like the only straightforward truth.

Just yesterday, Samir was describing the mysterious things happening at his home with great seriousness, and the listeners were nodding along. Shridhar was also one of them. So, what's the point of raising such questions today when he is about to provide answers to them tonight only?

I've heard these legends, in fact, the entire village has heard them. What's the point of repeating them over and over again, or what's the pleasure in opposing them, when neither side really knows the truth?

My response was brief, but it was honest and sufficient. Yet, nobody seemed particularly pleased with it, and gradually, I was pushed out of their conversation (or rather, ignored). The three of them continued crafting stories about life after death for Samir's father, with Shridhar firmly seated, bringing his so-called science into the discussion and making significant contributions. After listening for a while, I realised which treasure chest they were pulling their stories from. After all, what fresh perspectives could these boys in their early twenties truly bring?

Then, I started gazing at the setting sun. Ah, this setting sun! It feels deeply solemn and affectionate, as if at the moment of its departure, finding only me before it, it conveys the sorrow of separation hidden in its heart to mine in such a way that no one else could sense this parting. And as it fades silently, it seems to promise an experience yet to come—one with the power to embrace my entire night in its hold.

Suddenly, the aroma of some delicacy caught my attention, drawing me towards the house three doors down. Ah! Amma had made Poha today. Anyway, no one needs to call me to eat; I appear in the kitchen on my own for such things. She knew this, and so my meal was already served. Enjoying my food, I asked, "Amma, what happens after death?"

She replied, "How would I know, child? I'm still alive. Ask someone who's dead, someone who knows what dying feels like, because that's beyond my experience."

Amma's answer seemed better than mine.

She then asked me, "Why are you suddenly so eager to uncover this mystery today?" I narrated the whole incident to her.

"Yes, Amma, but you're right," I said. She then replied with a playful tone, "But you're wrong. If you didn't blindly believe what Shridhar and Nirmal said, then why believe my words? I could be wrong too."

What did she mean? In other words, she meant to figure it out for yourself. You're capable enough, aren't you?

As always, she left me speechless again. Amma is so wise – where does she get all this wisdom? I mumbled to myself as I headed to the rooftop and began gazing at the moon. But a harsh voice interrupted this tranquil moment saying something like this- "And then, suddenly, someone knocked on the door and called out to me saying, 'Let me in, son. I need my evening fix.' I was terrified. Father is no more, then who was this impersonator?"

Hearing the loud proclamations being shouted into the darkness of the night, I managed to piece together a few things-

First, someone was declaring their father to be both dead and an impersonator, tarnishing his name in front of the villagers. Second, this person's father seems to only come home suddenly at night when everyone is asleep, solely to collect his "fix".

Where he spends the rest of his day, no one knows. And if this "fix" is so important, why not keep it with him? What's the point of leaving it behind at home?

My suspicion turned into certainty, and I realized exactly whose father was being spoken about.

Laughingly, I lay down comfortably on the cold cot. Coincidentally, lying in this relaxed position allowed me to see the moon perfectly without straining my neck muscles. Tell me Moon, how can I find out about life after death? But Amma was right. I haven't even seen death, so how could I possibly know? And at the moment, I have no particular intention of dying. Perhaps this is a topic best pondered after I've experienced it firsthand.

Don't you think that since I'm alive, I should be thinking about life instead? But what is there to ponder about life? I already know about it, and there's no real curiosity left. So, unable to find any truly interesting topic to think about, I began to try to sleep. Just then, I stumbled upon something strange yet intriguing: that I can't explore things that happen after death, and I have no particular interest in things before death, so why not focus on that boundary where both meet, that is, "death"?

But since I have no experience with death, I might as well fall asleep and venture into the world of dreams.

Under the dense darkness of the winter sky, Nandini was enjoying the fodder in the trough before her. Piercing through the dense darkness, the light of a lone earthen lamp was performing the noble task of offering us both a faint warmth. But to me, it was providing something beyond this warmth— the tender yet profoundly divine face of Nandini as she grazed on her fodder. I was almost enchanted watching her and the sparkle in her eyes. She was the same as ever but today... As I watched her, no questions about life, death, or the afterlife disturbed my mind. I was so absorbed, so immersed, that these questions seemed meaningless as if they had ceased to exist.

Once her hunger was satisfied, she slowly lifted her head up. It seemed as though her physical hunger was gone, but there was another longing left to satisfy. And for some reason, I too, felt a strange restlessness from within – a restlessness I'd never experienced before, one that could only be calmed by her presence. It was as if my gaze had mesmerised her too. We both continued to stare at each other without reason, just silently, endlessly... But why? I didn't know.

Just as a plant slowly begins to lose its sap when being cut, it felt to me as if someone was cutting me from deep within, with its sap collecting in my eyes as tears, as if the eyes had forgotten how to blink. Tears had indeed turned into droplets, but even these droplets seemed to have forgotten how to fall. My entire body, every thought, every sense, the whole atmosphere— everything had become completely still. I wasn't sad, but I wasn't happy either. Had someone taken control over me? But I don't believe in any of this. Only mentally weak people fall prey to such things, don't they? but I wasn't like that. I don't believe in anything without reason, so what was this in reality?

I gently touched Nandini's two white cheeks and pressed my forehead against hers, wanting the stream of tears to flow. Doing so felt as essential to me as breathing was to my body. Maybe I had gone mad; surely, this was madness, but why was this madness so blissful?

Then I did just that, and Nandini also soaked her face in her own stream of tears. I was neither sad nor happy; it was as if I had disappeared; despite knowing about this state, I was unaware of it. Now Nandini had become life itself, but I used to embrace her every day. So why this extraordinary experience today?

Slowly, a strange bright light enveloped the entire atmosphere—it was the same ray of the sun that dared to break such a beautiful dream.

What? Was it all just a dream?

How could the sun do this? Just yesterday, it seemed so full of love, so close to my heart, and it was the same sun that gave me a glimpse of that dream. And now, it has committed such a vile act by breaking it. Look at it now, so cheerful after rising, as if it has done me a great favor. Oh! What has it done? I can't bear to think about it even for a moment. I was very

sad. Very, very disturbed. I had never been so disappointed. There wasn't even a cow named Nandini in our house; it was all a dream. Sadness was clearly visible in my eyes.

It was as if the tears wanted to step outside, just to gaze at those sorrowful eyes themselves.

I neither felt hunger nor thirst.

Perhaps I truly was going mad. I tried to sleep again, hoping to revisit that same dream, but the trick didn't work. For the first time, something irrational kept me entangled for days. Even today, when I recall that dream, I am filled with emotions and tears, lost in silence and fading into the strangeness of that incident.



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