



the **3** ~~mistakes~~
of my life



chetan bhagat

'The biggest-selling English-language novelist in India's history'
—New York Times

The 3 Mistakes of My Life

A Story about Business, Cricket and Religion

Chetan Bhagat

Rupa & Co

Acknowledgements

My readers, you that is, to whom I owe all my success and motivation. My life belongs to you now, and serving you is the most meaningful thing I can do with my life. I want to share something with you. I am very ambitious in my writing goals. However, I don't want to be India's most admired writer. I just want to be India's most loved writer. Admiration passes, love endures.

To Shinie Antony, a friend who has been with me all these years and who critically reviews my work and ensures that it is fit for my reader's consumption. My family, which continues to support me in all my ventures. Specially, my brother Ketan Bhagat for his critical feedback from Sydney and cricket freak brother-in-law Anand Suryanaryan who told me more about cricket than anyone else would have.

The people of Gujarat, in particular Ahmedabad, where I spent some of the most wonderful and formative years of my life.

My publishers Rupa and Co, who have fulfilled all my dreams and continue to pursue the goal of making India read.

My friends in the film industry, who have given me a new platform to tell my stories from, and who teach me new things everyday, in particular Atul Agnihotri, Raju Hirani, Alvira Khan, Sharman Joshi, Vipul Shah, Imtiaz Ali, Shirish Kunder, Farah Khan and Salman Khan.

The Madras Players and Evam Theatre Group, who turned my stories into wonderful plays.

My friends in the media, especially those who have understood my intentions for my country and are with me.

My colleagues at Deutsche Bank, my friends in Mumbai and Hong Kong.

God, who continues to look after me despite my flaws.

Prologue

It is not everyday you sit in front of your computer on a Saturday morning and get an email like this:

From: Ahd_businessman@gmail.com Sent: 12/28/2005 11.40 p.m.

To: info@chetanbhagat.com

Subject: A final note

Dear Chetan

This email is a combined suicide note and a confession letter. I have let people down and have no reason to live. You don't know me. I'm an ordinary boy in Ahmedabad who read your books. And somehow I felt I could write to you after that. I can't really tell anyone what I am doing to myself - which is taking a sleeping pill everytime I end a sentence - so I thought I would tell you.

I kept my coffee cup down and counted. Five full stops already

I made three mistakes; I don't want to go into details.

My suicide is not a sentimental decision. As many around me know, I am a good businessman because I have little emotion. This is no knee-jerk reaction. I waited over three years, watched Ish's silent face everyday. But after he refused my offer yesterday, I had no choice left.

I have no regrets either. Maybe I'd have wanted to talk to Vidya once more – but that doesn't seem like such a good idea right now.

Sorry to bother you with this. But I felt like I had to tell someone. You have ways to improve as an author but you do write decent books. Have a nice weekend.

Regards
Businessman

17, 18, 19. Somewhere, in Ahmedabad a young 'ordinary' boy had popped nineteen sleeping pills while typing out a mail to me. Yet, he expected me to have a nice weekend. The coffee refused to go down my throat. I broke into a cold sweat.

'One, you wake up late. Two, you plant yourself in front of the computer first thing in the morning. Are you even aware that you have a family?' Anusha said. In case it isn't obvious enough from the authoritative tone, Anusha is my wife.

I had promised to go furniture shopping with her – a promise that was made ten weekends ago.

She took my coffee mug away and jiggled the back of my chair. 'We need dining chairs. Hey, you look worried?' she said.

I pointed to the monitor.

'Businessman?' she said as she finished reading the mail. She looked pretty shaken up too.

And it is from Ahmedabad,' I said, 'that is all we know.' 'You sure this is real?' she said, a quiver in her voice. 'This is not spam,' I said. 'It is addressed to me.'

My wife pulled a stool to sit down. I guess we really did need write extra chairs.

'Think,' she said. 'We've got to let someone know. His parents maybe.'

'How? I don't know where the hell it came from,' I said. And who do we know in Ahmedabad?'

'We met in Ahmedabad, remember?' Anusha said. A pointless statement, I thought. Yes, we'd been classmates at IIM-A years ago. 'So?'

'Call the institute. Prof Basant or someone,' she sniffed and left the room. 'Oh no, the daal is burning.'

There are advantages in having a wife smarter than you. I could never be a detective.

I searched the institute numbers on the Internet and called. An operator connected me to Prof Basant's residence. I checked the time, 10.00 a.m. in Singapore, 7.30 a.m. in India. It is a bad idea to mess with a prof early in the morning.

'Hello?' a sleepy voice answered. Had to be the prof.

'Prof Basant, Hi. This is Chetan Bhagat calling. Your old student, remember?'

'Who?' he said with a clear lack of curiosity in his voice. Bad start.

I told him about the course he took for us, and how we had voted him the friendliest professor in the campus. Flattery didn't help much either.

'Oh that Chetan Bhagat,' he said, like he knew a million of them. You are a writer now, no?'

'Yes sir,' I said, 'that one.'

'So why are you writing books?'

'Tough question, sir,' I stalled.

'Ok, a simple one. Why are you calling me so early on a Saturday?'

I told him why and forwarded the email to him.

'No name, eh?' he said as he read the mail.

'He could be in a hospital somewhere in Ahmedabad. He would have just checked in. Maybe he is dead. Or maybe he is at home and this was a hoax,' I said.

I was blabbering. I wanted help – for the boy and me. The prof had asked a good question. Why the hell did I write books – to get into this?

'We can check hospitals,' Prof said. 'I can ask a few students. But a name surely helps. Hey wait, this boy has a Gmail account, maybe he is on Orkut as well.'

'Or-what?' Life is tough when you are always talking to people smarter than you.

'You are so out of touch, Chetan. Orkut is a networking site. Gmail users sign up there. If he is a member and we are lucky, we can check his profile.'

I heard him clicking keys and sat before my own PC. I had just reached the Orkut site when Prof Basant exclaimed, 'Aha, Ahmedabad Businessman. There is a brief profile here. The name only says G. Patel. Interests are cricket, business, mathematics and friends. Doesn't seem like he uses Orkut much though.'

'What are you talking about Prof Basant? I woke up to a suicide note, written exclusively to me. Now you are telling me about his hobbies. Can you help me or...'

A pause, then, 'I will get some students. We will search for a new young patient called G. Patel, suspected of sleeping pill overdose. We will call you if we find anything, ok?'

'Yes, sir,' I said, breathing properly after a long time.

'And how is Anusha? You guys bunked my classes for dates and how forget me.'

'She is fine, sir.'

'Good, I always felt she was smarter than you. Anyway, let's find your boy,' the prof said and hung up.

Besides furniture shopping, I had to finish an office presentation. My boss, Michel's boss was due from New York. Hoping to impress him Michel asked me to make a presentation of the group, with fifty charts. For three consecutive nights last week I had worked until 1:00 a.m., but had gotten only halfway.

'This is a suggestion. Don't take it the wrong way. But do consider taking a bath,' my wife said.

I looked at her.

'Just an option,' she said.

I think she is overcautious sometimes. I don't bite back.

'Yes, yes. I will,' I said and stared at the computer again.

Thoughts darted through my head. Should I call some hospitals myself? What if Prof Basant dozed off again? What if he could not collect the students? What if G. Patel was dead? And why am I becoming so involved here?

I took a reluctant shower. I opened the office presentation, but found myself unable to type a single word.

I refused breakfast, though regretted it moments later – as hunger and anxiety did not go well together.

My phone rang at 1.33 p.m.

'Hello,' Prof Basant's voice was unmistakable. 'We have a match at Civil Hospital. His name is Govind Patel, twenty-five years of age. A second-year student of mine found him.'

'And?'

'And he is alive. But won't talk. Even to his family. Must be in shock.'

'What are the doctors saying?' I said.

'Nothing. It is a government hospital. What do you expect? Anyway, they will flush his stomach and send him home. I won't worry too much now. Will ask a student to check again in the evening.'

'But what is his story? What happened?'

All that I don't know. Listen, don't get too involved. India is a big country. These things happen all the time. The more you probe, the more the chances of the police harassing you.'

Next, I called the Civil Hospital. However, the operator did not know about the case and there was no facility to transfer the line to the ward either.

Anusha, too, was relieved that the boy was safe. She then announced the plan for the day – the dining chair hunt. It would begin at Ikea on Alexandra Road.

We reached Ikea at around three o'clock and browsed through the space-saving dining sets. One dining table could fold four times over and become a coffee table – pretty neat.

'I want to know what happened to the twenty-five-year-old businessman,' I muttered.

'You will find out eventually. Let him recover. Must be one of those crazy reasons of youth – rejection in love, low marks or drugs.' I stayed silent.

'C'mon, he just emailed you. Your ID is on your book cover. You really don't need to get involved. Should we take six or eight?' She moved towards an oak-wood set.

I protested that we rarely had so many guests at home. Six chairs would be enough.

'The marginal capacity utilisation of the two chairs would be less than ten per cent,' I said.

'You men are least helpful,' she tossed back and then selected six chairs.

My mind strayed back to the businessman.

Yes, everyone was right. I shouldn't get involved. But yet, of all the people in the world, this boy had sent me his last words. I couldn't help but get involved.

We ate lunch in the food court next to Ikea.

'I have to go,' I told my wife as I played with my lemon rice. 'Where? To the office. Ok, you are a free man now. I did my shopping,' my wife said.

'No. I want to go to Ahmedabad. I want to meet Govind Patel.' I did not meet her eye. Maybe I was sounding crazy.

'Are you nuts?'

I think it is only in my generation that Indian women started slamming their husbands.

'My mind keeps going back,' I said.

'What about your presentation? Michel will kill you.'

'I know. He won't get promoted unless he impresses his boss.' My wife looked at me. My face was argument enough. She knew I would not talk sense until I had met the boy.

'Well, there is only one direct flight at 6 p.m. today. You can check the tickets.' She dialled the Singapore Airlines number and handed me the phone.

I entered the room the nurses had led me to. The eerie silence and the darkness made my footsteps sound loud. Ten different instruments beeped and LED lights flickered at regular intervals. Cables from the instruments disappeared into the man I had travelled thousands of miles to see – Govind Patel.

I noticed the curly hair first. He had a wheatish complexion and bushy eyebrows. His thin lips had turned dry because of the medicines.

'Hi, Chetan Bhagat ... the writer you wrote to,' I said, unsure if he could place me.

'O ... How did ... you find me?' he said, finding it difficult to speak.

'Destined to, I guess,' I said.

I shook hands and sat down. His mother came into the room. She looked so sleep-deprived, she could use a sleeping pill herself. I greeted her as she went out to get tea.

I looked at the boy again. I had two instant urges – one, to ask him what happened and two, to slap him.

'Don't look at me like that,' he said, shifting in his bed, *'you must be angry. Sorry, I should not have written that mail.'*

'Forget the mail. You should not have done what you did.'

He sighed. He took a hard look at me and then turned his gaze sideways.

'I have no regrets,' he said.

'Shut up. There is nothing heroic in this. Cowards pop pills.' *'You would have done the same, if you were in my place.'* *'Why? What happened to you?'*

'It doesn't matter!'

We fell silent as his mother returned with tea. A nurse came in and told his mother to go home, but she refused to budge. Finally, the doctor had to intervene.

She left at 11.30 p.m. I stayed in the room, promising the doctor I would leave soon.

'So, tell me your story,' I said, once we were alone.

'Why? What can you do about it? You can't change what happened,' he said tiredly.

'You don't just listen to stories to change the past. Sometimes, it is important to know what happened.'

'I am a businessman. To me, people only do things out of self-interest. What's in it for you? And why should I waste my time telling you anything?'

I stared at the soft-skinned face that hid such hardness inside. 'Because I will want to tell others,' I said. There, that was my incentive.

And why would anyone care? My story is not trendy or sexy like the IITs and call centres.'

He removed the quilt covering his chest. The heater and our conversation kept the room warm.

'I think they will care,' I said, 'a young person tried to kill himself. That does not seem right.'

'No one gives a fuck about me.'

I tried, but found it difficult to be patient. I considered slapping him again.

'Listen,' I said, pitching my voice to the maximum allowed in a hospital. 'You chose to send your last mail to me. That means at a certain level you trusted me. I located you and flew out within hours of your mail. You still question if I care? And now this cocky attitude, this arrogance is part of your business? Can't you talk to me like a friend? Do you even know what a friend is?'

A nurse came peeking into the room on hearing my loud voice. We became quiet. The clock showed midnight.

He sat there stunned. Everyone had behaved nicely with him today. I stood up and turned away from him.

'I know what a friend is,' he said at last.

I sat down next to him.

'I do know what a friend is. Because I had two, the best ones in the world.'

One

*India vs South Africa
4th ODI, Vadodra
17 March 2000
Over 45*

'Why the fuck did you have to move?' Ishaan's scream drowned out the stadium din on the TV. I had shifted up to a sofa from the floor.

'Huh?' I said. We were in Ishaan's house — Ishaan, Omi and I. Ishaan's mom had brought in tea and khakra for us. 'It is more comfortable to snack on the sofa. That is why I moved.'

'Tendulkar's gone. Fuck, now at *this* stage. Omi, don't you dare move now. Nobody moves for the next five overs.'

I looked at the TV. We were chasing 283 to win. India's score a ball ago was 256-2 after forty-five overs. Twenty-seven runs in five overs, with eight wickets to spare and Tendulkar on the crease. A cakewalk. The odds were still in India's favour, but Tendulkar was out. And that explained the frowns on Ishaan's forehead.

'The khakra's crispy,' Omi said. Ishaan glared at Omi, chiding him for his shallow sensory pleasure in a moment of national grief. Omi and I kept our tea cups aside and looked suitably mournful.

The crowd clapped as Tendulkar made his exit. Jadeja came to the crease and added six more runs. End of forty-six overs, India 262/3. Twenty-one more runs to win in four overs, with seven wickets in hand.

Over 46

'He made 122. The guy did his job. Just a few final closing shots left. Why are you getting so worked up?' I asked during a commercial break. I reached for my tea cup, but Ishaan signalled me to leave it alone. We were not going to indulge until the fate of the match was decided. Ishaan was pissed with us anyway. The match was in Vadodra, just two hours away from Ahmedabad. But we could not go - one, because we didn't have money, and two, because I had my correspondence exams in two days. Of course, I had wasted the whole day watching the match on TV instead, so reason number two did not really hold much weight.

'It is 5.25 runs required per over,' I said, not able to resist doing a mathematical calculation. That is one reason I like cricket, there is so much maths in it.

'You don't know this team. Tendulkar goes, they panic. It isn't about the average. It is like the queen bee is dead, and the hive loses order,' Ishaan said.

Omi nodded, as he normally does to whatever Ishaan has to say about cricket.

'Anyway, I hope you realise, we didn't meet today to see this match. We have to decide what Mr Ishaan is doing about his future, right?' I said.

Ishaan had always avoided this topic ever since he ran away from NDA a year ago. His dad had already sarcastically commented, 'Cut a cake today to celebrate one year of your uselessness.'

However, today I had a plan. I needed to sit them down to talk about our lives. Of course, against cricket, life is second priority.

'Later,' Ishaan said, staring avidly at a pimple cream commercial.

'Later when Ishaan? I have an idea that works for all of us. We don't have a lot of choice, do we?'

'All of us? Me, too?' Omi quizzed, already excited. Idiots like him love to be part of something, anything. However, this time we needed Omi.

'Yes, you play a critical role Omi. But later when Ish? When?'

'Oh, stop it! Look, the match is starting. Ok, over dinner. Let's go to Gopi,' Ish said.

'Gopi? Who's paying?' I was interrupted as the match began.

Beep, beep, beep. The horn of a car broke our conversation. A car zoomed outside the pol.

'What the hell! I am going to teach this bastard a lesson,' Ish said, looking out the window.

'What's up?'

'Bloody son of a rich dad. Comes and circles around our house everyday' 'Why?' I said.

'For Vidya. He used to be in coaching classes with her. She complained about him there too,' Ish said.

Beep, beep, beep, the car came near the house again.

'Damn, I don't want to miss this match,' Ish said as he saw India hit a four. Ish picked up his bat. We ran out the house. The silver Esteem circled the pol and came back for another round of serenading. Ish stood in front of the car and asked the boy to stop. The Esteem halted in front of Ish. Ish went to the driver, an adolescent.

'Excuse me, your headlight is hanging out.'

'Really?' the boy said and shut off the ignition. He stepped outside and came to the front.

Ish grabbed the boy's head from behind and smashed his face into the bonnet. He proceeded to strike the headlight with his bat. The glass broke and the bulb hung out.

'What's your problem,' the boy said, blood spurting out of his nose.

'You tell me what's up? You like pressing horns?' Ish said.

Ish grabbed his collar and gave six non-stop slaps across his face. Omi picked up the bat and smashed the windscreen. The glass broke into a million pieces. People on the street gathered around as there is nothing quite as entertaining as a street fight.

The boy shivered in pain and fear. What would he tell his daddy about his broken car and face?

Ish's dad heard the commotion and came out of the house. Ish held the boy in an elbow lock. The boy was struggling to breathe.

'Leave him,' Ish's dad said.

Ish gripped him tighter.

'I said leave him,' Ish's dad shouted, 'what's going on here?'

'He has been troubling Vidya since last week,' Ish said. He kicked the boy's face with his knee and released him. The boy kneeled on the floor and sucked in air. The last kick from Ish had smeared the blood from his nose across his face.

'And what do you think you are doing?' Ish's dad asked him.

'Teaching him a lesson,' Ish said and unhooked his bat stuck in the windscreen.



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