The Straight Drive

A love story in twenty-four summers

SUBASH

CHAPTER 1

The Straight Drive

The straight drive is the only shot in cricket with no margin in it.

Every other stroke forgives you a little. A cover drive can be slightly early. A pull can be slightly late. A cut is played with an angle, and an angle is a thing you can be wrong about by a few degrees and still get away with, because the ball goes somewhere and nobody knows what you intended.

The straight drive gives you nothing. The bat has to come down in exactly the line the ball is travelling on, with the head exactly over it, and the moment you are a fraction across it the ball goes off the inside edge onto your pad or off the outside edge to a man at gully, and everybody can see it, and there is no version of it that looks like anything else.

It is not the most productive shot in cricket. It is not close. What it is, is the shot that tells you the truth about a man's head.

Sundar Natarajan first had this explained to him in September 1989, on a step, by his grandfather, who had never played cricket at any level and had taught mathematics at a school in Kumbakonam for thirty-one years.

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"There is no angle in it," said Thatha.

"So?"

"So there is nowhere to hide, kanna." The old man was doing what he did every evening, which was sitting on the third step of the house on Solaiyappan Street with his feet on the second and his back against the pillar. "Most things people do have an angle in them. You can be a little bit wrong and nobody finds out. Teaching is like that. Marriage is like that. Almost everything is like that."

Sundar was eight and had asked about a shot in a newspaper photograph.

"This one is not like that," said his grandfather. "This one you are either exactly right or everybody sees."

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He was called Natarajan and everybody in that house called him Thatha and nobody except the pension office had used his name since 1977.

The story continues.

Twenty-six chapters and an epilogue. 97 pages.