

**IT'S
OKAY
TO
FAIL,
MY SON**

VASANT KALLOLA

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Preface

IT WAS THE month of March. Year 2012, I suppose. Summer was setting in. On one such night, after one round of a good, short sleep, I woke up; I was thirsty. I looked at the wall clock.

It was 12.20am. I got up and walked towards the kitchen.

I walked down the corridor, and went past the study room in my house. I peeped in the room. Viraj, my son, was still awake, engrossed in his school textbook. ‘Well, he must study hard,’ I thought, ‘this is his tenth standard, the foundation of his career.’ Yet, I couldn’t resist walking up to my son, to spend some time with him and cheer him up.

“Viraj, how is it going?” I asked.

He looked at me with sour red eyes; his tensed face and body language shook me from within! He did not say anything to me, simply smiled.

‘This should not be the condition of my son,’ I thought, ‘whom I love the most in this world. This should not be the condition of a future leader – tensed, tired and fatigued – who has to win on many fronts in the future. This should not be the condition of future’s all-powerful man, who has to carry forward my legacy and make me a proud father.’

“What’s the matter? Are you enjoying your studies?”

To be honest, his answer was not very positive. Deep in thought, I walked out of his room, went to the kitchen and poured myself a glass of water. How many glasses of water had I drunk that night? I don’t remember, frankly. I suppose I was deeply disturbed from within. I must have drunk more water than I needed to satiate my thirst! Whatever the case, one fact remains that I could not sleep properly that night (I am one of those lucky people who sleep well, and never lose sleep on any worldly matter; that night was an exception).

Seeing my son’s condition that night, I was shaken to the core. I told myself that I must help him, give him courage. I must not burden him with my thoughts and expectations. On the contrary, I must create a situation which will make him enjoy his studies and not feel stressed out; help him develop skills that will enable him to excel in whatever he does or pursues in the future. I must free him from all inhibitions. I want to see him relaxed, confident and courageous – to take up every challenge he comes across in his life with joy, courage and happiness, with utmost liking and pleasure.

But if all this has to happen, some proactive steps have to be taken. First and foremost, Viraj will have to get rid of his fears: of failure, of not meeting the expectations of his parents and teachers, of his own doubts and insecurities. He must unlearn to learn. And for that unlearning to happen, as a father, guardian and guide to my growing son, I have to assure him that, “It’s okay to fail, my son.”

I have written this book not only for my son Viraj, but for children and people both in India and around the world who are leading stressful lives due to the excessive pressure thrust on them

by all those around them: parents, teachers, friends, peers and all those known and unknown. This is equally applicable to people working in the corporate world, where people live under the constant stress of performance.

To make reading more interesting, I have presented it in the form of a story, of father and son, of teacher and students, weaving in the story the internationally acclaimed 'Mind Toughness Techniques'.

This is a novel that details how academically average students can turn out to be better than above-average students with the right inputs and support. It shows how learning capabilities of children can be dramatically improved with the right kind of environment, patience and motivation with slightly improvised methodologies. Finally, whatever one does, one must aim for excellence. And what is the point in excelling, if it is not exciting, enriching and joyful?

I am sure you will enjoy this novel. Please share your reviews, comments and suggestions with me. You can reach me through my email id – vkallola@gmail.com – and I will be glad to receive your suggestions and encouragement. That will be the next step of the strengthening of our relationship, my reader friend!

Warm regards,
Vasant Kallola

*To my son, Viraj,
and millions of children
around the world, who are
in constant pursuit of excellence*

The Rise of a Father

THUNDEROUS APPLAUSE ONCE again filled the hall. The Ball Room of the Taj Intercontinental Hotel, Mumbai, was full of people, attired in their best finery, in well-cut suits, gowns, and saris. The occasion was the Annual Business Awards Function of Mumbai's leading financial daily, *Global Economics & Analysis*. The who's who of Indian as well as internationally acclaimed business houses, in varied fields of businesses, be it real estate, manufacturing, power sector, software firms and whatnot, all rich and famous people had descended in the Taj's famous ballroom that day to participate in the event. The general talk in the corridor suggested that even to get an invitation to this event was a matter of privilege for business people.

The speaker on the dais, who had been making announcements related to the event, was the beautiful Priya Bhardwaj. Tall, extremely attractive and fair, she looked quite graceful in a dark red sari with a black sleeveless, backless blouse. Her stylish hairstyle too was drawing appreciative glances. After a few announcements, followed by a brief pause, she once again took the microphone in her hand and spoke into it.

“Welcome back, ladies and gentlemen, now let’s move on to the most coveted award of the year. The award for this year’s most innovative company goes to Gold Star Electronics for their development of the unique concept of Virtual Office, or V-Office. Although Gold Star is a US-based company, this concept has been conceived and developed by its Indian team headed by their outstanding CEO, Rahul Saxena. Ladies and gentlemen, please join me in welcoming Rahul Saxena on the stage.”

Rahul Saxena, a smart, handsome young man in his early forties, got up from his seat, and slowly but confidently walked up to the stage. All eyes were fixed on Rahul, noting his gait, his attire and his confidence. Fair, well-built and of medium height, the main point of attraction in his personality was his eyes; playful and sparkling, they indicated a joyful nature and sharp mind. While walking to the stage, Rahul’s straight posture hinted that he was a fitness freak. Needless to say, there were some in the room who became restless when they saw the young and suave CEO; others felt a sudden increase in their heartbeats after spotting the smart and gifted man.

Once he was up on the stage, Rahul shook hands with Priya and Shri Raj Shekhar Poddar, President of the jury, who was instrumental in selecting the awardee.

Raj Shekhar handed over the award, saying, “Congratulations, young man! You have not only made all of us proud but also given the world considerable hope of improving the quality of life of millions of citizens.”

Taking the trophy, Rahul said, “Thank you, sir, for the honour.”

As Rahul turned to go back to his seat, Priya quipped, “Congratulations, Rahul, for such a fantastic innovation, but we

will not allow you to go back without hearing a few words from you,” then she looked at the audience and said, “right?”

The audience responded enthusiastically, as if on cue. Rahul smiled and nodded his head in affirmation. She walked towards him and handed him the mic.

Holding the mic, Rahul looked at the trophy which he was holding in his right hand, smiled a bit and said, “Innovation is not new to Gold Star, because we love what we do,” Rahul paused.

A round of applause greeted this statement.

He continued, “We always strive hard to give our customers and users a great experience, help them save on expenses and compete not only in India but across the world. Virtual Office – or V-Office – Concept, introduced for the first time by Gold Star, will redefine the way businesses are run. It is an application consisting of state-of-the-art hardware and software which are put together to facilitate all your business functions. V-Office will free people from the need to attend office every day; people will be able to operate from their homes and carry out business activities in a much more efficient way. This will free millions of people from the day-to-day routine of attending office in the conventional way, that is, travelling from home to the workplace and back, thereby helping companies, cities and countries save billions of dollars through better and smarter ways of conducting businesses.

“Let me tell you how we are going to transform your life and the budget of your companies, cities and countries and of the entire globe. At present, on every working day, all of us travel in the morning from our home to office, using either our own transport or the public transport. In office, we carry out our respective work and return home in the evening. According to the survey conducted by Gold Star, an average worker or executive spends two hours of

travelling time to office, covering a distance of about 25km. He then works in office – which are generally air-conditioned spaces – and conducts his business. Do you realize the costs involved in making all of us work, out of our so-called, systematic office premises? Let me show you how much we spend.”

He started explaining the details to the audience. The conclusions were that V-Office could save travelling costs of US\$ 739 bn per annum; second, it could save office infrastructure investments to the tune of US\$ 7,032 bn; and third, operational costs worth US\$ 64.4 bn per annum could be saved as well.

Rahul continued, “Now going forward, if we assume 10 per cent more people are added to the global workforce, we will need an additional US\$ 1,758 bn of investments in setting up new office premises, roads for travelling, fuel and several other essential resources. And we would need approx. US\$ 263 bn per annum of operational costs to maintain the infrastructure. But, with our new solution, V-Office, you won’t need all these – just a broadband connection and a computer at home. It’s that simple! As a matter of fact, our new concept has the potential to alter the economies of several nations of the world.”

As Rahul finished speaking, some people in the audience were so excited that they started clapping loudly. Before the applause could settle, the vice-president of the jury got up from his chair. His gesture inspired members of the audience to follow his lead: they too stood up, applauding, showing their admiration and appreciation. The standing ovation to Rahul’s speech, the bright lights in the majestic hall, and the continuous flashlight from the cameras captured every moment with Rahul, which were some of the memories that every attendee of the function carried home with him that night.

The Troubled Son

SACHIN STOOD NERVOUSLY in the school principal's office. The principal was scolding Sachin, and the boy was listening, with his head down.

“What a shame, Sachin, month after month, your performance in school has been deteriorating. I have repeatedly told you to improve your grades but in vain. Look at your father; I can't believe you are the son of such a brilliant man. If this continues, I will have to talk to your parents,” declared the principal.

Tensed and scared, Sachin slowly walked out of the principal's office. Out on the ground, Sachin's friends called out to him to play with them, but he hardly looked at them. He was confused, too, and hastily walked away, as if wanting to get away from school as quickly as possible. Soon, he reached home.

“So you've come!” quipped Aaya, as she threw open the entrance door for him.

He gave her a weak smile, and headed straight for his room. Aaya came in, behind him.

“Will you eat something now?”

“No, I’m not hungry,” replied Sachin, and then, after a brief pause, “when will Dad come?”

“I don’t know, but he will eat and come. He will be attending a function, so he will have his dinner there. He called up some time ago to ask about you.”

Sachin looked disappointed. “I don’t want to eat,” he repeated angrily.

That night was really tough for Sachin. His father reached home quite late that night, and by that time, a tired and dispirited Sachin had fallen asleep.

Son of Rahul and Sheetal Saxena, Sachin is an innocent-looking boy with a slightly dark complexion and a lean body frame. Just last month, he had celebrated his thirteenth birthday. He was a student of Class IX, in Saraswati Vidhya Mandir School at Vile Parle, which is a suburb in Mumbai. Till some years back, when he lived with both his parents, Sachin was a very cheerful boy and a bright student; and a very happy family it was. But after his parents’ divorce, it seemed as if his life had been divided in many parts...

Next morning, he woke up with a start, and almost ran to his father’s room. He desperately wanted to talk to his father about his interaction with the principal. As he pulled open the door of the room, it opened with a big bang, but there was no one in the room. His father had already left for office!

Poor Sachin, he didn’t know what to do!

* * *

Since the day he had been awarded by the industry, life had become even more hectic for Rahul Saxena, who had to leave home very early in the mornings. Even today, he wanted to meet

his son. With that intention, he had peeped into Sachin's room before leaving for work, but Sachin was fast asleep. Reluctant to wake up his son, Rahul had kissed Sachin on his cheek and left.

At around 9am, Rahul got down from his chauffeur-driven car at the entrance of his office building. His office was in Worli, Mumbai. Located near the famous Television Tower, Gold Star's office consisted of three wings and 15 floors. As he entered the main lobby of the office, he saw the whole staff gathered there, to greet and welcome their favourite CEO. Smiling broadly, he stopped, pleased to see them in an upbeat mood.

Sunil Malhotra, HR Head, walked up to him with a bouquet of flowers and said, "Rahul, hearty congratulations for the award last night."

Middle-aged, medium height, fair and slightly heavy, Sunil reported to Rahul functionally, but on a personal level, they were very good friends.

Rahul took the bouquet and said, "Congratulations to you, Sunil, and all the staff of Gold Star Electronics. It is because of your hard work and contribution that we have achieved such an honour."

Staff members too looked quite excited to meet Rahul. He was surprised to see them forming a semicircle. Rahul walked up to each one of them and shook hands with them all.

After meeting his colleagues in the ground floor, Rahul took the lift that carried him to his office on the top floor of the building. As usual, copies of all leading newspapers had been neatly kept on his desk. He picked up one and started going through the pages. The news of Gold Star Electronics being awarded for V-Office was covered in detail with a photograph of Rahul receiving the award. The other newspapers too, had

covered the event, in similar fashion. As Rahul was glancing through the papers, Nancy walked into his room.

“We all feel very proud today, sir,” Nancy said.

Rahul smiled at her and said, “Yes. It is a matter of pride for all of us. Thank you for your support, Nancy.”

‘This gentleman keeps amazing me with his modesty,’ Nancy thought, as she smiled in return.

“What’s the schedule for today, Nancy?”

Nancy looked at her iPad and listed Rahul’s agenda for the day. “First, at 11am, you have a meeting with the staff across India; I have been receiving many calls and messages from the staff about the recognition we got last night. At 3pm, there is a press conference and at 7pm there is an interview with News Broadcasting Company, which will be live telecast.”

Though Rahul personally didn’t approve of so much fanfare, but the board of Gold Star Electronics, the company he headed in India, wanted to make the most of the current situation. An interview had been scheduled that evening with the international business channel, NBC – News Broadcasting Company – of the UK. Tom Walter, an internationally acclaimed anchor, was supposed to conduct the interview.

At around 6pm, Rahul walked into the reception area of NBC’s office, where he was warmly welcomed by Greta, Walter’s secretary, who escorted him to Walter’s cabin.

After exchanging pleasantries, Rahul and Tom went to the studio where the interview would be conducted, and sat down on the sofas meant for them. Rahul looked around; the programme director, Anupama Tyagi, was busy giving instructions to the cameramen. He also noticed an audience of around hundred people, in the studio. After finishing her work with the camera

and light men, Anupama walked up to Rahul and greeted him. She checked if Rahul was comfortable and she could start the show. Rahul said he was ready to face the camera. She gave him a brief idea about how they would go about the interview, and told him that cameras would start rolling once she gives the signal.

As Anupama shouted, "Action!", cameras focused on Tom, who started talking to the viewers.

"Good evening, ladies and gentlemen. Today, I have the privilege of welcoming to our show, 'The Young Achievers Show', one of India's leading technocrats and business personalities, Rahul Saxena, the CEO of Gold Star Electronics. Recently, Rahul has introduced a new concept, V-Office or Virtual Office, which is likely to redefine the way businesses are conducted. According to Gold Star, it's going to make remarkable reductions in business expenditures, and will have an incredible impact on the quality of life of millions of office-goers who would benefit not only in saving their travelling costs and time, but will also be able to spend more time with their families and lead healthy, stress-free lives.

"So, ladies and gentlemen, please join me in welcoming Rahul Saxena to our today's business show."

Cameras changed angles to focus on Rahul and then zoomed back to cover the whole space where Rahul and Tom were sitting. Rahul waved at the audience with a smile on his face. He was wearing a steel grey jacket, a white shirt and black trousers.

Walter continued, "Rahul, welcome to the show. We would like you to tell us something about V-Office and how it will impact our lives."

"V-Office is based on broadband technology which uses the latest 4G network to connect people situated in different

locations. Gold Star has developed an application, which will connect people, located thousands of miles away, with the same effectiveness as if they were all sitting in the same room. In technical terms, this is called Virtual Reality.

“This will eliminate the need to travel to office daily. Companies too will not feel the need to have multiple offices for their employees. With a small infrastructure at home or anywhere nearby, a person will be able to conduct his/her business operations, interact with one/many colleagues like they presently do in a meeting; give and take instructions/orders; share papers and drawings and carry out all other normal business transactions in a much more efficient way. In addition, the system can maintain all records of date, time of discussions, instructions given/taken, timelines agreed upon. And it will also give alarms, reminders to track the agreed plans/actions. Therefore, business transactions would be conducted seamlessly and in a well-organized way than the current form of office-based system.

“Now, think of the kind of savings it will bring about: to business entities, cities, countries and the entire globe! We can save millions of acres of land which we are currently using to house our office buildings and roads to carry people to and from the office. Besides the space, think of the billions of gallons of fuel which is consumed in transporting people to and from office. Apart from better utilization of existing infrastructure, we can free society from creating new infrastructure of office buildings, roads, bridges and public transport systems. Just imagine how changed the world would be if these saved resources can be used in building gardens, parks, lakes, and in the natural world.”

Walter’s eyes were widening with every sentence that Rahul uttered, as if he wanted to catch every word, every movement of

Rahul's, like a small child who was experiencing the wonder of some technological marvel for the first time. Walter was absolutely excited.

"This sounds amazing, Rahul... if I talk about my own life, I can save at least 2-2.5 hours of my travelling time every day. In other words, I can sleep for an hour more, use 30 minutes to do my exercise which I generally miss because I have to rush to office. And wow, in the remaining one hour I can drop my son to his school and even do my work more efficiently because I'm not tired as I'll be free from the regular struggles of running, jostling in train/traffic before I reach office."

At the back of his mind, Walter's thoughts flitted to his increased flirtations with his son's beautiful teacher! But reminding himself that he was in the midst of an interview, he brought his mind back to the studio.

Rahul smiled, "Exactly, Tom! This is not only true for you but for almost a billion people living on this planet. All the monies that we could be spending in building office space, building new roads, bridges and public transport systems, can be used in building and maintaining parks and orchards for our children. Lakes which can not only beautify our cities, but also help us solve our water problem. Billions of dollars saved in fuel can change our entire economy from trade deficit to surplus. In short, we can gift our children a far more livable planet."

At this statement, there was thunderous applause from the live audience in the studio. It lasted for almost 2-3 minutes, as if those present did not want to stop clapping, despite several requests from Walter.

"Rahul, I'm really impressed with your highly promising and inspiring vision. I sincerely wish your vision turns into reality and we all live a very healthy and peaceful life."

Rahul nodded confidently, “It will – why doubt it?”

One member of the audience raised his hand. A camera immediately focused on him. It was a young man.

Walter looked at him and asked, “Is there something you’d like to say?”

When he nodded, Walter said, “Go ahead.”

“Sir, the picture you have drawn is too good to believe, and I sincerely wish we can achieve it. But I have a question...?”

“Please go ahead,” Rahul nodded encouragingly.

“If we stop building new roads, bridges, cars, won’t our progress get impacted?”

Rahul looked at him and asked, “May I know your name?”

“Srinivas.”

Rahul explained, “I agree that roads, bridges and other essential infrastructure play a supporting role in the development of a country, and we could continue to build infrastructure that can support our growth. But, Srinivas, roads and bridges are not the only things we need; we also need to focus on telecom, ports, manufacturing and irrigation capabilities to support our growth requirements. While not discounting the need to build infrastructure, what I am saying is that we must use technology to its full potential and avoid unproductive activities such as commuting to office every day.

“Now, looking at your question on progress from another angle, what do you mean by progress of a society?”

Srinivas looked a bit uncertain, tried to find an answer but didn’t say anything. So Rahul spoke, perhaps to help Srinivas find an answer.

“In my opinion, the true reflection of the progress of any society is the happiness, health and well-being of its people.

Happiness means that people live a stress-free and relaxed life. Every human being should get proper food, shelter and medicines. Right?”

Srinivas nodded in affirmation.

Rahul continued, “But do you know that today, 16 per cent of the world’s population is going to bed without a proper meal twice a day, that millions of people are not getting the opportunity to study, and a large number of children are victims of malnutrition? This is not the world we would like to see. In our so-called modern society today, people are hassled. You add roads but faster than that you add traffic; you build houses, but today in a city like Mumbai, a decent 2-BHK house is out of reach of almost 70 per cent of the population. There can be an argument that you get easy finances from banks and institutions, but houses have become extremely costly. Once you take a loan, you have invited tension for the next 15–20 years – in other words, you have mortgaged your youth to financial institutions!

“Let’s talk about health. It is due to the stress caused by the present lifestyle that people are becoming victims of life-threatening diseases. Almost 16 per cent of the world’s population is victim to hypertension and diabetes. In the last three decades, the cost of building a house has increased by 1000 per cent but sperm count among men has reduced to 20 million per ml, one-third of what it was thirty years ago. So, the rotation of money has increased dramatically in the system, which has resulted in an increase in salaries and wages, but your houses have become smaller, you have become weaker and vulnerable to diseases. Leave aside physical diseases, even mental diseases have dramatically increased in our society. In short, in my opinion, so-called progress has made us less happy, fragile and more

dependent on outside systems for our own survival. I feel there is an urgent need to change that.”

As soon as Rahul finished talking, there was a big round of applause which continued for some time.

* * *

Sachin was watching his father on the TV. But there was no expression on his face.

In another part of the city, someone else was also watching Rahul’s interview on the TV, but switched it off, muttering to herself, “Bullshit! Why is it that your talks are always beyond my understanding?! I hope someday you will talk sense, Rahul.”

Mrs Rahul Saxena, or Sheetal Mehra Saxena – Rahul’s ex-wife and Sachin’s mother – was a modern, beautiful lady, and a lawyer by profession; perhaps her argumentative nature had contributed in some measure to her success in her chosen career. Rahul and Sheetal had divorced two years back (after 15 years of married life) and she had since then shifted to her own apartment in Bandra. The daughter of a very successful lawyer in Mumbai, Sheetal managed her own legal practice in her Lower Parel office.

“Forget it, I have a very important case in court tomorrow. I have to get up early,” murmuring to herself she left the drawing room and went to her bedroom.

The next day in a corridor of the family court, Sheetal walked alongside her client, assuring her.

“Look, Shilpa, your case is very strong. You have all the reasons to leave Sudhir and seek divorce. He has to consider your requirements and keep your interests in mind; after all he has married you. His argument that he can’t leave his family is a lame excuse. Why can’t he leave his mother and brother, and live

separately with you? We have a very strong case in our favour, Shilpa, and I'm sure you will be able to get justice in court."

After some time, they stood near the courtroom where their case would be heard, waiting for their turn. After about 15 minutes, the name of Shilpa Phadake was announced. Sheetal and Shilpa entered the courtroom, and took their respective seats. Shilpa's husband Sudhir, and his lawyer, Bankim, also entered the courtroom, and sat down. The judge was busy reading some papers. Sheetal waited for him to get free. After a while, he looked up at Sheetal and nodded, giving permission to start her argument.

Sheetal presented her case confidently, "Your Honour, my client Mrs Shilpa Sudhir Phadake has filed a case against her husband Sudhir and his mother Mrs Sulakshnadevi Phadake for physical labour, mental torture and harassment. Under the Indian Penal Code, she wants to divorce Sudhir, so that she can lead an independent, trouble-free life."

The judge announced solemnly, "You may proceed with your case."

"Your Honour, my client Shilpa is married to Sudhir for the past four years. They stay in a joint family, along with Sudhir's mother, his elder brother and his elder brother's wife. The elder brother has retired and, therefore, does not have an income of his own. In a way, he and his family are a liability on Sudhir; my client has repeatedly told her husband that they should live separately from them, in another house, which Sudhir has refused to do. My client has waited for many years but now she is not able to live under the same conditions, and is seeking divorce from Sudhir. You are requested to grant them divorce so that she can lead an independent and dignified life."

Sudhir's lawyer, Bankim, stood up and said, "Your Honour, I would like to question Shilpa."

"You may proceed."

Shilpa got up from where she was sitting in the courtroom, and walked towards the witness box. Once in the witness box, she faced Bankim. Adjusting his gown, Bankim walked towards Shilpa, looked at her in the eyes for a few seconds, and then proceeded with his questions.

"Ma'am, do you have parents?" and then quickly added, "what a silly question, you can't be born without parents. I mean, are your parents alive?"

"My dad passed away three years back, Mum stays in Kolkata."

"How old is she?"

"Seventy-five," Shilpa replied.

"Does she stay alone? Or is there a caretaker? I mean, is there some young person in the house who takes care of her needs, safety, etc."

"No, she stays in my father's flat, all alone. I have a brother but he lives separately, with his family. You see, we are a modern family, everyone is independent and leads his or her own life the way they wish to. We neither interfere in other's lives, nor do we like interference in our lives," Shilpa said emphatically.

"Last year, your mother suffered a cardiac arrest and she was unconscious in her house. Luckily, she has a good and caring young couple as her neighbour, who reached your mother's flat on time and took her to the hospital. Don't you think she would be better off by not being left alone? Would you not like your own brother to take care of your mother in her hour of need? After all, she gave birth to him, brought him up, and made him

capable of looking after himself, his family and leading the life he is leading at present?"

Shilpa looked down and said quietly, "Yes."

Turning to look at the judge, Bankim said, "Point to be noted, Your Honour."

Bankim continued, "Do you have any children?"

"No."

"I understand you had two miscarriages in the last three years. Is it true?"

Sheetal immediately stood up and protested, "I object, Your Honour. This question has no relevance to the case; Mr Bankim is misguiding my client."

"No, Your Honour, I am driving home a point which is relevant to the case."

The judge looked at Sheetal, and said, "Objection overruled," and then said to Bankim, "you may continue."

"Thank you, Your Honour."

Moving towards Shilpa, Bankim asked, "Please answer my question, you had two miscarriages in the last three years, yes or no?"

"Yes."

"You recovered quickly only because of the extra care and home-remedy medicines given by your mother-in-law and Bhabhi. Yes?"

Shilpa was silent, and when Bankim insisted that she respond, she replied, "I appreciate it but that could have been done even by my maidservant."

Everyone in the court was shocked, including the judge, but before Bankim or anyone could react, the judge announced that time was up and he adjourned the court, till the next hearing.

Coming out of the court, Sheetal had a big smile on her face, as if she had achieved something great, while Shilpa seemed preoccupied; maybe she was confused. On the other hand, Sudhir looked miserable, his eyes expressing his pain and haplessness. He looked at Bankim, who did not know what to say.

* * *

Sachin's steadily deteriorating academic performance, eventually prompted Principal Roshan Daruwala to summon him to his office, again.

Looking annoyed, the principal spoke sternly, "Sachin, your academic performance is becoming worse every month. You were once a brilliant child but I can't understand why you are scoring so poorly in your studies nowadays. You must bring your parents to school tomorrow, I want to meet them immediately."

"But, sir..."

"No, I don't want to listen to any excuses this time."

"Okay, sir," said Sachin and left the principal's office.

He didn't know what to do, and felt helpless and lonely. As he was walking past the school ground, he heard someone calling out to him.

"Hey, Sachin!"

He looked around to see Samir, his best friend in school, but today even Samir could not cheer him up.

Samir walked up to him, looking concerned, and asked, "Why are you looking so scared and miserable, what's happened?"

"Principal Sir has asked me to get my parents tomorrow to school, but my dad is in the US."

"Then you should have told him so."

"He isn't ready to listen. I don't know what to do!"

“Get your mother instead,” advised Samir.

Sachin shook his head in disagreement as if he knew it wouldn't work out either.

“You don't know my mother, Samir. If she comes here, the situation will become more difficult for me.”

“Then what are you going to do?”

“Don't know. Let's see,” answered Sachin, taking a deep breath.

Later in the day, and after thinking a lot and not finding any alternative, Sachin finally called up his mother.

“Hello?” Sheetal answered her phone.

“Hello, Mum,” responded Sachin.

“Yes, Sachin, how are you? How are your studies going? How did you do in the last exam? What marks did you get in mathematics? You did well in science, I hope?” she started throwing question after question at Sachin, who didn't know what to do, what to say.

The questions made Sachin even more anxious, and his hands as well as voice started trembling.

“Mum, you have to come to school tomorrow. Principal Sir has asked me to bring my parents to meet him.”

Abruptly, the tone of her voice became harsh and loud.

“Why has he called me? What have you done? Despite all my suggestions and advise, you're not improving at all. Every second day, I keep hearing complaints about you. I am fed up of all this! You have no shame at all.”

Her attack was so powerful that it was enough to fill tears in Sachin's eyes. He listened for some time without responding.

Suddenly she demanded, “Well, why don't you tell me why he has called? I know, you are not so clever that he would have called

me to his office to give me an award. He'll be again complaining about you, am I right, Sachin? Why aren't you speaking up?"

"Mum, I haven't got good marks in the exams, that's why," Sachin said, sounding low. "I don't know why I got such poor marks, I had put in a lot of effort, Mum," Sachin replied helplessly.

His mother shouted over the phone, "I don't know anything! Why did you get less marks? Look at the other students. Look at your cousins... they are all doing well in their studies, aren't they?"

With the passing of every minute, Sheetal was becoming more and more restless, passing her anxiety on to Sachin through taunts, without realizing what impact it could have on her son's tender mind. Sachin, of course, had no option but to listen to this endless bombarding!

"Now tell me," Sheetal commanded, "when do we have to go? By the way, where is your dad? Why don't you take him along, he has only spoiled you."

"Mum, Dad is in the US. He had to attend some conference. Mum, I'm sorry, but will you come, please?"

"Do I have any option?" she replied derisively.

The moment the conversation was over, Sachin could not ascertain if his Mum would accompany him to school or not. This uncertainty, combined with nervousness, brought tears to his eyes. "There is no one to support me," he thought. Sachin looked at a photograph of a smiling Rahul, who wasn't around....

* * *

Meanwhile, in the US, Rahul's contributions to business and the stock market performance of the company were well appreciated

by the board members of Gold Star Electronics. The company had called a board meeting and he was a special invitee. In the board meeting, Chairman David Brown took his seat; all board members were also seated. Rahul was one of them.

“Good morning, gentlemen, welcome to our board meeting,” David Brown greeted all members.

Looking around at the members, Brown said, “Today is a special day in the history of Gold Star Electronics – we have Rahul Saxena with us. Rahul is one of our brightest employees and he heads Indian operations. I am pleased to share with you that we have got an overwhelming response from the market for our innovative solution V-Office, conceived, designed, developed and introduced by Rahul’s team in India. I am sure all of you are aware of V-Office and what benefits it can offer to user organizations.”

With a broad smile on his face, he looked at all the board members, who were also in smiles.

He concluded his address by adding, “Needless to say, with this solution, Gold Star will become industry leader in revenue and profitability.

“I request you to join me in welcoming Rahul to our global board as a distinguished member. I am sure his experience, innovative mindset and researches will bring greater success and glory to our group.”

The board members applauded, signifying their approval of Rahul’s inclusion in the global board.

Acknowledging the recognition given to him, Rahul said, “David, board members, it is an honour to be a part of this unique group, which is well known the world over for its competency, business acumen and strategies. Today, the world is facing a unique challenge of deteriorating environment. We

believe we have made a lot of progress since the age of industrialization, but the fact is that our lives have become more confined within boundaries of the progress we have achieved. We have lost our childhood, houses have become smaller, play grounds have almost vanished, rivers have been replaced with gutters, and forests have been replaced by concrete jungles.

“We are increasingly getting entrapped in diseases like hypertension, cancer and HIV/AIDS. While we are finding cures for some diseases, new ones keep appearing as if there is a constant chase. Indeed, life itself has become a chase, resulting in a significant loss of pleasures associated with life. V-Office is an attempt to find a solution. I’m sure it will prove to be the first significant step in the direction of solving problems faced by mankind.”

He sipped some water and continued, “Being given this opportunity to work with you gentlemen, I can assure you that I will constantly strive to achieve greater success and glory for Gold Star.”

David got up from his seat and shook hands with Rahul; this was followed by other board members, and everyone congratulated Rahul on his achievement and for the promise he brought with him.

The company had arranged a press conference for Rahul the next day. As he was getting ready for the press meet, his mobile rang.

“Oh, it’s Sachin,” he murmured, recognizing the number.

He answered the call, “Hello, my son, how are you?”

“Hello Dad, it’s me,” said Sachin nervously.

Rahul could sense Sachin’s nervousness on phone and got concerned. “Son, what’s the matter? Are you alright? Why are

you upset? Is there anything you want from the US? I will bring back some interesting gifts for you.”

“Dad, please come back now. I need you here!” pleaded Sachin.

“I understand, son, but you have to realize that it’s just not possible for me to leave everything here just now and come to India. I have to finish some work and then I will certainly go back, we will have a great time together, Sachin,” Rahul tried to cheer him up.

On the other side, Sachin could not control his emotions and started to sob. The initial small sobs and gulps grew louder and uncontrollable, which really worried Rahul.

“Sachin, my son, how come such a brave boy is crying! What’s the matter?”

Sachin told him about his deteriorating performance in school, the principal getting upset with him and asking his parents to meet him. Sachin also briefed him about his interaction with Sheetal, his mother. Rahul asked him to relax, promising that he would talk to Sheetal and ask her to accompany him to meet the principal.

* * *

Sheetal was in her office when her mobile phone rang. She looked at the mobile’s screen, and her eyebrows rose. It was Rahul.

“Hello, Mr Rahul Saxena! How is it that you are thinking of me today?” she greeted him sarcastically.

Rahul ignored the sarcasm and replied, “I think of you every day, you are the one who has closed the doors of communication, and that’s not allowing my voice and emotions to reach you.”

“Oh, I see. Are you sure?” she continued with her sarcasm. “You have never telephoned me unless there is some work. I’m sure that even today you are calling me up for some work...?”

“Look, Sheetal, I wanted to talk to you about Sachin. He spoke to me some time back and I think he needs us. I’m in the US and can’t come back to India right now. Can you please accompany him to meet his school principal?”

“Why does it have to be me, every time? If you are busy, then so am I. He is not only my son, he is yours too!” Sheetal snapped.

“Yes, of course, he is our son and hence I am equally responsible for his well-being as you are, but currently I’m in the US for some urgent work and I can’t leave midway. You are in Mumbai, and can therefore make it to the meeting. Could you please attend the meeting with the principal?” requested Rahul politely.

Sheetal seemed to be in a mood to fight, but Rahul’s soft approach forced her to change her mind and she replied, “Okay, sir, but don’t make it a habit to throw all your responsibilities at me.”

After disconnecting her phone, she called up Sachin and fixed a time for meeting the principal.

Next day, when she went to pick up Sachin from his home, she was frowning. Sachin was ready when she reached his place. He got into the car and greeted her warmly.

“Good morning, Mum.”

“What is good this morning?” she asked him sharply.

Such a rough reaction was enough to make Sachin nervous, which was visible on his face and in his body language.

“Yes tell me, what’s the matter?”

“Mum, Principal Sir called me to his room because of my low marks in maths, and that’s why he wants to talk to you.”

“Why is it that month after month, your marks are dropping?”

Sachin opened his mouth to explain, but her scolding stopped him halfway.

“What do you do in school the whole day? Play games, right?”

“No, Mum,” Sachin replied timidly.

“I have warned you several times that I will not tolerate poor performance in academics, but you just don't listen! You're wasting time in useless activities.”

“No, Mum, I got poor marks in maths because I don't understand it. Geometry is very difficult and despite my very best, I just can't grasp it,” pleaded Sachin with teary eyes.

“Okay, okay, no drama please,” Sheetal stopped him, annoyed. “I have no interest in such drama. You must demonstrate success and intelligence in your performance. Dumb people have no place in today's world.”

‘Mum is very hard, she never tries to understand my difficulties and just pushes me to do better without really bothering to find out my problems,’ Sachin thought unhappily.

Four people were present in the principal's office: Principal Roshan Daruwala himself, Sachin's class teacher Ms Madhuri, Sheetal and Sachin.

The principal began, “Madam, I'm sorry to trouble you, but it was essential to meet you, to talk to you about Sachin's future. What I'm surprised about is that he used to be a very bright student till he was in Class VII, but in the last two years his academic performance has been deteriorating and all our efforts and counselling have not made any difference. I'm really worried, and so I called this meeting to apprise you about his performance and understand if there are any issues on the family front that are bothering him.”

Sheetal listened to him silently.

Then Ms Madhuri added, "Even in class he is withdrawn. He remains aloof; earlier he used to play, participate in class activities and would also be mischievous sometimes, but not anymore. He keeps to himself, speaks only if spoken to, does not smile much. Yet, at times, he is extraordinarily bright. Just last week I had asked all the students to write an essay on their hero and Sachin wrote a superb essay on his father."

"Thank you very much for your inputs, I'm worried about Sachin, too. I did notice his poor grades in class, but I thought it to be a temporary affair and advised him. I will give him more time and help him do better in his studies," Sheetal said.

Madhuri asked curiously, "Sachin is very fond of his dad, how is he? Why didn't he come along with you?"

On hearing this, Sheetal grew angry and said, raising her voice, "He is not in India, that's the reason why I had to come here today. Anyway, I will talk to him and we will do our best to improve Sachin's grades!"

"Oh, okay but it will be a pleasure to meet him, if there's a next time," Madhuri smiled a little as she said this, "please do bring him along. He seems to be very intelligent. Recently I saw his interview on NBC, where he spoke about his invention of V-Office and how it can transform our planet and improve the quality of life we lead."

All this while, Sheetal had been trying to control her temper, but hearing Rahul being praised so much, she blurted out rudely, "We don't stay together and, by the way, I'm not his secretary, so I don't have to agree with him on whatever he talks or does. He has a habit of talking big. Let's see."

Both Madhuri and the principal were taken aback, while Sachin squirmed in his seat, uneasily.

Sheetal carried on, furious, "It is because of the extra-busy, intelligent and smart Mr Saxena that Sachin is in the condition that you see him today. Even my condition is not good. He has all the time for the world, but not for his family!"

As she continued criticizing Rahul, Sachin who had been silent so far, mildly protested, "Mama, please don't say anything about Dad. I love him."

"See, look at this... even our son is on his side. I take all the trouble to come and meet you. There is no appreciation for it, but the moment I speak against his dad, Sachin has to object!" Sheetal ranted on.

Thanks to Sheetal's bitter words, Principal Roshan Daruwala realized the tension between Sheetal and Rahul.

He politely but firmly told her, "Well, er, Mrs Saxena, we have conveyed the facts which I feel you should know about your son. Try and support him, he does not seem to be in the right frame of mind. I don't know the reasons behind it. What I can definitely see is that he needs counselling, comfort and love. Children are like tender plants, with care and proper environment you can make them blossom, but under harsh conditions they can create some situations which we can only regret, if ignored. Okay then, I have to go for my class. Thanks for coming, it was nice meeting you," he stood up, signalling the end of the meeting.

On the way back from school, Sheetal was still seething – her ego was hurt. She couldn't accept the few firm words that the principal had said towards the end of the meeting. She obviously had not taken the message and concerns expressed by the principal and Madhuri in the right spirit. Her mind was wandering around Rahul's popularity, the appreciation he was getting for his innovation and the manner in which the principal had wrapped up the meeting. She took it as an insult! And her

fault-finding mindset had interpreted things in a totally different way, leaving no space or even thought for supporting or counselling Sachin. Poor Sachin!

As the car headed towards Sachin's home, Sachin became a victim to Sheetal's annoyance.

"It is all because of you that I have to listen to all this crap. Had you been responsible unlike your father, I would have been a proud mother today. They would not have treated me the way they did!"

Sachin's tender mind was not able to comprehend the developments around him. He just looked more confused.

He just sighed, "Come back soon, Dad."

* * *

The maths class was in progress. Bhattacharya Sir was teaching geometry to the class.

Suddenly he stopped to ask a question to the class, and his eyes fell on Sachin.

"What is the equation of the area of a circle?"

Sachin stood up, a blank look on his face; he couldn't answer the question.

Annoyed, Bhattacharya Sir started yelling at Sachin, "You don't know such a simple answer? What do you do in class? Where is your attention?"

Then, he looked at another student and asked, "Shivani, you tell me, what is the equation of the area of a circle?"

Shivani promptly replied, " πr^2 square, sir."

Nodding, the teacher looked at Sachin again, "See, how simple it is? You don't know the answer to even such a simple question?"

Sachin started fidgeting. He stuttered, "Sa-sa-ra actually..."

"What actually?" Bhattacharya Sir thundered. "Show me your note book. Have you written the notes I had given in class?" and he strode towards Sachin's desk.

He picked up Sachin's note book and found it blank. This was enough for all hell to break loose upon the boy.

"Get up, get up from your chair. Get out of my class!"

Slowly Sachin got up from his seat and walked out of the classroom.

He murmured, "Come back soon, Dad."

The Ultimate Step

AN AMBULANCE RUSHED through the busy streets of Mumbai, its wailing siren forcing the other vehicles on the road to move aside, giving way to it. It stopped outside Mahajan Hospital, and an attendant hurriedly got down from the ambulance and pulled the rear door, which the paramedic team, seated inside, had partially pushed open. Assisted by other hospital staff, they quickly but carefully removed a stretcher, on which lay a young boy, unconscious. It was Sachin Saxena!

The Emergency staff of the hospital swung into action and rushed him to the Emergency Ward. By the time the doctors present conducted a preliminary examination, and put Sachin on initial treatment, Dr Amit Mahajan came running to the ward. He too examined Sachin and gave some instructions to the nurse on duty. In the next few moments, Sachin was taken to the operation theatre.

Sheetal, who had left for the hospital the moment she got the news, rushed into the Emergency Ward, but was told that Dr Mahajan was treating Sachin at that very moment, and she was asked to wait outside, at the waiting area. When Dr Mahajan

walked out of the OT after around two hours, the hospital staff called out to Sheetal.

Tensed and scared, she virtually ran to him, and asked, "How is Sachin, Dr Mahajan?"

"Can't say right now, Ma'am, we are doing our best. We are keeping him under observation now," the doctor said, and turned to speak to one of the nurses.

Sheetal was in tears and started crying inconsolably. Suddenly, she remembered something. She wiped her tears, took out her mobile phone, and dialled a number.

After some time, a voice at the other end of the line, responded, "Hello!"

"Rahul? Sheetal this side. I have some very bad news."

Rahul was immediately on alert, "What happened?"

Sheetal's voice broke as she spoke, "Sachin has committed suicide," and then with another burst of tears, she added, "he consumed poison. Right now he is under observation, he has just been operated upon. Please come back immediately!"

Rahul was in a meeting with David when Sheetal broke the news to him. The mobile phone slipped out of Rahul's hand, and darkness enveloped him. Rahul felt as if the ground beneath his feet was shaking. He wanted to speak but no words came out of his mouth, just some unclear sound.

David noticed the sudden change in Rahul's face, and realized that he had received some horrifying news. He quickly filled a glass of water from the bottle kept on his desk, and offered it to Rahul. David noticed Rahul was not in a position to hold the glass, so he held Rahul's head in his left hand and took the glass, filled with water, in his right hand near Rahul's mouth. After some time, Rahul seemed to be recovering; he sipped some water

and closed his eyes. Rahul rested his head on the back of the chair. Tears trickled down Rahul's cheeks.

David sat quietly, wondering what had happened, and waited for Rahul to gain composure. When he had calmed down somewhat, David asked him what had happened. With moist eyes and in a trembling voice, Rahul apprised him of the situation.

David said, "I'm very sorry for you, Rahul, but everything will be alright, don't lose hope."

Then he looked at his watch and, thinking fast, continued, "At this time, there's no flight to India. Do one thing. You take my plane and leave, right away. I'll just call the aviation ministry and arrange your travel to India."

He got up from his chair, came closer to Rahul, put his hand on Rahul's shoulder and said, "I want you to stop doubting, and believe that your son will be alright."

Moved, Rahul looked at him and said, "Thanks, David. I hope your words turn out to be true."

After around 30 hours, Rahul landed at Chhatrapati Shivaji International Terminus in Mumbai. After completing landing formalities, he sat in a car which drove him to Mahajan Hospital.

When he arrived at the hospital, there was a long queue at the lift. Sheetal had informed him that Sachin had been allotted a special room on the seventh floor of the hospital. Rahul could not wait for the lift to arrive and virtually ran up the stairs. By the time he reached the seventh floor, he was exhausted, and in spite of being a fitness freak, such was his state that he was breathing heavily and perspiring. But he didn't care!

With his throat dry, perspiring, and heavy breathing, Rahul paced the corridor, his eyes searching for Sheetal. Then he saw

her, standing at a corner, looking out of the window, perhaps in deep thought. Rahul moved closer to her and put his hand on her back. She turned, looked up. Her eyes had swollen due to excessive crying, her face was pale; perhaps she hadn't slept well the previous night.

She put her head on Rahul's chest and started crying loudly. After a while, she took hold of herself. In a choked voice, she told Rahul, "Sachin consumed poison to commit suicide."

Tears welled up in Rahul's eyes. It was with tremendous effort that he controlled his emotions, but deep sadness and worry were visible on his face. Sheetal took Rahul to Sachin's room.

"How is he?" without moving his gaze from Sachin, Rahul asked her.

"He is out of danger now, but may take a few days to recover."

In a choked, trembling voice, Rahul asked, "Why did Sachin take such a step?"

Sheetal remained silent.

After an hour, the doctor came on the floor again, on his rounds. At that time, Rahul was outside Sachin's room, his mind blank. Seeing the doctor, Rahul recognized him; he had met Dr Mahajan in one of the functions where he had been invited as guest.

As the doctor came near Sachin's room, Rahul asked him, "Hello, Amit, how is Sachin?"

"Oh, Rahul, is he your son?"

"Yes, Amit, can you please tell me about his condition now?"

"Well, Rahul, he has consumed poison," Dr Mahajan began gravely. "And he arrived in hospital quite late. We have given him the required medications and treatment, and are waiting for him to respond to it. So far, there has been very little improvement in

his condition since the time he was brought in. I think it could have been better, so we are observing him. Let's hope for the best, Rahul."

"Amit, it's a little odd to ask, but do you think Sachin is safe here? I mean, do you need any support from doctors in the US, or any other place in the world?"

"No, Rahul. I don't think there's any need for that. He is in the best hands. Don't worry, Rahul. Just pray that we are successful in our efforts and may God bless Sachin with fast recovery."

Then, after thinking for some time, Dr Mahajan asked, "What happened? Why did your son take such a step?"

"I really don't know. I was in the US when my wife telephoned me. I've come here straight from the airport. I really don't know why Sachin would think of killing himself," Rahul replied, looking weary and haggard, gazing at the distance.

Then, exhaling slowly, he added, "God, please be kind to me. Give long life to my son, take mine in exchange, if you so desire."

Dr Amit Mahajan, who as a doctor was used to such kind of cases happening daily in the hospital, was moved by Rahul's grief and pain.

Trying to console him, Dr Mahajan patted Rahul's shoulder, and said, "Don't worry, God will surely be kind to a gentleman like you," and moving forward, entered Sachin's room.

Unable to do anything, Rahul stayed out on the corridor, and stared blankly at the door, which had closed some time back.

* * *

A police inspector walked up to where Rahul was sitting with Sheetal.

"Are you Sachin Saxena's father?"

"Yes," replied Rahul.

"I am Inspector Javed Khan," the inspector introduced himself, "I'm in charge of the Vile Parle Police Station. I need to know what exactly had happened. Why did the boy take such a step?"

"Inspector, I really don't know. I was in the US, when my wife, Sheetal," gesturing at Sheetal, Rahul added, "called me and broke the news. I reached Mumbai this morning and came here straight from the airport."

Inspector Khan turned towards Sheetal, "Then you must know, ma'am. Can you please tell me why has he taken such a step? What happened that pushed him into taking his life?"

"I'm sorry, I too don't know how exactly it happened. I was sleeping when I received a call from the servant at home that Sachin was lying on the bed, unconscious, foaming at the mouth. I telephoned the hospital and asked them to rush an ambulance. Just as the ambulance reached the house, I also reached the house where Sachin lives."

"Do you mean to say Sachin had gone to stay with someone?" the inspector asked, looking puzzled, and stopped writing on his note book, where he had been jotting down Sheetal's statement.

"No, Sachin was at home only."

"Oh, you must have gone to stay with someone... who... your mother or...?" he left the sentence incomplete.

"No, I was at my house."

Now the inspector really looked confused.

"Wait a minute. You said you were at your house, Sachin was also at his house, but then how come you are saying you don't know what happened to him? Are you joking with me in such a situation?" he was on the verge of losing his cool.

Rahul intervened, "Sorry, inspector, she doesn't stay with me. We are separated, and Sachin, out of his choice, stays with me. I was in the US, so neither of us really know what happened."

In the meantime, news of Sachin's attempted suicide had spread in the city, and in Sachin's school. Hearing the news, the school principal and Sachin's class teacher Ms Madhuri, too, had come running to the hospital.

As the inspector was talking to Rahul and Sheetal, the principal and Madhuri walked up to Rahul, asking about Sachin's condition.

"Ticha Maila! Aata samjhlo. Aapan modern maa baap hai. Padhe-likhe, intelligent but ahamkari. Aap logon ka emotion se zyada bada ego hota hai tabhi toh bachche ke paas koi nahin tha. Bachcha bechara kya karega? (Oh Mother Beater! Now I understand. You are well-educated, modern parents, who are intelligent but also egoistic. Your ego is bigger than your emotions towards your wards. That's why no one was beside the child to support him when he was in depression. What option would the poor child have?)"

Sheetal grew angry and as she was opening her mouth to respond to the inspector, a nurse opened the door of the room, and said, "The patient is gaining consciousness. Any one of you can go inside the room."

Rahul rushed into the room, past the nurse who shut the door behind him; she stood just inside the room. With eyes filled with tears, he walked towards Sachin. Sitting down on the stool kept near the bed, he took Sachin's cold, limp hand in his hands, gently kissed it.

Holding his hand, with tearful eyes and in a trembling voice, he whispered, "I'm extremely sorry, son, that because of my negligence you are in such a condition. I was not beside you during perhaps the most critical time of your life. Had I been there, I would have taken all your troubles on myself and would not have allowed you to take such a drastic step."

Sachin's eyelids fluttered. With great difficulty, he opened his eyes once and then closed it. Seeing this, the nurse stepped outside to inform the doctor. After some time, a doctor, Sheetal, Inspector Khan, Sachin's school principal and class teacher all walked into the room. Rahul was trying to wake up Sachin.

Finally, Sachin opened his eyes. Rahul wiped his tears with his shirtsleeve so that Sachin wouldn't see that his father had been crying.

"Dad," Sachin said feebly, with a small smile. "You are back."

"I'm sorry, son. I was away from you when you needed me the most. But from now on, I will always be with you, my son."

Sachin smiled and said in a very weak, barely audible voice, "Promise?"

"God Promise," Rahul kissed his hand.

The doctor requested Rahul to step aside so that he could check Sachin. Rahul got up from the stool and stood near Sheetal, who was now smiling through her tears.

The doctor carefully noted Sachin's pulse, his eyes and did other preliminary checks. He looked at the patient chart, wrote some comments, and gave some oral instructions to the nurse.

Turning towards the others, he smiled slightly and said, "Good news. He is out of danger now. He is still very weak though, so allow him to sleep as much as he can. Today he will be on saline and if he maintains the same health parameters, we will start him on a light diet from tomorrow morning."

Rahul and Sheetal folded their hands and said, "Thank you, doctor. We are really grateful to you."

As the doctor nodded and left the room, followed by the nurse, Rahul turned towards Sheetal and said, "You look tired. You probably need to catch-up with your sleep as well. Why don't

you go home and take some rest?”

Shaking her head, Sheetal said, “You too have come from the airport after 24 hours of flight. You also must be tired. You go home, I’ll manage.”

Unexpectedly, someone spoke softly and gently from behind them.

“No one needs to remain here. I will stay beside Sachin. I’m not tired and since I had slept well last night, I’m not sleepy. I will take care of Sachin, till you come back in the evening.”

This was Madhuri Desai, Sachin’s class teacher. Rahul was tired and upset, so he didn’t notice much, but he seemed to like the voice. It sounded like a musical bell, sweet, soft and warm. The voice had a hint of affection and command, which generally comes from someone very close, very caring.

Rahul thanked her for her gesture and left the room.

* * *

After reaching home, Rahul bathed, and forced himself to eat something. He tried to sleep but could not do so, because of anxiety and worry; although Sachin was out of danger, he still could not get over the acute pain and helplessness that he was feeling. After a few unsuccessful attempts, Rahul got up and started to get ready to go to the hospital.

When he reached the hospital, it was around 1.30pm. He took the elevator to the seventh floor, and strode towards Sachin’s room, quietly opened the door and peeped in. His eyes first went towards Sachin – he was fast asleep. Then he looked around to see Madhuri taking a nap. A half-open book lay in her hands, which were resting on her stomach. Rahul carefully closed the door, so as not to disturb either of them. He looked

around the corridor, and seeing a row of steel chairs, sat down on one of these.

He closed his eyes. A stream of thoughts surfaced in his mind, starting from his courtship days with Sheetal; her father's objection to their relationship because of Rahul's economic background; their marriage; Rahul's struggle to get a foothold in the tough city of Mumbai; Sachin's birth; differences over career decisions vs taking care of their baby and Sheetal prioritizing her career; Rahul's anger and objection to this decision; her decision to part ways; Sachin's loneliness due to his mother's sudden exit from his life; Rahul's failed efforts to fill the void created by Sheetal; his appointment in Gold Star Electronics and busy schedule that grew hectic by the day... which got him fame and money but drastically reduced the time he used to spend with Sachin.

The more Rahul thought about Sachin, the guiltier he felt, the worse he felt. That guilt started coming out in the form of warm tears from his eyes. He didn't know how long he sat like that, his eyes closed but tears rolling down his cheeks, till a sweet and soft voice broke through his pensiveness.

"First time I'm seeing someone crying after learning that all his problems are over."

He opened his eyes. Madhuri was standing in front of him, two paper cups of coffee in her hand.

Smiling, she asked, "Coffee?"

Rahul felt himself smiling back at her, her friendly behaviour easing the tension in him.

"Do you generally drink two cups of coffee at a time?" he couldn't help asking her.

"No."

“That means, obviously, the second one is for me? If it is so, then why ask?” quipped Rahul.

‘The guy is sharp,’ flashed through Madhuri’s mind, and she smiled, acknowledging it, extending one cup towards him.

Rahul took the cup of coffee, and said, “Thanks for your support. You see, I could never envisage that my son would be in such a condition. Suicide? I can’t believe it even now that Sachin could take such a step. I’m just trying to reconcile with the fact.”

Sitting down beside him, Madhuri said, “I can understand your feelings. But we must take solace from the fact that he is out of danger now and soon he will be with you and your family.”

As she was talking to Rahul, someone waved at her, some distance away.

She waved back, and told Rahul, “My friend is there. If you don’t mind, I will come in some time, say around 10 minutes? Some time back, Principal Sir had called me to say that he was planning a visit here, to see Sachin.”

Rahul replied, “Sure. I will just see how Sachin is doing.”

Once again he went to Sachin’s room, and peeped in. Sachin was awake and gazing at the ceiling. Rahul entered the room, shutting the door quietly behind him.

“Hi! How are you, young man?”

“Hi Dad! Your young man is lying on a hospital bed.”

Rahul hadn’t expected Sachin to come to the topic so fast. He thought Sachin coming straight to the situation at hand indicated that something indeed was troubling him, and he was eager to discuss his problems.

Feeling that there was no point in losing time as Sachin’s life was at stake, Rahul sat down at the foot of the bed and asked him, “What happened? Why did you take such a step?”

“I am bad at studies, Dad. Everyone around me is angry and unhappy with me. Mum, Principal Sir, Madhuri Ma’am... they are all unhappy with my performance. From next month, prelims are starting in school, and this time, too, I may not perform well, so again I will dishearten them. I thought, let me not disappoint them again, so I decided to end my life as I can never be a bright student in my life.”

Pained at hearing this, Rahul said, “No, son, who said you are not a good student? You are a very lovely child; we all love you very much.”

“That may be true, but that does not get me the marks that Mum and Principal Sir want me to get in exams. What is the use of such a dumb life? It’s better to end such a life!”

Rahul could not believe that his sweet-natured son had attempted to give up his life for such a reason – because of the high expectations that people had from Sachin, on the academic front. He could not control his anguish and started sobbing for some time, holding Sachin’s right hand in both his hands. Rahul couldn’t help but think, how much trauma this boy has gone through just to fulfil the wishes of the elders around him.

Just then, while Rahul was trying to cheer up and assure Sachin, there was a knock on the door, and Sachin looked in that direction. Rahul also looked back and noticed people coming in but he preferred to continue talking with Sachin.

Rahul had still not come out of his state of shock and grief. That was evident from the fact that he preferred speaking to Sachin although Sheetal and Principal Roshan Daruwala had just entered the room. Sachin shyly smiled at his mum and Principal Sir; they stood a few feet away, and listened to the father–son dialogue.

Rahul continued to assure him, referring to what Sachin had just said.

“My son, this is not true. Performance in academics do give you hope for a better life, but it is not a pre-condition to success. I can count so many, highly successful and great people who have achieved amazing heights in their lives but they were not bright students. To become successful in life, it is advisable to study well, but it is certainly not essential to pass every exam with top marks!”

And Rahul solemnly declared, “From now onwards, my son, you needn’t become tensed and stressed because of your exams; from now onwards your academic performance will be my responsibility. I am freeing you from my expectations and declaring to the whole world that...

It’s okay to fail, my son.”

Roshan Daruwala was stunned with Rahul’s announcement. He found it unusual, unheard of and perhaps unacceptable, but he attributed it to Rahul’s disturbed mind. He took a deep breath, and slowly walked out of the room.