

# Preface

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

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

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

“Viraj, how is it going?” I asked.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Warm regards,  
Vasant Kallola

# The Rise of a Father

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

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

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

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

Rahul moved up the stage, shook hands with Priya and the President of the Jury, Shri Raj Shekhar Poddar, who were instrumental in selecting the awardee.

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

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

As Rahul turned to walk back towards his seat, Priya quipped, “Congratulations, Rahul, for such a fantastic innovation, but we will not allow you to go back without hearing a few words from you,” then she looked at the audience and said, “Right?”

There was enthusiastic response from the audience. Rahul smiled and nodded his head in affirmation. She walked towards him and handed him the microphone. Holding the microphone, Rahul looked at the trophy which he was holding in his right hand, smiled a bit and said, “Innovation is not new to Gold Star, because we love what we do.” Rahul paused.

A round of applause greeted this statement.

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

“Let me show you how we are going to transform your life and the budget of your companies, cities and countries and of the entire globe. At present, on every working day, all of us travel in the morning from our home to our office, using either our own

transport or the public transport. In office, we carry out our respective work and return home in the evening. As per the survey conducted by Gold Star, an average worker or executive spends two hours of travelling time to office, covering a distance of about 25km. He then works in office, which are generally air-conditioned spaces and conducts his business. Do you realize the costs involved in making all of us work out of our so-called, systematic office premises? Let me show you how much we spend.”

He started explaining the details to the audience. The conclusions were, that V-Office could save travelling costs of US\$ 739 bn per annum; second, it could save office infrastructure investments to the tune of US\$ 7032 bn; and third, operational costs worth US\$ 64.4 bn per annum could be saved as well.

Rahul continued, “Now going forward, if we assume 10 per cent more people are added to the global workforce, we will be needing an additional US\$ 1758 bn of investments in setting up new office premises, roads for travelling, fuel and several other essential resources. And we would need approx. US\$ 263 bn per annum of operational costs to maintain these infrastructure. But, with our new solution, V-Office, you won't need all these - just a broadband connection and a computer at home. It's that simple! As a matter of fact, our new concept has the potential to alter the economies of several nations of the world.”

As Rahul finished speaking, some in the audience were so excited that they started clapping loudly. Before the applause could settle, the Vice-President of the Jury got up from his chair. His gesture inspired members of the audience to follow his lead: they too stood up, applauding, showing their admiration and appreciation. The standing ovation to Rahul's speech, the bright

lights in the majestic hall, and the continuous flashlight from the cameras that signified that every moment with Rahul was captured, were some of the memories that many carried back home with them that night.

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# The troubled son

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

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

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

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

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

“Will you eat something now?”

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

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

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

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

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

Next morning, he woke up suddenly and started running towards his father’s room, as if he wanted to catch him as soon as possible. He was quite eager to talk to his father about his interaction in the school with his principal. As he pulled open the door of the room, it opened with a big bang, but there was no one in the room. His father had already left for office!

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

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Mrs Rahul Saxena, or Sheetal Mehra Saxena. Rahul’s wife and Sachin’s mother, Sheetal, was a modern, beautiful lady. She was a lawyer by profession and, perhaps that is why she had an argumentative nature. Rahul and Sheetal divorced two years

back, after 15 years of married life and she had since then shifted to her own apartment in Bandra. The daughter of a very successful lawyer in Mumbai, Sheetal managed her own legal practice in her Lower Parel office.

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

“Look Shilpa, your case is very strong. You have all the reasons to leave Sudhir and seek divorce. He must get committed to you, after all he has married you. His argument that, he can't leave his family is a lame excuse. Why can't he leave her and separate with you? We have a very strong case in our favour, Shilpa, and I'm sure you will be able to get justice in court.”

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

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

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

“Your Honour, my client Shilpa is married to Sudhir for the past four years. They stay in a joint family, along with Sudhir's mother, his elder brother and his elder brother's wife. The elder

brother has retired and therefore, does not have an income of his own. In a way, he and his family are a liability to Sudhir, so my client is insisting her husband to separate from them and live in another house. But, for some strange reasons, Sudhir is refusing to do so. My client has waited for many years but now she is not able to live under the same conditions, and is seeking divorce from Sudhir. You are requested to grant them the divorce so she that can lead an independent and dignified life.”

Sudhir’s lawyer, Bankim, stood up and said, “Your Honour, I would like to question Shilpa.”

“You may proceed.”

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

“Ma’am, do you have parents?” and then quickly added, “What a silly question, you can’t be born without parents. I mean, are your parents alive?”

“My dad passed away three years back, Mom stays in Kolkata.” “How old is she?”

“Seventy-five,” Shilpa replied.

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

“No, she stays in my father’s flat all alone. I have a brother but he lives separately, with his family. You see we are a modern family, everyone is independent and leads his or her own life the way they wish to. We neither interfere in other’s lives, nor do not like interference in our life,” Shilpa said emphatically.

“Last year, your mother suffered a cardiac arrest and she was unconscious in her house. Luckily, she has a good and caring young couple as her neighbor, who reached your mother’s flat in time and took her to the hospital. Don’t you think she would be better off by not being left alone? Would you not like your own brother to take care of your mother in her hour of need? After all, she gave birth to him, brought him up, and made him capable of looking after himself, his family and leading the life he is leading at present?”

Shilpa looked down and nodded her head in affirmation.

Turning to look at the judge, Bankim said, “Your Honour, point to be noted.”

Bankim continued, “Do you have any children?”

“No.”

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

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

“No, your honour, I am driving home a point which has relevance to the case.”

The judge looked at Sheetal, and said, “Objection overruled,” and then said to Bankim, “You may continue.”

“Thank you, Your Honour,”

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

“Yes.”

“You were able to recover fast only because of the extra care and home medicines given by your mother-in-law and Bhabhi.”

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

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

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

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

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

"But, sir..."

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

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

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

"Hey, Sachin!"

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

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

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

"Then you should have told him so."

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

"Get your mother instead," advised Samir.

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

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

"Then what are you going to do?"

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

After thinking a lot and not finding any alternative, Sachin finally called up his mother.

"Hello?" Sheetal answered her phone.

"Hello, Mom," responded Sachin.

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

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

"Mom, you need to accompany me to school. Principal Sir has asked me to get my parents to meet him."

Suddenly the tone of her voice became harsh and loud.

"Why has he called me? What have you done? Despite all my suggestions and advice, you're not improving at all. Every second

day, I keep hearing complaints about you. I am fed up of all this! You have no shame at all.”

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

Suddenly she demanded, “Well, why don’t you tell me why he has called? I know, you are not so clever that he would have called me to his office to give me an award. He’ll be again complaining about you, am I right, Sachin? Why aren’t you speaking up?”

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

His mother shouted over the phone, “I don’t know anything! Why did you get less marks? Look at the other students. Look at Samir, in spite of losing his father last year in an accident, he is still doing well in his studies!”

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

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

“Mom, Dad is in the US. He had to attend some conference. Mom, I’m sorry, but will you come, please?”

“Do I have any option?” she replied sarcastically.

The moment the conversation was over, Sachin started crying uncontrollably. There was no one to reassure him, to counsel him. Sachin looked at a photograph of a smiling Rahul, who

wasn't around....

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Meanwhile, in the US, Rahul's contributions to business and innovation were well appreciated by the board members of Gold Star Electronics. The company had called a board meeting and he was a special invitee. In the board meeting, Chairman David Brown took the seat; all board members were also seated. Rahul was one of them.

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

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

With a broad smile on his face, he looked at all the board members, who were also in smiles. He concluded his address by adding, "Needless to say, with this solution, Gold Star will become industry leader in revenues and profitability."

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

All board members applauded signifying their approved of Rahul's inclusion in the global board.

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

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

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

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

Rahul could sense Sachin’s nervousness and grew concerned.

“Son, what’s the matter? Are you alright? Why are you upset? Is there anything you want from the US? I will get some interesting gifts for you when I come back.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Hello, Mr Rahul Saxena! How is it that you remember me today?" She said in a sarcastic tone.

Rahul ignored the sarcasm and replied, "I remember you every day, only you have closed the doors of communication and that is not allowing my voice and emotions to reach you."

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

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

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

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

Sheetal seemed to be in mood to fight, but Rahul's approach forced her to change the mind and she replied, "Okay sir, but make sure it does not become your habit to throw all your responsibilities at me."

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

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

“Good morning, Mom.”

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

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

“Yes tell me, what’s the matter?”

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

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

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

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

“No, Mom,” Sachin replied timidly.

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

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

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

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

Four people were present in the principal’s office: Principal

Roshan Daruwala himself, Sachin's class teacher Ms Madhuri, Sheetal and Sachin.

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

Sheetal listened to him silently.

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

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

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

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

"Oh, okay but it will be a pleasure to meet him, if there's a

next time,” Madhuri smiled a little as she said this, “Please do bring him along. He seems to be very intelligent. Recently I saw his interview on NBC, where he spoke about his invention of V-Office and how it can transform our planet and improve the quality of life we lead.”

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

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

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

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

“See, look at this... even our son is on his side. I take all the trouble to come and meet you. There is no appreciation for it, but the moment I speak against his dad, Sachin has to object!” Sheetal ranted on. Principal Roshan Daruwala realized there was some tension between Sheetal and Rahul. Since he knew both of them well, he thought it appropriate to intervene, “Well, Mrs Saxena. Thanks for coming, it was nice meeting you. We have conveyed the facts which I feel you should know about your son. Try and support him, he does not seem to be in the right frame of mind. I don’t know the reasons behind it. What I can definitely see is that he needs counselling, comfort and love. Children are like

tender plants, with care and proper environment you can make them blossom, but under harsh conditions they can create some situations which we can only regret, if ignored. Okay then, I have to go for my class. Thank you,” he stood up, signaling the end of the meeting.

On the way back from school, Sheetal was still seething - her ego was hurt. She couldn't accept the few firm words that the principal had said towards the end of the meeting. She obviously had not taken the concerns and message by the principal and Madhuri in the right spirit. Her mind was wandering around Rahul's popularity, the appreciation he was getting for his innovation and the manner in which the principal had wrapped up the meeting. She took it as an insult! And her fault-finding mindset had interpreted things in a totally different way, leaving no space or even thought for support or counselling to Sachin. Poor Sachin!

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

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

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

He just murmured, “Come back soon, Dad.”

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

Suddenly he stopped to ask a question to the class, and his eyes

fell on Sachin.

“What is the equation of the area of a circle?”

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

Annoyed, Bhattacharya Sir started yelling at Sachin, “You don't know such a simple answer? What do you do in class? Where is your attention?” Then, he looked at another student and asked, “Shivani, you tell me, what is the equation of the area of a circle?”

Shivani promptly replied, “Pi r square, sir.”

The teacher beamed in joy and looked at Sachin again. “See, how simple it is? You don't know the answer to even such a simple question?”

Sachin started getting nervous. He stuttered, “Sa-sa-ra actually...”

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

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

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

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

He just murmured, “Come back soon, Dad.”

\* \* \* \* \*

## The ultimate step

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

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

Sheetal, who had left for the hospital the moment she got the news, rushed into the Emergency ward, but was told that Dr. Mahajan was operating on Sachin at that very moment, and she

was asked to wait outside, at the hospital lobby. After around two hours, the doors of operation theatre opened and when Dr. Amit Mahajan walked out, the hospital staff called out to Sheetal.

Tensed and scared, she virtually ran towards him, and asked, "How is he, Dr. Mahajan?"

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

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

After some time, a voice on the other end of the line, took the call. "Hello!"

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

Rahul was immediately on alert, "What happened?"

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

Rahul was in a meeting when Sheetal broke the news to him. Mobile phone dropped from Rahul's hand. There was darkness in front of his eyes. Rahul felt as if whole building in which he was sitting had started shaking. He wanted to speak but no words were coming out of his mouth, just some unclear sound "Ozz.. Ozzz".

David Brown was sitting beside Rahul when Sheetal rang up. David noticed sudden change in behaviour of Rahul, but he could not make out why there was sudden change in Rahul's condition. He immediately sprung to action and filled a glass of water from jug kept on his desk. He offered water to Rahul in a glass. While

holding the glass, David noticed Rahul's hand was still shaking. Rahul sipped some water from glass and closed his eyes. His closed eyes started brimming with tears, which started rolling down his cheeks.

Rahul gained control in some time. David asked him what had really happened. With moist eyes and in a trembling voice, Rahul apprised him of the situation.

Brown said, "I'm very sorry for you, Rahul, but everything will be alright, don't lose hope." Then he looked at his watch and, thinking fast, continued, "At this time, there's no flight to India. Do one thing. You take my flight, right away. I'll just call the Aviation Ministry and arrange your travel to India."

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

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

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

When he arrived at the hospital, there was long queue at the lift. Sheetal had informed him that Sachin had been allotted a special room on the seventh floor of the hospital. Rahul could not wait for the lift to arrive and started climbing the stairs at a fast pace. By the time he reached the seventh floor, he was exhausted, and was breathing heavily and perspiring. But he didn't care!

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

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

She put her head on Rahul's chest and started crying loudly. After crying for some time, she became normal. In a choked voice, she told Rahul, "Sachin consumed poison to commit suicide."

Tears welled up in Rahul's eyes. It was with tremendous effort that he sought to control his emotions, but deep sadness and worry was visible on his face. Slowly Sheetal took Rahul to the room where Sachin was being treated.

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

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

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

Sheetal remained silent.

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

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

"Oh, Rahul, is he your son?"

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

"See, Rahul, he has consumed poison," Dr. Mahajan said gravely. "And he arrived in hospital quite late. We have given him

the required medications and treatment, and are waiting for him to respond to it. So far, there has been very little improvement in his condition since the time he was brought in. I think it could have been better, so we are observing him. Let's hope for the best, Rahul."

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

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

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

"I really don't know. I was in the US when my wife telephoned me. I rushed to the hospital straight from the airport. I really don't know why Sachin would think of killing himself," Rahul replied, looking weary and haggard, gazing at the distance. Then, exhaling slowly, he added, "God, please be kind to me. Give long life to my son, take mine in exchange, if you so desire."

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

Putting his hand on Rahul's shoulder, trying to console him, said "Don't worry, God will surely be kind to a gentleman like you," and moving forward, entered Sachin's room. Unable to do anything, Rahul stayed out on the corridor, and kept on looking at the door, which had closed some time back.

\* \* \* \* \*

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

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

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

The more Rahul thought about Sachin, the guiltier he felt, the worse he felt. That guilt started coming out in the form of warm

tears from his eyes. He didn't know how long he sat in that condition, his eyes closed but with tears rolling down his cheeks, till a sweet and soft voice broke through his pensiveness.

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

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

Smilingly she asked, "Coffee?"

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

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

"No."

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

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

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

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

As she was talking to Rahul, someone waved at her, some distance away. She waved back, and told Rahul, "My friend is there. If you don't mind, I will come in some time, say around 10 minutes? Even some time back, Principal Sir and other teachers of the school had called me to say that they were planning a visit here, to see Sachin."

Rahul replied, "Sure. I will just see how Sachin is doing?"

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

"Hi! How are you, young man?"

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

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

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

"I am bad at studies, Dad. Everyone around me is angry and unhappy with me. Mom, Principal Sir, Madhuri Ma'am... they are all unhappy with my performance. From tomorrow, prelims are starting in school, and this time, too, I may not perform well so again I will disappoint them. At least this time, I did not wish to disappoint them so I decided to end my life as I can never be a bright student in my current life."

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

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

Rahul could not believe that his sweet-natured son had attempted to give up his life for such a reason - because of the high expectations that people had from Sachin, on the academic front. He could not control his anguish and started sobbing for

some time, holding Sachin's right hand in both his hands. Rahul couldn't help but think, how much trauma this boy has gone through just to fulfil the wishes of the elders around him.

Just then, there was a knock on the door, and Sachin looked in that direction. Rahul, who was in the midst of his discussion with Sachin, also looked back and noticed people coming in but he preferred continuing dialogue with Sachin.

Rahul had still not come out of mental state of shock and grief. That was evident from the fact that, he continued speaking to Sachin in spite of the presence of Sheetal and Principal Roshan Daruwala, who had just entered. Sachin shyly smiled at his Mom and Principal Sir who were standing in a corner and listening to the father - son dialogue.

Rahul was still talking, referring to what Sachin had said that he wanted to perform better academically because the elders around him wanted him to do so and also to ensure better life going forward.

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

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

"It's okay to fail, my son"

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