

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.

“Okay, it is in the seventh floor, go through this gate and lifts will be on your right side” saying that, he shows the small door.

Kailash is now inside the building and it took a while before he could locate the lifts. After waiting for few minutes he’s inside the lift looking very uncomfortable as the people around him are in neat clothes with some even in suits. He is wearing a half sleeve shirt and relatively good cotton pant. As the lift stopped on the seventh floor, he steps out to a small reception area and there was a girl neatly dressed in a suit with her head buried into the computer monitor in front of her.

Kailash stands there for five minutes expecting her to notice his presence; once he realises that she’s in no mood to bother other than what she was doing, he hesitantly asks her:

“Excuse me, my name is Kailash and I am here to see Ms Mathews in HR department” he said.

“Do you have an appointment? Is she expecting you?” Without looking at him she asks.

“Yes, I am here to collect my appointment letter” He said.

“Oh, okay; let me check if she’s free. Please be seated over there and she’ll come to take you inside”

“Thank you” he said, and finds a vacant seat in that area.

After about thirty minutes, a lady in her late thirties comes out of a glass door next to the reception and calls for Kailash.

She takes him through the glass door and when he enters, a huge open area with many cubicles greets him. It was so huge that he can easily run some ten good restaurants inside he thought. After passing through some 60 cubicles on both the sides they reach a small room with a round table and few chairs in it. She opens the door for him and once both are inside closes the door behind her.

After a formal introduction and general icebreakers, she hands him an envelope which has few A4 sized papers in it. He just glances through those papers which are in English and finds Rs. 500,000 at one place and just puts them back. He does not say anything, shakes her hand nervously and quickly comes out of the office.

As soon as he’s out, he calls Venkat and requests him to see if he can meet him now. He wants to know what exactly is written in those papers, barring Rs. 500,000 he could not understand anything.

He is now waiting outside Venkat’s office, it is already half an hour since the person before him went in. Kailash pulls out those papers again to see if he can understand anything; he could barely read few words understanding it is far stretched imagination for him. Suddenly he heard the door is open and Venkat comes out along with the other person, after seeing him off Venkat takes Kailash into his room knowing what’s inside the envelope he asks:

“Are you happy with the salary”?

"What happy sir, I could not understand anything other than five lakhs; everything is written in English" Kailash said.

"Oh okay, let me see it" Venkat takes the envelope from Kailash opens it and after going through for five minutes, he says:

"The five lakhs you saw will be your annual salary and on top of it you'll get some bonus, medical benefits and transport"

"How much it'll be in a month"? Kailash asked.

"Roughly thirty five thousand a month after all the deductions"

"Oh, okay; thirty five thousand a month" visibly happy/anxious Kailash said.

"Good, you can join tomorrow if you're happy with the money. I'll talk to my friend who works there" Venkat said.

"Sure sir, will talk to Anjali and I think I can join tomorrow" he's still unsure if the money they're talking is real. Who'll want to waste Rs. 40 thousands on an aged cricketer who's yet to prove himself?

Without wasting anytime further, Kailash goes back home where Anjali is eagerly waiting for him. He silently hands over that letter to her; she carefully reads every paragraph; Annexures, Terms and Conditions and after making sure that she read it correctly, slowly moves towards Kailash and kisses him on his forehead.

"I am proud of you, this is the best of day of my life" she said her voice was very heavy and eyes moist.

He was surprised by her actions; she's very balanced and never shows her emotions; even when she lost her father she was very brave.

"If I am happy with the offer, I should tell them now and can join them from tomorrow" Kailash said.

"It's not that I need spend the whole day in the office, I need to sign few papers and can come back home for lunch; we can go for dinner outside" he continued.

She just nods her head as an approval, still unable speak.

Kailash calls Venkat and tells him that he'll be there by 9 am tomorrow in the office and checks with him if he needs to call them to inform about this. After getting assurance from Venkat that he'll take care at his end; he asks Anjali if she wants to come with him to Gymkhana. He wants to share this news with Ashok sir; after all it is Mr. Ashok who right from the beginning trusted his abilities.

"The kids are home so I'd rather stay back; will meet him next time" Anjali said.

"Okay, I shall be back in an hour" saying this, he walks out of the house.

Mr. Ashok is talking to the representative of SG when Kailash reached his office; they came up with new series of light weight bats and they want Mr. Ashok to promote them in his academy.

"Hello Kailash, come in; please take a seat" Mr. Ashok said when he saw Kailash at the entrance hesitating to come inside.

"This should be over in 10 minutes, is that okay?" he continued.

"Sure sir" Kailash replied.

For the next fifteen minutes the SG representative explained how advanced these bats are and they also discussed about the pricing, discounts etc., while this is going on, Mr. Ashok picks up a rather heavy bat; and after careful inspection hands it over to Kailash.

"Congratulations, I heard the news from the ABC & Co's coach; he was a student of this academy" Mr. Ashok said.

"I want you to use this bat going forward and consider this as my gift" he continued.

Kailash could not believe with what just happened and with a heavy voice:

"Thank you sir, but I can't take it; this looks very expensive"

"Don't worry about the price; this is anyways free, they gave it to me as a sample" while saying this he just winks at the SG representative who understood what Mr. Ashok is trying to do and said:

"Yes, we want this to be tested in the real match scenario"

After couple of minutes of discussion the representative takes leave and Mr. Ashok after seeing him off comes back to his office.

As soon as he enters the office, he hugs Kailash and when Kailash tries to touch his feet to seek his blessings he simply stops him by holding his shoulders.

"I am very happy for you Kailash; finally you're getting what you deserve; though I feel it's a bit late" Mr. Ashok said.

"You know when I met you in the train few years ago I felt very sad; I could not concentrate for the rest of my trip"

"I hated the god, the system, and particularly myself for letting you go" he continued.

"Looks like maybe that was not the time for you; maybe this is the right time; maybe this is what god has planned for you"

Kailash could see tears in the eyes of Mr. Ashok and he looked very emotional. After spending some time with him, Kailash takes leave from him and heads back home.

His training with the ABC team started that Saturday and fortunately for him they practice at Mr. Ashok's academy. The training camp is scheduled for few hours in a day, sometimes both

morning and evenings and it lasted for a month. The coach and selectors were very happy with the fitness levels and the performance of Kailash during the training and was included in the playing eleven for the first few matches.

A division three day league is one level below Ranji tournament; it is played for three days with usually twelve teams taking part in it. It is difficult to get an outright win in a three day match as it is highly unlikely that four innings to be over in a three day period.

It is very competitive tournament considering most of the Hyderabad Ranji team players and aspirants play this tournament. The 2011-12 edition featured 12 teams with Primark Limited as defending champions. ABC & Co never came in the top end of the table; they're always at the position below eight.

After completion of the first few weeks, ABC & Co stood at fifth place in the table thanks to an excellent performance by Kailash. In the four matches he batted, he scored two centuries with two not outs. In the local playing circles he has become the talking point; few kids who watched him play, started spreading the word about his talent and aggressive style of batting.

And when the tournament reached the final stages, people used to gather in hundreds just to watch him bat. At the end of the season ABC & Co stood at the third position and Kailash was chosen as the player of the tournament. He scores 1545 runs in fifteen innings with eight centuries of which three are double centuries and adjusted as player of the match nine times.

In addition to all those on the field accolades, he also was awarded with 100% bonus for his performance by ABC & Co and now he's become an overnight star.

Next few months just went normal; during the break from playing Kailash focused on expanding his canteen and catering business with the money he received. He also joined an evening college and enrolled for a private graduation certificate exam. But the biggest surprise came in the form of a visit by Venkat; it was like any other day but when Venkat came to his house, Kailash was busy with his English preparation. He was a bit surprised to see Venkat there; and when got over it, he invited him happily.

"Venkat sir, what a surprise; it has been very long since you came this side" Kailash said.

"Yes, what to do have a lot of things to take care of and you know about my laziness; won't you" laughingly Venkat replied.

"I was just passing by so thought why not meet you than a call; Seems like Anjali and kids are not home;"

"Yes sir, they went to my cousins' house; there was a birthday party; I stayed back as I've an exam to prepare"

"That's great what are you preparing for"?

"I am appearing for B.A privately sir" Kailash said.

“Very good, I am very happy for you. By the way the reason I came here is to update you on very important information”

“The selectors for the Hyderabad Ranji team have shortlisted your name as one of the probables” he continued.

“It is not final yet, but your name is there along with 30 others; only thing which could be against you is your age; you don’t often see a 35 year old making his debut at a Ranji level” Venkat just continued, but Kailash seems to have lost in the beginning itself. He looked completely shocked at the prospect of playing at a Ranji level.

His best friend and his idol have played at that level and he has watched so many great players who have represented Hyderabad when he played at the A division league.

Venkat realised that Kailash is not in this world and just stopped talking and simply waited for him to recover. After a while when Kailash is normal, Venkat said:

“It is very premature to conclude on anything right now; but just wanted to give you a heads up so that when the news comes you’re well prepared to take a decision quickly”

“When we meet next time, I’ll explain the way Ranji tournament works and the things you may consider before taking any decisions” he continued.

After few other general discussions, and about his work at ABC & Co, Venkat took leave from Kailash.

For the next hour Kailash could not concentrate on anything except on what just Venkat said. If everything goes well, he’ll play for Hyderabad. He knows how difficult it is to play at that level and amount of travel involved. Can he manage it? Can his family manage without him being in Hyderabad?

They could decide on the A League quickly as he never had to travel as all the matches were in Hyderabad. In fact he was able to manage the business also at times, even though his cousin took care of it mostly.

Around 8 pm, Anjali and kids came back; Kailash was inside his room with door closed and they didn’t bother him. Anjali quietly served the dinner which she brought along from the party in his room and could see a tad worried Kailash buried in his English literature book.

Kailash tells Anjali about Venkat’s visit and the prospect of representing Hyderabad in the Ranji trophy tournament next year. She did not say anything; she knows what it means to Kailash and also knew how much she and the kids will miss him if he is selected. They already discussed many times how and why Karthik has become more like a tourist to his house and Hyderabad; and many times pulled his leg on this matter too.

For the rest of the night they didn’t speak a word and Kailash never brought that matter again. In a week’s time both forgot that there was ever a discussion about it took place. Anjali was busy with the school as she was made lead teacher for Maths and Science and Kailash getting adjusted his new role as Admin manager at ABC & Co.

He was quickly learning his role at the Company and even though they didn't expect to him play an active role; he made sure that he "earned" his salary. Considering his love for the game he knew, he could have played for free.

Things went on like that for few weeks until suddenly there was a call from Venkat; he wanted to meet Kailash at the ground and wanted to see if he's available at 7 in the morning next day. Next day Kailash was there at the ground at his usual time of 6 am and went on with daily fitness routine; at around 7.30 am, Venkat comes and greets him while he was in the nets.

"Hello Kailash, seems like practicing hard"

Kailash was busy with his practice and did not notice Venkat's presence there. The U19 bowler who's bowling for Kailash saw Venkat and just stopped as he knew Venkat was here to speak to Kailash. Kailash was furious that he just stood there and didn't bother to bowl.

And when Kailash saw that the bowler not even looking at him and his attention was somewhere else, he looked towards where the bowler was looking to find Venkat standing with a broad smile.

"Venkat sir, how are you? When did you come" Kailash asked

"Just couple of minutes ago; in fact I tried speaking to you but you were buried in your practice" Venkat replies.

"Sorry sir, that bowler was very good and he's really quick for his age; any lack of concentration he's going to get you out" he simply continued.

"I was just trying not to get out; it doesn't look good you know" he sounded like a kid who want's everything.

"That's fine Kailash, no need to apologize; come to the office once you're done will wait for you over there" Venkat said.

"Okay sir, will be there in fifteen minutes" and went on with his business.

After about twenty minutes, Kailash went into the office room where Mr. Ashok, Lakshman and Venkat were discussing about something and they just stopped as soon as Kailash entered the room.

"Hello Kailash how is the practice? How is the new kid, he is very quick right?" Mr. Ashok said.

"Yes sir, he's but very predictable" Kailash said.

"Lakshman sir you need to focus on his length; he is not consistent" he continued and just went on talking about many other things and Venkat had to stop him to bring back to the main reason for which he was there.

"Kailash, yesterday the selection committee had a meeting and finalised the team for the next year's Ranji trophy" Venkat said.

"The official announcement is expected sometime tomorrow but wanted to let you know beforehand" he continued.

"They've included you in the list of fifteen players; congratulations"

This was the first time even Mr. Ashok and Lakshman are hearing the news so it was kind of a surprise for all three of them; and as a matter of fact a shock for Kailash. It was few weeks ago they discussed about this and he simply forgot about it after a week; and since it was disclosed when he was least expecting it, he was completely shocked.

"Thank you sir, it was a very good news; I think it is a wonderful opportunity and am not quite sure how I'll manage on the personal front though" Kailash said.

"I don't know what to say; I cursed the God for playing with your cricketing career few years ago and now I have a lot of repairing work to do to earn back his trust again" Mr. Ashok who's almost in tears said and while saying he just bursts into a huge smile.

Next one hour they simply discussed about what happens next, like; when the season starts; what kind of travelling involved; whether he'll still be playing for ABC & Co and if he'll continue to be an employee; money he'll earn; the kind of travelling arrangements etc.,

Only sad part in the whole discussion was about Karthiks' omission; since he was undergoing a surgery to his shoulder (his bowling arm) he may miss the first half of the tournament. Venkat tells him, he should be back in the team once he recovers completely.

"So for the first few months I'll be all alone there" Kailash said.

"No you may not be, I think you know some of the players and you must have played against them in the A division league" Venkat said.

It was around lunch time when Kailash reaches home; Anjali looking a bit worried opens the door and just starts off:

"Where were you? I was really worried about you; why didn't you call me"? She just continued...

All this while Kailash was laughing and that made Anjali really mad and she just pushes him out and locks the door on his face.

"I am sorry, was really held up at the ground; I've very good news to share. Can you please open the door now; I am really hungry, not had my breakfast just ate couple of bananas" He simply sits in front of the closed door and tries to convince her to open.

She waits for few minutes, opens the door and heads straight into the kitchen without even waiting for him. He simply places his kit bag in a closet and follows her directly into the kitchen and before he could even tell her anything; she simply tells him to take bath and then enter the kitchen.

It was only during the lunch she cools down a bit and sensing the mood Kailash says:



"Today Venkat sir came to the ground to discuss something with me; I think I'll be playing for the Hyderabad team next season"

"Myself, Venkat sir, Ashok sir and Lakshman sir were discussing the next steps that's why it took me so long" he continued.

She was not concentrating on what he was talking and simply went on eating her lunch and suddenly realises Kailash mentioned about something in the lines of playing for Hyderabad etc.,

"What? What did you just said? She asked.

"If you listen carefully when I am talking I need not repeat every time" he said.

"Every time? How many times you had to repeat in the past? If you come home on time, I'll concentrate on what you're trying say"

"Okay, I told you I am sorry; I was with Venkat sir and all at the ground and he told me that my name is in the list of the team selected for Hyderabad Ranji team for the next season"

"What??? that's a great news; why didn't you tell me before; you waited all this while to tell and took an hour since you came home" she simply continues as if it was purely his fault.

Knowing her pretty well, Kailash simply enjoys his food and the conversation too.....

After the lunch when everything is normal, they both discuss about the next steps. One important aspect is to take care of the kids; all this while it was Kailash who was there at home when they're back from the school and now since he won't be there they need to look for alternatives.

"Kids stay at Sundar's place till I come back home; anyway his wife does not work and their son also goes to the same school as Prateek and Kaushik" Anjali said.

But how much ever she tries to convince him; Kailash is somehow not happy that he's travel for cricket.

"Do you really think I should be playing for Hyderabad? Is it worth the sacrifice? What am I going to achieve, I won't play for the country, so why waste time on this thing" Kailash says.

"Of course yes, it's a big thing to play for your state and it doesn't matter if you play for the country or not; at least your sons can say you've represented Hyderabad"

"Yes, but it won't be easy on you and the kids; they need me now"

"I agree, but you're not going to be away for months; may be couple weeks in a month and that much we can manage" she's not angry now, simply trying to convince him to take the option. After all who'll get an opportunity like this at the age of 35?

Finally after couple of hours of discussion, he says "okay let the announcement come, we can save some energy to discuss further".

Few weeks later; Kailash is driving his Activa with his kit bag stored in the front, he's happy but anxious at the same time. For the first time he's entering the ground as his home ground, he

played couple of matches during the A division league but that time he was not a member of Hyderabad Ranji team.

While driving he refreshed the memories of what went through when he met the other members of the team. After the announcement of the 15 member team, the coach and the Hyderabad Cricket Association management held a meeting so that the new players will get to know the others and vice versa.

It was not a happy meeting for Kailash; he could clearly see some groups formed over there. The existing members formed a group and among the newly selected ones; couple of them represent the same at A division league level hence they preferred each other's company. Others from the newly selected members formed their own team and it was Kailash who did not belong to any of the group and he thought because of his age and to an extent he was correct as some of the younger members tried to make fun of him.

When he reached the ground he parked his scooter in the area designated for "players" and walked to the entrance. As he tried to enter the ground the security stopped him and told him that outsiders are not allowed on that day as the Ranji team will be practicing. When he tried to explain that he's one of the players, the security guy simply laughed at him.

They know all the old players in the team and he simply can't be a Ranji player by the look of it. Kailash patiently waits there for fifteen minutes before any of the other team members arrive; unfortunately for him even they didn't (want to) recognize him. Finally the matter was settled when the coach came and told the security guys.

During the first week of practice he felt more like a spectator over there. He got an opportunity to bat couple of times and was somehow felt nervous. For the first time in the last few years he felt maybe he made a mistake by choosing to play cricket at this level or any level for that matter.

He was never humiliated while managing the canteen or catering business, moreover he was respected by his employees and customers. He felt maybe this is not the place for him. Based on his experience from the initial meeting he expected some kind of a resistance and hostile environment for some days but never thought he will be isolated completely.

That's when he realised how much he missed Karthik's presence; he could have been the ice breaker and made things easier. Kailash was going through a very tough time and it was Anjali who instilled a lot of courage in him and tells him to just bear for one season and if things don't improve then he can consider quitting in the next year.

The 2012-13 season witnessed some changes to the Ranji system and for the first time group system was introduced. Hyderabad was part of Group C known as Plate/relegation division in the past. The coach knew the potential of Kailash and has seen his dedication during the practice sessions, but playing a 35 year old when there are bright young "recommended" talent available was a tough decision for him.

For the first few matches, the team's performance was below par; losing three and drawing one out of the four matches played. It was the fifth match when Kailash got an opportunity to play

when couple of other players dropped out due to "injury". It was a last minute call, he was told about being included in the final eleven just before the toss and he felt like the burden of the whole world on his shoulders. The other team won the toss and invited Hyderabad to bat on a grassy seaming wicket. It was a worst condition for any batsman to make his debut.

Like in the other matches the openers failed and Kailash walks in at No. 5 when his team was in deep trouble with the score on eighteen for the loss of three. The ball was seaming across and the other three who got out could not even touch the ball. He went in the middle; the bowler was on a hat-trick. Kailash took the guard and felt like the ground beneath his feet crumbling as he was about to face the ball. He simply told to himself, whatever happens I just need to enjoy the moment; it doesn't matter if I succeed here or not, coming this far and playing at this level in itself is a huge achievement.

He was ready to face the ball, it was an out swinger; ball was pitched on the middle stump and was heading towards the top of the off stump. It was in his hitting zone and with a blank mind he simply swings the bat and tries to drive the ball over the mid-wicket. The ball takes the outside edge and flies through the stretched hands of the second slip; it went so fast that the fielder could barely touch the ball.

It was four, but he knew he was lucky to be there and it was a mistake on his part to play like that. Next couple of deliveries were of the similar in the nature but only this time Kailash carefully negotiated by standing tall and right behind the ball.

He survived the first three deliveries of his domestic career and he felt happy but still very nervous. He never played at this level and even though he played Karthik in the nets, it is completely different in a match scenario. Kailash and his partner have a brief chat; being experienced at this level, the youngster on the other end tried his best to make Kailash comfortable in the middle.

The pair survived the first hour and by the lunch time they were fifty four for three with Kailash playing on twenty two. He never played like that in his brief playing career; always known as an aggressive middle-order batsman used as a finisher by ABC & Co, the role which he always liked.

Today was different, his side needed some kind of a consolidation in the middle and fortunately he could do it. It's not easy to bat outside your comfort zone. During the lunch time, coach came to Kailash and simply said "Good job" by patting on his shoulder. That was enough, he felt a bit more confident and sense of belongingness slowly started to appear. He knew it takes a lot more to be accepted fully, but it was a step in the right direction.

The match was drawn and Hyderabad with the lead in the first innings could score maximum points in a draw. Kailash was not out 176 and with the help of lower middle order and the bowlers they could score 452 in their first innings.

From that match onwards Kailash was never had to look back again; he was a permanent fixture in the playing eleven. In the remaining 8 matches and 13 innings he scored 9 centuries with 4 double centuries, one triple century with an average of 142.80. He broke the record for a debutant and few other records including most double centuries in a tournament. His performance ensured that Hyderabad topped their group and were elevated to the main draw for the next season.

2013-14 was no different he was prolific as ever and was able to break all possible batting records at the domestic level. Rajasthan Royals known for their knack of unearthing raw talent, have picked him for their IPL team by paying 50 lakhs and he had a very good outing there too. But it's not 50 lakhs which made him happy, the prospect of sharing the locker room and playing alongside his idol made him to lose sleep for over a week.

He has become a hero in the eyes of the cricketing public; a canteen owner at the age 35 making his debut at Ranji level and at the age of 36 making his mark at an international level through IPL was more or less like a fairy tale.

One fine evening after his regular practice he was sitting with Anjali and said:

"I think I should quit cricket now; I never thought will play at this level and this game gave me everything; name, fame and money. Maybe it's time for me focus on the kids; Kaushik is playing well and Ashok sir told me that he has a bright future"

Knowing that it is difficult to change his mind, Anjali says:

"If that's what you want to; but can you keep yourself away from the game? That to after what you've done over the last couple of years? Why don't you continue to play in the IPL, it's a short tournament and you don't have to be there full time."

"That's correct, but once I am not playing regular cricket I won't be able to perform in the IPL" he said.

"Even though I am enjoying my game, somewhere I feel as if I am responsible in blocking a bright young talent. At times I feel it'll be good if they don't select me for the next season, that way I don't have to blame myself for whatever decision I take" he continued.

"Ha ha ha; that's a good idea, why don't you talk to Venkat sir and tell him you'll pay if they don't select you" She said while bursting into laugh.

"Great, first time in the history someone bribed for not to be selected. I'll be in the history books for the wrong reasons" he joins her.

"No, seriously what do you think I should do?" he continues.

"I think you should eat the samosas I made, they're getting cold. Meanwhile I'll go and make a cup of tea for you" saying that she just pushes a plate of samosas lying on the center table and goes into the kitchen.

After a lot of discussions which continued for few more weeks and involved Venkat, Mr. Ashok and Lakshman; they decide to leave it on to the selectors. If he's selected, he will play for one more season and that's it, it'll be his last domestic season. Unfortunately for him he gets selected and more importantly made the captain of his team.

In the middle of the 2014-15 season the list of 30 probables for the 2015 world cup to be played in Australia and New Zealand were announced to Kailash's surprise, his name was included in that list.

Everyone knew it'll be difficult for Kailash to be selected considering his age and also the list has names that automatically select themselves on any day. 22 names in that list already represented the country and played more than 10 matches. Knowing that the tournament will be played on fast bouncy wickets of Australia and New Zealand, picking an unknown player is a risk. Even though Kailash was part of India A tour to West Indies and Sri Lanka, his experience on the fast pitches is in question.

As expected the selectors kept their faith on the international experience, Kailash's name was not included in the final fifteen. In the mean while Hyderabad team under the leadership of Kailash won the 2014-15 edition of Ranji and Kailash for third consecutive year scored more than 1000 runs in a season. In doing so, he broke some of his own records set in the previous couple of seasons.

After the season was over, as promised to his kids; Kailash took them to the new Batman movie. Thirty minutes into the show, when the movie is into a serious and tense chasing, Kailash's phone rings with a loud noise. Everyone looks at him as if he's committed a huge crime and before it goes into the second ring Kailash answers it, it was from Venkat:

"Hello Venkat sir, I am in the middle of a show can I call you in twenty minutes time? He whispers to the phone.

Venkat says something, but the noise in the theatre gulps his voice.

"Sir I can't hear anything, will call you in twenty minutes" he says apologetically and hangs the phone and turns his phone into silent mode.

During the interval Kailash and Prateek came out to buy some refreshments; Kaushik and Anjali are huge fans of popcorn and no movie is complete without them. Both were at the counter Kailash tells Prateek to place the order and he pulls out his phone to make a call to Venkat. He's surprised to see many missed calls and realises that he kept the phone in silent mode instead of vibration.

It was Venkat who called him and also Mr. Ashok and few other numbers which are not in his address book; Kailash was totally pissed off with himself. While making sure that Prateek is not overdoing with his order, he dials Venkat's number and after couple rings he answers:

"Venkat sir, I am extremely sorry I kept my phone in silent mode and did not realise you called me" Kailash said.

Venkat said something to Kailash as he was collecting a popcorn bucket from the vendor and what he heard just made him cry in pain. In the process he ignores the vendor and paper bucket just falls on the floor with popcorn all over the place. Kailash could not control his emotions and he takes a support from an adjacent wall and slowly collapse on the floor with the phone tightly held to his chest.

He was sobbing like a child and everyone nearby gather around him to check what actually went wrong. Few could recognise who he is and tried to understand from him as to what exactly happened. In the meanwhile Prateek runs into the theatre to bring Anjali and Kaushik. Both arrive

at the scene after couple of minutes and Anjali was in complete shock to see her husband crying like a baby. She saw the phone which was held to his chest and could notice that the call was still on.

She slowly pulls the phone from his grasp to see who's on the other side; it was Venkat. She places the phone near the left ear while trying to make sure that both the kids are in her sight.

"Venkat sir, this is Anjali" She said slowly, her voice was very weak as if it came from 100 feet below.

"Hello Anjali there's very good news; I was just telling him about this and he simply vanished from the call" He said.

"I don't know what you told him sir, but he is crying; is everything alright?" she says.

"Of course yes, he is selected to the national team for the upcoming world cup in Australia. I just told him and he's gone" Venkat replies.

"What??? Sir are you serious? I don't think this is matter to make fun of" she knew Venkat and very well somewhere down that he's not joking. She wanted to make sure that it is true, after all Kailash will be playing at the highest level.

"Yes I am damn serious; in the afternoon one of the player broke his wrist while practicing at the National Cricket Academy (NCA) and physio ruled him out for 6 to 8 weeks. Captain saw Kailash in the IPL and he wanted a good finisher to support him in the team and I was told he recommended Kailash's name to the selectors. The news is already out and the board made an announcement 15 minutes ago" he sounded very confident while saying that.

Anjali leans forward looks at Kailash who's still looked shocked at the news he just heard; she picks up a water bottle from the shop and slowly make him drink. It was only after ten minutes or so he could recover from the shock, they leave the theatre heads home directly. While doing so she asks the vendor to turn on the new channel; just confirm. It was there; a ticker with breaking news was to be seen "Tea vendor to World cup team".

When they reached home they could not believe what they saw, the whole area was filled with media people, neighbours and in a corner Mr. Ashok along with Karthik and Lakshman were standing. Kailash could see the tears in Mr. Ashok's eyes from a distance; he reaches him first by carefully avoiding the media people. As soon as he reaches him, he simply bows and touches his feet out of respect; only this time Mr. Ashok let him do what he feels like and later simply hugged him and said "Thank you".

After answering couple of questions from media people and accepting the wishes of the neighbours all seven of them go into the house.

"Even though you're not the first player to play for the country from my academy, somehow I felt very happy" Mr. Ashok said.

"I always thought everything is in our control; but I may have to change my opinion, maybe many things are not in our control and whatever happens, happens for our good" he continued.

While they're discussing about the next steps, Anjali makes dinner for them and after a lot of pressure from the family, they trio eat their dinner at Kailash's place.

After everyone left and they finish speaking with all the relatives and friends from all across; both sat together and checked the news channels which were showing his selection as breaking news. Kids were in deep sleep on the sofa itself and the hall was a mess with all the dinner plates and other stuff just left everywhere. They didn't move; they wanted to enjoy that moment in solace.

Right then Kailash asks:

"Do you know why I cried and was in shock when I heard the news? I thought you'd ask."

"I know you'll tell and moreover when did I get the time to ask you"? She replies.

"Listen carefully; I've never shared this with anyone; maybe because I was afraid or maybe because I was worried that people will laugh at me." He stopped for a moment to gather some courage and then continued.

"From the day I saw this sport I simply fell in love; I always had a dream; a goal which was even impossible to be dreamt off. To play at the highest level, those days I didn't know what highest level is. I didn't even know one needs to cross many hurdles to play for a national team. I simply told myself, one day I've to play this sport and should be considered as the best in the world"

"Every day I get up, reach the ground and wait. Few months later I simply realised it's not easy for me; not because I don't have the talent; simply I didn't have resources to sharpen my skills"

"I realised, my goal is like wanting to have the moon in hands; maybe that's easy"

"When Ashok sir let me work at the ground, I felt there's one per cent chance and that soon gone when I was forced to move back. The rest you know." He said.

"When I was picked for ABC & Co or Hyderabad team; I was afraid that I may fail; I was afraid that I get rejected. I know it sounds funny if I say I am afraid of getting rejected when all along I was saying that I don't want to play. I lied, I simply lied because if I shared my dreams with anyone they'll laugh; why someone else, even you'll laugh won't you"? He continued.

She didn't say anything; first time she saw him like this after their marriage.

"I felt like my heart stopped when I heard the news; I was dejected when my name was not in the list of 15 players and I could not concentrate anything for two days" he continued.

"I don't know if I get a chance to play or simply warm the bench; but I can tell you I've no more dreams. Once I wear the national colors, I don't care even if I can't play for the rest of my life. For that matter my last game at a national level will be my last cricket match"

Still she didn't say anything and simply let him do the talking.

Next morning all the newspapers carried one important news: "Tea vendor to Indian Team"; "Performance over age"; "Local man made it to the national team"; "Who's Kailash"? He's become an overnight celebrity and at the academy Mr. Ashok was busy interacting with various reporters:

"Mr. Ashok how long since you knew Kailash"? A reporter asked him.

"If I remember it correctly, I think it was early 90s when first saw him; he was standing right behind that wall (directing towards where he first saw Kailash); in those days there was no wall, it used be a barbed wire fencing. Kailash used to come here every morning, stood there and watch people practicing. At first I thought he's like any other kid but when I saw him every day for few days, I developed some kind of an interest on him" he said.

"I used live towards Tarnaka and one day on my way to the ground I saw this kid running barefoot on chilly winter morning and realised how much pain he's taking just to watch the game. I found a pair of torn shoes left by one of my students as they're no use for him; I got them repaired and left them where this kid stood every day. He picked them and started coming to the ground wearing them then onwards" He continued.

"So, how did he manage to enter the academy for coaching"? Another reporter asked.

"After seeing his interest and sincerity, I asked him if he's interested to work with us. I told him if he works well, one day he can play. He was very happy and started working here; he used to like Venkat very much and just used to imitate exactly how he played standing right next to him outside the nets. Boy you should've seen them, it used look like synchronised swimming"

"How was he when he was a kid, I mean his game?" Another reported asked.

"I think he was the most gifted player I've ever seen. This boy was a natural talent; he was very good at predicting the bowler's next step. At times I and Lakshman, our bowling coach thought he has some unnatural powers and he was able to psyche the bowlers and made them to do exactly what he wanted".

"Why did he leave the academy"?

"It was due to personal reasons and I don't think it's appropriate on my part to comment on that" he replies.

"When did he came back"

"It was around four years back; he came to join his kids in my academy. He wanted them to become good cricketers and asked my help; and what happened next I think you'll know" he replied.

Kailash left for NCA Bangalore next day where he met the coach, physio and the team for the world cup in serious preparations where he was well received by the whole team and the support staff.



India starts off well by beating Pakistan in their first match and what followed next was a heart break for most of the fans. They lose to South Africa cheaply and in a tight match they lose to the UAE, which is considered as the biggest upsets in the world cup history. They go to their next match needing to win to have a chance to advance to the next round.

### **March 06, 2015; WACA cricket ground, Perth, Australia:**

The whole Indian team was sweating in the nets; it was an important match for them after they've lost against South Africa and UAE, they needed to win the match against West Indies to save themselves from elimination. After the nets, Captain came to Kailash and tells him that he will be playing in today's match. He was not in the playing 11 for the first three matches and the captain felt it was time to test Kailash.

West Indies after winning the toss batted first and they could score 283 on a fast and bouncy WACA wicket. The score on that wicket was very competitive and most of the experts felt that India may lose the game unless the batting unit clicks collectively, which failed in their last couple of matches miserably.

Indians were 256 for 4 in 48.4 overs needing 28 runs in 8 balls. Varun, who is well set along with the captain who just came to join him in the previous over were at crease. It was a very difficult task and the pace and bouncy wicket at the WACA made things worse for India.

Jason Brown a fearsome young bowler who already took 3 wickets in the match was bowling his final over. It was fast full-length ball outside the off-stump and in a flash, Varun swings his bat and the ball flows over the extra cover fielder for a huge six. 22 needed of 7 and there was a mini conference between the captain, bowler and their senior player Brain; Jason tells something to the captain for which he nods and moves an extra fielder to support the uppish drive on the offside boundary rope.

"I am sure he's trying a bowl a slow bouncer and force Varun to go for an uppish cut" James one of the commentators said.

"It may back fire on him as we'll know how good Varun on the square of the wicket and if it doesn't work out as planned for Jason, Captain will be able to finish the match in the next over" Bob, the other commentator shares his view.

Jason now looks at the fielder at the deep midwicket tells him to move a bit squarer indicating he might bowl a bouncer targeting the face.

He takes the stride, runs fast and bowls exactly the similar delivery as of the previous one but only this time the pace was 30 kmph slow. Varun sensing the opportunity just rushes into another uppish drive over the extra cover, only this time as there was no pace on offer and the ball flies high into the air and fielder in the deep third man could grab onto an easy catch.

India loses a crucial wicket and now need 22 runs in the last over; unfortunately the problems didn't end there for them:

"What just happened? So Jason did a double bluff on Varun and induced a false shot on a slow ball, what a clever tactic" Bob said.

"Don't forget in that process he made sure that it'll be the new batsman at the crease in the next over and not the captain"

"Oh, what a blow to India's chances, their only hope is their captain and now he's a mere spectator like us, at least in the first one or two deliveries" Bob continued.

Kailash a 37 year old cricketer about whom very few people heard only in the last year or so, thanks to IPL walks in to the middle with his team needing 22 runs in last 6 deliveries. It is not something which was never done; there were scores of over 22 achieved in the past in the last over. But the situation his team in and experience of the batsman who's at the crease made it a worst scenario for India's chances.

"Good thing is no one knows what his favourite scoring areas are or his weakness at international level and I heard he's a very good puller of the short pitch ball which is needed on this fast bouncy Perth wicket" Bob said.

"I've seen him score 30 runs in an over in the IPL, but you can't compare IPL performance to the international cricket" James joins.

The last over is to be bowled by Dennis, who's not as quick as Jason is but a very useful bowler at the death. He bowls a very good slow ball and known for his Yorkers.

Captain and Kailash were in the middle with Captain telling something and Kailash simply nod his head as an approval.

"Captain must have told him to take a single and give him the strike; 21 runs in 5 balls with him on the strike gives a remote chance to India"

"Maybe Captain told him go with full force; we all know Kailash can hit few outside the park"

"What would you do James if you're the captain? Would ask him to hit like his life depends on it or take a single and give me the strike" Bob says.

"I think I'll ask him to play as per the merit of the delivery, if the ball is there to be hit and he's confident I'd simply ask him go at it full-strength" James replies.

Kailash takes the leg stump guard, looks at the field which is predominantly offside protected with only one fielder at the long on towards outside outside 30 yard circle. The field indicates it'll be a slower full delivery outside the off with only option to hit it on the offside.

"Will it be a full delivery outside off stump James? Or maybe another bluff in the offering here"?

"If you look at the field, that's what you can make out" James replies.

Dennis runs in fast and bowls a fast Yorker few inches inside the wide marker and right on the crease; everyone was so focused on the delivery they simply missed what Kailash did before hitting slashing the ball over third man for a six. They could see only in the reply what he exactly did.

From the leg stump guard he moves his back leg outside off, opens the blade slightly, and bends his upper body towards back like an arc and with the whole body weight on his right leg simply slashes the ball very hard. The ball hits the sweet spot and flies over third man 20 rows into the stands.

The whole stadium erupts into a loud cheer and the whole Indian team is on their feet in the dressing room.

The next delivery was a slow bouncer on the off-stump and by the time the ball reached Kailash he's perfectly position himself way outside the off-stump and all he had to do is to connect it. He did exactly that and the ball just falls over deep square leg for another six.

"I've heard from his couch Ashok that Kailash is very good at predicting the bowler and he went on to say that sometimes he think Kailash can psyche the bowler and make him bowl where Kailash wants. Do you think he could Bob"? James asked him.

"I don't know; I've never heard or seen a batsman doing that. But one thing I can say, he's able to read the bowler well; for this kind of a delivery only option is behind the square on the leg side. He was out in a flash towards the off stump and I think he knew what's coming at him" Bob replies.

After taking 12 runs from the first 2 deliveries, all India needed were 10 in the last 4 four deliveries.

Another mini conference from the fielding side; they didn't expect a 37 year old rookie to play like that. Meanwhile Captain had a quiet word with Kailash, which everyone presumed not more than "you're doing great, keep it going".

The next ball was a fast Yorker on the middle stump which is unplayable if someone is standing right on the crease which batsmen usually do. But what Kailash did is baffling; he was standing way back in the crease just few inches in front the stumps and slightly outside leg stump, which gave him enough opportunity to get under the ball and it was sweetly timed for a six over extra cover.

Four runs needed in 3 deliveries, now it was India's game to lose. The whole Indian team and the support staff were standing outside the rope, arms on each other's shoulders waiting for the impossible to happen. Mr. Ashok, Lakshman, Karthik, Venkat, Anjali and Kids were shown on the monitor and they looked really tensed with Mr. Ashok seen praying.

After a mini conference between Dennis, Brian and Jason the field was again moved. Long on and Long off were brought back in; with deep third man, fine leg, long leg and deep cover as the four fielders guarding the boundary it has to be a slow bouncer on the off stump is what commentators concluded.

With mid-on and mid-off right at the edge of the 30 yard circle, Dennis starts his run up with a huge burden on his shoulder to stop the carnage. He bowls a slow good length ball right on the middle stump, Kailash simply waits and this time he didn't move; takes one step forward and lofts it

over the bowler's head for a six. The whole Indian team rushed on to the pitch and in no time Kailash is thrown into the air.

India won the match and they now have a very good chance to qualify for the quarter finals of the world cup 2015. The next day newspapers read:

"A NEW HERO IS BORN"

\*\*END\*\*