



# ENTRUPPTED

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# Prologue



## Present Day

“Friends, we have faced stiffer challenges than this. Let us, for one last time, put our collective thinking caps together and outwit the competition – again. As usual, we have everything but time,” concluded Shreyas.

He was encouraged by the thunderous applause from all the 10 men who were listening with rapt attention for almost an hour. He did take breaks in between to embrace their concerns or views. Shreyas was always admired by his colleagues for his participative style of management; it was the hallmark of his leadership trait. It was almost impossible for anyone to say ‘no’ to him. He could just motivate the team to buy into his dream. A dream that became a mission statement of their life. A mission that they then began to own. And once you become an owner, you find solutions and not problems.

A corporate ‘butterfly,’ he loved the excitement of seeking greener pastures as frequently as a Michael Phelps or Usain Bolt would seek an Olympic gold from one country after another. And the nectar for him was not only the colour of green but the gratification

of the new job that would promise to offer challenges. Challenges that would ensure that he didn't miss his daily mental work-out. No wonder Shreyas accelerated his corporate career, now on the threshold of celebrating its 21<sup>st</sup> anniversary, at a very brisk clip. More often than not, Shreyas came out unscathed and successful in spite of taking bets which a typical CEO of a multi-billion company would loathe taking.

As his mates slowly dispersed to their respective work zones, Shreyas stood there for a long time, staring at the wall in front of him and drawing down deep-rooted thoughts and action plans to face the biggest test of his life tomorrow – to convince people who didn't share his school of thought and vision. But the sound of the mighty bell aborted his thoughts. It was lunchtime. And the rule at Western Road Jail was 'you miss your lunch if you miss your time.' Shreyas had no choice but to rush to the long waiting queue of people from different walks of life, including the 10 who were planning to beat the competition in a game of carpet making.

# You Can't Leave the City



“Mr. Gupta, please come here.”

The officer wasted no time in exchanging pleasantries. Anand was on his way to Singapore when he was stopped at the Mumbai airport for questioning.

Anand Gupta made attempts to remain calm and cool as he saw the ID card of the officer.

“Yes, sir?”

“May I know the purpose of your visit out of India?”

“We have an office in Singapore.”

“What is your designation in the company?”

“Chief executive officer.”

“What is your role?”

“I look after the day-to-day management of the company on the advice of the board.”

“What happened to Ms. Radhika Narayan?”

“I don't know, sir.”

“Ok, I will get back to you in a few days. Please ensure that you don't leave the city without our permission.”

“Ok, sir.”

*A Few Years Ago*

## Even Death Is a Transaction



The Lexus was heading toward Changi Airport when its chauffeur was ordered from behind to slow down. The car was just a few metres away from the airport when a phone call interrupted its movement and direction. “Mr. Gupta,” said the caller, “There’s some sad news.” Anand, who was readying to disembark, helped himself firmly back into the limousine, which was being driven aimlessly till the time he completed the call. After the call, he directed the man behind the wheel to get to East Coast Park immediately. Singapore can easily claim the top spot in the world for the ease of traffic movement. Within a drive time of 45 minutes, Anand spotted his business manager waiting for him at the entrance of the complex. “Welcome back, Mr. Gupta. Sorry to call you back like this—” Before he could complete his sentence, Anand snapped, “What was the problem?”

“It was a cardiac arrest.”

Anand was shocked for a moment; he had met her just a few hours ago. He had awarded her the title of ‘Best Performer of the Asia Pacific Region’ a few months back. She was the country head based in Singapore,

and she was just 30. She was the youngest person to reach that position in VVL Group's history. He directed the business manager, "Ensure that her family is supported and well taken care of." As an afterthought, he continued, "And listen, keep the company out of this." After offering his condolences to the bereaved family, Anand was back on his way to the airport to catch the flight to Mumbai. He had a board meeting the next day.

*One more casualty of the rat race to climb up the corporate ladder, he thought while looking out of the window of the vehicle. He had been witness to many stressful moments in the office, but this was the first time he had witnessed a victim of those moments. Life here just moves on at a fast pace with each one trying to outwit the other or just trying to survive. The pace of the race remains the same; the level of hierarchy is irrelevant, but the stress is directly proportional to one's level in the ladder, he pondered. These were the travails of the senior management of large companies. With huge perks and fat salaries come unlimited responsibilities and accountabilities from 'a pin to an elephant.'*

Anand represented one of India's leading consumer brand companies managed by a board which knew only the language of market capitalisation. Keeping the emotions related to the tragic event aside, Anand knew very well that his immediate prime concern was to ensure that the market perception was intact even if this was a personal matter. Anand wondered about the ruthlessness and speed of corporate life, in which events of life and death were *just transactions*.

Just when the air hostess started announcing the impending arrival of the flight at Mumbai Airport, Anand pulled away from his deep thoughts which had led him to go through flashes of the good times he had spent in Singapore. He had come to attend an investors' conference and was happy with the keen interest evinced by the investors.

## Journey Begins



It was well past 9 am, and Radhika was seriously working out transport solutions near Diamond Garden, which is one of the premium residential areas of Chembur—a north-eastern suburb of Mumbai. She had a meeting at Worli, which was located 15 km from her place. Radhika considered this an important event of her entrepreneurial journey because it took her almost 2 months to get an appointment for this meeting with the investor.

She cursed the drivers of Ola and Uber for choosing her *important* date to go on strike to claim their *important* demands. Her eyes flashed with happiness as her taxi app gleamed ‘Rs. 989’ and prompted her to ‘Confirm Booking.’ She promptly obliged. *Unfaithful driver*, she thought. *This guy must have refused to go on strike today.* She had no qualms about paying 3 times the normal fare. And then, the aggregator on her phone went in circles to find the rider. The circumference of the circle increased, but the rider was nowhere to be located. After 5 critical minutes, it popped up with the message ‘No cars available.’

Out of frustration, she tried to hail a *kaali peeli* (the local Mumbai taxis), but very soon she found out that they continued to be on their ego trip in spite of almost being out of business the last few years. These *kaali peelis* had not learnt anything from the technological advances and alternate commuting solutions available to the erstwhile harassed customers of the city; she wondered why. She remembered the time when helpless passengers would politely enquire of any of these haughty drivers as to where *he* was travelling, and the poor passenger would find the right taxi to board if it matched their destination. But radio taxis had changed the travelling landscape of the generation which walks, eats, sleeps and lives on mobile apps, and Radhika was obviously no exception.

She was a millennial woman in her early 30s; a simple Tam Bram with loads of passion and intelligence and now perhaps ambition too. Quitting a cushy job, she had taken the entrepreneurial plunge in the hope of making it big in the corporate world. She always knew the journey was fraught with challenges, but she was up for it. But for now, she faced a different challenge to crack on the ground, literally. And crack, she did. And how! By a route which, on its way, marked all the possible means of transport available in the city—an auto, public transport bus, local train and shared transport services. She reached the destination with a delay of only 15 minutes! She got away with a ‘Sorry, I got late because of bad traffic.’ She was glad that people still believed that one gets late to the office or appointments only because of bad traffic.

## Calm Before the Storm



Within a few hours, he had to step into a board meeting, but Anand could not remove his thoughts from the unexpected turn of events in the last few days. It all started with a raid by the tax officials on the day he was to board the flight to Singapore. It was evening when the uninvited guests parked themselves at various points in the office premises. On the side table of his office cabin, he could see multiple missed calls on his cell phone. He wondered if the tax guys were trying to seek his permission before embarking on their journey. But a glance at the 30 missed calls from the same number made him shiver. It was SWATI! He remembered their conversation at the breakfast table earlier that day at home.

“Anand, I hope you remember that my parents are coming today. Please reach the airport on time.” And he also remembered his reply, “Of course, Swati dear. How can I forget such an important matter? What time is their flight?” Anand remembered her answer while looking at his watch, “7 pm.” It was a sheer coincidence that his watch also showed the same time. In normal circumstances, Anand knew very well that she would

not have delegated this to him, but he remembered his categorical assertion, “I will reach the airport, receive them and send the car with them so that I can catch my flight to Singapore on time.” Anand also remembered Swati cautioning him, “Don’t do what you did last time.”

A sudden volley of outbursts in his mental background shook him up. He almost became numb holding tightly the hand rest of his office chair. His memory system briefly took him to a flashback of last year when he was assigned the most important duty of a married man’s life. He was only half an hour late from the expected arrival time, leaving cushion time for baggage clearance. But the flight arrived half an hour early. And the backlash he got that time from Swati! He quickly brought himself to the present before his eardrums became non-functional.

Now, Anand, at a stroke, had multiple problems to handle. An ongoing tax raid, an expected discourse from Swati on his irresponsible behaviour, the thought of spending the next few weeks or *months* with his in-laws at home and the anxiety of an important foreign trip. It didn’t take much time for him to conclude that the tax raid was the easiest one at hand, and he straightaway took it head on.

That was so typical of Anand. Even during the worst crisis, he would find a reason to smile and compartmentalise the situation to address them effectively. Swati, with her experience in dealing with Anand for almost 20 years, knew very well that decisive action was the need of the hour rather than wasting precious moments on follow up calls to her husband.

Anand was a great admirer of Swati's ability to multi-task in spite of the fact that she would make him wait endlessly near the stove, early in the morning, for the milk to boil. Staring at the milk, he would feel sorry for his office team members who also had to go through similar mundane tasks delegated by him at the workplace. *But they are more fortunate, he thought. They don't get monotonous tasks on a daily basis.*

It was one of those few moments in Anand's packed life where he actually did nothing while Swati finished all the other important tasks at home. 'Cleaning' constituted approximately 75% of those important multi-tasks while he waited for that eureka moment to put off the gas. Fully aware that a small lapse of concentration was equal to a series of waves that could emanate because of the high tide at the epicentre of the vessel, leading to flash floods in the kitchen. The additional time allocation required for disaster management services was enough motivation for him to ensure maximum focus on the boiling milk. It was a meditation of a different kind to start the day.

Anand had deftly managed the after-effects of the raid. It also helped that VVL Group was a reputed business house with a clean image and lineage. He had also managed to reach the international airport on time. Since he had no time or the requisite bravery to manage Swati, he had decided to complete that assignment after his return from Singapore.

The fact that he returned late last night and whisked himself off early in the morning on the 'pretext' of a board meeting didn't create the right platform to 'manage.'

Anand was prepared for days of silence and ‘avoiding eye contact moments’ at home for a while. Sometimes, in-laws’ presence could be a blessing in disguise, and Anand had plans to fully leverage this opportunity to break the ice in the evening if he reached home early after the meeting.

All that could wait because his immediate priority was the board meeting, not that he was a novice nor did he have the jitters generally associated with big-ticket events. He had more confidence in his communication skills than his knowledge on the subject. It had helped him in the past whenever he had hit rough weather. But circumstances were different. It was one of the worst quarters in recent times, with fragile financial results. And he had to face a strong board which included nominees from financial institutions and investors apart from prudent professionals who were insightful and well informed.

## Welcome to the World of Investors



Radhika gave her business card to the charming person at the reception desk. She could hear him speaking on the intercom:

“Sir, Ms. Radhika Narayan from Ferma Brands is here to meet you.”

Initially, she used to enjoy such meetings. This was very similar to courtship days where both parties try to impress each other with some half-truths and some half-lies. In fact, in a bid to impress, all parties ended up dressing up so many aspects of their lives.

After going through multiple rounds of investor meetings to raise money for her start-up venture, without much of a success, she had lost the enthusiasm generally associated with these meetings.

But then she thought, *Investors are professionals, unlike the amateur wannabe spouses. And perhaps more intelligent. No wonder there are more instances of consummation of marriage than those of investment deal transactions in the country.*

She realised that this insightful analysis of hers should answer the much sought-after question of

start-up entrepreneurs like her seeking to raise capital in the country.

Even though it was only 15 minutes since the time she was asked to wait, it seemed like ages.

Radhika had completed her survey of the entire range of paintings generously displayed at various corners of the plush office space. While looking at them, she wondered, *These should easily fetch a barter of a decent 2 BHK flat in any of the suburbs in Mumbai.*

Gulping a couple of bottles of small-sized packaged water and making corresponding rounds to the nature's room could consume only 15 minutes, and the wait was still not over. While she was laboriously adjusting her seat on a bean bag, which was going all over the place, she noticed a game room during one of her 'swings.'

A few executives were trying their hand at hand hockey at 10.30 am.

*Investors must be contemplating investing in a gaming company, and their team must be practicing due diligence before they take the investment decision,* she almost thought out loud as she was tempted to ask the receptionist about their game plan.

Radhika had already started dreaming of getting an office space there, so excited was she with the décor and ambience! But then she said to herself, *I have read enough internet jokes on how any new job and office look like heaven at the time of interview and anything but that on the date of joining.* So, she alerted herself.

Being the inquisitive kind, she wasted no time in deploying her investigative skills into action to the

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