

Howzaaaaat!



NEVER EVER GIVE UP!

*The great way is gateless
Yet it has a thousand differing paths
Able to pass through this checkpoint
You stride alone through Heaven and Earth*

*Wumen Huikai
Zen master
1183-1260*

‘What about Agbar?’ said Sanjay, trying to fix his brother with a look of deadly seriousness. Dad’s glassy-eyed gaze on the hospital floor was broken but only for a moment.

‘Rudi!’ said Sanjay, demanding more of a response. ‘What about Agbar? Agbar the snakeman. Don’t you remember?’

My father nodded without looking up. As I sat up in bed and looked at my mother, all red-eyed and teary, it was I who met my uncle’s longing stare.

‘Who’s Agbar the snake man?’ I asked him.

‘Let your father tell you,’ Sanjay replied.

‘Why?’ I said.

‘Because it’s his story, not mine’ ...

Chapter 1 – The Truth

Hello, my name is Ravindra Jai Balakrishnan but you can call me Ravi for short. That's what everyone calls me, except for Uncle Sanjay who calls me 'Ravi boy' and Tabetha who calls me 'Ravi the fire-bird' but I'll get to that later.

Chapter One is entitled 'The Truth' and the first thing I need to tell you is that I'm not really a writer. I'm just a boy.

So right off the bat, I want to apologise for any spelling mistakes or grammatical errors you might find. You are sure to find something, even though I've done everything I can to eliminate them.

But it's not that important, really. What's important is the story I have for you, a story with a message, an *important* message, a message that I believe is my destiny to deliver. I know that might sound melodramatic but it happens to be the truth.

This message might help you all your life. Maybe it will change your life forever. Maybe it will inspire you to do something special, something wonderful, something you never thought you could do.

You might become famous one day and people might ask you 'how did you do it?' or 'what inspired you?' and you might say it was because of a book you once read. This one. It *could* happen, you know.

I have heard that when people choose a book, they often look to see who wrote it to help them decide whether to read it or not. I've been told that, as a rule, if the writer is well-known, people are more likely to read it.

But as you can see with *this* book, there's no name on the cover. Maybe you think it's because I'm just a boy and not really a writer and not famous or anything. Well that's *not* the reason but I'll explain everything a bit later if I may. If I tell you *now* it'll only spoil things for you.

To be perfectly honest, I don't much care for books. I only read books

when I have to, for school and stuff. Most often, when I pick up a book, I read a page or two and then I get bored. That's the truth.

So it's very strange for me to be *writing* a book when I can't even be bothered to read them! If only I could meet you in person and just *tell* you my story. That would be so much easier.

But as I have learned in life, sometimes you have to do certain things whether you want to or not. Writing a book might be hard to do but I know it's not impossible. Nothing is impossible really.

Another thing I want to tell you is that chances are, you won't believe me when I tell you my story. You'll probably think I made it all up.

So let me say this: all I can do is tell you my story. If you believe it, you *believe* it. If you don't, well ...

My name is Ravi Balakrishnan. In 2002, when I was just twelve, I contracted a rare blood disease, so rare that the doctors couldn't even identify it, let alone cure it. I spent a lot of time in hospital, slowly deteriorating until there was virtually no hope for me.

But I'm getting ahead of myself. My story really begins the year before that, in 2001, when I first arrived in Sydney, Australia from London, England with my parents Rudi and Victoria.

Can I tell you my story?

Chapter 2 – The Decision

My father's name is Rudi. He was born in India in 1951. Dad is a highly intelligent person. He works with computers but don't ask me what he does exactly. He has explained it to me many times before but it is easier just to say that he works with computers. Less boring, too.

Dad has one brother called Sanjay who is five years older than he is. Sanjay lives in Sydney, Australia.

My mother's name is Victoria. She's an only child like me. Mum was born in England but she was only there a short while because her parents moved around a bit when she was young.

Mum is always well-groomed and immaculately dressed. Never a hair out of place. She's a bit of a snob, too. I know she won't like me saying that but there's no point in lying.

Her father was a big shot in the army and he was posted to India for a few years when Mum was a teenager. She did some of her education there and that's how my parents met.

I was born in India like my dad. Apparently, I was already on the way so my parents decided to get married. My dad was a Hindu but he became a Catholic just to please my mum and her family. Dad was happy living in India but not my mother. She convinced Dad to leave India behind.

I was two years old when we left. We came to England and we lived in a house on Coombe Lane in Wimbledon, London, the same Wimbledon where they play tennis.

I was really happy there. I lived next door to Martin Durkin on one side and Jonathon and Paul Taylor on the other. Stuart Healy lived two doors down. We were all about the same age. There were other kids too but Martin, Paul, Jonathon and Stuart were my best friends.

We were always doing stuff together. Riding our bikes, playing football,

going to the movies, playing hide and seek, knocking on doors and running away. We were never bored because there was always something going on.

One day, when I was watching television in the sitting room, Dad came home and he had a long and serious conversation with Mum in the kitchen. I remember hearing my mother say 'Australia?' in a shocked sort of way. I should've known something was up.

That night over dinner, I was told that Dad had been offered a big job in Sydney through the company he worked for. We talked it over as a family and I made it clear that I didn't want to go.

As it turned out neither did they. So Dad knocked it back. That was that. We just carried on with our lives.

But the company came back with a better deal. More money, basically. Dad rejected it again but the company wouldn't let up. For the next two months it went back and forth: more this, more that, free this, free that.

To cut a long story short, they made him an offer he couldn't refuse. Dad told us that it would set us up for life and Mum eventually caved in and agreed.

So that was that. My vote didn't count anymore and three people did something none of them initially wanted to do, all because my dad could be 'bought' for the right price.

That's the truth. That's how I saw it anyway and on a freezing cold morning in January, 2001, we boarded a plane bound for Sydney, Australia.

As I sat in my seat waiting for take-off, I was as miserable as could be.

Chapter 3 – The Pickup

The plane journey was horrendous. Cooped up like a chicken for twenty-odd hours with nothing to do except sit there and think about everything we were leaving behind. I was grumpy and snarly the whole way to Australia.

Dad was grumpy, too, on account of all the stuff Mum was buying from the duty free trolley. Mum was always spending money and Dad was always getting wound up about it. He said that even at 30,000 feet she could find a way to go shopping.

With one of her purchases she received a free diary and in an attempt to lift my spirits, she gave it to me. She said 2001 was going to be an amazing year and I could keep notes of everything that would happen.

I ignored her so she made the first entry herself. On January 17th, 2001, she wrote 'Arrive Sydney. YAHOO' with three big exclamation marks.

She was right though. 2001 *was* incredible and thanks to her, I have a record of everything that happened. That diary became one of my most valuable possessions. In actual fact, it nearly saved my life.

But as remarkable as our first day in Australia was, with the incomprehensible accents of the airport staff, our first experience of the heat as we stepped out of the air-conditioned airport and the deafening noise of the cicadas, I remember that day mostly for one thing. That was the day I met my uncle Sanjay.



Before we came to Australia, I noticed that whenever Sanjay's name was mentioned, my parents would usually react in totally contrasting ways. My mother would invariably roll her eyes or her top lip would curl as if she'd

eaten something sour. Dad, on the other hand, would almost always smile. Sometimes he would even burst out laughing.

I wasn't sure why my mother's reaction was so different to my dad's but when I met Sanjay, I could tell straightaway. As two people go, my mother and my uncle were as different as two people could be.

Sanjay had lived in Sydney for years. He had also gone to England from India but he left for Australia soon after. Dad said it was because of the terrible English weather but Mum reckoned it was because of an Australian girl called Barbara whom Sanjay was keen on.

Barbara had lived in England for a couple of years but when she returned to Australia, Sanjay missed her so much he decided to join her there. He came to Sydney and they were together for a while but in the end it didn't work out.

When we touched down in Sydney, I could tell my dad was excited about seeing his brother again.

'Why do you always smile whenever you talk about him?' I asked. Dad laughed.

'You'll see,' he said.



Sanjay was late. Very late. We waited for ages.

Mum was furious, smoking cigarette after cigarette and blowing the smoke out her nose like a dragon. She said Sanjay was the most reliably unreliable person she'd ever known.

'Ring him on the mobile!' she scowled.

'He doesn't have one!' said my dad.

'Who doesn't have a mobile these days?'

'Sanjay!' came my father's reply.

As my mother scoffed, I pointed to a large, mostly orange car, heading in our direction. I only pointed it out because it was such a peculiar-looking car but when I saw my dad smiling, I realised who it was.

For a moment everything seemed to be happening in slow motion. My mother's face turned from shock to disbelief as this motley-coloured car pulled up, right alongside us. It was in three colours: orange, faded orange and rust.

People stared as the car coughed and spluttered, black smoke spewing

out the back. Some of them crossed over to the other side of the footpath just to avoid it.

And there at the wheel was Sanjay. One hand on the steering wheel, arm leaning out the window. No apology for being late, no embarrassment about all the smoke, no jumping out to embrace us. Just a big smile and a wobble of his head.

'Your chariot awaits!' he said proudly, tapping the door three times with his hand. I tried not to but I couldn't help it. I just had to laugh.



Sanjay insisted that I sit up front with him and I can honestly say I'd never been in a car like that before. It had long bench seats in the front and back and although the car was old and tired, it had a strong feel to it. It was solid like a tank. Sanjay said it was an old Holden and that old Holdens never die.

The dashboard was decorated with many small figurines of Indian gods and goddesses. One god had the head of an elephant. Another was blue and played a small flute. The car also had a strong smell of spicy Indian food. It wasn't unpleasant or anything, just noticeable.

But as interesting as the car was, I found it hard to keep my eyes off Sanjay. I don't know if it was because he was nervous or something but he was continuously on the move – head, hands, shoulders, legs, face, everything!

His face was like rubber, contorting so easily from one expression to another. I couldn't help but stare at him.

When he spoke, his enthusiasm was such that I found myself mimicking his facial expressions because I would get so interested in what he was saying. I couldn't help myself. He hooked me in straightaway.

At one point, when the figurines momentarily distracted me, Sanjay startled me by slapping me on the thigh and shouting 'Ravi boy!' excitedly. I really jumped in surprise and Sanjay found this very amusing. Then he started rattling off all these questions and before I could answer, he was firing off the next one.

'Ravi boy! How are you? Good? Nice flight? Did you see the harbour as you flew in? How old are you now? Are you very, very excited to be here?'

he said, moving his head all over the place. The questions were coming so thick and fast that I just nodded agreeably to everything.

Then he made a strange facial expression, as if he was going to ask the most important question ever. He was so wide-eyed I thought his eyebrows were going to disappear over his forehead. He put one hand up, like a policeman stopping traffic, and in a deadly serious tone he said, 'Tell me Ravi boy. Do you like cricket?'

Before I could answer, he threw his head back and he roared with laughter.

'Of course you do!' he said. 'That is what we Indians do! We eat lovely, lovely food and play lovely, lovely cricket!'

'He's not *Indian*,' said my mother indignantly from the backseat. 'He's *English*'.

Out of the corner of my eye, I could see her pulling a face like a cat's bottom, picking fluff off her blouse. Soon after, Sanjay pulled up at the traffic lights and took a glance at the rear vision mirror, but it was only a fleeting one.

When the lights turned green, Sanjay hit the accelerator but the car made a noise I've never heard a car make before. It sounded as if a huge spring had uncoiled. That spring must've been important because the car rolled to a stop and when Sanjay turned the key to start it again, there was no response.

'It's not far. We can walk from here,' said Sanjay without turning to face my parents in the back. It was probably a good move as I could only imagine the look my mother would have given him.



Sanjay was right in that it wasn't very far but it was really hot and we had a lot of luggage and stuff. Lots of 'duty free crap' according to Dad. Sanjay tried to make amends by carrying the most stuff but he kept dropping things and this made Mum even angrier as she puffed and panted along our new street.

When we finally reached our new house, everyone was very impressed with it. Everyone except me. I just felt sad because I knew that this was

our new home and our old house and our life back in London was now in the past. Forever.

When we went inside, there were more gushes of approval as the whole house was fully furnished with nice things everywhere and everything worked – telephone, cooker, TV, stereo, the lot. There was even a car in the garage. Everyone was very impressed. Everyone except me.



Not much happened in those first few days until after dinner one night when Mum suggested that we go for a walk to see my new school. Just the mention of the word ‘school’ depressed me and my misery was real but if I’m honest, I really wanted to show it, to make my parents feel guilty for bringing me here.

So we walked to the school on a hot, humid night and as we strolled around the grounds, Mum was absolutely unbearable. You know when someone tries to make something sound really good and they go completely overboard? That’s what she did.

‘Look at this, look at that, blah blah, very progressive school, Mr Watson the principal, he’s so impressive, blah, blah, blah.’ On and on and on she went.

It was driving me mad and I was ready to explode when Dad said ‘Hey look, a bell tower! You’ll have to tell your uncle.’

‘Why?’ I groaned.

‘He’ll tell you,’ he replied.

‘Why can’t *you* tell me?’ I said, grumpily.

‘Because it’s his story, not mine. You can ask him about it on Sunday. We’ve been invited over for lunch’.

‘Ummph,’ I grunted, as if it was going to be the biggest drag ever.

But it was far from a drag because I actually got to meet India’s greatest cricketing all-rounder and the finest opening batsman the world has ever seen. It’s true I tell you, for I met none other than Kapil Dev and Sunil Gavaskar both in the one day!

Chapter 4 – The House

As we drove to my uncle's house on that Sunday, I remembered the time when we were living in London and Dad got a letter from an 'Uncle Sanjay'. The letter was all about 'the house' and even though it's not my story to tell, I've decided to break the family tradition and tell it to you anyway.

When Sanjay first arrived in Sydney he was happy because he was with Barbara, his girlfriend. But after a while, when things went bad, he was lonely and sad and he felt he'd made a big mistake in coming to Australia.

At the time, Sanjay had a job as a kitchen hand in an Indian restaurant in a suburb of Sydney called Newtown, a vibrant, multicultural, foodies' paradise inhabited by all kinds of unusual and colourful people where anything goes in relation to fashion.

Before he started work, Sanjay got into the habit of having his lunch in a nearby park every day. He would sit on the same bench almost every time he went there and he began to notice an elderly man who was sitting on a bench nearby, invariably looking sad.

Nearly every time Sanjay went to the park, the elderly man would be there. Even when it was cold or rainy.

One time, when the weather looked ominous, Sanjay decided to risk it and started eating his lunch. He was halfway through when sure enough, down came the rain. It was an unexpectedly heavy shower; so heavy that Sanjay had to run for nearby shelter. As he stood under a tree, listening to the first sounds of thunder, he noticed that the old man hadn't moved. He just sat there getting absolutely drenched.

After a while, Sanjay couldn't bear it. So he left his lunch under the tree and ran over to the elderly man.

'You're getting soaked!' said Sanjay.

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The man looked straight ahead and said 'I don't care!'

'You'll catch pneumonia! You could be struck by lightning!' shouted Sanjay over the sound of the pouring rain.

'Good!' the man replied.

Sanjay didn't know what to do but he knew he couldn't just leave him there. So he grabbed the elderly man by the arm and even though he tried to resist, Sanjay led him to the shelter of the tree as the rain pelted down even harder.

'Are you crazy?' said Sanjay, as a loud clap of thunder echoed all around. 'You could die out there!'

The old man sat down on the muddy ground, put his hands to his face and started to cry. Really cry, as if there was no tomorrow.

Sanjay tried to console him but the man was very upset. Eventually the old man stopped crying and Sanjay asked him what was wrong.

The old man told him that his wife had passed away suddenly just a few weeks earlier and he felt completely lost without her. He said they'd been married nearly fifty years. He said he had retired, he had no friends, no children, nothing. He said he didn't know what to do with himself. He actually said he was ready to die.

Sanjay didn't really know what to say so he started telling him *his* story, all about Barbara and how he had no friends or family in Australia himself. Sanjay said he was miserable too and even though there was a great age difference between them, Sanjay suggested that perhaps they could try to become friends.

Sanjay said that maybe they could start by having lunch in the park together. Eventually, the old man agreed and he introduced himself as Mr Alfred Pristine.

So that's what they did. They started having lunch together and they gradually got to know each other and they each had someone to talk to and listen to. Mr Pristine told Sanjay all about his amazing life as a top quality jeweller and how he owned a famous jewellery store on King Street, the main street in Newtown, many years ago.

He told Sanjay many stories about the beautiful jewellery and the famous people who would come to his store and in return, Sanjay told Mr Pristine all about his life in India.

They would spend hours together just chatting away and they got on famously mainly because just like Sanjay, Mr Pristine loved the game of cricket. In time, Mr Pristine would invite Sanjay over to his place and they would watch a whole day's play of a test match together, even coordinating their lunch and tea to coincide with the meal breaks in the game.

One day, when Sanjay was complaining about the place he was living in, Mr Pristine suggested that Sanjay move in with him. Just like that!

Mr Pristine said that maybe Sanjay could help out with the shopping and household chores and in return, Sanjay could stay there for as long as he wanted, for free. Mr Pristine said he would be doing an old man a great favour and he managed to persuade Sanjay to move in.

Mr Pristine was so happy the day Sanjay came to stay. He said he was so pleased he wouldn't be on his own anymore. When Mr Pristine handed Sanjay his own set of keys, he made a special point of showing him everything in the house including the old oil heater in the hallway.

He told Sanjay that if ever he needed money, he could sell the oil heater because he was sure it would fetch a very tidy sum. Sanjay was doubtful but Mr Pristine was absolutely certain, repeatedly telling Sanjay 'There's money in that old heater, there's money in that old heater' and holding onto Sanjay's arm firmly as he told him so!

Sadly, they shared that house for only a few months because one morning, after Sanjay had called out to Mr Pristine a number of times, he went to his room and found him lying in his bed, cold to the touch.

Mr Pristine had passed away at the age of 83. Sanjay was so sad but he was also glad that he had known Mr Pristine and had been there with him, at the end.

At first Sanjay didn't know what to do about the house and all of Mr Pristine's belongings but a phone call soon changed that. Sanjay was summoned to the offices of a top solicitor in the city and it was there that Sanjay was told, by way of Mr Pristine's will, that everything that had belonged to Mr Pristine was now Sanjay's.

Everything. All the furniture, the old Holden that Mr Pristine loved so dearly and all of his other belongings, too. Even the house!

The very same house we were going to for lunch on a gloriously sunny Sunday, the 4th of February, 2001, if my trusty diary has served me correctly.