

Under the black sky filled with ominous clouds signalling a thunderstorm, stood a grey, stark building, adorned only by a nameplate which read, "Sharma's". A passer-by would find it uninviting to the extremes; as if it had gone pale after a long ailment. The house itself seemed to exude pain from struggles fought and lost. It seemed on the verge of collapse, any minute, any moment. More than the anguish, the house appeared to exhibit desolation. It gave the impression of being a derelict.

However, if seen through the half-open window, the evidence of life inside the gloomy building was given by a flickering lamp which casted dancing shadows on the wall. A quick passer-by might observe the shadows of a closet, over which were a few trophies, a worn-out bat, three stumps and something like a panama hat. But only a closer look would reveal the shadow of a hand in a constant motion. And a deep scrutiny would also reveal a revolver whose cylinder was in a constant motion.

The raven croaked in a distance and interrupted Aarman's musings. He gradually shifted his gaze towards that worn-out bat. The instance his eyes fell on it, a whole series of memories ran through his mind, making his body tremble with fear, misery and dashed hopes. His eyes closed on their own volition but he forced them open once again and steadfastly gazed at the bat. What he was about to do was going to restore his peace of mind and free his mind from all the grief. But before that he all that life had offered him, came as a flashback in his mind. His mind made him involuntarily view all the moments of his life once again.

3 years back: The selection day

Aarman gets up from his bed with a pounding heart in his chest. He gets ready and completes the days chores but with his heart beating heavily in his chest. The most important day of his life has arrived. Aarman prays to Lord to give him enough strength to accomplish his and his parents' dreams. Cricket had been his soul and body since the day his father gifted him a bat with Sachin's fake signatures. The boy took it to be the original one and vowed to be the best cricketer in the world like the little master blaster. There was no way his father could afford the fees for a cricket class. The school fees itself was a burden. Owing to their poor financial condition, there was little the father could do for his ambitious son. But Mr Sharma had no regrets since he believed in his' son's talents and knew deep in his heart that someday Aarman is going to make them all proud and rid them of their poverty.

Mr Sharma had all the grounds to believe in Aarman's talent. At the age of 18, he had won several trophies at regional and state levels. Aarman was quite a popular figure in his mohalla and his father's bosom would fill with pride anytime a neighbour would mention his son's achievements. Today was a big day for Aarman. Today was the selection for the national cricket team for the international tournaments. Mr Sharma blessed his son and wished him good luck. Aarman left with his cricket kit which his father had bought from the few savings they had.

Young boys in snowy white shirt, pants and shoes could be seen practising on the ground. Aarman entered the stadium and beheld a sight that brought an involuntary smile on his

face. He could already imagine the stadium, full of people, shouting his name on top of their voices as he enters to begin the match. He sees the panel of selectors and gets jittery. But he recovers himself and begins his practice before the final selection. A few more moments and then it would be his turn to showcase his talent and take his first step towards success.

“Aarman Sharma”, calls out one of the selectors and his heart jumps to his mouth. He swiftly stands up and walks with long strides. His play begins. With a perfect stance, Aarman hits his first six and astounds everyone present there. And after that it was a succession of amazing fours and sixes by Aarman Sharma that left everyone gaping in awe. With that his turn comes an end and he leaves the pitch with satisfaction in his heart. Now, with great anxiety, he awaits the results.

A few days pass by and with each passing one, Aarman’s nervousness increases twofold. The sight of a postman in the street makes him extremely excited but then it subsides when he realizes that the letter did not belong to him. But one fine morning, he wakes unusually early due to electricity failure and goes to the living room. He sits near the window to enjoy the cool breeze of the morning. Suddenly, his eyes fall on the red letter box and he could see some white paper through the thin aperture. His legs jump as if they had a life of their own and he throws open the letter box. It was the most awaited letter from the selection committee and he opens it with an ear to ear grin. But the grin turns into a smile when he learns that he was selected not as one of the eleven players but as the substitute player for the Indian Cricket Team. With his exultations, he wakes up other people in the house and they share his joy with a small, familial celebration.

After that, he had no sense of time. His coaching began and he became acquainted with the eleven players of the Indian Cricket Team. That was the best part of his life when he met all of them in person. One player he adored the most was Mahesh Dhavan, the Indian captain. He played with unmatched diligence and resilience. His secret ambition was to acquire the best qualities of each of them. He soon struck a good bond with almost everyone, especially with Yashraj Singh. Yashraj was one of the most prolific players of the team and the two became very good friends. Each day felt like a boon to him. At last, the day came when he would accompany the Team for the World Championship Trophy.

To Aarman, all seemed to happen in a flash. Sometimes, he wouldn’t believe his fate and would pinch himself to ensure that he wasn’t really dreaming. A quiet, sober boy with dreamy, brown eyes, coming from the underprivileged section of the society, had no idea a few days back that he would be packing his bags to depart for London with the other cricketers of the Indian team. It really seemed like a fantasy. The people in his house were going wild with preparations and his mother would never stop counting her beads and praying for the welfare of her only son. The father would go through the list repeatedly to make certain that every item was covered. All of them had already started conjuring up the scenario where they lived in a posh bungalow with a garage full of cars. All this would be made possible by the hero of their family. Aarman was so excited that he couldn’t sleep the entire night for the fear of not being able to wake up early despite setting the alarm clock at five.

People bustled about the airport and Aarman watched everything happening around him in silent admiration. He had to bid adieu to his family members just outside the airport and was now standing along with the other team members who were constantly watched and stared by the passers-by. There were people around them to ensure that a fanatic wouldn't jump out from nowhere and disturb the formalities the cricketers had to go through. Aarman was in a complete awe of everything since this was the first time he was commanding such an attention although most of it was not for him. But his amazement grew even more when he entered the plane and saw its extravagance. The others seemed to be completely indifferent to everything while Aarman watched it with marvel. He got a seat beside his friend, Yashraj Singh and found his journey to London to be one of the most amazing one ever.

London with all its charm and beauty had not failed to impress our pensive cricketer. Finally, the day came when the first match of the championship trophy was to be played: India v/s Australia. Aarman was totally thrilled to behold a match between India and Australia as a part of the Indian Cricket Team. The match began with India winning the toss and opting to field. Aarman saw the animated stadium with colourful posters cheering for India and Australia and people with flags painted on their cheeks. Nishant Verma was bowling and was doing quite a good job. And so was Australia, playing to set a high target for India. Aarman saw each and every person on the field and tried to grasp best from them. He saw their stance, the way they bowled and everything he could capture and implement. Out of all the people out there on the ground, there was one he particularly admired more. It was Mahesh Dhavan, the Indian captain. He had always been in the limelight for his extraordinary leadership skills and the way he tackled the most trying situations. Seeing his role model play, Aarman could not help but visualise himself to be that person.

Australia had set a target of 310, not an easy one. Ramesh Rana and Yashraj Singh begin the match and the first bowl is served to Yashraj, who hits an amazing six, getting uproar from the crowd. Aarman gets up from his chair and cheers for his friend. What a perfect start it was! The next two overs go perfect enough but then a downfall begins. Ramesh Rana is out after contributing 10 runs to the team and walks out by vociferating a few depressive words. Samrat Khanna is the next one to enter and gives the same disappointing performance like Ramesh. He is clean bowled and the Indian crowd in the stadium cheers with less fervour. Gaurav Ghosh was the next one to come. Yashraj is still playing and is giving an average performance. A ball just whizzes past the stumps which makes Aarman jump in his seat. A maiden over goes by and Aarman's anxiety rises by many folds. A sudden disquiet creeps into him and the excitement which he felt at the beginning of the play now turns into a disappointment for not being able to be there on the field. Yashraj was just not playing well that day. It was as if he was not giving his best shot. While he was busy thinking in an agitated state, Yashraj gets run out and the crowd clamoured in unison. Suddenly, an inner, suppressed voice in Aarman spoke in him mind, "you could have definitely done better than him". Immediately he shakes off the thought and begins to concentrate on the match. The captain, Mahesh Dhavan is now on the field. The burden of victory now rests on his shoulders. The Indian cricket fans sitting out there in the crowd were hollering incessantly at the entry of the captain. As the overs go by, Mahesh's performance gets better and better. He scores half a century in 38 balls. His was the best performance so far. Aarman watched him in silent admiration. But the bad luck soon fell on him too. Mahesh

was declared out after he scored 65 runs. Despite the admirable performance by the captain, India lost the match. Aarman had really not expected such a start to his journey in the cricket world. Somewhere, deep down inside his heart, he felt contempt more than the sorrow for India's failure. He felt contempt for all those who played on the ground with lesser abilities than those showed by him. Just one match and he felt he could do better than most people out there. Probably Aarman might have been correct. He could have played better than those who played that day. But the air of superiority that was beginning to blow in his mind needed constrain because proud people breed sad sorrows for themselves.

India was already through with two matches of the series; one against Australia, resulting in India's loss and the other against England, resulting in India's victory. It was a celebration night for the team when the other match resulted in a win. But just two more days were to go when the most critical match was to be played: India v/s Pakistan. No frenzy or hysteria could be seen in other matches as it could be seen in this one. The Indian and the Pakistani cricket fans would eagerly await this very match to portray the superiority of one over the other. The stadium was full that day. Indians were overly enthusiastic. The match began after Pakistan won the toss and decided to bat first. They played with great vigour and set a target of 300. Now it was India's turn to reply to that target and not to let down all those cheering for her in ear-splitting voices. Mahesh and Samrat Khanna were the opening batsmen. The Indian batting started with a slow pace and there was not much progress on the score board. Mahesh was at strike when Sharaf Akhtar threw a rapid spin which struck the batsman right on his shoulder, leaving him groaning on the ground. It struck him so fiercely that he had to drop the bat and clutch tenaciously to his arm. Tears of pain ran down his cheeks and immediately the medics were sent on the ground.

The Indian team was now in a very critical situation with their best player and captain injured. The consternation of the coach and other players was apparent on their faces. Samrat and Yashraj were now on the field and the hopes of Indian cricket fanatics lay on their shoulders. But alas! It seemed as if that day the Indian team was doomed. The wickets fell in succession and the score board read: 120/8. The Indians if the crowd had lost their vigour or it seemed as if they had passed it on to the Pakistanis. The result of the match seemed more or less predictable. Nishant Verma was on the field and now a substitute had to be sent in place of Mahesh. The substitute who was going to play was decided well in advance and it was the unanimous decision of the team to send Aarman on the field. The players knew the feeling a cricketer gets when he's about to play the first important match of his life and therefore, they tried their best to boost his energy and spirit. Aarman was in a different world at that time. The day he had waited for since years had finally arrived. That day the people of his muhalla were going to watch him play on international television and swell with pride. That day his father would be the most gratified person on the planet. He lifted the bat and made his way towards the pitch. He walked like he walked on a red carpet, seeing the stadium like he used to see as a child, visualising and fantasising his victory and the cheers he would receive from the crowd. It was the time to show what was in him to the world. The time had come when he had to spread the magic of his passion and enthral the spectators.

Aarman was on strike. The spectators vanished. The fielders vanished. The two people who remained on the pitch were Aarman and the bowler. The bowler takes a run-up and in a flash Aarman sees all his childhood dreams and the magnificent way in which they had come true. With concentration enough to set the whole stadium on fire, Aarman sees the spin of the ball and the moment it touches his bat, he swings it with tremendous force as if that was the first and the final ball of his career. The ball flies high into the sky and drops itself somewhere among the audience. For Aarman, all this happened in slow motion and he lived each and every millisecond of his first six. The Indian crowd once again grew wild and stood up to applaud the new player. After that there was no stopping him, sixes followed by fours and the Indian score kept on multiplying. The victory became very much obvious after the outstanding performance of this beginner. Even the Pakistani players stood up in praise of Aarman. The Indians won and without any doubt Aarman became a celebrity that day and India witnessed the birth of a new, talented, rising super-cricketer.

After that India won the championship series and the captain had not played any match since the India-Pakistan one. Aarman was considered to be the mainspring of the Indian victory. Those were his days of glory. The world was astounded by his play and the news channels never stopped reporting about this new player, citing him as the next prospective captain. Aarman was too happy with his success and could not wait to return India. He could almost see before his eyes the celebration that would take place outside his house in the muhalla and the way his people would adorn him with garlands. But when the box of success or eminence opens, nobody, nobody in the entire world is content with just one piece of sweet. That hunger never satiates and the person goes to all the extents he's capable of going, just to keep that box of fame open and with himself.

Someone has rightly quoted, "Fame doesn't fulfil you. It warms you a bit, but that warmth is temporary". Aarman had already opened the box of fame and now his days were filled with dreams of reaching to that peak of victory where no one had dared to reach. Now, it was not only the media considering him to be the next captain. Aarman had already imagined himself as the captain of the Indian cricket team. All it takes to burst that bubble of prominence is a flicker of pride inside the person. The moment he considers himself to be above others to some aspect, he takes his first towards his own downfall. And Aarman had already taken a few steps.

Just when the public eye had turned towards Aarman, news spread that Mahesh Dhavan was successfully past his surgery and was returning to the team. The beloved captain of India was coming back after a long span and naturally there was hype about it in the media and also amongst the rest of the team members.

"Hey Aarman, Mahesh's returning today. Let's throw him a party, what do you say?" Yashraj said with a lot of perkiness.

"Ya, go ahead, throw him a party, but I won't be there. Dad's invited a few guests home and asked me to meet them. Won't be possible for me. But you guys go ahead. Have a blast!" said Aarman with an impassive face, betraying no trace of the lie he had just spoken.

"Seriously? You won't be there for Mahesh's party? I mean the way you used to talk about him when you just entered the team and how you used to admire him! You wouldn't miss a chance to be around him for even a moment. In fact, I had even seen you secretly practicing

the way he plays. No dude, you have to be there. Ask your dad to call on the guests sometime later.”

“Yashraj, I just said I won’t be able to come and now that’s final. And as far as practicing Mahesh’s style is concerned, I am least interested in the way he plays. I have my own style and the world loves me for that. There’s no need for me to copy anyone. And why do you even need to throw a party? Hasn’t any other player got injured before? It’s ridiculous, the way you guys hang left and right around that sucker all the time.”

“Aarman watch your tongue! And what has got into you? You are talking like this about Mahesh? You?”

Aarman had never intended to be so crude while talking about Mahesh. For a moment he stood still and a long silence ensued. Yashraj stared at Aarman and Aarman looked straight ahead of him, seeing nothing in particular.

“Yashraj please let me alone for a while. I really don’t know why I spoke with such gruffness. I am sorry; I just need to clear my mind.”

“Okay, but bro anything you need to talk out....I’ll be available anytime. I can understand. We are all stressed at some time or the other. But you buck up, alright. See you later.”

With that Yashraj leaves and Aarman is left with a rattled mind. He is unable to explain it to himself the reason why he spoke so roughly. Yashraj was right. He shouldn’t have spoken about Mahesh in.....Mahesh the name itself gave him a different feeling now. Initially when he entered the team, hearing that name gave him tremendous hope and courage. He had someone to look up to. But now, the name has a totally different connotation for him. It produces a feeling that he wants to get rid of. It makes him nervous, restless and uneasy. But above everything else, it musters fear, a lot of fear in him.

“Fear for what?” he asks himself.

And then he answers himself.

“What I said might have sounded a little curt. But it was correct. Yes, it was correct. I was the one who played like a star and the triumph was because of me.” By saying so he robbed the credit of other players as if he was the only one who played the entire match.

“None of them celebrated when I was proclaimed the man of the match. But when Mahesh comes out of the hospital with a successful surgery, there are celebrations all over. Where’s the logic in that? I was the sole person who occupied the attention of every cricket fan and every news channel until Mahesh, the great Indian captain returned from nothing but a damn surgery. He’s taken it all now. I deserved that distinction which he has robbed me of. I might have talked about him in the heat of the situation but everything I said was absolutely correct. I have a justification for my grudge against him. He cannot wrong me. I won’t let him.” By this time, the seeds of revenge and betrayal had been planted in him which were to grow into full-fledged trees and bear cruel fruits.

A few months later

The days passed in quick succession and Aarman was now made to play as one of the eleven members of the Indian Cricket Team. However, this attainment had not really quenched his desire to gain more and more success. He was always in search of an opportunity to either bring Mahesh down or to prove himself superior over others. And one

fine morning, opportunity presented itself. Aarman was never to know the consequences of taking up this opportunity which would put an end to all his dreams and success in a jiffy.

“Aarman, dude, make it fast. We’re already late. Not even a girl takes so much time to get ready.” Yashraj had come to pick Aarman up for a party they were going to. India had just won a match against the Indies and this was their little, personal celebration. He went on honking till Aarman finally appeared out the door and presented himself in a very urban way. Yashraj had never seen him like this before and any girl would have gone gaga over seeing him dressed up that way.

“Aarman, you look no less than a modern day Adonis. I mean you could beat even Mahesh in looks today”, Yashraj said.

“Thanks Yash. And sorry for being late. Dad caught me up in some work.”

“Never mind. So, ready for the bash?”

“Absolutely”

Aer is considered to be the bar of the highest order in Mumbai city. Yashraj parks his Mercedes and the two friends head towards the bar. This had become their favourite hangout place and visited it umpteenth time since they first met. However, Yashraj being the nice, sophisticated man, never even touched the glass of beer. On the other hand, Aarman drank like he was left alone in a desert without water for days. Yashraj had to keep a strict check over him and sneak late into his home to drop him on his bed without his father’s notice.

They take a place around the corner and order for a cognac. The view from Aer was splendid and neither of them talked for a while and sat there, contemplating the view.

“You know what Aarman; I just got an offer to feature in an advertisement for Gillette shaving cream. The shooting starts the day after.”

“Wow! Amazing man”, said Aarman. Replying just that much.

“More brandy?”

“Yes sure.”

The friends sat there, bantering and enjoying the view. Just in the middle of their conversation, a hand gets laid on Aarman’s shoulder with enough force to give him a start.

“Hey Kabir! How are you doing! Such a great pleasure to see after such a long-long time. Where have you been and what have you been doing?”

“Yeah Aarman, it’s a pleasure to meet you and Mr Yashraj Singh. I have been working with a firm in Mauritius and have come here on vacation. How’s uncle?”

“Dad’s great”. He looks at Yashraj and then introduces the newcomer. “Yash, this is Kabir Rathod, dad’s best friend’s son.”

“Oh! Hi Kabir”

“Hi Mr Yashraj, pleased to meet you!”

Kabir Rathod, a man with highly charismatic personality which can win someone over within a few moments, was a high class bookie, working under the most dreaded man in Mumbai, David Abraham. It was no chance that he bumped into Aarman in Aer. He had the most sophisticated plan in mind, totally thought upon along with David. Kabir had always

been secretly involved in numerous spot and match fixing and the villa that he owned on Juhu beach was built not from the money he earned from the firm, but from the earnings he received from such black acts. He knew this was a vicious circle where once a man gets involved, he's trapped in it forever. With this thought in mind, he had come there to add one more player in the circle.

"So Aarman, you're a great man now. A player for the Indian Cricket Team! Now that's something! I remember how you used to practice on the school playground for hours at a stretch. I knew it from the first day I saw you practising that you would end up somewhere at the top and see I was right!"

"Yeah! And you were a cricket fanatic yourself, weren't you? Oh, you remember the way we used to place bets on various matches. Man, those were the days. I seriously miss them."

"Oh the bets....yes of course I remember them. I used to win most of the times. Your predictions were never as accurate as mine. Of course I remember them."

"What...my predictions? Wrong? Really?" Aarman questioned with utter disbelief.

"Of course they were wrong. Like most of the times."

"Kabir, I have never been wrong with the predictions. I knew the fate of each and every ball that was played in the match. Your memory's betraying you."

"Okay then prove it. Let's place a bet on the England V/s Australia match. Let's try our luck once again and see who wins this time", said Kabir with a taunting and challenging tone.

"Okay fine. Five hundred rupees for Australia."

"hahahaha" Kabir laughed for about a minute, clutching his stomach in the process. "Five hundred Rupees, really? Aarman you're a super star now. Gone are the days when such cheap bets were placed. Oh boy, you're such a simpleton. It's in lakhs now. Speak if you wish to place it for this amount or else accept that you were always a loser at betting and predicting for the games."

"Okay guys, no betting. Aarman, if you're done then let's go. Excuse us Kabir, we have an early morning practice tomorrow", intervened Yashraj when he saw that Aarman was already high and was slowly losing his senses. Kabir kept on refilling Aarman's glasses and that dunce went on drinking without realising the purpose behind Kabir's tactic of making him drunk and easing out the process of making Aarman place bets.

"Oh Yash I am not. At least not so early. It has only been 5 glasses and you say I am drunk. Nonsense! And you Kabir, calling me a loser...you were a loser. You lost bets, you idiot. Don't you dare call me a loser. Better learn talking to me. I am Aarman Sharma, the super cricketer, the best cricketer of India. You wanna call me a loser? Well then, I place a bet of ten Lakh rupees on Australia. See there, I've got guts."

"Okay Aarman, you've lost your senses. Kabir, please don't take him seriously. He's just too drunk...", Yashraj tried to sober up his friend and apologize to Kabir at the same time.

"Aarman, let's go ahead with the bet. Ten Lakhs it is then", said Kabir

"Mr Kabir, you're....", interjected Yashraj who was cut short by Aarman.

"Oh stop it Yash. Mind your own business. Kabir, get lost now. The bet's placed and meet me here at the same place on next Sunday with a bag containing the amount stated. The match's on Sunday and that's when I am going to win."

"Let's see Aarman. Bye for now. Bye Mr Yashraj, nice meeting you."

The next day Aarman had a terrible headache which was intensified by brooding over the bet placed. Of course he was a big cricketer now but he had to save his money for the plans he had in his mind. He could not afford to lose them on such stupid bets. He did not

dare tell anything about it to dad. But then the bet was already placed and again and again he vowed never to drink another time in life. He prayed to God like he had never prayed before. So with a fluttering heart, he waited for the coming Sunday. And along came the most awaited Sunday. Aarman's heart skipped a beat each time the Australians lost a wicket. Yashraj was there by his side and had chided him a hundred times for the carelessness he showed while being drunk. But as always, Fate had also decided to be on Aarman's side and the Australians won the match by 6 wickets. Aarman's happiness knew no boundaries. An increase in his bank balance delighted him like nothing else.

That day Aarman went to Aer, all dressed up and with a lot of pride in his stride. Kabir was there, all ready with the bag and his face beamed with a smile, like an animal seeing his prey getting caught in the net. But as mentioned before, this was not once and for all matter. It was a vicious circle and Kabir had successfully managed to trap Aarman in it. After that day, Aarman had placed 3 more bets, losing one and winning the other two. All in all, he had made a great amount of money, more than he would earn by playing a single match. Kabir had very skilfully trapped Aarman in the net, not leaving any space for him to come out. Betting had now become an addiction for him. Now he had to place bets in order to suffice his greed. The bets he placed were still in lakhs and now he wished to move a step ahead.

And Aarman did advance. From betting, he moved on to spot fixing. Kabir was his bookie and three overs of a match between India and New Zealand were fixed. So before the over would begin, Aarman would stretch himself as an indication for the bookie who would subsequently open the betting for public. The number of runs he would score were also fixed. India lost that match and the next one more match. He was made to play good in the next match so that there wouldn't be any doubts arising from any person. For money, Aarman willingly lost the matches and that too without his conscience biting him. Spot fixing advanced to match fixing and Aarman got away without a shred of doubt. Indians were really disappointed to see their star playing so badly. Even his team mates were greatly disappointed but they assured him by saying that every cricketer had his bad times. And this is how Aarman found luck to be in his favour and the pleasure that money gave him was in no match for the pleasure he initially used to get while playing wonderfully for his team.

But there was one person who was greatly moved by Aarman's bad performance. Because he had seen Aarman's dedication and passion towards the game, Yashraj was unable to fathom the reason behind this sudden disheartening performance by his friend. He had tried to reason it out with himself by thinking that Aarman must be going through a bad time which all the players go at some or the other point of time in their careers. But then the thought makes him so restless that he was unable to sleep and wanted to know the reason why Aarman played so badly. The first scruple of doubt came into the mind of Yashraj and it irked him. He remembered the way in which Aarman placed the bet the other day and this transition in him came after that. He really didn't wish to distrust his best friend but he had to find out if anything was going haywire behind his back and whether Aarman had found some new trouble for himself. And so he decides to confront Aarman and rushes to his home at midnight. He had this bad feeling that something was wrong somewhere.

Yashraj reached Aarman's house and was shocked to see Aarman leaving it in his car. At first he decided to get out and ask him to talk. But then he thought it wise to remain seated in the car and follow him. And this is how he finds out the real reason why his friend played the way he played when he saw Aarman taking a bag loaded with currency notes from Kabir. In the beginning, Yashraj could not believe his eyes and stood there shattered. He thought he knew Aarman extremely well and it broke his heart to see him committing such a big crime. But deep down in his heart, he still had that trust and love for his dear friend. So, before taking any step, he decided to talk it all out with him. He stood at the same spot for a long time until Aarman returned and their eyes met; the eyes which once saw love and tenderness in one another. But today, one's eyes were full of disappointment and other's full of fear.

Aarman walked towards his Yash with casual strides.

"Hi Yash! What are you doing here?" he asked with a calm and composed voice.

"What am I doing here? Seriously Aarman? What is in that bag? And why did you meet Kabir. You're fixing matches, aren't you? And for this reason you played so badly. I get it all now. Aarman, I thought you to be not only my best friend but a great, a very great cricketer as well. I still cannot believe you did all this. I trusted you like I trusted no one else. Aarman how could you...."

"Calm down Yash and come with me. We'll go sit somewhere and talk. There are just too many people here. Come let's go."

"I am not coming anywhere with you Aarman. Answer my questions first or else I am going to Mahesh and telling him everything. You better tell me everything from start till the end."

"You're not going anywhere Yash. And you know perfectly well why I did this. Why are you even bothering me? Did I stop you from doing anything? In fact, I would even ask you to join me. What's wrong in earning a few bucks with little or no effort?"

Yashraj was just baffled.

"Aarman you are the vilest person I have ever seen. I thing I was mistaken in judging you. You just wait and watch now. I am going straight to Mahesh and telling that we have a traitor right here amongst us."

"The moment you do any such thing, you lose me as a friend Yash."

"Do you think now I would care to have a friend like you? I would detest it."

"Fine then, go. I wouldn't stop you but bear one thing in your mind, you would regret this. You would seriously regret telling Mahesh all this."

"I don't care a farthing Aarman. Do what you want. One day, you're going to regret all this, not me."

Aarman might have threatened his friend with great conviction in his voice but every nerve of his body was tensed. He knew how true to his words Yashraj was. He knew too well that Yashraj would go straight to Mahesh and then everything would be out in the open. More than the regret of losing a great friend, Aarman was deeply scared. Right away he called Kabir from the phone booth. He was careful enough not to use his own mobile phone in case there were to be any investigations later one. Kabir was thoroughly enraged and blamed Aarman for all the neglect of safety.

"What was I supposed to do if he was following me? I did not have the faintest idea of it", Aarman spoke with a quivering voice.

“You fool, what are we going to do if that Mahesh gets to know everything? You have made a mess of everything.”

“Now what”, asked a tensed Aarman.

“Give me a call after some time.”

Aarman was trembling all over. He was thinking of all that could happen to him if he was caught. But he had enough faith in Kabir and his people. Kabir worked under David Abraham and that man was capable of doing anything in the entire world. Half an hour passed since he had talked with Kabir. He rang Kabir but no one answered. After forty five minutes, he called once again and he heard the coarse voice of Kabir Rathod.

“Listen now, I have talked with Bhai and he has assured to settle the matter. All you have to do is keep a check over them and anyhow get hold of their mobile phones. Hand it over to our man and we know what to do with them. And yes, one more thing, if our names are out, by any means, you would be destroyed. I hope you know what all Bhai can do. Better be careful with what you speak and with whom you speak. Go now and do what’s told to you.” With that, Kabir slams down the phone, leaving Aarman in an utmost dreadful condition. He was not able to move from where he stood. It was only when someone knocked on the window that Aarman came out of the booth.

Meanwhile, Yashraj had told everything to Mahesh who himself could not believe what he heard. He was totally confused and crushed. He had considered Aarman to be one of the most trustworthy and capable players of the team. But he had backstabbed all of them. Just when they were deciding how to handle the crisis, they got a call from Aarman at Mahesh’s place stating in brief that he would like to confess everything in front of the two and would once like to meet them before telling it publicly. He asked them to meet him on their practice ground in the morning. He stated all this within forty five seconds so that nothing could be taped.

It was a grim night for both of them. With great ease, David’s people were able to their mobile phones. The next day, Mahesh and Yashraj arrived at the ground earlier than the others and went straight to the room where Aarman had asked to meet them. Aarman was nowhere in sight. All that could be seen was an empty room with bare walls. But somewhere near the corner, on a long stool, lay a black bag. They stared at each other and then walked towards the bag. Mahesh laid his hands on it and just when he had half opened it, the door banged open and in came the Mumbai police. They were shell-shocked. Alongside them was Aarman who claimed to have eavesdropped their conversation about betting over the next match and the amount the betted was in crores. Beside the bag, were their mobile phones which neither of the two had cared to think about in all the hustle-bustle. The police checked the phones and found Kabir Rathod’s number in it. There were even three missed calls from the previous night. Kabir was definitely in for it but so were these two.

“Inspector, this is a misconception. It’s Aarman who was involved in all this. When we learnt about his involvement, we had decided to tell you first but....” said Mahesh with his usual cool state.

“Inspector, Mahesh is lying. And this Yashraj has always been jealous of me. He always wanted to get rid of me. Here’s the proof in front of you. You can see it for yourself.”

After that, no protests from the Mahesh or Yashraj were entertained. Based on the fact that no evidence was found which could claim Aarman guilty and the fact that they were caught red handed taking in the money sent by their bookie, they were in deep trouble. Aarman had managed to talk directly with Bhai and save himself. But Kabir had to be sacrificed in the process. He was already taken in jail with the false assurance from David that he would have him out so that he wouldn't dare speak a word against anyone. Due to lack of substantial evidence against either Mahesh or Yashraj, the two were temporarily suspended from the team. The investigation would go on but the blotch on their fair names was already put by Aarman. Aarman inwardly smiled to himself after coming out spot-free from all the mess. After that, no time was lost in proclaiming the next captain for the team. Aarman was the best and unanimous choice. With this, Aarman found his long-cherished dream of replacing Mahesh as the captain gets fulfilled. In all his felicity, he keeps the two people he had ruined, at the back of his mind. Never once does he let them occupy his mind.

The Indian media has a peculiar tendency of magnifying minor information by ten times. So was the case here. According to the media, Mahesh and Yashraj were guilty of not only betting, but also spot fixing and match fixing. They were portrayed as the traitors of the country and had brought great shame to her. The once beloved captain had turned into a betrayer. Although they were not jailed and were temporarily suspended, they very well knew that they wouldn't be loved or received in the same manner as they were before. Their pleas went unheard since Aarman had been smart enough to cover all the traces. They knew that their careers were almost over. They even knew that all this was handled by David and that he could ruin any person in the world. Their chances of claiming innocence were diminishing day by day. Mahesh had still kept his courage tight and would not give up. But Yashraj had gone into depths of depression. Betrayal by the only best friend, ruin of the career, all were too heavy for him to handle. And so he chose a simple way to end it all. The very next day it was reported in the news that Yashraj Singh, the perpetrator of the Indian Cricket Team, commits suicide due to guilt. No sympathising tears were shed for the good man.

When Aarman learnt of Yashraj's death, he was completely shaken. During the course of all these happenings, he had kind of hardened himself. But when he learnt of his friend's death, he did feel a pang of guilt in his heart. Aarman knew very well that Yashraj was irreplaceable and so was Mahesh. But he shakes these thoughts and begins to think about the next game against Sri Lanka. But at the back of his mind, there was something constantly nagging him, something which produced a very bad feeling in him and did not let him concentrate.

Sri Lanka had won the toss and decided to field. India was to set a target. Aarman and Samrat go as opening batsmen. Samrat hits a four to the first ball and after that they take a single run. Aarman was at strike. The bowler takes a run up and suddenly everything disappears right in front of Aarman. It was just him and the bowler. Aarman could not discern what was happening and the bowler comes nearer and nearer. Now it seemed as if time had slowed down its speed to a minimum and Aarman could see everything just in a slow motion. The hand of the bowler was still blocking his face and Aarman with squinting eyes waited to get a proper look at the whole face of the man. Once the hand was no more

a blockade, Aarman saw a face with a pale forehead and cheeks, long nose, thin lips and a tall figure.....

“Yash” cried out Aarman in absolute terror. The bat trembled in his bat and before he could make sense out of anything the umpire raised his hands, declaring him to be out in the very first ball. All the cricketers on the field stared at him. Some thought that he might still not have recovered from the death of his best friend. Everyone in the cricket world was aware about a strong bond between these two cricketers. It was almost like Tendulkar and Kamble. Samrat looked at him in disbelief as he Aarman walked out of the stadium with tears of fright and guilt in his eyes.

India was to field now. Aarman had yet not got over with the hallucination he had just seen. His mind was constantly occupied and therefore, he did a pathetic fielding. The opponent had hit a ball high in the sky and Aarman could see it coming towards him. He runs a few steps ahead and takes a stance to catch the ball. When the ball was just a few inches away, someone brushed past him and whispered in his ears, “Aarman how could you.....?” Naturally Aarman was terrified and drops the catch. He gapes around in with a startled face. This time it was too much. Some if the cricketers of his team even abused him for being so absent-minded. India lost the match and Aarman was credited for this. His first match as the captain of the Indian Cricket Team and this was the result, a result of guilty conscience.

A few days passed after that match and with each passing day, Aarman’s culpability did not seem to decrease. It had actually worsened. He had robbed his own sleep. The remorse could not find a way out of his mind. The words he had during the match when he had dropped the catch had repeatedly occurred in his mind. Yashraj’s image with all his perkiness and breezy character would conjure up in his mind and his regret would take deeper roots in his mind. There came a point when he badly wished to undo what he had done. He wanted Yashraj back. He wanted him badly. The repentance had filled his body, mind and soul and his peace of mind was lost, never to be regained.

Today, while sitting here on the chair with a revolver in his hand, Aarman had decided to give an end to all his miseries. But he didn’t wish to die with regret still deep-seated in his heart. The last thing he wished to do before dying was save Mahesh. At least that would clear a little bit of his guilt. He puts down the revolver for a while and decides to call the radio station. He had to undo a little bit of his mistake. He calls the station and after a few minutes during which the RJ created hype by stating that they had with them the super-star of cricket himself, Aarman Rathod, he is put online. He begins with a long sigh and the tears had already welled up in his eyes.

“My dear friends, I am greatly indebted to all of you. The love that all of you have shown me gives my heart a warmth I have never experienced before. I have no words to express my gratitude.” He inhales a lot of air and pauses for a while.

“But the purpose of my talking to all of you today is not just to thank you all. I have much more to say, much more to express. I have to let down the burden weighing on my heart. What I have done can never be pardoned. I’ll never be excused for my mistake. What I am about to say is simply for my sake because one cannot go to Him with bundles on guilt and sin. Yes my friends, I have committed an indefensible crime. I betrayed my people, my friends and my country. I was the one involved in the entire match fixing scandal that the

news channels are showing you. Mahesh and Yashraj had caught me in the process and to free myself, I had created a plot wherein they were seen as the culprits. They are innocent. I am responsible for the loss of all those matches and Yashraj's death as well. Yashraj was the best man I knew and he had a golden heart. Mahesh, I still look up to you. Never will anyone be as capable a captain as you. Mahesh is innocent. I am to be blamed. I confess my crime." And a moment later, the trigger was pulled. The nation was stunned.

The tragedy of Aarman Sharma ends here. He showed the world that when power, ambition and pride are channelled in the wrong direction, there is but one outcome, your downfall and your demise. The world with all its glory would have nothing but hatred for you.

"Greed, envy, sloth, pride and gluttony: these are not vices anymore. No, these are marketing tools. Lust is our way of life. Envy is just a nudge towards another sale. Even in our relationships we consume each other, each of us looking for what we can get out of the other. Our appetites are often satisfied at the expense of those around us. In a dog-eat-dog world we lose part of our humanity."

– Jon Foreman