

Natural Talent

By

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It is 5.40 am on a chilly winter morning; barring few people waiting to collect the newspaper bundles and milk packets to be distributed later in the day roads are completely empty. Hardly any vehicles are on the road and street lights are still on. In spite of the cold a boy who is around 13 years old, running as if his life depends on it. He is coming from Tarnaka, a widespread area on the Secunderabad side of the Twin cities.

He just crossed the railway underpass and took a right turn at the circle; he was wearing a khaki nicker and an old checked shirt, which looked dirty. He has torn shoes on his legs, those you can find in the garbage bins.

His name is Kailash; he works as a helper at the Gymkhana cricket ground. His boss, Mr. Ashok who's the head coach at Gymkhana clearly told him to be at the ground at least by 5.30 am on that day. There was a special net session to be arranged for a corporate cricket team, who booked one net for the whole four hour session. The session usually begins at six and ends at ten in the morning. Thinking about his boss, he picked up the speed and took the left turn just before Rail Nilayam and continued his run towards the "clock tower" junction.

Once he reached the clock tower, the time was 5.50 am and he heard a scooter horn repeatedly blown as if the driver is seeking Kailash's attention. When he looked to see who that idiot driver who's honking when the roads are empty, he found his boss Mr. Ashok on his old Bajaj Chetak with a kit bag in the front open space between his legs. Looking at him Kailash stops and waits for his boss to reach him; seeing Kailash drenched in his own sweat Mr. Ashok tells:

"Come, sit; this takes you faster"

"No, sir, I can reach on my own" Kailash was hesitant, after all, who wants to ride along their boss?

"No problem Kailash, you look awful with the sweat all around" Mr. Ashok insisted.

Having noticed that there is not much option left with him and knowing that he'll be late if chose to run, Kailash quietly occupies the empty back seat of the Chetak.

Before Kailash could say anything, Mr. Ashok asks:

"Did you sleep late again"?

Kailash didn't say anything, just nods, even though Mr. Ashok could not see it, he sensed that it was a yes and he's focused on getting to the ground before 6 am.

"Why don't you tell them it'll be difficult for you to clean the utensils after 10 in the night; I am sure they close their canteen by then" Mr. Ashok said.

Kailash is still silent; Mr. Ashok knew that Kailash works in a canteen as a helper in a canteen to clean the tables and also the utensils before they close in the night.

"Why don't you leave that work" He asked.

Kailash sounds defensive “Sir, they pay me Rs. 50 a month and I need that money to buy a good bat and shoes”

Mr. Ashok couldn't say anything more; he knew it'll be difficult for him to help Kailash. He never bothered to raise that topic again.

Kailash's father is a day-labourer and his mother works as a servant maid in the nearby houses and he's their only child. He goes to the municipal school as and when his father could afford to pay his fee, which is roughly a month or two in a year. They came from a small village near Vijayawada, another big city in the state of Andhra Pradesh.

As they reached the ground, to Kailash's relief no one has come yet and he jumps out of the scooter grabs the kit bag and runs into the ground. Mr. Ashok opens the lock to his “office”, a small room with a wooden table and four *Godrej* iron folded chairs in it. He opens the draw and places the booking register along with the receipt book in it, which he always carries along with him. Pull out his sports shoes from the wooden cabinet and gets ready for the morning session to begin.

As it was a Saturday, all the four nets are booked and he is also expecting all his students to turn for the practice/coaching today. He has six cricket nets in his academy, of which four are given to outsiders on rent, and two he keeps for himself for coaching purposes. It will be a busy day for Kailash, he needs to make sure that every pitch is properly mopped; the mats are tightly placed and nailed so that they don't move when the ball hits. He needs to ensure that the stainless steel water dispenser is full and the glasses are properly cleaned.

Kailash likes weekends as during the weekends one of his favorite players Venkat comes to practice; Venkat plays for the Hyderabad Ranji team and he's an opening batsman. Kailash likes the way Venkat hits every bowler all around and he's yet to see Venkat getting out in the nets. Once everything is set in the ground he runs outside and waits for Venkat's car to arrive. Kailash spots Venkat's fiat from a distance and prepares himself at the parking lot to pick his kit bag.

What follows next for him is like watching his favorite cartoon movie; Venkat sweats in the nets for nearly an hour dispensing every ball bowled at him in all directions and in the process he breaks one of his bats. The bat with which he practiced for over five years now, breaks and a large piece of wood from the bottom-half flies, when he played his signature cover-drive.

Venkat carefully collects the broken piece and takes the bat to Mr. Ashok, who, after inspecting it advises him look for another bat. Venkat tells Ashok to get the bottom of bat evened and shorten its length and murmurs something in his ears; later asks Kailash to pack the kit bag as he prepared to leave the ground.

Mr. Ashok yells at Kailash to come back to the ground quickly after leaving the kit bag as he needs to focus on the coaching to the junior players soon. As he was yelling at Kailash, Ashok sees the team, which he is to coach for the next couple of hours entering the gate. He calls his assistant coach and requests him to take care of his son who's practicing at another net.

Mr. Ashok's son who is younger to Kailash is an aspiring fast bowler and preparing for the selections of state under 12 team. Kailash loves cricket, especially he loves the way Venkat bats in the nets, he even watched a couple of games Venkat played at Gymkhana. He likes to stand outside

the net when Venkat is practicing and he has learned to imitate all the shots he plays without a bat just like him (shadow practice).

After 3 to 4 hours of struggle managing everything, the morning session ends for that day. In the meantime Mr. Ashok gives the broken bat to the person who comes every alternate day to collect the bats for repair. He tells Mr. Ashok that not much needed to be done and just cuts the bottom part evenly, levels it after scrapping the excess wood and hands it over. Once everyone left Mr. Ashok, the assistant coach Lakshman, his son, Karthik and Kailash sit in the office to eat the breakfast. Mr. Ashok ensures that he feeds Kailash at least one good meal as he knows Kailash's parents can't afford more than one meal a day.

At around 10:30, they finish the breakfast and the Mr. Ashok hands over the shortened bat, which Venkat broke in the morning to Kailash and tells him that it's a gift from Venkat to him. Kailash just could not believe what he just heard and once he realizes what just happened, he takes the bat and just sprints towards the nets. Goes into one of the nets, takes guard and starts playing shots all around as if someone is really bowling at him.

For the next ten minutes Kailash just plays some shots, cleans his bat with his shirt after every few shots as if it has gathered some dirt, runs from one end to the other as if he's taking singles and twos. This was thoroughly enjoyed by Mr. Ashok, his son and Lakshman; then Mr. Ashok tells Lakshman to throw few deliveries to Kailash telling him to be careful as he is not wearing any protective gear.

First few deliveries, Kailash could hardly touch them and once he established hand eye co-ordination he was able to middle every ball thrown at him. Kailash plays proper cricketing shots; moving forward for an over pitched one and back for a short pitched for most of the deliveries. Plays all kinds of shots; cuts, drives, pulls and even hooks. After few deliveries, Lakshman realizes he's properly getting smashed all around by someone who held the bat for the first time.

For once ignoring what Mr. Ashok told him, he starts increasing the pace, but still he is getting badly beaten by a rookie. Even though Mr. Ashok is worried with what is going on in the middle, the coach side of him is enjoying every shot Kailash is playing and he simply keeps quiet even after Lakshman is at his full pace.

After 30 minutes or so, they take a break and Mr. Ashok and Lakshman go into their office room to discuss.

"Kailash seems to be a natural talent" Mr. Ashok said.

"Yes sir, I've never seen anyone hitting the ball so fluently even after few years of coaching" Lakshman said, he still can't digest that a young rookie just taken him for a ride.

"We should do something to preserve and nurture this talent"

"Are you suggesting we should coach him sir? Can his parents afford it?"

"Yes, that's exactly what I am thinking, forget about whether they can afford it or not, I am more worried whether they agree or not"

“What if we do it on our own? Anyways, he won’t go to school half the time”

Mr. Ashok is not happy with that suggestion; he does not want to do anything without the consent of Kailash’s parents. But he’s really worried that they’ll say no.

“Let’s try for a few more sessions before we decide on this” Mr. Ashok said and they come out of the room.

As they come out they see Kailash now hitting Karthik all around, they realize it won’t be long before they’ve to decide on Kailash.

On one of the week days when there’s not a lot of crowd; Mr. Ashok calls Kailash and starts explaining about how to concentrate and when to hit and when to leave a delivery.

“You should wait till the ball leaves the bowler’s hand; if you move before, he may change and it’ll be difficult for you to hit”

“It’s easy to throw your bat at every ball; but best batsman around the world knows when to leave it. Mind you, leaving it alone is not a crime; all it does is gives you one more chance to be at the crease and do what you wanted to do”

“Whenever you’re playing a shot make sure to keep your head still, keep the body in balance and never lose your sight over the ball. You’ll wear pads and all other sorts of protective gear, but it’s the bat, which gives you runs so make sure to use the bat always, unless it’s not practical”

“The most important thing for any player is to maintain his fitness; from tomorrow you’ll make ten rounds in the ground before the nets”

After explaining those basics and demonstrating few other aspects, Mr. Ashok lets Kailash to continue his practice keeping a close eye on his mistakes and explaining him what he’s done wrong.

It goes on for a few more days; every day after the coaching Mr. Ashok asks a new set of bowlers to bowl at Kailash and result is always the same. Kailash’s footwork, his hand-eye coordination and the decisiveness in his stroke play is shocking to even people like Venkat. It’s now become a habit for Venkat to stay after he finishes his practice to watch Kailash play.

During the end of March, the coaching was closed for a week as Mr. Ashok and Lakshman had to travel to various cities along with the under 19 team for the district championship. The institute opened during the second week of April and to their surprise, Kailash stopped coming there. After waiting for a few more days Mr. Ashok visits Kailash’s house and when he calls for Kailash someone else comes out asking him who exactly he’s looking for:

“Whom are you looking for sir?” that man in his late 30s asked.

“I am looking for Kailash; he works at my cricket coaching center” Ashok replies.

“I don’t know any Kailash sir; we just came three days ago into this house”

He knocks the next door and calls his neighbour to see if he knows anything about this Kailash.

A man opens the door and asks him.

"What do you need?" that man said.

"This sir is asking about Kailash, seems he used to work with him"

"Oh, Kailash; they left the city and went back to their hometown, I think it is somewhere near Vijayawada" that man said.

"Kailash's father was seriously injured in an accident and lost both his legs. His uncle came from the village and took his family along with him to treat his father and take care of the family" he continued.

Hearing that Mr. Ashok was really upset and asks them if they know the address of his uncle, or at least the village they live now. Unfortunately, that man does not know any of those details.

Mr. Ashok goes back to Gymkhana, next day he updates this news to Lakshman, Venkat and others who are really concerned about Kailash. After few days he slowly forgets about Kailash and gets busy with the summer season and summer coaching camps.

### **Around 1997; Vijayawada Railway Station:**

Mr. Ashok and his son, Karthik were travelling to Visakhapatnam for the state U19 selections. They're on a day train which starts at around 8 am at Secunderabad, reaching Visakhapatnam at around ten in the night. The selections are scheduled for the next couple days. When the train reached Vijayawada station, it was just after the lunch time and Karthik gets down to refill the water. The compartment is filled with many vendors selling lunch, tiffin and tea. Mr. Ashok is busy reading the latest edition of Sportstar when he heard someone taking his name:

"Ashok sir"

He comes out from his book to locate the person who called him and could see a tea vendor looking straight at him with some kind of devotion in his eyes.

"Ashok sir, do you remember me?" that man said again.

Before Mr. Ashok says anything, that man introduces himself.

"It's me sir, Kailash; I used to come to work at your coaching center"

It took a while for Mr. Ashok to realize what that man is saying and once he understood who that is, jumps up from his seat holds that man with both hands and asks him.

"Of course Kailash, how are you? And where have you been all these days"

"My father met with an accident and lost both his legs when you're out on a tour and my uncle brought me and my family here" Kailash said.

"My uncle runs a tea shop in this station and also has few other small restaurants in the city and I take care of this place for him" he continued.

That's when Karthik comes back and Mr. Ashok tells him.

"Karthik, do you remember Kailash; he used to work with me at our coaching center"

"Yes dad, I remember him; once he smashed all the bowlers in the nets, how can I forget him?"

"Hello Kailash how are you?" Karthik said.

"I am good Karthik sir, how are you?"

Karthik felt uncomfortable being called as "sir" by someone older than him; replies that he's good and they're on their way to Visakhapatnam for the U19 selections.

For the next 15 minutes they discuss about the days while Kailash worked there etc., and just before the train starts Kailash tells them about where he lives and asks them to visit him when they come to Vijayawada. The next seven hours of the journey was like a nightmare for Mr. Ashok, he was really upset with himself and more so with the fate for wasting such a talent like Kailash. Karthik knew how much his father loved Kailash and he did not try to disturb him and kept himself busy with the Sportstar.

### **Sometime in 2008, Vijayawada, AP, India**

It was a small tiffin center named "Balaji Tiffins", a man in his late 20s is sitting in front of the cashier's desk watching nervously to a cricket match on a small TV placed in a corner of his desk. They just closed the lunch service and are now open with evening snacks which is usually some Bajji and Pakoda. One customer after calling him several times pats on his shoulder to grab his attention:

"Yes, what do you want" the cashier visibly upset asked him.

"I need a plate Bajji and a plate Pakoda" he said

"Twenty rupees" while saying that he tore two small paper tokens coloured differently and gave it to him.

That man hands him a fifty rupee note and in return the cashier gave him eighty, all the while his attention was on the TV. The customer was happy that he got Fifty for free and calmly walks out; just about then another man comes out of the service area and tells the cashier:

"Brother, you gave him fifty extra"

"What?" the cashier asked.

"That man gave you fifty rupees and you gave him eighty back"

That's when the cashier checks into the box and finds a fifty on top of the stack of other notes. The man in the service area goes to the customer and takes back the fifty from him.

"What Kailash, you should be careful; if you want I'll take care of the cash box during the match days" he said.

"No problem Sundar, I can manage it; will be careful next time" Sundar is a cousin brother of Kailash; he's the son of his uncle who took care of his family when they're trouble.

"The match is tightly poised, we need another 60 runs and only 10 overs left" Kailash continued.

"You and your cricket, can't understand how anyone can watch that game for a full day" Sundar said.

Kailash is not in a mood to argue with his cousin and just buries his head into the monitor. Now the score reads that India needs another 50 runs in 9 overs, means someone scored 10 in the last over. He was very frustrated that he missed it, and wished that it is Dravid, who scored those runs and when he found out after the ad break that it is indeed Dravid who scored those runs, he was very happy.

It was around 6 in the evening; Kailash came on his bike fast and stops in front of a house which has three portions. He ran into the house located on the far left and started banging on the door, he held a box in his hands, presumably some sweets in it and some flowers neatly packed in a lotus leaf. After about four times the door was opened by a lady who's visibly younger to him and along with her came two small boys.

"What's wrong is everything all right?" She said

"Of course yes, but what took you so long to open the doors?" Kailash asked her.

"I am preparing some snacks for Prateek, he asked for Bhajji" she replied.

"Bhajji, he never eats in our hotel"? Kailash said.

"May be I make better than your hotel" She replied and winks at him.

"Okay, whatever, look I brought some sweets and flowers, get ready we'll celebrate" he continued.

"What's the occasion and why did you waste money on outside sweets, I could have made anything you wanted" She said.

"It is a special occasion dear, my wife will be a government teacher and all our worries will soon be gone" he said, taking her into arms.

Signalling him that the kids are around she said "really, I can't believe it; How do you know"

"I just saw the results and you got selected, you'll get the posting orders in a week or two"

The lady who opened the door is Kailash's wife Anjali; she's his aunts' daughter. They got married about 8 years ago when her father was seriously ill and wanted to see his daughter's marriage before he died.

They've two sons Prateek and Kaushik who are 6 and 4 years respectively. Before their marriage his wife studied till 12<sup>th</sup> standard and Kailash forced her to finish her graduation and later



appear for B.Ed. He runs a tea/tiffin stall in Vijayawada along with his cousin Sundar and it is running successfully; he always wanted to study and learn cricket, both he could not do. So he thought at least his wife should be enough educated to take care of their children and in the process through private education he completed his 12<sup>th</sup> standard too with the help of his wife.

He is now very happy, his wife will be a teacher and the money she earns will be sufficient to take care of household expenses. He wants his sons to become cricketers and represent India; he has decided to work hard, earn enough money so that they can join a good cricket coaching academy and learn the game. He also made sure that there's a TV at home and at his restaurant so that he's not away from the game.

He likes watching cricket and always seen agitated when any of the batsman plays a false shot or not able to play a good cricket. He and his friends (regular customers) always gather in front of the TV whenever there's a cricket match and he's a die-hard fan of Rahul Dravid. His friends always tease him by comparing him with Sachin or some other international stars and that makes him really furious and he starts with all the records and achievements of Rahul.

His day starts early; gets up 5 and runs for an hour. He covers at least 10 to 12 km every day and by 7 he is at the restaurant to supervise the affairs. He spends couple of hours in the evening teaching some basics on batting and fitness at the local cricket club. The coach there and the students highly respect him for his sincerity and his knowledge about the game. While at home he spends a lot of time with his two sons, mostly talking them about cricket, fitness and education.

### **Early 2011; Secunderabad, India:**

Mr. Ashok, Lakshman and Karthik are sitting in their office room at the Gymkhana grounds and someone knocked at the door. Karthik opened the door to find a man in his 30s with two kids standing.

"Yes sir, whom do you want"? Karthik asked.

"I am here to see Ashok sir" that man said.

"Dad, someone came to see you"

"Please check who that is, I am a bit busy now" Mr. Ashok said.

That man forces himself in while Karthik was busy talking to his father.

"Sir it's me Kailash" that man said.

Mr. Ashok couldn't recognise who Kailash is but Karthik is quick to realise who's just barged in into his father's office.

"Dad, it's your favourite student Kailash, remember we met him in the train on our way to Visakhapatnam"? Karthik said.

Still Mr. Ashok fails to understand about whom his son is talking and meanwhile Lakshman realises who just came in. He knew the story about Ashok and Karthik meeting Kailash at Vijayawada station.

"Hello Kailash, how are you"? Lakshman said.

"Who're these beautiful kids you've with you"?

It took few moments before Kailash realised it's Lakshman who spoke with him.

"Hello Lakshman sir, I am good and how are you? It's been a long since I met you"

"Yes, guess it's around 20 years" Lakshman replies.

"Sir, these are my sons Prateek and Kaushik" As he introduced both his kids to Lakshman, he asked them to wish him namastey.

It took a while for Mr. Ashok to realise that who Kailash is and once he knew who's standing in front of him he slowly walks towards the wooden cabinet and pulls out the broken Symonds cricket bat. The same bat which was gifted to Kailash by Venkat when it was broken during the practice. Mr. Ashok kept it with him, hidden carefully behind all the shields and cups in the wooden cabinet with a hope that one day Kailash will come back to see him and he'll hand over his property back to him.

With moist eyes Kailash takes the bat from Mr. Ashok cleans the dust on the Rhino logo; holds the bat and swings it couple of times as if he is hitting an off-drive. Mr. Ashok comes and hugs him and says;

"I am very happy to see you Kailash, more so to give your property back to you"

"I was worried if I ever be able to see you again, and here you're right in front of me with two beautiful kids"

"I am so happy for you" He said and sits quietly on the bench next to the cabinet, he looked anxious and was shivering with excitement.

He then calls both Prateek and Kaushik to him and pulls couple of cricket balls from the draw and hands them over, both have signatures of some cricketers on it. They sit next him on each side and three of them indulge into a conversation of their own. Meanwhile Kailash, Lakshman and Karthik go out of the room towards the nets and Kailash asks:

"How is Venkat sir doing? I heard he's head of Hyderabad Cricket Association now"

"Yes, he's part of the selection panel at the national level too; how do you know about him?" Karthik asked.

"I still follow cricket Karthik sir" Kailash replied.

"Please, just call me Karthik; I always felt you like a good friend"

"Sure sir, oh sorry Karthik" and everyone laughed.

"I heard you're doing well for Hyderabad Ranji team Karthik, when can we expect a call from national team?" Kailash asked.

"It's not easy you know; Venkat sir always proposes my name over there but I need do more hard work and unfortunately age is not on my side. They're looking for young fast bowlers to represent India" Karthik replied.

"I was selected for India A, but just warmed the bench throughout the entire tour" he continued.

"So Kailash tell us about yourself, when did you come to Hyderabad"? Lakshman said.

"Sir, I came about a week ago; we found a house in Tarnaka near the same place we lived back in those days"

"Parents didn't want to move, so they stayed in our home town with my uncle and other relatives"

"My wife works as a teacher in government school; recently she's transferred to a school in Secunderabad"

"I ran a small restaurant in Vijayawada, saved some money and now planning to open one in Secunderabad"

"My friend is taking care of the restaurant over there, and will visit once in a fortnight or so when I go to meet my parents" He tells them the whole story of his life happened in the last 15 years.

"Great, I am happy for you" Lakshman said.

"Did you play cricket again" Karthik asked.

"Did not get time play till recently Karthik, started coaching few kids in a ground near my restaurant when I took Prateek and Kaushik to play there"

"But never a serious cricket, in fact I never wore pads or gloves till date" Kailash said and laughed.

"Do you want to try"? Karthik asked with a wicked smile.

"Ha ha, looks like you still want to take revenge on me Karthik; actually I am here to join both my sons in Ashok sir's academy"

"I want them to be great cricketers and that is one of the reasons I asked my wife to opt for a school in Secunderabad" Kailash said.

That's when Mr. Ashok comes out of his office with Prateek and Kaushik, they looked comfortable with him.

"You know Kailash, I still remember the first time I saw you here; it was many days before you joined me" Mr. Ashok said.

"You used to come to the ground, stood right over there (showing towards the end of the wall) and watch Venkat practice and for hours you just stood there without moving" Mr. Ashok continued.

"I wondered what this young boy doing here, just watching someone practicing"

Visibly surprised Kailash "Sir I didn't knew you still remember that, I don't know why but I always liked Venkat sir's batting and to some extent that's one of the main reasons which brought me every day to this ground"

"To tell you the truth, the shoes you used to wear those days were left by me near the place you stood every day; one of my student thrown them away and I thought you could use them better" Mr. Ashok said.

"Also after seeing your interest and more than that, your talent with the bat, Lakshman and I wanted to coach you. When we shared this idea with Venkat, he was very much happy to sponsor you a new full-kit and any money needed" he continued.

"But by the time we could reach a stage, you were gone and not to be traced. We came to your house in search of you and someone told us that your father met with an accident and your uncle took your family back to your village" His face was filled with sorrow when he mentioned this to Kailash.

"Yes sir, what you heard was correct"

"When I met you in the train as I told you I was running my uncles' canteen and that's where I learned how to run a canteen" he continued.

"I plan to open a small tiffin center and a catering service here; the tiffin center does not need my full-time presence as my uncles' son will take care of it but I may need to focus on the catering business"

"I want to join Prateek and Kaushik here for coaching sir, they'll come from next week; please let me know what I should buy and maybe you should tell form where I should buy them" Kailash continued.

"Sure, will leave a message with my friend who deals in sports goods you can and pick it from him" Mr. Ashok said.

"Okay sir, Thank you and will meet you on Sunday; see you Lakshman sir, bye Karthik"

It has now become a daily routine for Kailash to bring his sons to the academy every evening between 4 and 6; that way he gets a chance to spend time with them and with Mr. Ashok. More importantly with the sport he loved so much. Instead of mornings now he runs in the evening; with many of Mr. Ashok's students to accompany him in his jogs. On Mr. Ashok's request he teaches basic fitness and stretching routines to the kids and helps them in warm-up before the practice.

Kailash opened a small canteen and names it after Mr. Ashok and he requested to him to inaugurate it. One evening after his fitness routine, Kailash finds few new bats placed in a bin; those

were brought by Mr. Ashoks' friend to exhibit and sale. Kailash is impressed with the way these bats are designed, they're light but bulky at the bottom with thick edges and one can hit a six just from an edge he thought. That's when Venkat walks in:

"Want to try how it works Kailash" Venkat said.

"Venkat sir, how are you doing? No sir, I was just looking at them; these are really good especially when you compare the ones with which you used to play" Kailash replied.

"Yes, now a day a lot of technology has gone into making bats and you don't need a lot of skill to hit sixes these days"

"Maybe one day you should try them, you'll like them at least more than the Symonds bat which I gave" Venkat continued.

"Why not now, I need someone to practice; how long I'll bowl to empty wickets and young kids" Karthik who just came back from his practice joins them in their conversation.

"No Karthik, I am too old for this; not sure if I even touch the ball. I think all my reflexes are gone" Kailash said.

"How do you know, you've not tested it; anyways you said you're coaching few kids back in Vijayawada"

"Karthik, that was just for fun and those were kids"

"It's okay I am not going break your leg; will go easy on you, let's try few balls and if you're not comfortable we can stop" Karthik said.

"Okay, let me get my guard and I won't be wearing pads am not comfortable in them. Never tried the abdomen guard too but can't risk without it" Kailash said and ran towards his bag, pulls out a new abdomen guard.

As Kailash is playing without any protection, Karthik made sure that he has not bowled anything onto his stumps or onto the body. For the first few deliveries, Kailash could not connect the ball and when he did, ball just flown off the edge towards third man. This went on for few minutes and all of a sudden there was huge "thud", he could connect a full delivery right on the middle and the ball just crashed on to nets stretching it far.

Not expecting this both Karthik and Venkat just stood in a shock; and what followed next was unimaginable. Kailash could middle at least two of three deliveries and most of them were certain boundaries; the real fast bowler in Karthik slowly started waking up and the ego of being the opening bowler of a Ranji team slowly started taking over him. He now forgets that Kailash is unprotected; all he could see in him an opponent who's smashing him all across. Karthik now ups his pace with only one goal that is to get Kailash out bowled.

Venkat knows what's happening over there but kept silent as he is enjoying the battle. He sees this more like a selection for Karthik and wants to see how he reacts to this kind of challenge; he has every faith in the abilities of both Kailash and Karthik. For half an hour Karthik tries different

deliveries, but he could only beat him not get him out. Seeing all this from his office Mr. Ashok's eyes lit with a satisfaction, on one side his son is getting hammered by a rookie and on the other his favourite student is back on the field.

Kailash so enjoyed that half-an hour practice, he picks couple of bats for himself and gives them to Mr. Ashok to get them ready for practice. Slowly Kailash gets name for himself at the academy and has become the favourite for any bowler in the nets. More than favourite he's become a challenge for every bowler, and anyone who could get him out (which is very rare) is an instant celebrity at the academy.

This went on for few weeks and day by day the reputation of Kailash started growing at the academy, and people specifically used to come there just to see him bat at the nets. During one of those weekends Kailash was greeted with so many people inside the nets he thought they just came to see him play when Karthik told him that 4 of the 6 nets were booked by few "A division teams" for their selections. These teams play a level one tournament every year and that is usually the gateway for the Ranji/State team. After hearing that Kailash was comfortable and starts his own practice on the last net.

There was a lot of activity in the other nets with few aspirants trying to impress the respective teams' selectors and Kailash felt it's not correct to judge ones capabilities in couple of overs of batting. But the main thing is they're here for the selections as someone has seen them batting elsewhere in full match conditions.

Not disturbed by any of the circus going on around him, Kailash went on with business he's now practicing with new bowling machine which was purchased recently. He asked the operator to set the machine in such a way that every ball is different; be it line, length or speed and such a gifted cricketer he is that he could easily deal with every delivery bowled at him.

After an hour or so, Venkat comes to the ground as one of his ex-teammate was coaching the A division teams and he has requested Venkat's presence for some help. Venkat after discussing with his friend heads straight away towards Kailash who has now taken a break after a round of practice. They both start talking while doing so Venkat signals towards the direction of his coach friend and tell something to Kailash. Kailash looked puzzled and after speaking briefly to Venkat simply walks slowly towards his bike; in the process he don't even bother to pick his kit.

Kailash is back home and was greeted by his wife Anjali with a glass of lemon juice, his favourite drink. Without speaking a word he quietly sits on the sofa and starts reading the newspaper while savouring the juice. Realising that there may be something wrong Anjali asks:

"Is everything okay? I was expecting you a bit late; you came back early"

"Were you injured in the nets?" she continued.

He just nods his head to confirm that nothing of that sort happened over there.

For the next couple of hours he tried to look busy and occupied and sat there quietly thinking about something. Anjali knows about Kailash and she knew that he would tell everything when it's the right time. He calls up his cousin and tells him he won't be able come to the canteen.

Once the kids gone out to play in the nearby park he goes into the kitchen where Anjali is busy preparing the lunch and says:

“Venkat sir asked me if I am interested in playing A Division 3 day league cricket (A League)”. He said.

“He told me there’s one team which is coached by his friend and they are interested in signing me and if I am willing then they wants me to come for selections tomorrow” he continued.

For a while Anjali could not believe what he just said; she doesn’t know what an A League is, the only thing she understood was that some cricket team wants him to play for them if he is selected.

For the next one hour he starts explaining what an A League is and what happens if he plays well there and how much time he needs to devote on that etc., Good thing is he may not have to travel outside Hyderabad as this is basically a city based tournament.

“If I really perform well and outperform every other youngster in contention, I may get a chance to play for a Ranji team” Kailash said.

“That is farfetched reality and considering my age I stand absolute no chance to fight for that place” He continued.

“What happens if you’re selected to play for Ranji team” Anjali asked.

“Ha ha ha, if they select me to play for a Ranji team; one thing is certain, I need travel a lot as this is a national level tournament and you might miss me or get rid of me for few days in a month” He said.

“Oh, that’s why we don’t see Karthik often at the ground is it”? She said.

“Yes and the consistent top performers at Ranji level are chosen to represent the country” He said.

“That would be nice” Anjali said.

“Yes, It would be nice if I can become the Prime Minister of India” as Kailash said both start laughing.

Anjali is now happy to see Kailash smiling; but she knew they’ve a big decision to make and one way or the other the onus will be on her to make him take the correct decision.

She knew how badly Kailash is in love with this game; there were days when they missed the first few minutes of a movie and at times more than half an hour because he had to stop on their way just to watch some local boys playing a friendly game. He just don’t sit and watch, for a moment he literally becomes the coach for the batting team and sit there to strategize along with them.

He always made time for those who needed his inputs on how to improve their game, but somehow to her surprise he never tried to be on the field. She thought maybe he thinks he's too old or maybe he's simply afraid. But the truth is he never wanted to commit himself to the game as he knew once he's in there is no way out for and especially after Prateek was born he slowly diverted himself towards the family.

She knew what needs to be done if he's selected; even if that means she had to take care of the canteen and catering business after the school.

"Have you decided anything about tomorrow"? Anjali asked after the dinner and when kids slept.

"What do you think I should do"?

"I think you should go there and show them how incapable you are and once they get bored of you get on with your daily practice come back home; we can go out for lunch" She replies.

"That's a very nice idea; so I just need to play bad over there. I think that's easy" again both laugh.

Next morning he was there at the ground 30 minutes before they asked him to; after his warm-up routine started his net practice. Venkat came around 20 minutes later and calls Kailash for a quick chat.

"I was told that they decided to test you in match scenario, since they've seen you play in the nets and they want to test you other way round" Venkat said.

"What do you mean by match scenario"?

"They want to have two friendly T20 matches from their players and you'll play in them representing both the sides"

"By the way, I forgot to tell you if selected you need to be part of their organization as an employee and to the extent I know you'll be offered Assistant Manager – Operations, position and will get a good salary too" He continued.

"Are you saying I need to go to their office and work?"

"Yes sometimes you need to be there in office, but work not quite sure. Your main job is to play for their team"

"So you're saying, I need play cricket for them and at times go to their office spend some time there and I'll be paid salary?" Kailash said.

"Yes"

"How much do you think I'll get?"

"Not quite sure, but I used to get a decent amount during those days when I played for VST"

"Okay, this is really interesting"



That's when Venkat gets a call on his mobile phone and after a minutes' discussion he said.

"They'll be here by around 9 am, and expect the match to start at 9-30; if you need to pass on any message to Anjali use this" Venkat said, while passing on his mobile to Kailash.

Kailash makes a quick call to Anjali explains her everything, including the employee and salary bit and tells her not to wait for lunch.

Both Venkat and Kailash go out to have breakfast and when they come back, they could see few already on the ground wearing ABC & Co team jerseys. Most of them are in their early 20s with very few on the higher side of 20s.

By around 9-45 the match starts and as advised by Venkat, Kailash suggests that he's comfortable in the middle order with a role as a finisher. He plays well in the first match scoring 36 not out in 20 deliveries. In the second match the selectors want to test him more by sending at No. 3 and he scores 60 in 35 deliveries, he gets out run out.

After the matches are over the selectors are happy with his performance and tell Venkat that his name will be in the list which will be sent to the HR team where they decide the salary and role etc.,

It was around six in the evening when he reaches home, Anjali and kids are waiting eagerly for him. He reaches to his sons first and hands them each a cricket ball and turns to his wife to tell her that he's selected.

"They said I'll receive the employment letter in few days and can start playing for them afterwards" Kailash said.

"That's great, congratulations; did they tell you how much you'll be paid?" Anjali said.

"No, but Venkat sir told me that it'll be a good amount and will be sufficient to run a family"

"That's great, good thing is you can always go back to your canteen business even if they don't like you" and they start laughing.

On Tuesday Kailash gets a call asking him to meet someone in the HR department on the next day around 11 in the morning.

It was hot and Kailash reaches the office they told by 10-30, it was a very big building; at least 10 floors covered completely in dark glass. He is not sure whom to ask and how to get inside, that's when a man in uniform comes to him and asks:

"Hey, what are you doing here? What do you want"?

"I am here to meet Ms Mathews from HR department"

"HR department of which Company? There are some 10 companies in this building" he asked.

"ABC & Co" Kailash said.

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