Take It Deep

A story about not panicking

SUBASH

CHAPTER 1

The Asking Rate

The asking rate is the only honest number in cricket.

Everything else on a scoreboard is history. Runs scored, wickets taken, overs bowled — all of it has already happened and none of it can be argued with. The asking rate is the single number that looks forward. It tells you what you still have to do. It does not care how you feel about it, it does not care whose fault it is, and it goes up while you are thinking.

Vetrivel Selvam was eight years old when he learned this, and he learned it from a man who had never watched a full day of cricket in his life.

His father walked track for a living.

Selvam was a keyman on the Permanent Way, which meant that six days a week he walked a beat of four and a half kilometres out of Villupuram Junction and four and a half kilometres back, with a hammer, a gauge and a canvas bag, looking at rail. That was the whole job. Look at the rail. Look at the fishplates and the keys and the ballast and the sleepers, and at the thin bright line along the top of the rail where the wheels had polished it, and notice, before

anybody else noticed, that something had begun to be wrong.

He counted while he walked. He counted because counting was the only way to know where you were when every hundred metres looked exactly like the last hundred metres.

"Fourteen hundred and forty sleepers," he told Vetri once, when the boy asked what he did all day. "Roughly. Each way."

"You count them?"

"I count the ones that are bad."

That was the first thing Vetri ever understood about numbers: that you do not count everything. You count the thing that matters, and you count it every single day, and the day the number changes you say so before the train comes.

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The quarters were a row of eight, single-storey, on the far side of the goods yard, painted the particular railway yellow that has no name outside the railways. Number six was theirs. Two rooms, a kitchen at the back, a tap in the yard that ran between five and seven in the morning and again at six in the evening, and a veranda where his mother dried chillies on a mat in February.

The story continues.

Twenty-six chapters and an epilogue. 113 pages.