

the **3** mistakes of my life



chetan bhagat

'The biggest-selling English-language novelist in India's history'

—New York Times

The 3 Mistakes of My Life

A Story about Business, Cricket and Religion

Chetan Bhagat

Rupa & Co

Acknowledgements

My readers, you that is, to whom I owe all my success and motivation. My life belongs to you now, and serving you is the most meaningful thing I can do with my life. I want to share something with you. I am very ambitious in my writing goals. However, I don't want to be India's most admired writer. I just want to be India's most loved writer. Admiration passes, love endures.

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Prologue

It is not everyday you sit in front of your computer on a Saturday morning and get an email like this:

From: Ahd_businessman@gmail.com Sent: 12/28/2005 11.40 p.m.

To: info@chetanbhagat.com

Subject: A final note

Dear Chetan

This email is a combined suicide note and a confession letter. I have let people down and have no reason to live. You don't know me. I'm an ordinary boy in Ahmedabad who read your books. And somehow I felt I could write to you after that. I can't really tell anyone what I am doing to myself - which is taking a sleeping pill everytime I end a sentence - so I thought I would tell you.

I kept my coffee cup down and counted. Five full stops already

I made three mistakes; I don't want to go into details.

My suicide is not a sentimental decision. As many around me know, I am a good businessman because I have little emotion. This is no knee-jerk reaction. I waited over three years, watched Ish's silent face everyday. But after he refused my offer yesterday, I had no choice left.

I have no regrets either. Maybe I'd have wanted to talk to Vidya once more – but that doesn't seem like such a good idea right now.

Sorry to bother you with this. But I felt like I had to tell someone. You have ways to improve as an author but you do write decent books. Have a nice weekend.

Regards

Businessman

17, 18, 19. Somewhere, in Ahmedabad a young 'ordinary' boy had popped nineteen sleeping pills while typing out a mail to me. Yet, he expected me to have a nice weekend. The coffee refused to go down my throat. I broke into a cold sweat.

'One, you wake up late. Two, you plant yourself in front of the computer first thing in the morning. Are you even aware that you have a family?' Anusha said. In case it isn't obvious enough from the authoritative tone, Anusha is my wife.

I had promised to go furniture shopping with her – a promise that was made ten weekends ago.

She took my coffee mug away and jiggled the back of my chair. 'We need dining chairs. Hey, you look worried?' she said.

I pointed to the monitor.

'Businessman?' she said as she finished reading the mail. She looked pretty shaken up too.

And it is from Ahmedabad,' I said, 'that is all we know.' 'You sure this is real?' she said, a quiver in her voice. 'This is not spam,' I said. 'It is addressed to me.'

My wife pulled a stool to sit down. I guess we really did need write extra chairs.

'Think,' she said. 'We've got to let someone know. His parents maybe.'

'How? I don't know where the hell it came from,' I said. And who do we know in Ahmedabad?'

'We met in Ahmedabad, remember?' Anusha said. A pointless statement, I thought. Yes, we'd been classmates at IIM-A years ago. 'So?'

'Call the institute. Prof Basant or someone,' she sniffed and left the room. 'Oh no, the daal is burning.'

There are advantages in having a wife smarter than you. I could never be a detective.

I searched the institute numbers on the Internet and called. An operator connected me to Prof Basant's residence. I checked the time, 10.00 a.m. in Singapore, 7.30 a.m. in India. It is a bad idea to mess with a prof early in the morning.

'Hello?' a sleepy voice answered. Had to be the prof.

'Prof Basant, Hi. This is Chetan Bhagat calling. Your old student, remember?'

'Who?' he said with a clear lack of curiosity in his voice. Bad start.

I told him about the course he took for us, and how we had voted him the friendliest professor in the campus. Flattery didn't help much either.

'Oh that Chetan Bhagat,' he said, like he knew a million of them. You are a writer now, no?'

'Yes sir,' I said, 'that one.'

'So why are you writing books?'

'Tough question, sir,' I stalled.

'Ok, a simple one. Why are you calling me so early on a Saturday?'

I told him why and forwarded the email to him.

'No name, eh?' he said as he read the mail.

'He could be in a hospital somewhere in Ahmedabad. He would have just checked in. Maybe he is dead. Or maybe he is at home and this was a hoax,' I said.

I was blabbering. I wanted help – for the boy and me. The prof had asked a good question. Why the hell did I write books – to get into this?

'We can check hospitals,' Prof said. 'I can ask a few students. But a name surely helps. Hey wait, this boy has a Gmail account, maybe he is on Orkut as well.'

'Or-what?' Life is tough when you are always talking to people smarter than you.

'You are so out of touch, Chetan. Orkut is a networking site. Gmail users sign up there. If he is a member and we are lucky, we can check his profile.'

I heard him clicking keys and sat before my own PC. I had just reached the Orkut site when Prof Basant exclaimed, 'Aha, Ahmedabad Businessman. There is a brief profile here. The name only says G. Patel. Interests are cricket, business, mathematics and friends. Doesn't seem like he uses Orkut much though.'

'What are you talking about Prof Basant? I woke up to a suicide note, written exclusively to me. Now you are telling me about his hobbies. Can you help me or...'

A pause, then, 'I will get some students. We will search for a new young patient called G. Patel, suspected of sleeping pill overdose. We will call you if we find anything, ok?'

'Yes, sir,' I said, breathing properly after a long time.

'And how is Anusha? You guys bunked my classes for dates and flow forget me.'

'She is fine, sir.'

'Good, I always felt she was smarter than you. Anyway, let's find your boy,' the prof said and hung up.

Besides furniture shopping, I had to finish an office presentation. My boss, Michel's boss was due from New York. Hoping to impress him Michel asked me to make a presentation of the group, with fifty charts. For three consecutive nights last week I had worked until 1:00 a.m., but had gotten only halfway.

'This is a suggestion. Don't take it the wrong way. But do consider taking a bath,' my wife said.

I looked at her.

'Just an option,' she said.

I think she is overcautious sometimes. I don't bite back.

'Yes, yes. I will,' I said and stared at the computer again.

Thoughts darted through my head. Should I call some hospitals myself? What if Prof Basant dozed off again? What if he could not collect the students? What if G. Patel was dead? And why am I becoming so involved here?

I took a reluctant shower. I opened the office presentation, but found myself unable to type a single word.

I refused breakfast, though regretted it moments later – as hunger and anxiety did not go well together.

My phone rang at 1.33 p.m.

'Hello,' Prof Basant's voice was unmistakable. 'We have a match at Civil Hospital. His name is Govind Patel, twenty-five years of age. A second-year student of mine found him.'

'And?'

'And he is alive. But won't talk. Even to his family. Must be in shock.'

'What are the doctors saying?' I said.

'Nothing. It is a government hospital. What do you expect? Anyway, they will flush his stomach and send him home. I won't worry too much now. Will ask a student to check again in the evening.'

'But what is his story? What happened?'

All that I don't know. Listen, don't get too involved. India is a big country. These things happen all the time. The more you probe, the more the chances of the police harassing you.'

Next, I called the Civil Hospital. However, the operator did not know about the case and there was no facility to transfer the line to the ward either.

Anusha, too, was relieved that the boy was safe. She then announced the plan for the day – the dining chair hunt. It would begin at Ikea on Alexandra Road.

We reached Ikea at around three o'clock and browsed through the space-saving dining sets. One dining table could fold four times over and become a coffee table – pretty neat.

'I want to know what happened to the twenty-five-year-old businessman,' I muttered.

'You will find out eventually. Let him recover. Must be one of those crazy reasons of youth – rejection in love, low marks or drugs.' I stayed silent.

'C'mon, he just emailed you. Your ID is on your book cover. You really don't need to get involved. Should we take six or eight?' She moved towards an oak-wood set.

I protested that we rarely had so many guests at home. Six chairs would be enough.

'The marginal capacity utilisation of the two chairs would be less than ten per cent,' I said.

'You men are least helpful,' she tossed back and then selected six chairs.

My mind strayed back to the businessman.

Yes, everyone was right. I shouldn't get involved. But yet, of all the people in the world, this boy had sent me his last words. I couldn't help but get involved.

We ate lunch in the food court next to Ikea.

'I have to go,' I told my wife as I played with my lemon rice. 'Where? To the office. Ok, you are a free man now. I did my shopping,' my wife said.

'No. I want to go to Ahmedabad. I want to meet Govind Patel.' I did not meet her eye. Maybe I was sounding crazy.

'Are you nuts?'

I think it is only in my generation that Indian women started slamming their husbands.

'My mind keeps going back,' I said.

'What about your presentation? Michel will kill you.'

'I know. He won't get promoted unless he impresses his boss.' My wife looked at me. My face was argument enough. She knew I would not talk sense until I had met the boy.

'Well, there is only one direct flight at 6 p.m. today. You can check the tickets.' She dialled the Singapore Airlines number and handed me the phone.

I entered the room the nurses had led me to. The eerie silence and the darkness made my footsteps sound loud. Ten different instruments beeped and LED lights flickered at regular intervals. Cables from the instruments disappeared into the man I had travelled thousands of miles to see – Govind Patel.

I noticed the curly hair first. He had a wheatish complexion and bushy eyebrows. His thin lips had turned dry because of the medicines.

'Hi, Chetan Bhagat ... the writer you wrote to,' I said, unsure if he could place me.

'O ... How did ... you find me?' he said, finding it difficult to speak.

'Destined to, I guess,' I said.

I shook hands and sat down. His mother came into the room. She looked so sleep-deprived, she could use a sleeping pill herself. I greeted her as she went out to get tea.

I looked at the boy again. I had two instant urges – one, to ask him what happened and two, to slap him.

'Don't look at me like that,' he said, shifting in his bed, *'you must be angry. Sorry, I should not have written that mail.'*

'Forget the mail. You should not have done what you did.'

He sighed. He took a hard look at me and then turned his gaze sideways.

'I have no regrets,' he said.

'Shut up. There is nothing heroic in this. Cowards pop pills.' *'You would have done the same, if you were in my place.'* *'Why? What happened to you?'*

'It doesn't matter!'

We fell silent as his mother returned with tea. A nurse came in and told his mother to go home, but she refused to budge. Finally, the doctor had to intervene.

She left at 11.30 p.m. I stayed in the room, promising the doctor I would leave soon.

'So, tell me your story,' I said, once we were alone.

'Why? What can you do about it? You can't change what happened,' he said tiredly.

'You don't just listen to stories to change the past. Sometimes, it is important to know what happened.'

'I am a businessman. To me, people only do things out of self-interest. What's in it for you? And why should I waste my time telling you anything?'

I stared at the soft-skinned face that hid such hardness inside. 'Because I will want to tell others,' I said. There, that was my incentive.

And why would anyone care? My story is not trendy or sexy like the IITs and call centres.'

He removed the quilt covering his chest. The heater and our conversation kept the room warm.

'I think they will care,' I said, 'a young person tried to kill himself. That does not seem right.'

'No one gives a fuck about me.'

I tried, but found it difficult to be patient. I considered slapping him again.

'Listen,' I said, pitching my voice to the maximum allowed in a hospital. 'You chose to send your last mail to me. That means at a certain level you trusted me. I located you and flew out within hours of your mail. You still question if I care? And now this cocky attitude, this arrogance is part of your business? Can't you talk to me like a friend? Do you even know what a friend is?'

A nurse came peeking into the room on hearing my loud voice. We became quiet. The clock showed midnight.

He sat there stunned. Everyone had behaved nicely with him today. I stood up and turned away from him.

'I know what a friend is,' he said at last.

I sat down next to him.

'I do know what a friend is. Because I had two, the best ones in the world.'

One

*India vs South Africa
4th ODI, Vadodra
17 March 2000
Over 45*

'Why the fuck did you have to move?' Ishaan's scream drowned out the stadium din on the TV. I had shifted up to a sofa from the floor.

'Huh?' I said. We were in Ishaan's house — Ishaan, Omi and I. Ishaan's mom had brought in tea and khakra for us. 'It is more comfortable to snack on the sofa. That is why I moved.'

'Tendulkar's gone. Fuck, now at *this* stage. Omi, don't you dare move now. Nobody moves for the next five overs.'

I looked at the TV. We were chasing 283 to win. India's score a ball ago was 256-2 after forty-five overs. Twenty-seven runs in five overs, with eight wickets to spare and Tendulkar on the crease. A cakewalk. The odds were still in India's favour, but Tendulkar was out. And that explained the frowns on Ishaan's forehead.

'The khakra's crispy,' Omi said. Ishaan glared at Omi, chiding him for his shallow sensory pleasure in a moment of national grief. Omi and I kept our tea cups aside and looked suitably mournful.

The crowd clapped as Tendulkar made his exit. Jadeja came to the crease and added six more runs. End of forty-six overs, India 262/3. Twenty-one more runs to win in four overs, with seven wickets in hand.

Over 46

'He made 122. The guy did his job. Just a few final closing shots left. Why are you getting so worked up?' I asked during a commercial break. I reached for my tea cup, but Ishaan signalled me to leave it alone. We were not going to indulge until the fate of the match was decided. Ishaan was pissed with us anyway. The match was in Vadodra, just two hours away from Ahmedabad. But we could not go - one, because we didn't have money, and two, because I had my correspondence exams in two days. Of course, I had wasted the whole day watching the match on TV instead, so reason number two did not really hold much weight.

'It is 5.25 runs required per over,' I said, not able to resist doing a mathematical calculation. That is one reason I like cricket, there is so much maths in it.

'You don't know this team. Tendulkar goes, they panic. It isn't about the average. It is like the queen bee is dead, and the hive loses order,' Ishaan said.

Omi nodded, as he normally does to whatever Ishaan has to say about cricket.

'Anyway, I hope you realise, we didn't meet today to see this match. We have to decide what Mr Ishaan is doing about his future, right?' I said.

Ishaan had always avoided this topic ever since he ran away from NDA a year ago. His dad had already sarcastically commented, 'Cut a cake today to celebrate one year of your uselessness.'

However, today I had a plan. I needed to sit them down to talk about our lives. Of course, against cricket, life is second priority.

'Later,' Ishaan said, staring avidly at a pimple cream commercial.

'Later when Ishaan? I have an idea that works for all of us. We don't have a lot of choice, do we?'

'All of us? Me, too?' Omi quizzed, already excited. Idiots like him love to be part of something, anything. However, this time we needed Omi.

'Yes, you play a critical role Omi. But later when Ish? When?'

'Oh, stop it! Look, the match is starting. Ok, over dinner. Let's go to Gopi,' Ish said.

'Gopi? Who's paying?' I was interrupted as the match began.

Beep, beep, beep. The horn of a car broke our conversation. A car zoomed outside the pol.

'What the hell! I am going to teach this bastard a lesson,' Ish said, looking out the window.

'What's up?'

'Bloody son of a rich dad. Comes and circles around our house everyday' 'Why?' I said.

'For Vidya. He used to be in coaching classes with her. She complained about him there too,' Ish said.

Beep, beep, beep, the car came near the house again.

'Damn, I don't want to miss this match,' Ish said as he saw India hit a four. Ish picked up his bat. We ran out the house. The silver Esteem circled the pol and came back for another round of serenading. Ish stood in front of the car and asked the boy to stop. The Esteem halted in front of Ish. Ish went to the driver, an adolescent.

'Excuse me, your headlight is hanging out.'

'Really?' the boy said and shut off the ignition. He stepped outside and came to the front.

Ish grabbed the boy's head from behind and smashed his face into the bonnet. He proceeded to strike the headlight with his bat. The glass broke and the bulb hung out.

'What's your problem,' the boy said, blood spurting out of his nose.

'You tell me what's up? You like pressing horns?' Ish said.

Ish grabbed his collar and gave six non-stop slaps across his face. Omi picked up the bat and smashed the windscreen. The glass broke into a million pieces. People on the street gathered around as there is nothing quite as entertaining as a street fight.

The boy shivered in pain and fear. What would he tell his daddy about his broken car and face?

Ish's dad heard the commotion and came out of the house. Ish held the boy in an elbow lock. The boy was struggling to breathe.

'Leave him,' Ish's dad said.

Ish gripped him tighter.

'I said leave him,' Ish's dad shouted, 'what's going on here?'

'He has been troubling Vidya since last week,' Ish said. He kicked the boy's face with his knee and released him. The boy kneeled on the floor and sucked in air. The last kick from Ish had smeared the blood from his nose across his face.

'And what do you think you are doing?' Ish's dad asked him.

'Teaching him a lesson,' Ish said and unhooked his bat stuck in the windscreen.

'Really, when will you learn your lessons?' Ish's dad said to him.

Ish turned away.

'You go now,' Ish's dad said to the beeping driver, who folded his hands. Seeing that no one cared about his apology, he trudged back to his car.

Ish's dad turned to his neighbours. 'For one whole year he's been sitting at home. Ran away from the army of his own country and then wants to teach lessons to others! He and his loafer friends hanging around the house all day long.'

One sidelong glance at his dad and Ish walked back home.

'Where the hell are you going now?' Ish's dad said.

'Match. Why? You want to curse me some more?' Ish said.

'When you've wasted your entire life, what's another day?' Ish's father said and the neighbours half-nodded their heads in sympathy.

We missed the final five overs of the match. Luckily, India won and Ish didn't get that upset.

'Yes, yes, yes,' Ishaan jumped. 'Gopi on me tonight.' I love idiots.

Actually, Ishaan is not an idiot. At least not as much as Omi. It is just that both of them suck at studies, especially maths, and I am good at it. Hence, I have this chip on my shoulder. It does sound a bit conceited, but it is the only chip on my shoulder. For instance, I am easily the poorest of the three (though I will be the richest one day), even though Ishaan and Omi aren't particularly wealthy. Ishaan's dad works in the telephone exchange, and while they have lots of phones in the house, the salary is modest. Omi's dad is the priest of the Swamibhakti temple, which actually belongs to Omi's mom's family for generations. And that does not pay well either. But still, they are a lot better off than me and my mom. My mom runs a small Gujarati snacks business, and the little bit of money I make from tuitions helps us get by, but that's about it.

'We won, we won the series 3-1,' Omi repeated what he read on the TV screen. Of course, it would have been too much for him to express such original insight. Some say Omi was born stupid, while some say he became stupid after a cork ball hit him on the head in Class VI. I didn't know the reason, but I did know that maybe the best idea for him would be to become a priest. He wouldn't have much of a career otherwise, given that he barely scraped through Class XII, after repeating the maths compartment exam twice. But he didn't want to be a priest, so my plan was the best one.

I ate the khakra. My mother made it better than Ishaan's mom. We were professionals after all.

'I'll go home to change and then we will go to Gopi, ok?' I said as Ishaan and Omi were still dancing. Dancing after an Indian victory was a ritual we had started when we were eleven, one that should have stopped by thirteen. However, here we were at twenty-one, jigging like juveniles. Ok, so we won, someone had to. In mathematical terms, there was a pretty good probability - did it really need jumping around?



I walked back home.

The narrow lanes of the old city were bustling with the evening crowd. My house and Ishaan's were only half a kilometre apart. Everything in my world fell between this distance. I passed by the Nana Park, extra packed with kids playing

cricket as India had won the match. I played here almost every day of my school life.

We still come here sometimes, but now we prefer the abandoned bank branch compound near my home.

A tennis ball landed at my feet. A sweaty twelve-year-old boy came running to me. I picked up the ball for him. Nana Park is where I had first met Ishaan and Omi, over fifteen years ago. There was no dramatic moment that marked the start of our friendship. Maybe we sized each other up as the only six-year-olds in the ground and started playing together.

Like most neighbourhood kids, we went to the Belrampur Municipal School, hundred metres down Nana Park. Of course, only I studied while Ish and Omi ran to the park at every opportunity.

Three bicycles tried to overtake each other in the narrow by lane. I had to step inside Qazi restaurant to let them pass. A scent of fried coriander and garlic filled the narrow room. The cook prepared dinner, a bigger feast than usual as India had won the match. Ishaan and I came here sometimes (without telling Omi, of course) for the cheap food and extraordinary mutton. The owner assured us 'small mutton', implying goat and not beef. I believed him, as he would not have survived in the neighbourhood if he served beef. I wanted to eat here instead of Gopi. But we had promised Gopi to Omi, and the food was fantastic there as well. Food is a passion here, especially as Gujarat is a dry state. People here get drunk on food.

Yes, Ahmedabad is my city. It is strange, but if you have had happy times in a city for a long time, you consider it the best city in the world. I feel the same about Ahmedabad. I know it is not one of those hip cities like Delhi, Bombay or Bangalore. I know people in these cities think of Ahmedabad as a small town, though that is not really the case. Ahmedabad is the sixth largest city in India, with a population of over five million. But I guess if you have to emphasise the importance of something, then it probably isn't as important in the first place. I could tell you that Ahmedabad has better multiplexes than Delhi or nicer roads than Bombay or better restaurants than Bangalore - but you will not believe me. Or even if you do, you won't give a damn. I know Belrampur is not Bandra, but why should I defend being called a small-town-person as if it is a bad thing? A funny thing about small towns is that people say it is the real India. I guess they do acknowledge that at one level the India of the big cities is fake. Yes, I am from the old city of Amdavad and proud of it. We don't have as many fashion shows and we still like our women to wear clothes. I don't see anything wrong with that.

I stepped out of Qazi and continued my way home, turning in the pol towards Omi's temple. Of course, we called it Omi's temple because he lived there, but the official name was the Swamibhakti temple. As I entered the by lane, two people fought over garbage disposal around the crammed pol.

There are things about my small town neighbourhood that I want to change. In some ways, it is way behind the rest of Ahmedabad. For one, the whole old city could be a lot cleaner. The new city across the other side of the Sabarmati river has gleaming glass and steel buildings, while the old city finds it difficult to get rubbish cleared on time.

I want to change another thing. I want to stop the gossip theories people come up with about other people. Like the theory about Omi becoming stupid because a cricket ball hit him. There is no basis for it, but every pol in Belrampur talks

about it. Or the theory that Ish was thrown out of NDA and did not run away. I know for a fact that it is not true. Ish cannot handle unquestioned authority, and even though he was really excited about the army (which was his only option), he could not stand some Major ordering him around for the next two decades of his life. So he paid the penalty, cited personal reasons like ailing parents or something and ran right back to Belrampur.

And of course, what I want to stop the most - the weirdest theory that I became emotionless the day dad left us. Dad left mom and me over ten years ago, for we found out he had a second wife across town. As far as I can remember, I was never good with emotional stuff. I love maths, I love logic and those subjects have no place for emotion. I think human beings waste too much time on emotions. The prime example is my mother. Dad's departure was followed by months of crying with every lady in every pol coming down to sympathise with her. She spent another year consulting astrologers as to which planet caused dad to move out, and when would that position change. Thereafter, a string of grandaunts came to live with her as she could not bring herself to stay alone. It wasn't until I turned fifteen and understood how the world worked that I could coax her into opening the snacks business. Of course, my coaxing was part of it, the rest of it was that all her jewellery was officially sold by then.

Her snacks were great, but she was no businessman. Emotional people make terrible businessmen. She would sell on credit and buy on cash - the first mistake a small business can make. Next, she would keep no accounts. The home spending money was often mixed with the business money, and we frequently had months where the choice was to buy either rice for our consumption or black pepper for the papads.

Meanwhile, I studied as much as I could. Our school was not Oxford, and emphasis on studies was low with more teachers bunking classes than students. Still, I topped maths every single year. People thought I was gifted when I hit a hundred in maths in class X. For me, it was no big deal. For once, the gossip vine helped. The news of my score spread across polys, and we had a new source of income - tuitions. I was the only maths tutor in Belrampur, and bad maths scores had reached epidemic proportions. Along with khaman and khakra, trigonometry and algebra became sources of income in the Patel household. Of course, it was a poor neighbourhood, so people could not pay much. Still, another thousand bucks a month was a lifestyle changing event for us. From fan, we graduated to cooler. From chairs, we went to a secondhand sofa. Life became good.

I reached Omi's temple. The loud rhythmic chime of the bell interrupted my thoughts. I checked my watch, it was 6 p.m., the daily aarti time. I saw Omi's dad from a distance, his eyes closed as he chanted the mantras. Even though I was an agnostic, there was something amazing about his face - it had genuine feeling for the God he prayed to. No wonder he was among the most liked people in the community. Omi's mother was beside him, her maroon saree draped along her head and hands folded. Next to her was Bittoo Mama, Omi's maternal uncle. He was dressed in a white dhoti and saffron scarf. His huge biceps seemed even larger with his folded hands. His eyes, too, were transfixed in genuine admiration for the idols of Krishna and Radha.

Omi would get into trouble for reaching the aarti late. It would not be the first time though, as matches in Nana Park were at a crucial stage around 6 p.m.



'How was the match?' mom said as I reached home. She stood outside the house.

She had just finished loading a hired auto with fresh dhokla for a marriage party. Finally, my mother could delegate routine tasks like delivery and focus on her core competence - cooking. She took out a dhokla piece from the auto for me. Bad business - snucking out something from a customer order.

'Great match. Nail-biting finish, we won,' I said, walking in.

I switched on the tubelight inside. The homes in our pol required light even during daytime.

'If I have a good Diwali season, I will get you a colour TV,' mom vowed.

'No need,' I said. I removed my shoes to get ready for a shower, 'you need a bigger grinder urgently, the small one is all wobbly'

'I will buy the TV if only the business makes extra money,' she said.

'No. If you make extra money, put it back in the business. Don't buy useless things. I can always see the match in colour in Ishaan's house.'

She left the room. My mother knew it was futile arguing with me. Without dad around, it was amazing how much say I had in the house. And I only hoped Ish and Omi would listen to my proposition as well.

My love for business began when I first started tuitions. It was amazing to see money build up. With money came not only things like coolers and sofas but also the most important stuff - respect. Shopkeepers no longer avoided us, relatives re-invited us to weddings and our landlord's visit did not throw us into turmoil. And then there was the thrill - I was *making* money, not earning it under some boss or getting a handout. I could decide my fate, how many students to teach, how many hours per class - it was *my* decision.

There is something about Gujaratis, we love business. And Ambadadis love it more than anything else. Gujarat is the only state in India where people tend to respect you more if you have a business than if you are in service. The rest of the country dreams about a cushy job that gives a steady salary and provides stability. In Ahmedabad, service is for the weak. That was why I dreamt my biggest dream - to be a big businessman one day. The only hitch was my lack of capital. But I would build it slowly and make my dream come true. Sure, Ish could not make his dream of being in the Indian cricket team real, but that was a stupid dream to begin with. To be in the top eleven of a country of a billion people was in many ways an impossible dream, and even though Ish was top class in Belrampur, he was no Tendulkar. My dream was more realistic, I would start slow and then grow my business. From a turnover of thousands, to lakhs, to crores and then to hundreds of crores.

I came out of the shower and dressed again.

'Want to eat anything?' my mother voiced her most quoted line from the kitchen.

'No, I am going out with Ish and Omi to Gopi.'

'Gopi? Why? I make the same things. What do you get at Gopi that I can't give you at home?'

Peace and quiet, I wanted to say.

'It's Ish's treat. And I want to talk to them about my new business.'

'So you are not repeating the engineering entrance,' my mother came out of the kitchen. She raised dough-covered hands, 'You can take a year to prepare. Stop taking tuitions for a while, we have money now.'

My mother felt guilty about a million things. One of them was me not making it to a good engineering college. Tuitions and supporting my mom's business meant I could study less for the entrance exams. I didn't make it to IIT or any of the top institutes.

I did make it to a far-flung college in Kutch, but it wasn't worth it to leave my tuition income, friends, cricket at Nana Park and mom for that. Not that I felt any emotion, it just did not seem like the right trade. I could do maths honours right here in Amdavad University, continue tuitions and think about business. The Kutch college did not even guarantee a job.

'I don't want to be an engineer, mom. My heart is in business. Plus, I have already done two years of college. One more and I will be a graduate.'

'Yes, but who gives a job to a maths graduate?'

It was true. Maths honours was a stupid course to take from an economic point of view.

'It is ok. I needed a degree and I can get it without studying much,' I said. 'I am a businessman, mom. I can't change that.'

My mother pulled my cheeks. Chunks of dough stuck to my face.

'Be whatever. You are always my son first.' She hugged me. I hated it. I hate a display of emotion more than emotion itself. 'I better go.'



That is your tenth chapatti,' Ish told Omi.

'Ninth. Who cares? It is a buffet. Can you pass the ghee please?'

'All that food. It has to be bad for you,' Ish said.

'Two hundred push-ups.' Omi said. 'Ten rounds of Nana Park. One hour at Bittoo Mama's home gym. You do this everyday like me and you can hog without worry.'

People like Omi are no-profit customers. There is no way Gopi could make money off him.

'Aamras, and ras malai. Thanks,' Omi said to the waiter. Ish and I nodded for the same.

'So, what's up? I'm listening,' Ish said as he scooped up the last spoon of aamras.

'Eat your food first. We'll talk over tea,' I said. People argued less on a full stomach.

'I am not paying for tea. My treat is limited to a thali,' Ishaan protested.

'I'll pay for the tea,' I said.

'Relax, man. I was only joking. Mr Accounts can't even take a joke. Right, Omi?' Omi laughed.

'Whatever. Guys, you really need to listen today. And stop calling me Mr Accounts.'

I ordered tea while the waiter cleared our plates.

I am serious, Ish. What do you plan to do with your life? We are not kids anymore,' I said.

'Unfortunately,' Ish said and sighed. 'Ok, then. I will apply for jobs, maybe do an NIIT computer course first. Or should I take an insurance job? What do you think?'

I saw Ish's face. He tried to smile, but I saw the pain. The champion batsman of Belrampur would become an insurance salesman. Belrampur kids had grown up applauding his boundaries at Nana Park. But now, when he had no life ahead, he wanted to insure other people's lives.

Omi looked at me, hoping I'd come up with a great option from Santa's goodie bag. I was sick of parenting them.

'I want to start a business,' I began.

'Not again,' Ish said. 'I can't do that man. What was it the last time? A fruit dealership? Ugh! I can't be weighing watermelons all day. And the crazy one after that, Omi?'

'Car accessories. He said there is big money in that,' Omi said as he slurped his dessert.

'What? Put seat covers all day. No thanks. And the other one - stock broker. What is that anyway?' Ish shrugged.

'So what the fuck do you want to do? Beg people to buy insurance? Or sell credit cards at street corners? You, Ish, are a military school dropout,' I said and paused for breath. 'And you got a compartment in Class XII, twice. You can be a priest, Omi, but what about us?'

I don't want to be a priest,' Omi said listlessly.

'Then, why do you oppose me even before I start? This time I have something that will interest you.'

'What?' Ish said.

'Cricket,' I said.

'What?' both of them said in unison.

'There you go, nice to get your attention. Now can I talk?'

'Sure,' Ish waved a hand.

'We are going to open a cricket shop,' I said.

I deliberately left for the rest room.

'But how?' Omi interrogated when I returned. 'What is a cricket shop?'

'A sports store really. But since cricket is the most popular game in Belrampur, we will focus on that.'

Ish's silence meant he was listening to me.

'It will be a small retail store. Money for a shop deposit is a problem, so I need Omi's help.'

'Mine?' Omi said.

'Yes, we will open the shop right inside the Swami temple complex. Next to the flower and puja shops. I noticed an empty shop there. And it is part of the temple land.'

'A cricket shop in a temple complex?' Ish questioned.

'Wait. Omi, do you think you can arrange that? Without that our plan is a non-starter.'

'You mean the Kuber sweet shop that just closed? The temple trust will rent it out soon. And normally they let it out to something related to temple activities,' Omi said.

'I know. But you have to convince your dad. After all he runs the temple trust.'

'He does, but Mama looks after the shops. Will we pay rent?'

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