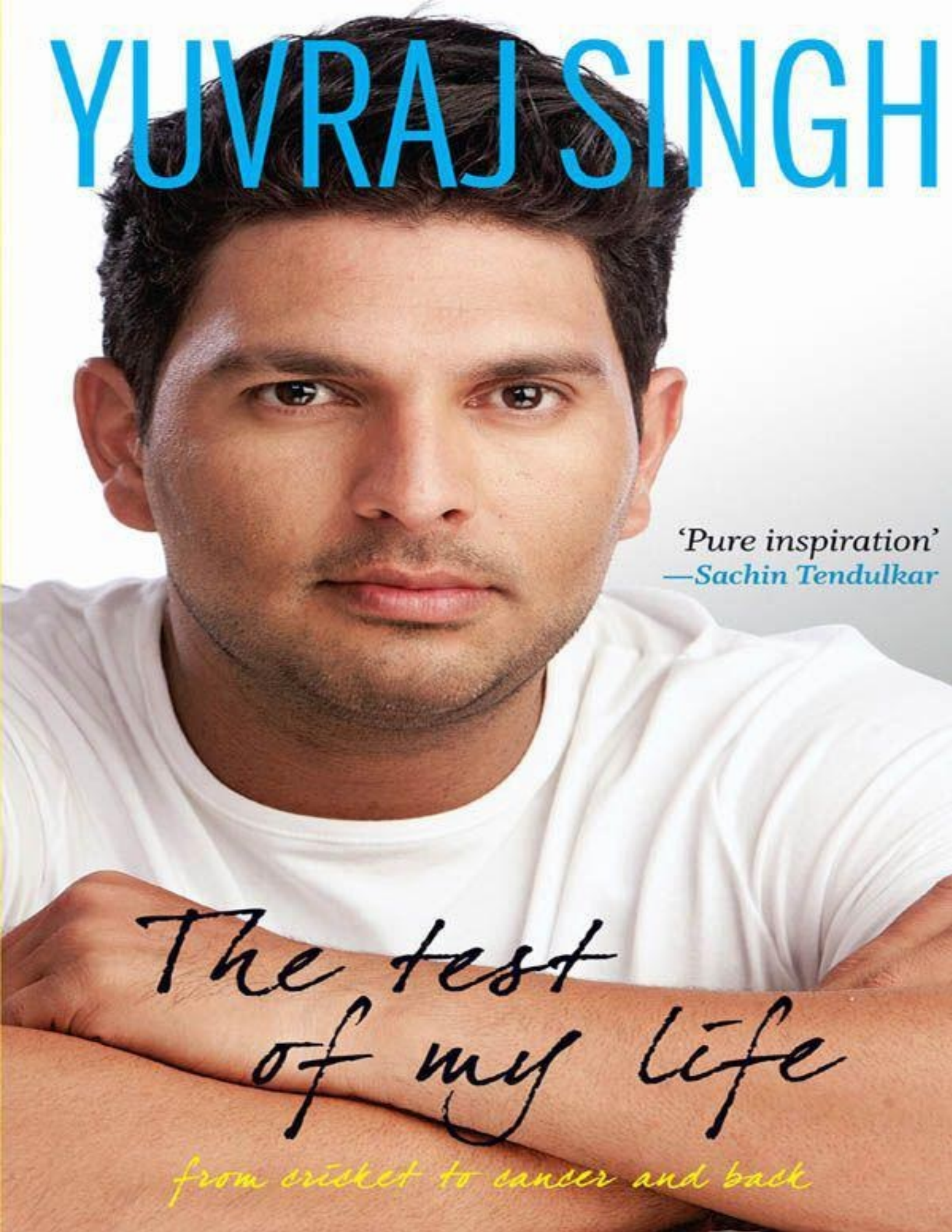
YUVRAJ SINGH



'Pure inspiration'
—Sachin Tendulkar

The test of my life

from cricket to cancer and back

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YUVRAJ SINGH

WITH

SHARDA UGRA & NISHANT JEET ARORA

RANDOM HOUSE INDIA

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THE Test of my Life is a story in my own words. It is about my toughest days and how I managed to come out of it.

It is about hope, determination and courage to face challenges despite all odds. And believe me, we all have the strength to do it. So keep it up and keep ur dreams alive and NWER give up.

GOD Bless

Yuvraj Singh

To my mother, Shabnam Singh
This book is not about me; it's the story of a brave mother.
A mother who has given me birth twice.
Someone said rightly, God can't be everywhere so he
made mothers. I can tell you I saw that.

Contents

Timeline for the Sequence of Events April 2011: ICC Cricket World Cup Final, April 2. India wins against Sri Lanka at the Wankhede stadium, Mumbai.

May 2011: Yuvraj's chest X-rayed in the last week of May. Yuvraj advised further testing. FNAC test carried out. A tumour is found in the cavity between the lungs. It is possible that the tumour might be malignant.

July–August 2011: Travels to England with the Indian team for a four-Test tour. During the second Test at Nottingham, fractures his finger and is ruled out for the series. Returns to India in the first week of August 2011.

August–September 2011: Alternative therapy for tumour undertaken in Jatin Chaudhry's care.

October 2011: Confusion over the exact nature of the tumour. Biopsy report conducted in end-October suggests that this could be a rarest of rare germ cell tumour called a seminoma. Unconfirmed.

November 2011: India play West Indies at home, Yuvraj plays two Tests and is dropped from the third and final Test.

December 2011: Yuvraj trains at the National Cricket Academy (NCA), Bangalore to be ready for the ODI series in Australia.

January 2012: Scans in Bangalore and an oncologist in Delhi confirm that Yuvraj has mediastinal seminoma, a germ cell cancer. Yuvraj pulls out of ODI matches in

Australia. Meets Dr Peter Harper in London in the third week of January and is advised immediate chemotherapy.

Travels to Indianapolis to begin his treatment under Dr Lawrence Einhorn at the IU Simon Cancer Centre, in the University of Indiana. Therapy begins on January 25.

March 2012: Chemotherapy ends on March 18.

April 2012: Arrives back in India on April 9.

May 2012: Begins training on May 20 at the NCA, Bangalore, in order to return to the game July 2012: Yuvraj launches cancer charity YOUWECAN.

August 2012: Is named in the India T20 squad to play against New Zealand at home and the World T20 tournament in Sri Lanka.

September 2012: Plays his first match for India after his recovery from cancer on September 11 versus New Zealand in Chennai.

Acknowledgements

THIS BOOK IS very close to my heart. It traces that part of my life which was a steep learning curve for me in many ways, and during which I learnt a lot about my friends and support group. Without them I doubt I would have been able to make it.

One man who is very special and close to my heart is my Dad, Yograj Singh. Whatever I am today it is because of him. If I have a story to tell, it's because Dad could see that there was a story in me. Our relationship might be a little strange, but not once have I doubted that my success is a result of your hard work and your belief, Dad. I love you, and I assure you that I have tried to and will try to live all your dreams in this life.

To my brother Zorawar Singh. Zoru, I know you don't talk much. But I also know how much you love me and care for me.

A big thanks to Sandeep Sharma (Sandy)—my best friend, philosopher, and guide in life. He was there when I needed him the most.

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Thanks to my friends Binwant, Gulzar, and Amit Sharma who were always praying for me.

I also owe sincere thanks to the millions of Indians everywhere in the world who prayed for me and sent me wishes. I discovered how much I was loved. It was humbling.

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Dr Lawrence Einhorn and his nurse Jackie Brames; oncology nurse Elizabeth; Dr Nitesh Rohatgi, my oncologist. Today I am alive and breathing normally and it's because of all of you. I would also like to thank the staff of IU Simon Cancer Research Centre in Indianapolis who helped me during my treatment. Thanks to Dr Ashish Rohatgi for telling me the truth always. A big thank you to Sanjeev Kapur for helping me in shaping YOUWECAN.

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Thanks to the staff at the National Cricket Academy in Bangalore who worked tirelessly to get me back into shape, especially Ashish Kaushik, the Ghajini. You believed in me more than I did.

I owe a big thanks to the co-authors of this book, my friend and manager Nishant Jeet Arora, and one of the finest journalists and human beings I know, Sharda Ugra. They both helped me give shape to my thoughts. Nishant, who has seen my life and my fight against cancer very closely, was among my closest allies in this battle. He believed this story had to be told and pushed me to do so. Sharda, one of the finest sportswriters in India, is a warrior with a smile. She was

diagnosed with multiple sclerosis, and at times the attacks leave her helpless, but they can’t take away the smile and her will to live life fully. She understood my battle better than most. Added to it, we had the experience of Shruti Debi from Aitken Alexander Associates, who was a guiding light while writing this book. I couldn’t have asked for a better team.

And last but not the least, I want to thank two people to whom I owe my life. My Gurujis Sant Baba Ajit Singhji Hansaliwale and Sant Baba Ram Singhji Dupheda Sahibwale. Their blessings, their love and prayers have helped me to heal and recover. I connect to God through them.

Prologue: It’s a Deal

IN INDIANAPOLIS, the winter sky is cold and dark. It might rain or snow anytime. The maple trees have shed their leaves. If you land here at eleven in the night the airport is empty. Outside, no one is on the streets. You reach downtown, and steam rises out of manholes, the buildings are huge, but hardly a soul to be seen. Indianapolis feels like a ghost town if you go there from the crowds of India. By the time I reached Indianapolis in the last week of January 2012 I was feeling a bit like a ghost myself. I had flown in from London with my mom. When we landed it was nearly midnight. My oncologist Dr Nitesh Rohatgi had arrived in the morning that day.

It had been almost a year since my body sent me the first signal that something was wrong. On the 14th of January 2011, the night before a one-dayer in South Africa, I woke up coughing in my hotel room in Johannesburg. I went to the bathroom to clear my throat. When I spat I saw that the phlegm was not normal. It had specks of colour in it, red and purple. I frowned. I shrugged it off as something odd getting out of my system and went back to bed.

The next day at the Wanderers, we batted first. I came in at no. 4 but within an over Sachin was out to Johan Botha and India was at 67–3. In the previous match in Durban, where I had scored 2 runs, we had lost by 135. In Johannesburg, now, I wanted to settle down, and collect the singles.

They kept Botha on from one end, and from the other, the South Africa brigade: Morkel, Parnell, Steyn. It was a busy over against Botha, maybe the thirty-third, when Mahi and I were pushing singles. I hit Botha to square leg and after I ran a quick one, I suddenly felt out of breath. Two balls later, I hit Botha over his head, and again, coming back for the second run, my breathing turned ragged, uneven. I couldn’t draw in a lungful of breath.

Breathing is breathing: hard to describe when working fine, and when wrong, you can clearly spell out the discomfort and the panic it causes. At the

Wanderers in the middle of that match, I felt the left side of my body was cut off from oxygen. Imagine running up and down a cricket pitch in the middle of a game, taking in half a breath every time. That's what it felt like. I was getting out of breath, and the left side of my body, the side I favour, was not able to recover as much as I needed it to.

After a couple of overs, it was drinks and Botha came off. With this puzzling breathing problem on my mind, batting to a new bowler, I played a silly shot on 53 and got caught at mid-off by Dale Steyn off Lonwabo Tsotsobe. We made a total of 190. South Africa were playing without Jacques Kallis but it was going to be tight.

Munaf Patel, Munna as we call him, can be a precise miser. He was in this mood that day and it kept us in the game. Graeme Smith made a fighting 77. Once Smith was gone after the batting Power Play, we leaned heavily into their lower order. Despite that, by the fortieth over, they needed just 14 to win with two wickets left. When Munaf came on to bowl in the forty-third over, all Morne Morkel and Wayne Parnell needed was four to win the match. With his second ball Munna got Morkel cutting, caught by Yusuf Pathan at point. On the last ball of the over, with 2 runs left for a South Africa victory and one run to draw (and seven overs in the tank), Wayne Parnell cut Munna straight into my hands at point.

India had won an ODI by 1 run only three times before: less than a year ago against South Africa in Jaipur and way back in 1990 and 1993. We pulled this game out of nowhere as South Africa collapsed on 189.

On the field, we went crazy with joy. I turned around with the ball in my hand, and ran off randomly in celebration, as everyone else ran towards Munna. A few minutes later, they caught up with me, piled onto me and sent me to the ground. In the middle of the hooting and hollering, I found myself gasping for air. And I knew it was not because of the weight of five or six bodies on top of me in a heap.

When I went back to the dressing room I was a bit shaken. What the hell happened! I told Paul Close, our physio, that I needed a check-up. There was something wrong with my breathing. He was ready to do it right away, but I did the one thing that I would do for the entire year after this. I delayed the right decision. I said, 'Let the series be over.' After the series ended, we returned to India, the World Cup camp began and I got busy with everything else that was happening around me. There was incessant talk about my form, I was dealing with injuries and in the media there was this non-stop chatter that I was

competing for a spot with two other guys in the team. This kind of constant speculation from the media, which is a pain in every cricketer's life, is superficial but nevertheless irritating.

Meanwhile, for the World Cup Paul Close was replaced by Nitin Patel as the India physio. Nitin, who inherited our records from Paul, asked me whether we should get the breathing problem looked at. With the World Cup looming over me, I did not want to bother about anything else. Like the last time, I decided to defer the check-up and told Nitin to leave it for now. Once the World Cup was over, I would look into it. And so I carried on like before.

On my first night in America, lying in a hotel bed at the Marriott Downtown, Indianapolis, trying to sleep, my mind went back to that warm evening one year ago when we were happy as we piled up on top of each other after snatching the win from South Africa. Yusuf, a great lamb of a guy but weighing about 90 kilos, was closest to me in the pile and in a panic I had said to him, 'Yusuf, Yusuf, *uth jaa, yaar, mujhe saans nahi aa rahi.'* (Get up, man, get up, I can't breathe.)

As I thought about it I realized my life was full of words beginning with C. I was born in Chandigarh, I became a cricketer, and through my decade as an international cricketer all I craved, along with rest of the India team, was the Cup.

In 2011, in my third ICC World Cup as a member of the India team, we won the Cup. It was the best feeling in the world. The tournament was held in the Indian subcontinent, and the final on Indian soil. We won before the home crowd. It could not have been scripted better.

When the tournament began, there were taunting headlines about my weight, about my selection into the team, and since I was recovering from injuries, there was this talk about my 'indifferent form' all over the media.

As the tournament progressed, we had all wins except one loss and one draw. If we hadn't lost to South Africa, we would have equalled Australia's magnificent record. During the tournament, which lasted for seven hot weeks, my symptoms became more defined. I suffered from insomnia and nausea. And many months later, I went on to discover a new C in my life. My cancer. Here I was in freezing, cold Indianapolis to deal with this new C in my life.

So the next day, on the morning of the 24th of January, Mom, Dr Nitesh and I

found ourselves in a small, tidy, consultation room with a picture of flowers hanging on a wall. I had come to meet Dr Einhorn. There was a check-up. I was examined, after which I was counselled. I was told I would start chemotherapy the next day, Wednesday. I would be admitted for the day. After the dose was complete, I could go home.

We had decided that Nitesh would stay for the first day of chemo and then fly back to India, to his many duties and waiting patients. I, on the other hand, buckled down to prepare for three twenty-one-day cycles of chemotherapy right here in Indianapolis. Not counting the off days at the end of the last cycle, it worked out to fifty-seven days. Ok, I thought, fifty-seven days. Fine. I can do this.

Back at the hotel, we had another issue to sort out. The thing is, you can stay in a hotel only as long as they can accommodate you. Because of the way in which my diagnosis unfolded, we had booked the rooms at the very last minute. One day I was in training, the next day I was a patient. Since it was all so sudden, we got bookings for only five days.

You see, unseen by any of us in India, the Super Bowl was rolling into Indianapolis and for that one week till the final game on Sunday, the 5th of February, when the New York Giants would play against the New England Patriots, every hotel room, every restaurant, every pub and bar in Indianapolis, would be full of partying, excited fans. I could see the stadium lights from the hotel. There were banners everywhere in town. The hotel lobby and the corridors were full with people connected to the game. The buzz was similar to the IPL in India or when there is a home series. In this electric atmosphere, which I was so familiar with, I found myself a cancer patient, not a player. It was as if life was again playing a joke on me. To top it all, since I was a patient and not a player, I would soon have to clear out.

Back in India my manager launched a frantic online search for a place to stay. The house he found was in a building called the Cosmopolitan on the Canal. We went to review it. It was a mile from the hospital and one and a half miles from downtown. The building was peach-coloured, with a small green bridge nearby. True to its name the Cosmopolitan on the Canal overlooked the beautiful clear canal around which Indianapolis is built. The apartment was a duplex on the ground floor. Mom and I took one look at it and said yes. After the travel and the constant tension of the last few weeks, finally there was something good. It felt like we had hit the jackpot. I chose my room. I took the bedroom on the upper floor, from where I could look at the water.

It was here, in this two-bedroom flat, that I sometimes succumbed, at other times fought, plotted my comeback, laughed, puked, cried, shaved my head and missed my cricket, my friends, and my country.

To help us shift in, a friend of mine came from Canada. Ritesh Malik drove nine hours, fighting back his own jetlag for he had only just flown in from India. He arrived with groceries in his big arms, ready to move us on the 31st. During the course of my illness, I would experience many such acts of kindness. But that first night in the apartment in the Cosmopolitan on the Canal, as I lay down in the bed exhausted, Ritesh handed me my new Playstation. 'Is Mom sleeping?' I asked Ritesh.

'Yes,' he said.

I told Ritesh what I had been too scared to mention to anyone so far. On the 1st of April, it was All Fools' Day and the eve of the World Cup final. It was on this day, the night before the final match, that I did something slightly stupid.

We were desperate to win, I was desperate to win. The fear of failure was great. The day had been spent at the nets, followed by the usual routine, some rest and a session in the pool. The evening had gone in trying to find tickets for the sold-out final, which I wanted to give my Mumbai friends. It is very tough getting a ticket for a big cricket match in India and let no one tell you it is easy, even for a player. I spent three lakh rupees on tickets that evening. My mother, whom I had tried to persuade to be in the stadium for the match, is a stubborn one and she had said no. More nervous than me, she never comes to critical matches. She won't even watch them on TV. On this landmark day, she was going to be at home in Chandigarh. Or she would drive around the city on her own, following match updates on her phone. Or she might go to Hansali and Dupheda Sahib to spend the hours of the final with her Babajis, praying.

Since I had managed to get the tickets in the end, by the time Nitin Patel came on his rounds, I was relatively relaxed. Nitin, who wears specs and looks like a software engineer, went from room to room all through the World Cup ensuring each one of us had stretched and was at ease. He would then settle us in for a comfortable night. Nitin was often at my bedside, trying to relax me. On this night too he was easing out the knots and the tension in my body. As he treated my neck, we casually talked about the next day. We were both trying to drive out the butterflies. Physios are special. Players are anxious before matches, and it falls to guys like Nitin to let us on to the field fully aware of our physical vulnerabilities. I think a physio can tell what is wrong just by seeing a player's walk. To Nitin, I must have come to represent an entire walking hospital or at

least the following departments: general medicine, orthopaedics, gastroenterology, rheumatology, and neurology, psychiatry, neuropsychology. It had been seven difficult weeks. On this last night I was hungry for peace and for the will, tranquility and luck to finish off what we had started. Tired, tense, in need of sleep, in that mood and in that drowsy moment, an idea popped into my head. I said, 'Whatever happens tomorrow I just want God above to give us the World Cup.' I was taking my sleeping tablet. 'You know,' I told Nitin, 'He can take whatever he wants, take away my life, giving me pain … God, just give us the World Cup.'

Nitin froze for a second, then relaxed because he thought I was babbling.

That night, I knocked off at 10.30 p.m. I had a deep and unbroken sleep after a long time. When I woke up the next day, I could not believe the clock. For the first time in the tournament, I had slept all night. I threw open the curtains of my corner room at the Taj Hotel, and looked outside at the bright Mumbai morning. The World Cup final awaited us.

Twelve hours later, we won the World Cup. After twenty-eight years of prayers and hope, we had finally done it. The Cup was ours. That night the entire country erupted in wild joy, a wild night not just for us in the Indian team but, we could see, could hear and feel it in the mood of everyone in the country. The last time India won the World Cup I was a one-year-old. Now, I was Player of the Tournament.

I have been a part of three World Cup winning teams. India under-19 World Cup in 2000, the ICC World T20 in 2007 and, the biggest of them all, the ICC World Cup 2011.I was Player of the Tournament in the under-19 Cup, missed the same honour by one point in 2007 and got it again in 2011. Not too bad a record for one life, what do you say?

Many months later and thousands of kilometres away, a lifetime had passed, that's how it felt, as I confessed all this to Ritesh. I had started thinking of it as my deal with God. It had been, I said, a clean deal. I was not going to feel sorry for myself. No, why should I? When my form came back, or when I picked up wickets, or when I got the big scores, or when I got player of the match, or hit six sixes, had I ever asked God, 'why me?' Of course not. Often in my career, I have been the man with silver in the fist. Have I ever asked God, 'why me?' No, never. So when the illness came I had no right to ask 'why me?'

Did I ask for cancer? That night, when I was asking God to make a deal with me, did I tempt fate? When you are ill, when you are down, these questions can come and haunt you. But you should square your shoulders and look them in the eye. Look over your life. Count your blessings. Like me you will come around to the view that all in all, like in cricket, everything balances out and it all ends up OK.

On coming back to India after the treatment, I met the honorary secretary of the Indian Cancer Society in Delhi. She said, 'Yuvi, the way you have fought your battle in the open, you have wittingly or unwittingly become the ambassador for cancer survivorship. In this country where we have five million cancer patients, it's hard to believe no celebrity has ever had cancer. The last person who comes to my mind is Nargis Dutt.' I was the first famous person in the country since the beautiful Nargis Dutt to have cancer? I don't think so. Maybe I am just the first well-known person in India who is not afraid to talk about living with it, owning it, getting bald because of it, and battling it.

Believe me, none of it is easy. One day soon after my return, I was chilling with some friends in Mumbai. We were laughing and joking around at a welcome party for me. One friend said to me, I hope the rest of 2012 is better. 2012? I thought she was pulling my leg. The others thought I was the one pulling the leg, taking the mickey out of her, and they started teasing her. Everyone started shouting and laughing. 'This is 2011!' I was puzzled. What was the joke? Was this not 2011 when we won the World Cup? Wasn't the 2nd of April 2011 a few montsh ago? Turns out more than a year had passed.

It is a horrible feeling to misplace the happiest day of your life. Another friend recently gave me a T-shirt, which says: 'I have a chemo brain! What's your excuse?' In a sense, that's true. Chemo can wipe you out. But you can come back. You've got to come back. You will come back.

This is why I am telling you my story. About my life before cancer, with cancer, and my life after it. It is a story about struggle, denial, acceptance, and new struggles ahead.

Soon after my conversation with Jyotsna Govil, the secretary of the cancer society, I started writing this book. Those days I would wonder and worry about how and when I would get back to my cricket. And then I would take comfort from the fact that I was writing my book.

A few years back I had started reading Lance Armstrong's *It's Not About The Bike* and left it unfinished. Maybe, like they say, this was also destined. Perhaps I had to come back to Lance and finish his book at another time. I read it all the

while during my chemotherapy, using it as a friend, a guide, an ally. It made me want to tell the world what happened to me. Just as we share our victories and joys, we need to share our grief so someone else can feel they are not alone when the chips are down. If there is one person whom I can help by telling my story, as I was helped by Lance Armstrong's cancer story, I will be very happy.

I will feel I did not waste the year of my life that vanished.

Chapter 1

All the Way to India

IF I HAD A CHOICE, I may never have been a cricketer. I love sport of every kind, loved it as a kid, and love it now. I was naturally gifted at sport. Unlike studies, at which I was not so naturally gifted! The part of school I looked forward to was outside the classroom. I enjoyed recess and PT, beating the others at marbles and filling my pockets with them. Books and studies did not excite me. I hated sitting in class, and listening to lessons. I was restless, yearning to get out and play.

Looking back now I realize that for some reason the school I was in, I was one of six boys in a class of thirty girls! It's too bad I didn't make the most of that tremendous advantage. To tell the truth there was only one girl in class who could tolerate my rowdy behaviour and we became friends in class four. Her name was Aanchal. Aanchal Kumar helped me with my studies and once, in a geography test, she let me copy her entire answer paper. How I managed to score 36 out of 50 and she 34, I will never know.

Around class six, no matter how much Aanchal or anyone else helped me, my grades started dropping. From 80 percent I was down to 60 percent, from 60 to 40, then hovering dangerously around 37. My mom wanted me to be good in studies as well as in sport, and there followed a period where I changed schools frantically, trying to find the right one for me.

In one such attempt, I was sent to board in Patiala's famous Yadavindra Public School. I can see now why my father thought it was a good idea to send me there. The Patiala school of batting was much admired in Punjab those days. Navjot Singh Sidhu was the latest in a long line of bold shot-makers from Punjab and Sidhu used to practise at the famous Maharani Club in Patiala.

While I was there, Dad would come on weekends to visit me. One fine day, he took me to the Maharani Club and asked me to pad up. Sidhu would be at the club. Dad went around to him and asked him to watch me bat. I was not yet a teenager. I played a few shots, missed a few. After observing me for a couple of minutes, Sidhu turned to Dad and gave him his expert opinion: I was not made for cricket. I showed no promise.

As Dad took me back to the hostel that day, he muttered: '*Apna basta utha aur ghar chal. Ab main dekhta hoon ki tu cricket kaise nahin khelta*.' (Pack your stuff, we are going home. I'll see how you don't play cricket.) With these words he sealed my fate.

I cannot describe clearly enough what uncontained joy I found as a kid playing my different sports. From speed-skating through hot breeze, under trees, over distances, when I felt I could grab freedom one outstretched arm at a time, to the thrill of racing down a field, football glued to my boots as I dodged past my opponents, laughter in my throat, teammates running alongside waiting for the ball to leave my feet and get stuck to theirs.

I was always a prankster. I still am. My friends and I would turn up the volume of the television set at home just so that Mom would burst into the room to protest at the noise. We would make a run for it, leaping over the boundary wall that separated our house from the road. Running and running and running, far enough and fast enough to make our lungs burst and so far till I could not hear my mother's protesting voice anymore.

The Chandigarh Sector 10 skating rink was always full of kids and from the age of four or five I was the fastest. When I was eleven, I could race in the under-14s and win. Then there was tennis, which I could play patiently even for an hour, waiting for the sweet music of the racket making flawless contact with the ball, for a perfect zzzng. The ball would skim the net, clip the line, and my opponent would go flailing. It would be one point but on the court I felt any moment could lead to a big one. I played to win.

Even as a child, I wanted my life to be full of big moments and mega events. I especially enjoyed playing tennis because on the court I could pretend to be like my hero Boris Becker. He had won Wimbledon at seventeen and he was someone I wanted to be. I loved his energy, I loved his shouting; he had passion for everything he did. I loved that.

Seeing that I was so keen, Dad bought me a tennis racket. It was for Rs 2,100. This was 1989 or thereabouts and that was a lot of money. It is a decent amount of money today, so think back to twenty years ago. One day soon after I got it I lost a match with that racket. I got furious. I threw the racket to the floor and smashed it. The moment the racket splintered, I knew I was in trouble. Maybe I had seen Boris do it, maybe another tennis player on TV. I thought this is what

you do when you are angry and you want to argue with fate.

Back then, I had started thinking of my dad as ‘Sher’, Tiger. I knew Sher was going to give me the shouting of my life—if not a proper hiding, which I had received many times before—and that it would be the end of my tryst with tennis. That is exactly what happened and this is how I stopped playing tennis.

After my momentous meltdown I stuck to skating. I skated six days a week and on Sundays I went to play cricket. But the desire to go back to tennis lingered on. Because I had been ok at tennis, I could cajole my friends into lending me their rackets and wangle an occasional game with the under-12 and under-14 players. Partly it was love for the game, partly loyalty to Boris, partly rebellion, but I kept playing tennis secretly for the years that I could still manage to escape my father.

My first memory of cricket has nothing to do with my father and his role in my game. It has everything to do with where I grew up, what I was like, and what kind of mischief I got into. As I recount this, I am taking the opportunity to apologize to the man on the scooter who got hit on his helmet.

One evening, we were playing outside my father’s old house in Sector 11. On the other side of the boundary wall was a bare patch of land that we kids in the neighbourhood had turned into a cricket ground. As I took a big swing at the ball, it flew through the air, over the ground, and on to the road outside the field. Exactly at that moment a man appeared under it on his scooter. Poor guy, he must have been on his way on a normal day in the middle of a normal errand. As the ball hit him, he toppled over and the scooter went sliding under him along the road. It took him a while to realize what had just happened and rise to his feet. As soon as he did, he ran towards us, red-faced, hurt and really, really annoyed.

As for us we simply ran as fast as we could, throwing everything in our hands to the ground. We jumped over the wall, fled into the house and hid behind the curtains. We watched the guy from this safe distance. He finished dusting himself off, looked around, picked up my bat, restarted his scooter and rode off with it.

Now there was a history to that bat. My buddy Sohan Singh and I had each pooled in Rs 150 to buy it. With it we would rain down sixes, which would crash through windows in the neighborhood. It had become our weapon of mass

destruction. We were so proud of owning it, we loved it.

Sir, if you are reading this book, I am saying sorry now, but can we please have the bat back?

This is my earliest cricket memory. An earlier memory, which will tell you a little about the kid I was, is about the difficult business of learning to ride a bicycle. A few years before the incident with the man on the scooter, I pestered my mother to buy me a bicycle. I did not know how to ride a cycle but I wanted to own one desperately. Cycles were shiny and cool. Cycles took you places and I wanted to have one to go anywhere I pleased.

I stormed the heavens and raised hell to make sure I got that bike. Stubbornness must be genetic, I guess. When the bicycle was presented, I took it to the road outside our house and promptly set about finding the balance one needs to keep a cycle going. Kids have to be taught to ride bikes with parental attention, with helmets, trainer wheels, slowly, safely, but not me. I wanted to master the machine on my own, in a day.

Off I went, on the main road, and while trying to balance the cycle, crashed into a rickshaw and fell. It was a spectacular accident, made up of a pinch of foolishness and plenty of blood. On the way to the hospital, my mother gave me an earful. We needed ten stitches to get two of my fingers working again. When I pull on my gloves now, I can still see the scars. The stitches remind me that balance is always a hard thing to master. Balance wasn't part of the way I grew up and it is not part of Indian cricket either. Being accident-prone got me used to getting up and dusting myself off without fuss.

My childhood was full of running and falling and getting up like this. Once I fell near a fast-moving local train. I must have been about nine, maybe ten. I had been dispatched to Sonepat to take part in a brief shot in one of Dad's Punjabi films. It was supposed to be simple: running through some fields to stop a friend from going away. I asked the female lead Preeti Sapru, a great friend of our family and my mom, whether it would be a good idea if while running I took a tumble.

She said why not! It would be all the more realistic, dramatic, *filmi!* I still remember the scene. I had to run fast, yelling 'Roop, Roop,' the name of the friend I was trying to stop. But as luck would have it, the script was very soon overtaken by incidents that happened within a few seconds of each other. Suddenly there was a real train passing at real speed and right then I stumbled and my head landed next to the train tracks. If I had not been pulled away in time there's a good chance those future wisecracks about my swollen head would

have been avoided.

When my father returned to the set and heard about the incident he went ballistic. For once he was not shouting at me but at the crew. How can you give a wild child the run of a place that has a train going through it!

So, this is what I was like. Well-meaning, all-consuming, fun-loving and prone to dive head first into trouble. Always seeking balance, I would run and fall, dust myself off and start over. It is not that my parents didn't try to keep things sane. After this episode, my film career was brought to an abrupt end. It was back to school, with no more messing around. But before they pulled me out of my *filmi* career, I did two short roles as a child 'star', *Mehndi Sajda Di* and *Putt Sardara*.

Cricket is a beast. It demands the labour of building a fortress around a treasure and that treasure is timing. When Sidhu appraised me in Maharani Club, Patiala, I must have been un-coordinated and miserable. Being the kind of child I was, I would have played a lot of shots instinctively, but I did not know where my leg stump was. At thirteen I was thirteen, not Sachin Tendulkar at thirteen. Sachin Paaji is an exception.

After it didn't work out in Patiala, Dad packed me up and we returned to Chandigarh. Once we were back, he made me his pet project. I didn't realize it immediately but the hours I would give to sport began to change. Six days of skating and one day of cricket slowly turned into six days of cricket and a day of skating and soon, no skating. Cricket became a chore. It involved work, sweat, there was no fun, no feeling that it was play. For the first time I felt this was not a sport for enjoyment or the joy of having fun. It was more like proving a point, and I began approaching it with the dread that here was a task set for me by my dad that I had to complete.

Dad wanted me to be like him: a big, burly, fast bowling all-rounder. In the seventies and eighties, which was his time, fast bowling all-rounders were a rage around the world. Every team needed one, and the teams that found one prospered. Botham, Hadlee, Imran and Kapil, these guys were the glamour boys of cricket. But before this part of the project could take off, Dad's dreams ran into a great man called Bishan Singh Bedi.

From 1993 Dad sent me to Bishan Paaji's summer camp for children. The first one was a scorcher, everyone plodding away in the mind-bending heat of Delhi.

The next year Paaji moved the camp to Chail, in Himachal Pradesh, God bless him.

I was sent to Bishan Paaji as a budding seamer. I was tall and strong for my age, so I tried to bowl medium pace and bat at no. 8. When he watched me bowl, he barked, ‘What are you doing?’ He knew right away that it was a bad idea. ‘You cannot be a seamer. Go bat.’ I don’t think he would have guessed that I would become a sly, slow, slow left-arm bowler (I dare not say spinner) ten years later.

Chail has the highest cricket ground in the world. It is on the top of a hill, at a height of 2,444 metres from sea level. In Bishan Paaji’s camp I scored the first century of my life. This is where I learned what it means to be on top of the world in cricket. I hit two sixes after crossing 100 and Paaji introduced a new rule at the camp. He said from now on a six would be out. Because, in Chail, if you cleared the ground, the ball—each of which cost around Rs 300—would sail into the valley and fall thousands of feet below.

Quickly, cricket became like a large, noisy member of my extended family. Once it came into my life, it would not leave. But even as a teenager, there were times I felt I was living my father’s life, chasing his dreams. I didn’t understand why I had to do it, but I knew I did.

I think my father lived with the deep, gnawing frustration that his international cricket career was unsuccessful. This is what must have bubbled up in him on the day Sidhu wrote me off. He poured his efforts into me, almost 24/7, and made it his mission to have me represent India.

We have seen this happen in so many sports with so many young athletes—in tennis, in golf, in swimming. The parent may deny the motive for the drive, but the child understands. My father wanted success in cricket so badly that it became the reason he chose to be harsh with me. When I was eleven years old I had won a gold medal in speed skating at the under-14 state tournament. That evening Sher was furious. He snatched the medal from me and said stop playing this girls’ game and threw the medal away.

Returning to Chandigarh from Patiala after I was withdrawn from YPS, none of us could have seen it coming. All he had said was that he would follow the regimen of his own playing days. All I can say is that it was brutal. He uprooted the beautiful garden that Mom had planted behind our house, covered it with marble flooring and put in floodlights. From now on I had permission to see my friends for half an hour between school and practice only. If there was a school holiday, I would train in the morning with DAV College students. On some days

he would wake me up and take me to the Sector 16 stadium, where first-class matches were held before the stadium was built in Mohali. From there it was back home and on to the gym. I could then take the half hour granted by him to be with my friends at the Sector 10 Tank, and have dinner. This was followed by more practice under lights for forty-five minutes before sleeping. The same routine was repeated the next morning.

He talked a lot about his time in cricket, about himself and Kapil Dev. He would say that his marble wicket was going to get me ready for international cricket and fast bowling.

So there I was, getting the hang of my game, wet tennis balls and hard plastic balls leaping off the cold hard turf, being bowled at my body. In the background I could hear my mother say, 'You are going to kill my son'. Dad told her to stay out of it. He was obsessive about the short ball and so he would take me to the Sports Authority of India's Pace Bowling Academy in the Sector 16 stadium and have me bat without a helmet.

Dad told the trainees at the centre to bounce me all the time. No helmet for me and a hard, leather cricket ball in their hands. Whatever fear I had of fast bowling or getting hit was leached out of me. Even now I know that the fear of getting hit can bother you as an international cricketer but if you are better prepared you can handle it.

During these years that Dad trained me, I may have become a tough nut and got used to being pinged around the ears, but I can't deny that I was also reduced to anger, tears, and was often left boiling in my own frustration.

One January my dad wanted me out of bed early in the morning. Chandigarh's winter mornings at times don't go above 1 degree C and I was dawdling because I didn't want to get out of bed. It was a chilly day and I didn't want to train. So I lay still in bed, and pretended I didn't hear him when he said, 'Better get up, Yuvi. I am warning you.' I thought he wasn't that serious and kept pretending to be warm, tucked up, cosy and asleep under my *razaai*. I heard him head towards the bathroom and thought he was gone.

He was not. He filled a bucket of freezing cold water, came back and emptied it over my bed. I don't think that I will ever be able to thaw out of that shock, the wave of cold water hitting and soaking the bed. It was like being caught under a moving glacier. I leapt out of bed and ran into the bathroom shivering. It took ages for the hot water to emerge out of the shower. All that time, he stood outside the door telling me to get ready fast and go for a run.

Inside I was standing under the shower, begging the hot water to hit me

quickly and conquer the shivering, the shaking. My teeth were rattling. In an open battle with the hot water and my father, I wished the worst on him. For the first time in my life, I cursed and hurled abuse at him. To prove he was the man in charge, he wanted me to go for a run right then. The mule in me, of course, didn't want to listen to him anymore.

I left home and walked around in a rage, determined to get back at him by bluffing him that I had gone for a run. Except, after twenty minutes, I found him at my side on his bicycle, telling me to run, run. There was no escape.

Slowly, gradually it was getting into my head that if I could live with this, if I could sweat the bullets and swallow the bitter pills, cricket would take me a long way, to where my dad had dreamt of reaching. I just had to push myself hard enough. Even better, cricket could give me direction and freedom from a life beyond running and falling, running and falling. On days when I had scored some runs, prompting people to point me out as my father's talented son, I came to accept that he may have been right. When my performances began to mean something in the middle, cricket began to mean something to me. I started scoring runs, at first in clutches of 20s and 30s and then proceeded to bigger scores. Fast bowling didn't frighten me anymore. I could swat bouncers off my nose, helmetless, and stare the bowler in the face. Around that time I think I started to feel that I had what it took.

In this period I was a teenager, growing in size and ambition, my own dreams wrestling with my father's, having thoughts like what is my place in this peculiar game, when things began to change at home. My parents had started fighting and arguing. They would start with small issues and my younger brother Zorawar, who was barely four years old, couldn't understand what was going on. I understood that my parents weren't getting along, the atmosphere in the house was getting ugly, but I could do nothing about it. Cricket became my escape route.

What cricket would do for me was take me out of the house and I chose not to miss a single game. I played wherever I could. At cricket practice, I would be in the company of my mates. We went to play in Patiala, Amritsar, Jalandhar, even as far as Delhi and Faridabad. If there was a match on a ground and I had been invited it didn't matter that the place had no wicket, that it was being played on a field that had just been tilled. Let me know and I would pick up my kit and go. Anything was better than being home and seeing my parents argue.

In those years I picked up a few things other than cricket. I realized that my parents were just living their lives when the rest of the world had put some

pressures on them: when to marry, when to have kids. Zorawar and I saw the difficulties and the problems they went through as people in their twenties and thirties and what that meant to us as kids. I was older than Zora by eight years and I found myself increasingly turning to cricket to fill my mind and time. Cricket stopped being a straitjacket and became a solace. Zora was adrift. He was pushed into a corner, told to do this or do that and went through a lot of issues. He is coping with them in his own way now.

Personally, I think the rift between my parents happened because they married when they were very young: my mom was about eighteen when she got married. She had me in a year's time. Dad was just twenty-two. In their earliest photographs, of which I have a huge one in my room in Chandigarh, anyone can see that they are a very good-looking and happy couple. They look like they are made for the best things in life. But they were still growing up and becoming their own individual persons. No wonder things went bad.

When conversations get a bit serious with my parents—which happens—I always say to both of them, hey, don't forget that the best thing that happened in your marriage was me. It makes everyone smile.

My views on marriage may be influenced by what happened to my parents but let's look at it from a common-sense point of view. No one, man or woman, should marry for the sake of marrying, just because it is some idea of a 'perfect time' dictated by the world. Like, if you have crossed twenty-five and you are a woman, or twenty-eight and you are a man, it is as if a fire engine runs through the lives of everyone you know with a siren ringing, spelling out in Morse code: M-A-R-R-Y. Marry them off soon!

Initially it felt awful that I came from a home where my parents were arguing. None of my friends knew that I came from a troubled home. I didn't tell anybody. Family matters are personal, best kept at home and sorted out within the family, and anyway I am not a moaner.

My mother moved out a few times and stayed away from the house to try and sort things out. It was hard. She was my go-to, my comfort and safety zone. Dad would tell me I couldn't meet her. Meeting her was rationed, allowed only after cricket practice, exactly like the fixed quota of my half-hour meeting with friends after nets. On days like that, cricket became a battleground between Dad and me. He wanted me to do something one way and, as I grew older, I wanted to defy him.

It was not only spending time with friends and Mom, Dad also hated it seemed the very signature of my batting: hitting the ball in the air, sending it

ballooning over the boundary and out of sight. His dictum was very 1960s and 70s: keep your head down, play along the ground. On a cricket field, let me tell you, you are by yourself. Once you are in the middle, it is not necessary that the orders given from outside are always going to be followed. Not when you are sixteen years old anyway and have limited control over yourself.

In a Ranji practice match, I was once out for 39, hitting the ball in the air and Dad got to hear about the dismissal. That evening he went back home and told Mom, 'Tell Yuvi not to enter the house or I will kill him.' In those words. (And Dad kept a gun at home.) So Mom made sure I got the message. Don't come home. He is very, very furious.

I stayed away from the house. That night I slept in my car, a tiny Maruti, parked in the sector next to ours. The next morning when I heard from my mother again, Dad had left the house and the coast was clear. I came home to get cleaned up and eat breakfast. Dad returned while I was at the table. He must have noticed the Maruti parked outside because his face was red, like there was smoke rising from him. I was terrified. I knew he did not want explanations from me, he wanted to vent. And vent he did.

Without warning, he picked up the glass full of milk on the table and threw it straight at me. It missed my head and broke the glass pane of the window behind where I was sitting. Then I received the full volley of his abuse. Most of it is unprintable but I remember in the middle of it he said that had I not been his son, he would have shot me, that I had ruined his reputation, and that there had been no point in training me so hard.

When I look back on that day, everything comes into sharp focus. Fear and anger made me shake, at the same time I couldn't say a word, couldn't challenge him, couldn't fight. Because there was the other thing—I *had* played a stupid shot. This was around the time I was trying to establish myself in the Punjab Ranji team. And it was as if Dad, Yograj Singh, the player of one Test match and six ODIS, was angry because he couldn't get me to renew his ties with cricket and take him beyond what he had done himself. He so badly wanted that to happen. At such a time, there can be no understanding, only extremes of emotion. Through all this, my mother tried to save me from him. She was trying to protect her son from her husband, from his own father.

Everyone knew whose son I was. People had seen us in the nets together. When I played a rash shot, they had seen Dad rip the non-striker's stump out of the ground and fling it at me. As soon as he left the net, I would go skywards. When he returned, I would show great respect and hit along the carpet. Everyone

in Chandigarh knew what he was about. No one messed with me because no one wanted to get into an argument with him. At the same time, because I was his son, I got plenty of grief from people who had a problem with him.

As it happened I had scored enough runs in junior cricket to make my first-class debut for Punjab at the age of fifteen. It was in February 1997 against Orissa in a Super League game in Mohali. My score from that game is a lovely 0 as opener, and I dropped a catch. Though I did not know it, I was carrying a stress fracture in my back. Possibly because of it I misfielded and it immediately earned me the label of a bad fielder. Under the circumstances I thought it would be unwise to go home that evening and find Dad there. I did the next best thing. I went to the team hotel and marched into my teammate Sandy-pa's room.

Sandeep Sharma is eight years older than me and when we met for the first time in the Jalandhar heat, he thought I was a bit loony. It was boiling under the sun and he found me grinning, joking and generally looking happy. His first words to me were, 'Are you feeling cold?'

With my big fat 0 on debut, I went to Sandy-pa's room and asked him to order dinner for us. Only when he fell asleep very late at night did I decide to head home to my own bed. The next morning in one of the newspapers on the dining table I saw the headline next to my name: India Gate. The ball had gone through my legs at the game. When I got into my Maruti I found its music system was ripped out.

My performance gave many guys the chance to score points against Dad. They couldn't have done it to his face earlier but after the 0 and dropped catch on debut they got an opportunity to mock his son's cricket. That hurt us both. Growing older, I saw the connection. The only way to get back at the viciousness against my dad was through my cricket. As I became more independent and mature with age and travel, and my performances began to count, I felt more responsible.

Slowly but steadily, I started making a name for myself. If others were scoring 50s, I was scoring 150s; if others were scoring 100 once in a way, I was getting two or three 100s in succession. It was like this in the junior tournaments, under-16s and under-19s, and soon the teenage quicks weren't that into bowling at me. I got the reputation that I could hit big, hit long and hit constantly.

I remember one time while playing for India under-19 against Sri Lanka in a home series I sent two of their main bowlers home. One leg spinner was the victim of a full throttle straight punch to the bowler. He split his right hand's webbing. After a few overs a similar shot again. The bowler couldn't get his foot

out of the way. He got two toes fractured. And after that I smashed four sixes in one over. If only cricket were all about the under-19 level … then I would have been its Viv Richards!

As teenagers, bowlers don't send the ball down quicker than 120 kmph, and you can smack them around. The great advantage for me was that when the bowlers were older, and the pace went up a level to 130-140-145, I didn't have a problem. I found I could play a level higher than my age. Those wet tennis balls and that cold marble wicket had taught me good. Those hard yards with the Sher were there in my head when I faced Brett Lee and Jason Gillespie in my first game for India in 2000; I could manage them. Everyone was astonished but not those who knew Dad and his regimen.

What Dad also trained me to do was to stretch myself. To get more. To want more. It is what a cricketing life needs to be built around—seeking more. But because it was Dad who kept pushing me along, I didn't grasp the need for individual, self-starter improvement until I was much older.

There was a two-year gap between my first and second first-class games for Punjab. In those two years in between, I filled out. I worked on my fielding. Being second rate at anything bothers me and fielding is the easiest of cricket skills. I was called a bad fielder on the basis of that one catch on my Ranji debut and that set my teeth on edge. In any case after the India Gate headline Dad took it upon himself to make sure I threw myself into fielding practice. 'I will make you the best fielder in the country,' he declared. Soon the routine of countless catches, mindless diving and hours of fielding drills started. He would hit the ball like a bullet and I would be expected to stop it, the next ball, the next ball, and so on, to the point where you could have hit my palm with a hammer and it would not have hurt.

The second time I played for Punjab was in February 1999 against Hyderabad in Secunderabad. I scored 20 and 18 and got two catches and affected one run out. But the runs weren't enough and naturally the question being asked was whether this senior level was too tough for me.

I would say I was lucky to have Vikram Rathour as my captain. He believed in me and told me so. The rest of the seniors were, let me say this, quite horrible. They were negative towards younger boys but I managed to find two slightly weather-beaten rocks in the side to lean on—Sandy-pa and Amit Sharma, who became my friends for life. They were my guardians and mentors. He is not doddering yet, but Sandy cannot even remember how long we've been friends. The rest of the older fellows, including the management and players, made it a

point to degrade and talk down to the younger players in the team. It was never about what you can do, what you are good at. It was about how inadequate you are. Negative stuff the entire time. It was a pointed way of trying to break a young player's confidence. Harbhajan Singh, who had come into the team at that point, and I especially got the maximum dose. Apart from Vikram, Sandy and Amit, it was as if the rest of the older lot did not want us to be there.

Once I misfielded and one of the seniors said to me, 'If the coach had been watching you, your career would have been over.' Another guy—each one knows who he is—said I played too many shots in domestic cricket so I wouldn't be able to survive in international cricket. (Sandy asked me to ignore that comment and said it was the very reason why I would succeed.) I was told that I was only seventeen years old and I should behave accordingly on the field. Once at nets, I asked someone to pass a ball that had gone a long way back. The coach said, 'Cricket *toonay khelna hai, tere baap ne nahin*.' (Hey, you're the one who has to play the game, not your pop.) One senior once said to Bhajju and me, 'You guys are lucky you are getting to play with us.'

There weren't too many teenagers playing first-class cricket for Punjab and maybe it made most of the senior guys a little nervous. They didn't like it. They wanted to be seen to be way better. Well, too bad.

In those days we would play 'days-cricket', the long-form game, and it was all I knew. The short game is a totally different animal and I was to learn its skills and demands much later. What I did know as a teenager, though, was how to bat when the team needed runs.

It took me three years of playing the Ranji Trophy—or rather sitting out for the better part—before I felt I really belonged there. I got my first 100 in the Ranji Trophy in November 1999 against Haryana. Vikram Rathour and I opened the innings for Punjab at the Nehru Stadium in Gurgaon, after Haryana had scored 279 on the first day. The wicket was a turner and at the time I thought I couldn't handle spinners very well. But I got stuck in and my friends tell me it was the innings where they saw me go up a level.

Vikram and I had a partnership of 180. It was the first time I could go past 60. The match was drawn but we won first-innings lead points and I will never forget that 100. The moment I crossed the century, it was like ankle weights had fallen off my legs. Now that I had a first-class 100 no one could say this wasn't

the game or level for me. The senior guys in the dressing room could not carry on and on about my dad. It was such a revelation, that moment I felt like I was thirteen again, on the top of the mountain in Chail. I got out on the third morning, after making 149 (291b (21x4, 2x6))—kept it on the carpet, didn't I? I was still a few weeks short of my eighteenth birthday.

This was the time before mobile phones and the Internet. I had to wait in my room for Dad's call in the evening during every away Ranji game. '*Kya Kiya*?' (What did you do?) he would ask. If I had done badly, I would get roasted. But that evening in Gurgaon, I waited for the call. I was itching to tell him that I'd ruled the world, that my teammates were impressed, that I'd scored my first 100.

The phone rang and I snatched it. It was Dad. '*Kya Kiya*?' I told him my score and was stunned when his reply was not a roar of approval or a *shabaash*, but: 'Why didn't you score 200?' I got deflated. Two hours later, I got another phone call. Dad said, 'The keys to your Honda City, they're kept in your room. I've had the car washed. You can drive it when you return.'

Speechless doesn't quite describe it. I began laughing when I put the phone down. That, I realized, was my dad. Quite like the Indian cricket fan, he lives between two extremes. I had to find my own way to make my peace with him. I think I have.

Now that my Ranji century was out of the way, I sought more. Around this time a very important thing happened at home. I had told my parents that we had to find a way for them to be calmer and more understanding, to make it easier for their children. I had been trying to patch up things between them because I loved them both dearly. Besides, Zora was not even ten. We couldn't stand the fighting anymore.

I think they understood the corrosive effect their relationship was having on them and us. They decided to separate, and Mom moved out of the house. I think it was the best thing that happened to me till then. It meant my mother could finally live her own life, my dad his own. There were no issues between them that had to be argued over in front of the kids. I lived with my dad for a bit but the big difference was that I had turned eighteen. He couldn't tell me that I could no longer visit my mother. Dad decided that he had better let me do whatever I wanted. It was tough for Zora who needed both his parents but had to split his time between them.

One of the things I learnt in my teenage years was to understand the difference between anger and aggression. My dad had a ridiculously angry personality, and Mom could also be a tigress if she got pissed off. The way they used to fight, it

was scary. It is through all of that that I learnt internally to keep a lid on my own anger, to control it. Anger is a bad quality that all of us have in us but we need to keep it under check. Rule it before it rules us. When I am on the field doing business, I know how to handle myself.

Aggression is not anger, aggression comes from performance. Aggression is a throw fired back cleanly at the keeper from point or cover, to have the batsman rushing to his crease. You have to use your aggression to get the opponent's heartbeat up, his mind racing, to force the mistakes at his end. Not yours.

Maybe this helped my cricket and, on the field, helped me think calmly in crisis situations: keep the emotion aside, think what would be the best option to take. The attitude might have propelled my name ahead of everyone else in the queue when people started looking for a new bunch of players for India—but it was two specific events that led me there.

My first important breakout performance came in the Under-19 Cooch Behar Trophy final of 1999 against Bihar. Keeping the wickets for Bihar was some chap called Mahendra Singh Dhoni. In those days when there was no IPL, the Cooch Behar Trophy was the biggest event for young cricketers, second only to the Ranji Trophy. I remember it was December. Not even a month had passed since the Haryana 100. We were in Jamshedpur.

By tea on day 2, Bihar were all out with a score of 357. The next morning I saw that the local newspapers were extremely excited. It was a rare achievement for Bihar. They had put up a fighting total. The two days that we had been fielding, the ground had been full of the local crowd making noise and jeering at us with claps and taunts from the stands. That morning while having breakfast I swore to myself that we would do well. In that match my opening partner made 95.

I spoke to Amit Sharma on the phone that evening. He was very impressed with my news that we had gone past the Bihar total. He asked me, 'How many did you get?' I said 358. 'And you?' He was confused. Then I clarified, 'Paaji, 'keyle ne banaye hain!' (Brother, yes, that's my score alone.)

Dad, of course, asked me why didn't you score 400? Punjab Under-19 finished with a total of 839. Vivek Mahajan, with whom I put up 341 for the third wicket, was not out on 280. We had batted the title away from Bihar. I can tell you the crowd was absolutely respectful and quiet by the end.

This is the kind of business I really liked doing; taking charge, controlling the flow of the cricket match and dictating the result. I had got to know what I liked about cricket: I liked scoring big and I liked winning. It was around this time that the small but key group of people who keep an eye on junior cricket—a few coaches, some young reporters, maybe a handful of administrators—started talking about me as a prospect for India. Some labelled me a prodigy.

Oh and Sidhu had told Dad by now that he had got it wrong, and that Dad had indeed made a cricketer out of me.

After that Cooch Behar Trophy match, I went to play the Under-19 World Cup in Sri Lanka in January. Early in the tournament, it went badly for me. I got out cheaply against Bangladesh. It was a group stage match. If I couldn't score now what would I do in crucial games? I was moaning to the coach, Roger Binny, when he said, 'Yuvi, you could end up being the most valuable player of the tournament.'

In the semi-final, we faced Australia. The Australian side had these blokes who went on to play for Australia: Nathan Hauritz, Mitchell Johnson (who went wicketless), Shaun Marsh. They were a good side and India piled on the runs against Australia, but some were worried that the total wasn't enough. We weren't kicking on like we should.

While I was padded up, I told a bunch of young Kenyan cricketers watching from the sidelines that India could get 70–80 in the last ten overs. I didn't think I was being cocky. I really knew I could do it. That day, I scored 58 off 25 balls and we reached the final. In the final we beat Sri Lanka and I was Player of the Tournament.

With these two events I built the reputation of being both a fire-starter and a troubleshooter. It got me into the Indian team. The 2000 ICC Knock Out Trophy in Nairobi (later this tournament came to be called the Champions Trophy) was a fresh start for the senior team, which had just come out of the match-fixing controversy. We had a new captain. It was without some experienced seniors and guys like me were picked to fill the gaps. In the first match that I batted, which I mentioned earlier, against Australia, I was the highest scorer in the match with 84 and was declared the Player of the Match too.

India reached the final in Nairobi, and we did not win, but a group of us tykes, who went on to become friends—Zaheer Khan was one of them—earned ourselves a name in the game. We had arrived. I felt naturally able to deal with sides like the Aussies, who were in their prime. Their pace wasn't a problem, I could ignore their talking, could handle their bowling. From now on cricket and

I were buddies, roommates, fellow travellers. The Nairobi success became my ticket to the big life.

People were excited about my performances and finally Dad was proud of me. So I asked Mom and him for a favour. I wanted them to be at the Chandigarh airport together to pick me up when I returned. I wanted to see them with each other. They did that for me. It was the first time they spoke to each other after their separation.

Life changed completely after Nairobi—not just for me but for my family as well. My mother thought she was living in a dream where one day we were in a bad state and the next day her son was a superstar. She said it was like a beggar winning a lottery. The equations we had with everyone else changed. No more snarky comments about Dad or my cricket. Wherever I went I was recognized. It felt good.

My friends remind me of the mad things I used to do in the early days. When we went to the cinemas in Delhi and Chandigarh, I would hide behind Sandy-pa so that no one could spot me. And then when we were driving around, I would stick my head out of the car and point to myself and say loudly to bystanders, 'Hey, I'm Yuvraj Singh.' My only excuse is that I was twenty-one. When I think about it, I still crack up.

Nairobi gave me my first big pay cheque. With it I bought Mom a house in Mani Majra just northwest of Chandigarh. I stay in that house when I am in Chandigarh even now. Ten years back when I first got it, it was my safe haven. It is a corner house, at the end of a row of ordinary middle-class homes, three floors are built up on a small plot of land. Outside the main door is a set of shops and a dhobi who does the ironing under a tree. When I finally moved out of Dad's house to go live there with my mother and brother, we realized how quiet and peaceful a house could be.

Over the next ten years, I gained a reputation as a consistent middle-order match-winner in the shorter version. Over ten years, I made 8,038 runs in the one-day game. It is a story I will tell another day. My father goes on about Test cricket still. It is the next target for me but it is not that over the years I didn't try.

When I was younger I found many reasons why it didn't pan out like I would have wanted. I was trying to break into a middle-order which was the best in India's history. When I was in form, they played me in Tests on and off. These will-he/ won't-he dramas appear in my Test career like a rash. In the historic 2003–04 series that we played in Pakistan, playing in the second Test in Lahore, I got my first Test century. In the next and final Test of the series, in Rawalpindi,

Sourav Ganguly, the captain, came back from injury and there was a huge controversy (because cricket media, of course, can make a big debate out of anything) about what the team composition would be. I had been picked to replace Sourav and he was back. But then I got this century. In the event, to accommodate me they dropped the regular opener and opened with Parthiv Patel, the wicketkeeper. That was fun. What was not fun was when a few months later, the shoe was on the other foot, and I was called on to open. Opening a Test innings is not all that fun I can tell you!

These days, I don't like calling the unfortunate things that happen 'bad luck'. Because when good things happen, I don't put it down to luck either. Things just happen, you have to go with the flow, cope, handle it and move on. I have played thirty-seven Tests over nine years. The break-up of the number of Tests I've played per year reads like a bank account number: 1-5-4-9-2-4-6-3-3. In this span I have three 100s and ten 50s. There is no consistency or pattern there that I could hang on to.

But, like that tour in Pakistan, there are other happy memories. In December 2008, I batted alongside Sachin Tendulkar in Chennai in the second innings when we were chasing England's 387 to win. India's openers Viru and Gauti gave us a great start, but we lost our miracle men Rahul and Laxman early. When I went in Sachin was batting as if he was somewhere else. In another place, another zone. It had been a few weeks since the 26/11 attacks, we were all greatly disturbed, maybe Sachin more than us because the horror had taken place in his hometown. He went about the chase with clinical calmness and as we ate up the runs, I could see the England fielders looking worried, their body language was wobbly. My heart was racing as we neared the total but Sachin was not looking at the scoreboard.

Sachin finally scored 103 not out, I made 85 not out and I remember the noise when the target was reached, the second highest India had ever scored for a Test win, after 406 in Trinidad in 1976.I ran over to Sachin to lift him into the air and that was when he realized the match had been won, when he saw me racing towards him. Behind that in the distance, we saw another celebrating group of men and women. They were the ground staff who swept the wicket every day. I was told later that only three other teams—West Indies, South Africa and Australia—had chased more in the hundred and thirty-one-year history of Test cricket. I felt happy to have played a part in it.

After this match, I thought I had finally broken through into Test cricket. But in a year's time the questions that had been asked earlier came back to haunt me.

Around 2009–2010, I was honestly wondering what was going on. I went through a string of injuries that took too long to heal. I had dengue twice in 2010 and got fractured easily. I hurt my hand, broke one finger twice, then broke that finger on the other hand, broke a wrist, had a cervical disc bulge that led to acute neck problems. Looking back I think it was the cancer that suppressed my immunity. Doctors have said that this is probably true.

With such an eventful couple of years, when the 2011 World Cup approached it felt like the toughest dream to achieve. In the months leading up to the World Cup I was torn between confidence in my ability and the betrayals of my body. And yet, I remember, in October 2009, when I needed to go to Australia for treatment for my wrist, I had to get a chest X-ray, which is mandatory if you are seeking an Australian medical visa. My X-ray was clear.

Running and falling and dusting myself off. Finding the right balance. The World Cup was round the corner and I had to find a way to do that all over again.

Chapter 2

The Top-of-the-World Cup

MY FIRST INNINGS in the 2011 World Cup came in our second match. In the first match in Dhaka on the 19th of February, Viru Lala had got a little carried away. It's his style. First ball of the World Cup, and he stepped back and smashed a four. Good afternoon, Bangladesh. Hello, World Cup! Because he is always so satisfied and happy, I call Viru Viv Richards Sehwag, Lala. Always like a happy businessman going about his day's work.

After the first four, Lala went on to score 175 off 140. When he got out there were only fifteen balls left in the innings. Virat—Cheeku, because he once had a haircut in which he resembled the bunny cartoon from the kids' comic *Champak*—was on 94. Yusuf went out for a quick bash. Cheeku got to his 100 and the team reached a total of 370. I didn't bat.

After winning the Bangladesh match hands down, we returned to India. The tournament was designed in such a way that the three participating hosts (India, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh) would play their group matches at home. The two semi-finals were in Colombo and Mohali, and the final was in Mumbai on the 2nd of April.

The schedule gave us an easy start. After the match in Dhaka there was a seven-day break, then we had to play England, and after another six-day break we were to play Ireland. We would be in Bangalore all through this period. Next, it would get a little busy: two matches within a week in different cities. After that we would come back to the south, this time Chennai, enjoy a break of seven days and play our last group match against the West Indies on the 20th of March. One month of the World Cup over. In our group there was Bangladesh, England, Ireland, the Netherlands, South Africa and the West Indies. The top four teams from each of the two groups would proceed to the knock-out stages.

Our second group game was against England. For the first time, at least since I started playing, they looked like a potentially decent one-day side. The team had a few acknowledged match-winners, like my old buddy Kevin Pietersen, who once lovingly called me a pie-chucker for my elegant bowling action. I thought this would be a good game to get a bat in.

On the day of the game, during our warm-ups before the match, I was getting ready at the nets in the Chinnaswamy Stadium. Suddenly I found I could not take my stance. My head, however gently and softly I coaxed it, would not pivot to the right and I could not gain the sight over my right shoulder. It was jammed.

This neck problem had started with a sprain in Sri Lanka in July 2010. When we got back to India, an MRI showed a disc bulge between the C4 and C5 vertebrae. Over the months the pain came and subsided persistently. At times it radiated through my neck to the scapula and down my left arm and I could not sleep all night. Sometimes physiotherapy would help and give me some relief.

This time around at the Chinnaswamy, Nitin Patel was called out. He tried to unlock it but the neck would not budge. Fans standing nearby were waiting, and I felt bad that I could not even glance in their direction because I couldn't turn my head that way. I couldn't sign autographs, nor give them any smiling pictures. Moreover, I was seriously worried about my fitness. Through sheer willpower in the past I had been able get my movement back. Today even that was not working. Zaheer Khan, Zak as I fondly call him, was by my side at nets, and he kept saying it would be ok.

Zak is the ideas man in the team. Whenever we are in trouble we turn to him. He never disappoints. He is Zaheer *bhai* Idea-wale. My Idea Baba. Frustrated and in pain, I said to him that I couldn't play the match. Zak looked at me in his calm way. He said, 'Yuvi, you play, you will forget about the pain.' I said, Zak, it isn't that I don't want to play, I just can't. And what else? I should not hold up the spot. We went on like this in the warm-ups. He was firm: you play, you'll forget the pain.

In January 2010 when I broke my wrist in Bangladesh, Zak told me this is small stuff, Yuvi, you are going to be the man of the World Cup. There I was with a fresh fracture, and Zak was talking about the World Cup a year down the line. The thing with him is he won't change his words. Our Idea Baba is a solid guy. He said, 'You're the man, you'll win us the World Cup. You'll do something for India, you watch. It will be you.' Later he said it in Sri Lanka, he said it throughout the year, and on the day of the World Cup game against England he was still saying it.

So when I went out to bat in the thirtieth over, taking his advice that *'bhagwan ka naam le aur bas khel ja,'* I said a quick prayer and took guard. I was in at no. 4 with about twenty overs to go. Gauti had just got out, and Lala was back in the hut. Sachin was on 88, India on 180. Thank god, Graeme Swann is bowling, I thought, and not one of the quicks. I assumed an awkward stance, bent my neck

at an angle and played two balls. Miraculously, as my body warmed, my neck loosened up and after that things weren't so bad at all. In the next over, facing Jimmy Anderson, I hit a four. Keep it on the carpet, Yuvi, I was telling myself, Sachin is batting beautifully. The partnership has got to be careful. Sachin got 120 that day. After he got out, Mahi came on and we revved up. I got out in the forty-sixth over on 58. We had crossed 300. We ended up with a total of 338.

Then England took the game away from us. A few decisions went their way but the big picture is this: post-Twenty20 no one knows what a good score is. There are days when 350 looks gettable. In this match we didn't take early wickets, and Andrew Strauss played a blinder. 158 runs came from 145 balls, terrific stuff. The crowd was stunned, silenced.

Then, in the forty-third over, Zak got Ian Bell and with the very next ball he got Strauss. From 280–2, to 281–4; finally, a chance! The crowd erupted. From here it took over and it pushed us, egged us on, as if it was taking the wickets.

It is pretty funny with crowds. When you are batting, at first you can hear them like a booming sound and then, when the bowler begins his run, the noise shuts down. You don't hear anything. You pay attention to only the bowler, his hand, watching the ball coming out of the bowler's hand. And when you are fielding, you *need* to hear the crowd all the time.

In the end we tied the game, and that was actually not a bad result. The match done, Zak walked over to me and drawled, 'See, I told you, shut up and play.' I realized I played that game only because of him and his constant nagging.

Who knows what would have happened if I had not played the England match. It was nearly two years since I got my last century and though there had been 50s and 70s, they had come between illnesses and injuries. I felt I needed to come into the World Cup with a score and what cricket commentators call 'time in the middle'. For anyone who is coming out after a long layoff or is in bad form, time in the middle is very important. No matter how hard you work in the nets or how many throwdowns you have taken, the real match always has a situation. So when you get some time in the middle, you hit a few balls, middle some and then with the passage of time your flow and confidence starts coming back. It helps you to stitch together your thoughts and bat in a way you want to. I was glad to have the 58 I got here not just because they were good runs to get in a good match but staying out for about sixteen overs, getting to try shots against Swann and Anderson, that's valuable in its own way. On the news that night on TV and the next day in the newspapers many commentators remarked, 'Crucially for India, Yuvraj has found his form.'

Our next game was against Ireland. I was happy our longest stay during the tournament was in Bangalore because I love being in that city. The National Cricket Academy is in Bangalore. Whether it is for check-ups or for rehabilitation work, for fitness or for conditioning camps, we land up in Bangalore. Over the past year I had been in Bangalore a lot of the time—after Sri Lanka, for example, I came back to Bangalore to get my neck checked up and we found the cervical bulge—so to me it felt like a good thing to be in a place that was so familiar. It is a pleasant city where the people have always been good to me. And it was here that for the first time in months I got the feeling that I knew what I had to do.

Ireland shocked everyone by beating England before our game with them. After they won, when you saw their guys hanging around in the ITC Gardenia, where the teams were staying, you could easily make out they were walking taller, talking louder. One of their batsmen Kevin O'Brien had made a brilliant century to knock England down.

We had to be careful as they were an unknown quantity for us. At the same time we did *not* have to be overly concerned. Paddy Upton, the mental conditioning coach, spoke to us all the time. He said it was ok not to top the group. The bowling coach Eric Simons believed we had only so much stress energy to burn. We needed to get to the knock-out stages fresh, not exhausted. Got it. But Ireland? Surely Ireland was to be beaten.

On the 6th of March as the Ireland match began, Zak came out, guns blazing. First over, bang, clean bowled! Third over, a tremendous ball, caught behind, gone! And after that they consolidated. When I was brought on, it was the twenty-sixth over and the score was 118–2. In the next over Bhajju got a wicket. The partnership was broken at last: 122–3. With the first ball of my third over, I took a wicket: 130–4. I was kept on from one side. My next over yielded no wicket. My over after that, the hero against England Kevin O'Brien sent it straight back to me. Thank you! The next over nothing; then in my over after that, a horrible long hop was hit beautifully, smoothly, into Bhajju's hands at extra cover. We started laughing. Two overs later I appealed for LBW and it was given out. The Irish decided to review the decision. The ball had pitched just outside off stump and would have hit the middle stump high-ish. Decision upheld, wicket number four, Ireland 178–7.

In my last over, on the fourth ball, the batsman came down a fair bit out of his crease to a very slow ball pitching back of a length on off. The ball caught his pad. Mahendra Singh Dhoni, now behind the stumps for India and leading the

side, put up his hands in a kind of quiet, grinning appeal. I mumbled a ‘howzzat’. We looked at each other. Mahi asked me, ‘Bat or pad?’ ‘Pad. Pad first …’ I said. We pressed for a review. It was given! And there it was: a five-for. So many years, in Chandigarh, in Chail, in endless camps and competitions around the hot stadiums and dusty grounds, batting, batting, batting, who would have thought I would one day have a World Cup five-for to my name! In the cheering and the laughing I put up my fist and opened my hand and fanned out my five fingers for the crowd. The Bangalore stadium stood up in one big roar.

Ireland got all out for 207. When our turn came to bat, I went in at no. 5, and though we had thought the total was not tough, we were three down for 87 runs in the twenty-first over. It was no surprise that the Irish were fighting hard. I had two good partnerships with Mahi and Yusuf. Mahi and I shared 67 runs for the fifth wicket and Yusuf and I had 43 not out for the sixth wicket. On the scoreboard, it shut the door. I finished 50 not out. I got my first Man of the Match in the tournament.

The medal in your hand always brings a warm feeling, but that night when the match was over and we were getting our breath back, I could not shake the sensation that something important had happened out there. What a difference it made to me. I began to realize that my job was not to hit the ball out of the stadium. It was to go along the ground and finish the game for my team and my country. I had controlled the big hits and the powerful boundaries. Controlling the desire to belt the leather off the ball, it was like denying a basic impulse. Maybe like sneezing. Ok, not exactly like sneezing but you know what I mean. If your standard reaction to something all your life has been one thing, changing it is no straight task. What if I had given in, hit a few and got out? Who knows. The Irish hung in there and tempted me. I knew they were thinking that I would get out hitting. But I didn’t give them the chance. We got home chasing a total of 207 with only four overs left.

That innings against Ireland probably was a highlight for me. It defined my World Cup performances as before and after. After this match no matter how tough the situation was, I did not try to hit my way out of trouble. Instead I tried to fight it, play the game the way Dad wanted me to play my cricket—along the ground, not in the air, carving an innings out of nothing with the mere threat that I could go big.

I played the same way against the Netherlands in Delhi three days later. This time I was in at no. 6. Netherlands had scored 189. Chasing 189, we lost our first four wickets for 98 runs. When I came in I was content to take singles, defend.

To many it looked outside of my nature. Well, they did not fully know my nature. Comments about my nature are often haywire. In this case, as far as I was concerned, I was playing in a way that let me do what I always knew I could do: change gears. I pride myself on being that player who has always been able to change gears. But maybe I have been seen more often shifting up. Here I was shifting down. It was as important. When I did it in the World Cup, I could see it was for my team, for me, and for those who had believed in me. When I started to bat well and get runs, I did not want to waste the start on the big shot. I had decided I needed to value my wicket, especially at those times when the fall of a wicket would be bad news.

Interestingly, when I was twenty-one or twenty-five, I did not think this way. I was a youth, I would go with the flow, and in ODIs the flow changes fast. In the 2003 World Cup in South Africa the responsibility was on the shoulders of the senior players. It was my first World Cup. I thought of myself as one of the kids. (The 2007 World Cup after four years is another story, which we shall leave for later.)

In 2011, I felt I was one of the senior guys. I had played two hundred and sixty-seven one-dayers. I thought of myself as being quite mature. But what is maturity? I think it is two things: instinct and experience. In fact, it is the kick you get from your natural gift, or instinctive ability, combined with experience, which makes you sober. In the 2011 World Cup, there was my one true love, whack the ball, and along with it, giving me strength, the knowledge buzzing in my mind that I had a lot of experience of reading match situations and I should make the most of it. Play for the team, bat within the big picture, keep it quiet and steady when required, build a base, don’t go out there, have a bash and feel happy thinking of the headlines.

In 2005–06, I was the Man of the Series in three back to back series. We played England at home, Pakistan in Pakistan and South Africa at home. I had centuries, good not-outs, and I finished games. That period is a memorable one in my career. I was proud of what I had achieved. But it was not till around this time in the World Cup that I started to fully appreciate what it meant to be really in control of my shots.

In my 51 not out against Netherlands, I believed I hit the ball well, that I was ahead of the other guy’s thought process and was in control of my shot selection. I also got the feeling we get sometimes, that this time luck is on my side. I shall use the analogy of the *topi* to explain. A *topi* is a cap. In Hindi when someone changes their opinion on a subject all of a sudden, usually to suit themselves, we

say that *‘usne topi ghuma di’* (he turned his cap). You can imagine we in Indian cricket find ourselves among turning topis a lot of the time! But funnily enough we cricketers are also always in a *topi*. I always say use the *topi*. If the sun is behind you, wear the cap with the peak covering your neck. If it is in front of you, wear it straight and keep your face covered. The *topi* needs to turn. You’ve got to be alert.

During the early pool matches, I used to joke with Mahi often. ‘Hey, come on,’ I would say to the captain in tight situations, ‘I can hit a six now.’ Mahi would get serious and reply, ‘No, no, play it down, play it along the ground.’ I knew I wasn’t going to but I enjoyed cracking the joke and watching him go red.

After the Netherlands match in Delhi I was at ease again. I had picked up another Man of the Match. We had played more than half our pool matches. I felt a sense of belonging once more after my year of being in and out owing to injury. I shut out the ups and downs I had gone through before the Cup. I was in what shrinks call a ‘good space’. Emotionally, mentally, thumbs up. But I was struggling to sort myself out physically. In these weeks of the World Cup, I had begun vomiting often. I could also hear myself breathing. The more ragged my breath became, the more Zak ribbed me, and our buddy Ashu, Ashish Nehra, would join in too. Getting old really fast, Yuvi, they would say. While they spent their sessions diving around, fancying themselves as Jonty Rhodes, I was creaking.

Normally I take my time going to bed. I am a bit of a night owl. But when I sleep, I sleep till late in the afternoon. For nearly nine months though I had not slept well because my neck had been troubling me. Every night that I spent tossing and turning, I would get nervous about the effect sleeplessness would have on my game. On nights before a match I would take a sleeping pill prescribed by Nitin. But these turned out to be useless. So before every World Cup match, I had the team masseur Mane Kaka or Nitin in my room putting me to sleep. Mane Kaka used to work very hard. One after the other, all of us players would troop on and off his massage table. I told him, ‘Kaka, in the next birth, watch, you’ll be a great player and I will be massaging you.’ Before the South Africa match, there were three people in my room at midnight doing everything they could so I would sleep. I felt two years old.

The next morning, I could not keep anything down. I usually don’t eat a big meal if I am expecting to bat but when things are fine, yes, breakfast is fairly large: eggs, toast, beans, potatoes. Before this particular match in Nagpur, I could not eat a thing. Guys around me thought I was nervous. I believed it too.

After all, I knew I was a nervous batsman. But throwing up before an innings was taking it to a whole new level even for me.

I rationalized that I had been bowling ten overs and batting, losing weight, so I was tired but that can't kill you. Go with the flow, I told myself even as I threw up. I wanted the World Cup, somehow, anyhow, I wanted to hold it above my head. On the health front I thought, let's get to the finish line and then we'll see. The World Cup is the biggest dish on the table. Everything else is a side dish. At the back of my mind I thought maybe I have a bronchial ailment, maybe tuberculosis.

In Nagpur, we couldn't defend 296. Even though we had a great start from the top three, Viru, Sachin, Gauti—Sachin even got a handsome century—for all the batting that came afterwards, we could add only 29. In India, where media madness is always present, journalists, commentators, ex-players, jumped up to air the opinion that this team cannot defend a total, that the batting unit has not clicked, if one or two batsmen do well, the rest fail. The favourite hoo-hah: the Indians have mastered the art of botching up winning situations.

After we lost the game, we were not going to finish top of the pool, which was fine, because it humbled us in a way. The fact is we should not have lost that match and South Africa should not have won. We would probably meet Australia in the quarter-final as a result, which was not going to be easy. Never is it easy with Australia, who have always been one of the top three teams in international cricket. We had to be strong for them, so we poured our energy into regrouping. We flew to Chennai immediately for our last group match against the West Indies. There was a week's gap and we filled this gap with reflection and chats. The chief selector Krishnamachari Srikkanth came over to the hotel and gave us a few words of advice. The team got together and spoke about the defeat and how we could get better from here. Sachin as a team senior, the coach Gary Kirsten and the South African-born explorer Mike Horn did one session where a lot of motivating things were said. Mike spoke to us about mind over matter. He was explaining that one needed to put one's mind to something to make it happen.

As far as Sachin goes, when my career is over, one of the things I will treasure most is that I played in the time of Tendulkar, that I was his teammate.

People often think of me as a joker of sorts and I kept up the laughter and the wisecracks whenever I was with the team in 2010, 2011, but coming up to the Cup, I think Sachin noticed me worrying somewhere. No one understands that for a player of his ability and his achievements to every time find the youngest,

most raw player in a corner and try to draw him out, for him to be this kind of a team-man, is a big deal. In his own example he has over and over again been a selfless teammate. This was going to be Sachin's sixth, and probably his last World Cup. He must have been waging his own internal battles. I did not understand his battles but he understood mine.

I will never forget the conversation he had with me one evening over dinner in Bangladesh, just before the World Cup began. It may have lasted forty-five minutes. I had worked very hard for a year and things were not going my way. He could sense my disappointment. He told me I mattered to the team. When it matters, he had said, you will matter the most.

That stayed in my memory, and I kept replaying it in my head. Before this most important event of my life he tried to get me to relax, to turn the World Cup into a simple mission, 'Play the tournament for someone you love or respect or for someone who is special and has played a huge role in your life. Play it for someone you think you owe something to. Make the World Cup part of that debt that you have to fulfil.' As he was saying this I told myself that I will play this World Cup for you, you who I spent my childhood watching, you who I've grown up watching.

He often used this strategy he said. It helped him focus on the game. He was kind and generous and I was amazed that after all these years he cared enough about what I was going through and wanted to share. I got hold of a picture of Sachin on-driving a ball from my one-day debut in 2000 in Nairobi and I pasted it on my coffin. Well, we call our kit bags our coffins. Next to it I stuck a picture of me playing a similar shot. Every time I opened the bag to get my kit, I was reminded who I was playing this World Cup for.

I knew I would have to recover quickly for the match against the West Indies if I had any chance of keeping my private promise to Sachin. Frankly, by then I was fed up. I was fed up of people whining about our performance all the time.

The evening after the Nagpur defeat Nishant Arora who was covering the tournament for his TV channel and I were eating dinner together in my room at the Chennai Sheraton. The TV was on and the usual topic, about the Indian team's fate at the World Cup, was being discussed, when Nishant turned to me and expressed his concern about our performance. We were eating Caesar salads with special healthy dressing so that my stomach would not get agitated. In Chennai I had started coughing a lot and spat blood in my cough. I figured maybe it was because we had lost the match to South Africa, and I had wanted to win. Seriously, World Cups can muddle up your insides and I thought maybe

that’s what was going on with me.

So Nishant was there, looking at me intently, and I got caught by the mood and said very seriously that I was going to take India to the final of the World Cup. I said I would get fifteen wickets and 400 runs before the tournament was over, that I was setting this as a goal right here right now, and he kept staring at me puzzled. Normally I don’t say things like this. You can’t, in a cruel game like cricket. But some deep hunger inside me brought this out that day. Nishant knew I had not been sleeping, that I had been vomiting. Here was India’s most nerve-wracked World Cup player telling him we were going to get to the Cup final.

But why do the World Cups matter so much to us, ever thought of that? How does it go from just a giant cricket event to an ache in the Indian cricketer’s gut? Every four years that the Cup went past with India ending up empty-handed, this trophy turned into a larger and larger empty space in our souls. How did it happen?

For me it happened because the more I played for India the bigger its loss became and the heavier it got. Maybe it was because the very first World Cup I played in, we came so close.

In 2003 in South Africa, I was a rookie kid who was so happy to be there because he was playing alongside giant names. Our best batsmen—Sourav Ganguly, Sachin, Rahul Dravid—were in their early thirties. They were epic personalities, fit, sharp, their jaws jutted out, they made their intentions clear. Our bowlers too were a hell of a combination—Javagal Srinath leading, Zak, Anil *bhai*, Harbhajan and Ashish, who bowled in the 140s, following (when Ashu hit 149 kmph on the speed gun in Zimbabwe, we fell over in astonishment, but he remained his usual self, cool as a cucumber and full of contempt—for us batters).

In that World Cup we lost one match in the group stages to Australia and when we got to the final, again against Australia, we blew it. The bowlers will tell you that we should have batted first but I maintain Sourav’s decision to bat second was not a bad decision. The wicket was damp. It was what we did on the day, having taken the decision to bat second, that really turned our dreams, ambitions, beliefs inside out. The occasion dwarfed us. Our strategies and our plans got messed up by our heads. That evening after the match was over and we had lost, every time someone came up in Sandton and said, ‘hard luck,’ I wanted to shout back, ‘Luck? Luck had nothing to do with it.’ We simply blew it. Rather than concentrating on what we needed to do, our skills, our special qualities, we had tried to out-attack the Australians physically and mentally, exactly as they

figured we would. That night I didn't know if I would ever reach a World Cup final again, I didn't know if we would ever get a team like that again. It was excruciating.

For me, there was also a historical reason: Dad. Growing up I would hear many of his friends in Chandigarh say that the 1983 World Cup should have been his. Instead it went to another guy from Chandigarh. The 1983 World Cup was Kapil's Cup. At home we could never forget that. Yograj Singh, my dad the sher, was also a massive, fast-bowling, jumbo-hitting all-rounder. As a bowler people used to say he was quicker than Kapil. Two of a type but Indian cricket had room for only one of them. After Kapil's victory in 1983, Dad slipped out of the picture. I wanted to fit him back in there somehow, to let people know that histories can be wrongly written, and sometimes we get a chance to rewrite the wrongs. I believed it was up to me to do it. That was my personal story and it grew and grew. Till it became that ache in my stomach.

The way it turned out, I was throwing up throughout the day of our last group match against the West Indies.

Chennai is a great city, and if they had great weather it could be paradise, but it is not. Everything is top volume, be it heat, humidity, or the crowd's ability to whistle. It is not a place for the faint-hearted. Ever since I got there from Nagpur I had been coughing. Two days before the West Indies match I threw up my food and there was blood in the vomit. It was a harmless masala dosa I had slipped in between Caesar salads. Nishant, who was with me, said, 'Yuvi, do you think you should see a doctor?' and I was like, hey, it's the 18th, the final is in less than three weeks. Don't you think I have time to sort out my digestive issues later?

I tried to eat more rice. Roti I could not keep down but I found rice was manageable. Maybe I could retain about 20 percent of the rice I ate. Curd rice was good. Water, juice, energy drinks, by this time these were all into-Yuvi, out-of-Yuvi.

During the match it was hot, and it made things worse. We were trying to set a total but the match had to be stopped a few times because I was throwing up. My mates would look at me anxiously during the innings as I kept vomiting. Standing there at one point I felt a bit dizzy until Umpire Simon Taufel, for whom I have a lot of respect, asked me, 'Are you ok, mate? Do you want to go off?' His question made everything fall into place. Things became sharp and clear then: I knew I was in a happy batting place.

I told Simon, 'No, boss, I ain't going out. I am nearing 100 after two years so if I fall and collapse you can take me to the hospital. But until then, I'm not

going out or going off. If I get out, I get out. Until then, I am staying.' I got to 113. The total was 268—not bad. I knew we could defend it.

I was the sixth bowler. In the four overs I bowled I got Devon Thomas and Andre Russell. After a decent start, they lost six wickets for 9 runs. All out for 188. Victory by 80 runs before the knock-out stage. India were back.

It was now confirmed that we had pulled up behind South Africa in the group, and that meant that our quarter-final opponent would be Australia. South Africa, group winners, would get to play New Zealand, supposed to be the easier game. Or so everyone thought. Ha! What happened in Mirpur went to show there are no guarantees in cricket. As far as we were concerned, it didn't matter. We didn't want to be third, fourth, or even second. We wanted to be world champions. We would have to beat the world champions to be world champions. That's the way the dice had rolled, and so be it.

One and a half years before the 2011 World Cup, we began talking about it. We asked the question: 'Are we ready to win the World Cup if we play it today?' The answer was no. After that we doubled our efforts. During every practice session, we talked about what we needed to do, we measured our progress, sometimes realizing ok, we further need to do this or that. We knew we had to be in the best shape physically, in the right frame of mind and working as a well-functioning unit. Nobody really spoke about it but the demons of 2007 had not left us.

The end of the 2003 World Cup final felt like such a horrid evening, we didn't realize that worse could or would come. Four years later, we were pretty much the same bunch of guys going into the 2007 World Cup in the West Indies. The difference was that the team environment was awful. Everyone watched their backs, we were all under pressure, and the fun was completely gone. You can find ways to handle pressure from the outside and still grin. Anxiety from within, however, sucks the oxygen out of a team. It makes the air bad. There was so much negativity that we ended up with a heap of odd moves. The biggest example was that Sachin, who was getting tons as an opener, was moved to no. 4. Big mistake I think. Then, all of us knew the coach and Sourav, who was no longer the captain but still a team senior, were having problems. I could see a lot of the younger players were suffering. When we went on to the field, all of this together backfired.

We lost to Bangladesh, beat Bermuda, lost to Sri Lanka, and by our third match of the tournament we had crashed out. There was the disappointment of 2003 and then there was this. This was disaster. It was supposed to be a long World Cup for us. We had expected we would be in the Caribbean till the end of April. Instead, it was still March and Bhajju and I were holed up in London, trying to joke about the fact that we were in hiding. In truth those were bad, bad days and we really had to wait for everyone in India to cool off before we landed in Punjab again. That experience stayed with me. This time before the tournament started I was so worried about my mother that I offered her a holiday outside India. I didn't want her to be in the house if stones were thrown, if I didn't perform or India crashed out. She refused.

I get what the World Cup means to us Indians. Cricket is a part of our heartbeat here. The Cup is the biggest prize and we Indians like big prizes. We don't believe in half-measures. I don't, so I am not surprised when no Indian does. I love our people because we are passionate and personal about the game. As a player you must quickly learn to roll with it: when you win, you are god, when you'll lose, everybody will jump on you. It's all-out attack.

Just six months after the Caribbean crash, we won the World T20 in South Africa without a coach. The adulation and celebration waiting for us in India was unbelievable. We landed in Bombay where it had been raining. There was a parade in an open-top double-decker bus that went on for more than four hours through falling rain, beating drums and an ocean of fans. As a young player this up-down reaction confuses the hell out of you. Later you learn how to cope with it.

Now imagine a World Cup in India. Imagine that huge an event plus the 2007 legacy we carried. Everyone talked about India's World Cup being 'at home'. 'At home' meant we were confined to a few four-walls for seven weeks: dressing room, hotel room, and maybe one or two private places where we could talk to family, meet our friends. Other than the field, we wore our headphones everywhere we went and turned the volume up. From all corners there was just one thing people were saying, 'How will India win? Will India win?' There was the constant seesaw of the people's hope, expectation and the weight of public dreams. The bearer who came to your room with a club sandwich (I wish! I mean curd rice). Before he said it, you heard it. 'Sir? Tomorrow, sir. Win, sir.'

So much for playing ‘at home’! We had to play the World Cup as if we had put bags over our heads. We did not want to be talked to, we did not want to be disturbed.

But inside me, inside my head, the chatter would not stop. It was hard to keep an even keel. Doubts, disease, nerves and desperation, there was plenty going on. The year leading to the World Cup had been the toughest for me in my entire career. I felt older, maybe even slower, I felt ill. My body didn’t get injured anymore. Instead injuries of all kinds found their way to my body. When faced with many ailments, the worst you can do is try to speed up recovery. So I decided to be deliberate, slow, patient. Still there were times I felt that the clock was running on double speed.

At the beginning of 2010 in January, I broke my wrist playing in the Test series in Bangladesh. It was reported as a torn ligament but we discovered it was a fracture. This meant I missed the two February Tests against South Africa at home, and that annoyed me as hell. But I thought I’d find my way through the IPL. It turned out to be the worst IPL I ever had.

I found that people in the Kings XI Punjab franchise, some folks from the main ownership group, were behind rumours that I was deliberately underperforming because I was not the captain. It was rubbish, dirty rubbish. My integrity was called into question, and it got me angry. I had performed in the four games that we won, but the bitching got me down. Through all of this Preity Zinta, one of the owners, understood what was happening and stood by me.

Still, I felt wretched. It is the nature of the IPL that days are scrambled and there is no time for recovery. The tournament lasts as long as a World Cup. We travel every third day. The games finish late and dinner is at the oddest hours of the night. As a result I put on three or four kilos, which I didn’t notice until we were in the West Indies for the 2010 World T20 in May. There we lost. We played like we were tired. On the last night in St Lucia, as I tried to sort out a pub brawl, I found myself right at the centre of it.

We were eating dinner in a Mexican restaurant and one of our ‘fans’, maybe an NRI, came up to Ravinder Jadeja and started hurling abuse at him. He was shouting, ‘How can you lose? What were you thinking?’, and in no time he launched into language that belongs in a gutter.

While Jadeja can be cool in a moment like this, Murali Vijay jumped to his feet and asked the man to apologize. Then everyone got involved. Before it could turn ugly, I intervened and tried to separate the two groups. I told security to get the ‘fans’ out. I hate fights, as I have said before. I would like it if

everyone walked off and cooled down in a corner but I find that usually does not happen. The fans who were evicted exited the restaurant and walked straight into an Indian TV journalist. By the time we had reached London on our way home, the story in the headlines was that half the team was involved in a huge pub brawl. Losing, drinking, fighting, that was the impression conveyed. Nobody hit anyone, no one's shirt got torn but we could not say it clearly or loudly enough to be heard. We played bad cricket, and this story was the special aftertaste of that. We were a star-studded side, who had just crashed out of the tournament. So here is what the media made of the defeat: Party boys, hardly care for the game, over-pampered, overpaid, unfit and hardly work hard.

When teams like Australia lose they too are criticized at home but it does not get personal. What we get is fullblown character assassination. I still remember that some TV channels used random footage of us dancing at an event before the tournament and played that on loop with headlines like 'Duds turn dancers'. A major Hindi channel wrote against my name, '*naach phissadi naach*'. My friends and family get angry and agitated. But I try and laugh it off. What else can one do?

After this episode, some targets needed to be found and one of them was me. I was dropped from the team. Maybe it was a fitness issue. I don't know. Maybe it was disciplinary. For once, a selector kind of warned me in advance that I had a fifty-fifty chance for being picked for the upcoming triangular in Zimbabwe. Usually we find out in the press, or a reporter finds out and sends an SMS.

When I wasn't in the team, I tried to do everything I could. I knocked off my IPL weight, trained for a month and a half, played domestic matches, club games. It is humbling. You don't live the five-star life but things become simpler. I wanted to return to play for the Test team.

In July 2010, I was selected for Sri Lanka. But being back in the Test team didn't sort out my problems because soon I began to have the neck pain that wouldn't let me sleep. The next two months turned into a different kind of hell. I would end up taking treatment sometimes as many as three times a day.

I had a relapse of dengue fever so I missed the second Test though I had a half-century in the first. For the third Test I was dropped. My confidence was shaken. In the tri-series with Sri Lanka and New Zealand which followed after the Test series, I had no fifties, no match-winning knocks.

When we came back, I was dropped for the two home Tests against Australia. In the following tri-series, this time New Zealand-Australia-India, I got a half-century against Australia and two 40s against New Zealand but here's where my

slow, slow bowling started to develop. I think it saved my skin. It kept me in the squad all the way to the World Cup. In Guwahati against New Zealand I picked up three wickets and in the last match of the series, against New Zealand, another two.

Next, we were going to South Africa. I was not optimistic. I knew very well I was struggling with form, the runs weren't coming, but I put my head down because what I could control I was trying to control and that was my fitness. I kept my diet under control. I couldn't be as quick as I was at twenty or twenty-three, but I had to be in the best shape I could be. I wanted to field at least 90 percent of what everyone remembered of the young me. No, of course not the one who dropped a catch on his Ranji debut!

I was determined to be in the best shape possible when the World Cup started after two-three months. In South Africa, where I first began to cough and then to vomit, naturally I blamed it on the nerves.

I have faced the Aussies many times. They have a knack for pulling off games you think they are going to lose. It's like they are born to fight, born not to give up. I have admired that quality in them but I have experienced equally the other side. No matter who says what, it's hard in sport—or maybe it's hard for us Indians only—to hear abuse targeted at one's mother or sister all day and then have a drink with the same guys in the evening as if nothing happened.

Australians are aggressive but sometimes their verbal gets quite nasty. It is why they get involved in ugly spats and then have to lecture the world about playing hard and fair.

When I played my first game against the senior Aussie team and scored 84—this was way back in October 2000—I received abuses from the entire inner circle. When I played my first Test against them four years later, in October 2004, I heard Shane Warne and Matthew Hayden go on and on. They were unbelievable, quite nasty, especially towards us youngsters. At night Warnie got hold of me and over dinner tried to explain why they did it. That's the way he was bought up in the game. He said that's what makes one tough; the game is not for the faint-hearted. Ok, that's fine, I thought, but I would not do the same to a youngster trying to make a mark. Sure, you learn that to compete against Australia you have to be tough and thick-skinned, but maybe they could learn a few things from the rest of the world too, like balance, perspective. Anyway,

things have got better with the IPL, after the Australians started sharing dressing rooms with Indian players and other players. I think to a large extent things have settled down. It's good.

In the World T20 semi-final in 2007, I got into a bad verbal fight with Hayden. We had decided that if they were going dish it out, we would return the favour. And in the end the scoreboard would tell the real story. We won the match. For the World Cup, now, I knew they were going to target us in their same two ways—with the short ball and the verbals. So, I knew in my response I would just have to keep my full attention on my batting. The more I could bat, the more I would hurt them. I decided I would not get into any arguments with any of the Aussies in the quarter-final match.

On a tough wicket in Ahmedabad, Ricky Ponting hit a fine century, but it didn't take them into the realm of the impossible. Australia made 260. It was not anything like the 359 they put up in the 2003 World Cup final. I thought every one of the bowlers—Zak, Bhajju, Munna, Ashwin—was superb with the ball. I got a couple of wickets. But forget all that, this was the match in which as a side we fielded like monsters. I won't be surprised if the Aussies wondered which Indians had turned up that day. We played a different brand of cricket. Compared to how we played in the earlier round's matches, we were rolling. Now, just as the gameplan had been, we were into the three biggest matches of our life and we were switched ON.

I remember going out to bat when we lost Cheeku. We had been doing well so far. Then Gautam got run out and Mahi came in. Mahi and I have been together in a few partnerships in our time. Our left–right combination works well. When Mahi came out, it was 168–4 and you could see that the Aussies were probably calculating that to really get to the tail and climb all over us they needed maybe two wickets more.

I was on some other plane. I was hitting the ball cleanly, nothing into the air, all along the ground. I thought back to how I used to be in my early days in the Ranji Trophy and thought how foolish a young batsman could be. Then suddenly, with the score on 187, Mahi was out. Brett Lee bowled one that climbed an extra inch. Mahi cut to Michael Clarke at point. Clarke held on and we had about 74 left in the chase. Mahi started walking off stone-faced and when he was passing me he did an unusual thing. He normally doesn't say anything while walking out. He walks and walks out quickly.

This time he quietly said, '*Shabaash*, Yuvi. Stay till the end.' You won't see it in the TV footage, but there was no cool there. It was faster than a second and I

think it lit a spark. Suresh Raina, the new man in, was the last recognized batsman. When Suresh was walking in, my mind was muddled with racing thoughts. I was thinking maybe this is the toughest and the most challenging situation I have faced on a cricket field. This chance may never come again. If I get out we won't be able to win the game. The dream I was visualizing of beating Australia in the World Cup will stay unfulfilled. My mind was cluttered and I was getting nervous. So I went to the side, realigned my thoughts and repeated to myself what my dad has told me all my life: watch the ball, hit straight down the ground.

I felt it most naturally that what I have to do now is shepherd. They needed another wicket, we needed another partnership. No attack till we got to a point when we would need eight or nine off an over.

Suresh got bombed with short balls. And that day he handled it well. At one point he got into some kind of an argument with David Hussey. I went to him and said don't mind what they are saying. It's a sign that we are getting to them. Put your head down, focus on your batting and let's get this one run at a time.

Our partnership lasted less than an hour. We put up the required 74 runs. For the first time in twelve years Australia was thrown out of the World Cup. They may have won three titles, but not this one. We got there with two overs to spare. No huffing, no puffing. Calm, tight, methodical, clinical work and that too in the middle of all the tension and ever-louder verbals from the Australians.

Why did I get so mad after hitting the winning runs? As I finished the innings with a boundary, I collapsed on to my haunches and held up the bat, waving it left and right. It was like something that had been building up in me burst through. When I crossed 50, I didn't raise my bat. The job was not done. I had an eye on the scoreboard. I could also see the Aussies were flagging. A little earlier, diving to field a ball that I had hit that was going to the boundary, Lee began to bleed when the ball jumped and hit his face. I felt they were all bleeding internally now. People tell me the noise at the Motera was unbelievable, but out there in the middle, it felt very quiet. I couldn't hear the noise. All I could see was a white ball and the target.

After the loss of 2003 I had dreamt of hitting a six to win a World Cup final against Australia. But this would do for now, a four to eliminate Australia and take us to the semi-finals. The K'naan song 'Wavin' Flag' was playing inside my head. It was the song I had been listening to for one year, in my darkest days, all odds against me, downed by injures, visualizing beating the mighty Aussies. I don't even remember sliding down to my knees at the end of the game. I have

seen photos of that moment where I am roaring like a freed beast. In one of the World Cup parties my friend Farhan Akhtar told me that my face reminded him of an image of Cassius Clay standing over Sonny Liston. I checked out the photograph and, of course I wouldn't want to compare myself to the great Ali, but I guess we're both looking angry and relieved at the same time.

That night when I walked into the press conference I was shocked to find myself at the receiving end of a round of applause from the media. I am someone who has always managed to be on the wrong side of the media. I had to remind myself of the forever-turning *topi* but in that moment, I'll admit, I felt quite surprised at being appreciated and felt I must have done something really quite special.

In less than a week, the semi-final was upon us. It was our next passage of pressure. Suddenly, just like that, the World Cup had zoomed towards its conclusion. The semi-final was scheduled on the 30th of March and the final on the 2nd of April. Meanwhile, what was happening with the other teams from our group was: South Africa had lost to New Zealand in the quarter finals, West Indies to Pakistan, and England to Sri Lanka. Here we were. Our semi-final match was against Pakistan and it was going to be at Mohali, my home ground.

There is always a feeling of history when we play Pakistan because of our bloody Partition history. In both the Punjabs, this side in Mohali and that side in Lahore, when we play against each other the emotions get more serious because Punjab itself was partitioned when Pakistan was formed. But history, future, whatever, in a World Cup, pressure and expectation never leave your shoulder. We had beaten Australia, the world champions, next we were up against Pakistan, who the whole world thought were our greatest rivals.

As expected the build-up was huge. Now the press said things like *this* was the real final, that this was a game we could not afford to lose. I once glanced at a TV to see what they were running. It was a programme in which everyone looked very hot and bothered and what they were discussing was whether they were putting too much pressure on us cricketers. Then came the announcement that both the prime ministers would be coming to watch the match.

As a team we stayed in our shell. But just when you are counting on things going exactly to plan, odd things start going wrong. The night before this all-important match versus Pakistan, an unwanted guest, my neck pain was back.

Unwanted and unbearable. I kept struggling all night waiting for it to go away. Finally at four in the morning I gave up and asked for help. Nitin turned up half-asleep and got down to dealing with the demon.

On the 30th morning the hotel mixed up all the breakfast orders. Somebody's food went to someone else's room. If you ordered eggs, you got paratha; your order was cornflakes, you got puris. My breakfast turned up one and half hours after I had ordered it, which left me with no choice but to take it to the team meeting.

At lunch time we didn't get our lunch at all because everyone had become very busy and there were other very important persons to feed. So we piled into the team bus and got to the ground and ate sandwiches at the stadium, or bananas and apples. We won our 'home' World Cup semi-final on sandwiches and fruit.

No matter. Until that day I had played three matches for India at my 'home' ground and my total runs were 46. In one of the innings I got to 34, which can only mean that over the other two innings I got 12. When I finished my innings in this match, let's just say my ground total was undisturbed. Yes, first ball duck. I walked in at my home ground to such a loud cheer and within no time, it was all numb, my timber shattered and my 'love affair' with Mohali intact. By now in this tournament I was feeling like a zombie, that's true, but still I would have loved to add something to the total.

The bowling won that game for us, no doubt about it. We defended 260 with the kind of confidence as if there were at least 100 more runs on the board. Five of us bowled ten overs each. We divided among ourselves their ten wickets equally. I remember we kept waiting and waiting and waiting for Misbah-ul-Haq to take off but he never really did. By the time we got through Umar Akmal at no. 6 and Abdul Razzaq came out at no. 7, it seemed to me that we had dried up their scoring opportunities. I thought I could feel that we knew the game was ours. In the second last ball of the forty-ninth over, their last wicket fell when Misbah got out.

For a year and a half we had been saying in our team meetings, 'When we play the final in Mumbai …' For a month my body had been screaming at me. Now that the final was here, and we had made it, all I wanted was sleep. I wanted to sleep well and eat well.

The day before the final, the team bus was scheduled to leave the hotel for practice at the Wankhede at 9.30 a.m. When I opened my eyes it was a half past ten. For the first time in the World Cup I had slept four hours at a stretch. I don't like being late. The older I get, the more I think it is silly not to be punctual. And

we guys give anyone who is late for practice a solid ribbing. But that day when I got to the ground expecting the usual ragging that would be my due, I found no one said anything. The guys were doing their own thing, no one was fooling around, Gary was busy. There was not one joke about Yuvi turning up two hours after everyone else.

I went over to Gary. I told him I was struggling to get sleep. The sleeping pill was useless. Obviously Gary wanted us to be fresh for the final, he didn't want me moaning about sleep. So he called Nitin Patel over and told him he was to give me an injection that night for a good night's rest. Nitin resisted. He said the injection was a worthy idea but what if it made me drowsy the whole of the day. A sleeping tablet it would be, but a different one.

I forgot my anxieties for a bit when we gathered to talk about the match. All the guys who had played the 2003 final were asked to speak freely. I didn't say much but when Sachin and Zak spoke I knew just what they felt. I was not the Yuvi of 2003, but when they reminded us of what it took to do the job, I could remember 2003 as if it had come to life again. Cricket had taken so much from them, they were going to make sure it gave them something back. Sachin laid it down plainly: on the field do anything you have to. Fall, break your bones, die, but do not let the ball through. For two hours we talked like this.

This was Gary's last tournament with us. He had come to us in 2008. He helped us grow from there and cement ourselves at the top of the world rankings. Under him for the first time we gained the status of the no. 1 Test nation. Going into this final, Gary had his own demons too: of having come so close but never winning a World Cup as a player for South Africa. His last one-dayer was a World Cup match against Sri Lanka in 2003 in South Africa, which they lost. And here he was, guiding us into the final against Sri Lanka, knowing that in the history of the World Cup, never had any home team clinched the title. At a time when we were fragile, Gary pulled us together and made us a band of brothers again. This would be the best gift we could give him.

Meanwhile, Nitin rang up many doctors and every one of them had advised that changing the medication on the eve of such an important match could be a disaster. What if it didn't go down well with my system or what if I overslept? That wasn't a risk worth taking. So Nitin pulled a smart one. He brought me a pill with the same salt but the pill was a different colour. He told me that as requested the medicine had been changed and hopefully it should work.

That night, as I was about to pop in my new sleeping tablet, I told poor Nitin, who was at my side, 'He can take whatever he wants, take away my life, give me

pain … God, just give us the World Cup.' In no time after that I was fast asleep. That night I had my best sleep in years. When I woke up the next morning, it was bright and sunny. In a few hours, we would be playing the World Cup final. Just then, Mom rang. She said she had prayed for me to get good sleep. I told her, her prayers had worked.

On the morning of the final, we had no big meetings, no big talk. Nike gave us T-shirts with three stars on them and said that when we came off the ground that evening the three stars should stand for three India World Cup wins.

It was Gary's last day. He asked us to enjoy the day. He said, you don't know when this is going to come back, so enjoy it. Remember we want to win this, we've talked about this for over a year, this is what we want real bad.

Then we left for the ground. I remember noticing how calm Zak was.

It was a hot day. Fielding first, we were on the ground from two in the afternoon to about five thirty. Zak bowled three maiden overs in his opening spell. We had all listened hard to Sachin. We stopped every ball that came our way. With our fielding that day, we saved around 25 runs. The Lankans scored 274. Zak took two wickets, I took two and Bhajju took one. Mahi effected a run out. To me it seemed we had come a long way from 2003. We had matured.

Paddy Upton had said he thought the day represented the highest pressure any individual would ever have faced or possibly could face in their career. But if you had walked into our dressing room when the match began I don't think you would have guessed it was a World Cup final. We were ready. In the changing room we even had the music on.

When the time came to chase, I won't deny there was a bit of panic when Viru and Sachin both got out, and the scoreboard read 2–31. But Gauti had been jumping all through the tournament that he had to make 100, had to make 100, and it was like we were all thinking, well, this would not be a bad time to do it. He had worked very hard through the event and here he produced what I think is one of the best innings I ever saw him play. He was composed, he was sure of what he was doing and it was unfortunate that he missed 100.

At the other end Cheeku looked steady but he got out in the twenty-second over and we still had 160 to get. Mahi went in. The offies were in operation and Gary talked to him about the batting order. He believed that at that stage a right-hander would be better at playing the off-spinners—whether it was Murali or

Dilshan or Randiv—than a left-hander. Also, Mahi going in to join Gauti gave us a right-left combo.

I was fine with that. The cricketing logic made sense. I padded up and waited. I had fortified myself by eating a lot of sweet bread to keep my sugar levels up and to keep the food down but I didn't feel too high on energy. As it happened Gauti and Mahi had a sublime partnership of 109 runs for the fourth wicket, and to my mind they played the innings of their lives. Mahi had not had a great World Cup with the bat. I knew his time would come. He took the pressure and kept scoring steadily. On the other side, just short of his 100 tragically Gauti got out. When I went in we needed just over 50 to win the World Cup, the body language of the Sri Lankans was wilting and when in the forty-eighth over Mahi hit Lasith Malinga for two back to back boundaries, I knew we were unstoppable.

Then he produced that tremendous six and I thought I would just explode. I went mad and I wanted to hug him and hit him at the same time and keep doing so till he confirmed to me that this was it. That we had won the World Cup. It was a cool finish—we didn't hit too many slog shots, except maybe the boundaries off Malinga and the six off Kulasekara—but it was exactly the opposite that evening for us. We cried like children. For some of us it had taken eighteen-twenty years in cricket to lift the Cup. It was the highest peak that all of us were going to scale together, and of course we wept. After that day, of course, all our lives were going to change, like mine did, but that day right then we didn't care about the next day, the next minute, the next moment. In the country, in every village and town, in the streets of the cities, it was like Holi and Diwali rolled into one. Everyone, the country's leaders and ordinary people, left their homes and came out to celebrate together, united, on the street. It was humbling that something we did could bring so much happiness to so many people.

So many people came up to me to say thank you after that night. They had taken the World Cup as personally as anyone in the team. Strangers would come and say you have made us very proud, it's an honour to meet you, we are really proud of the way you played. To them I could only say thank you. That kind of respect you can't buy or manufacture. No money, no house, no job can earn you the respect you get for playing cricket for your country, which almost every boy in India dreams of doing one day.

When I was in chemo for cancer, I would watch the canal outside my house far away in Indianapolis and suddenly something would trigger a memory of how kind and sweet everyone was that night, and how happy we were. I would

look back on that time and ask myself was I foolish not to see the doctor? Neglecting my vomits, neck pains, blood-flecked coughs and sleepless nights, wasn't I living on the edge? What was more important life or the World Cup? My answer to myself was if life throws me back there again into the same stage, I will end up taking the same decision.

Now, I'll tell you a weird story.

Before the World Cup had begun, I selected two bats for the tournament. I marked one as World Cup no. 1 and the other as World Cup no. 2.I had used World Cup no. 1 in South Africa earlier in the year and was very comfortable with it, it felt good. I thought: this is the bat with which I will tackle the World Cup.

In February when I was packing my bags for the inaugural match in Dhaka the no. 2 bat was nowhere to be found. I hunted around the house in Delhi where I had left it, but I couldn't locate it. I went to Dhaka without it. Unknown to me, Mom, who is quite spiritual, had asked a friend to bring the bat to her in Chandigarh. She thought she should take something of mine to her Babaji for his blessings before the World Cup got under way. It was this bat that was taken to her Bade Babaji in Fatehgarh, which is about five miles from where her Chote Babaji is, in Hansali. Both are southwest of Chandigarh. When she got to Fatehgarh, a big congregation was in the middle of a sangat.

In Sikhism, devotees sit together in a community or a fellowship to hear prayers or a sermon or a lecture from a holy man. We call it a 'sangat'. When Bade Babaji speaks in a sangat, thousands of people turn up to listen. Because the crowd becomes so big, the sangat spills on to open grounds outside Babaji's gurudwara, and it was like this that day.

There, among thousands of the faithful, went my bat, World Cup no. 2. Carried by the driver, hidden by my mother in the folds of her dupatta. When it reached Babaji, he looked at it and said, 'Oh, is this Yuvi's bat?' Loudly he announced, 'This is Yuvi's bat. It is going to the World Cup with him. Everyone in the sangat should bless it.'

That's what happened. The bat went around being blessed by many, many people, hundreds, maybe thousands, who knows. Some touched it, some folded their hands, the sangat blessed the bat, they blessed me.

Mom came to Bangalore just before the England match. That was our second

group match. In Dhaka at the inaugural match of the 2011 World Cup the two Vs of Delhi, Viru and Virat, had gone off like firecrackers in an opening ceremony. Yusuf completed the innings and I did not need to bat. But at nets I had noticed that the no. 1 bat didn't feel right somehow, it was not as comfortable as it had been in South Africa. In Bangalore Mom gave me the no. 2 bat and because it felt a little different, and the other one not so good, I thought I should use it.

All through the World Cup, I batted with this no. 2 bat. I scored 352 runs, including a century and four 50s. I looked after it, I taped it, and it held together. It felt good, it felt lucky. No one told me the bat had been to Fatehgarh till, in IPL 4, in the very first match the bat broke.

Chapter 3

‘C’ Change: from Cricket to Cancer

THERE I WAS. Strung up in a harness, legs dangling mid-air in a studio somewhere in Munich, looking properly perplexed as instructed by the director. Fernando Alonso, the F1 champ, was on one side and Manchester City’s Sergio ‘Kun’ Aguero was on my other. For over a year now, my system had ejected, you could say, or rejected, most of what I ate or drank. And here not knowing about this shot I had just gulped down a glass of orange juice. Up in the air, swinging in the harness I thought, oh no, what if I throw up and ruin Puma’s set? Was I going to cover myself in shame in front of these world-class athletes by emitting an unglorious stream? God, please, I prayed, not now.

Many months of denial had caught up with me but this one commitment with Puma I had decided I had to keep. It was the only fair thing to do. Even after the kind of year I had had since the World Cup—I played only three Tests and no ODIs—my sponsors had stuck with me. Way back in September Puma had asked for a date to shoot with Bolt, Alonso and Aguero. It must have been a logistical nightmare to bring together athletes from four different sports and four different parts of the world. In September I had assumed January 2012 would be free and had given them this date. Then I found out I had cancer, and when I told Puma their instant reaction was not to bail out of the deal or create a fuss or become sour, but to tell me that I had all the time I needed to get better. I need not come to Munich for the ad shoot. As Ratan Tata, the Indian industrialist, says, and I sometimes repeat, ‘a promise is a promise’—and I wanted to keep mine. After all it was a matter of only one day. That’s why I was in Munich.

At the shoot we were put on a treadmill and made to run. Oh god, run even here, I thought. But then I found I was quite enjoying myself. Fernando was shy at first and warm once we got talking. He autographed a cap for me. I wear it to the races and cheer for him. Aguero started playing professional football at the

age of fifteen and is Diego Maradona's son-in-law. In a few months I would watch him win the English Premiership with City and remember the signed football he had handed over to me with a big Argentina-sized grin.

Each of us would have loved to have Usain Bolt around. A cricket-lover, Bolt was to be the central star of the evoSpeedPuma ad. He had shot his part and left. He had wanted to meet me, the director said, and of course I wanted to meet him; we would have yakked about cricket.

Being in such a boisterous environment temporarily took my mind off the truth that I had learnt back in India only recently—about the tumour in my chest. But then we were sent up in the harnesses and I remembered the glass of orange juice sloshing in my belly and the tumour sitting on my hammering heart. Luckily the juice stayed in for a few more hours until I had said goodbye to Fernando and Kun.

In Munich I asked myself the question, how did I get here? Why was I trying to straddle two states of being, of the happy, public face and the anxious, private one? I am still trying to answer that question.

In hindsight it makes me want to bang my head against a wall and ask the Yuvi of that time, what the hell were you thinking, man? But that's life. The way my life has been anyway. Running full tilt and falling, then dusting myself and carrying on.

The way I see it, for the longest time far too much had been going on in my life for me to pay attention to the signals being sent to me by my body. There was the cricket, busy calendars, the mental reconditioning for the World Cup, but also the fact that over the last two years, I had constantly felt my body was under attack from all sides. Every time something new popped up my response was: Deal with it.

In ten years of cricket I had become an expert in anatomy. Rotator cuff, metatarsal, ACL, patella, adductors, I knew all the proper medical words for body parts that hurt. Like in Bangalore before the World Cup match with England, I promptly identified my neck pain as being caused by the bulge between my C4 and C5 discs. (Or maybe it wasn't, I don't know. After chemotherapy it completely disappeared.) This kind of knowledge comes at a price. As a professional sportsman you are constantly in conversation with your body, coaxing, pleading, demanding, and a time comes when you start thinking you know your body very well. When it still defies you it is a surprise but you know that a conversation can be had, a bargain can always be struck.

Being a sportsman I have spent my adult life outdoors, running around and

throwing myself around. When you live like that you tend to believe that you are meant to be ever-reparable, indestructible. Dealing with health and fitness in the two years before the World Cup had put me in a frame of mind where during the World Cup, frankly, if I was feeling bad, feeling a little ill, it was to me second nature, a dull habit.

In Chennai during the tournament, when I saw blood in the basin as I cleared my throat, my first reaction was a stab of panic. And then, with smooth ease, the possible medical reasons. Maybe it is tuberculosis. Bronchitis? Nishant wanted me to ring up Nitin Patel and head out to see a doctor but I decided I would deal with it later. The puking on the field two days afterwards was put down to heat and humidity. Before the quarter-final against Australia, when Mane Kaka was massaging me so I would go to sleep, I would start coughing whenever he exerted pressure near my ribs. I considered it for a moment but I thought more about needing to get to sleep.

Though the coughing had only increased, the last ten days of the World Cup were so intense that I forgot about it. I was wound up about the tournament. I worried about what would happen if we didn't win. I thought of people burning effigies and maybe even attacking our houses. I love our fans but I know what can happen when they get angry. Once again cricket gave me an escape out of medical thoughts. As I kept doing fine on the field, I found it easy to work my way around the off-field trouble even as it grew and intensified.

After the World Cup final, I spent the next twenty-four hours giving what felt like a thousand television interviews, like a zombie—but a happy zombie—and I am told that I coughed in every sentence I spoke. It didn't bother me because the IPL started in eight days and there was just a little time to bask in the happiness of the victory and maybe go a little wild and have a little fun.

It is well-known that I love having a good time, isn't it? I'll tell you what. I go into clubs and restaurants through the front door, not hiding through the back, because I believe at a certain age, it is fine to want to go out and have fun and be normal. It is normal to be normal and especially then, in that first week of April 2011, we deserved every chance to celebrate.

Ideally, I would have taken my foot off the pedal, gone and seen a doctor. My body was pleading with me to do it. I knew something was off in the World Cup. I would struggle for breath when I ran 2 runs or more. After a bowling spell I would be winded. Maybe I was just afraid to accept it. My mind, though, felt heady, free, and it leaped months ahead towards dreams of the series on the other side of the IPL.

We were going to the West Indies first, then to England, then the West Indies would be in India and finally in our winter and their summer, December, we were going to Australia. A tough meaty year full of Tests. It filled me with excitement. With the World Cup done, I wanted to be a part of those series, make them the next great stride of my career. I became dead serious about keeping myself in shape during the IPL, a tournament like none other in the world.

Much has been said about the IPL. It may be played in the shortest format of the game—Twenty20—but its demands are immense. It involves six to seven weeks of non-stop travel, training and cricket at the height of the Indian summer. Teams go helter-skelter around the country in weather and ground conditions that are varied and extreme. We race through the dry, burning north Indian heat of Delhi and Chandigarh and Jaipur to the sticky heat of Chennai, Kolkata and Mumbai, catching Pune and Hyderabad on the way, and sometimes stopping for the balm of Bangalore and the hills of Dharamsala.

As modern-day cricketers this is part of the deal and we are happy to dive right in. It is a whirlwind but we live in it, we thrive on it. In fact I, for one, love the IPL because it has helped young cricketers immensely, given them exposure, belief and financial stability. We must however deal with its demands. In the IPL, the body clock goes haywire because your games finish late, so you eat late, and after that you are too wired to go to bed quickly because the adrenalin has gone through the roof in most games. I suppose this drastic change in routine does not upset me too much because, like I said, I am a night owl and a late riser. But even I sometimes find myself sleeping like a jetlagged traveller, getting up only at lunch time and taking off to the next destination within a few hours. Your life and your routines are put through a blender non-stop for two months. Over and above this are winning and losing and the emotions that come with it.

My experience of the previous IPL seasons had taught me that if I was not extra careful my weight would shoot up. Weight doesn’t creep up on me, it pounces. Putting on three or four kilos is as easy as snapping my fingers and, if you read the papers and see the news on TV, you know that in my line of work two kilos can just as easily be made to look like twenty. But call it a high metabolism rate or my good Punjabi genes, fortunately I don’t have a problem shedding weight. Yes, it takes work and it is a nuisance but it happens quite logically.

In this IPL, I had decided to be extra careful so I would not tip over into my danger zone, which is to go above 93 kilos. I decided to bring Varun Shivdasani, a personal trainer, over from England to travel with me through the event and make sure that I stuck to my training routine. Did that work well! He was always around to drag me to training. But even here, there was a puzzle. I was doing weights a lot but not putting on muscle mass. I was only becoming skinnier. I started to look like what I have always wanted to look like—a lean, mean fighting machine—but my stamina dropped like a stone.

There was an IPL game in Chennai against the Chennai Super Kings. We were chasing 143 and needed 35 runs off the last sixteen balls. Big shots were required and it was time to step on the gas. But because I was feeling unwell and also finding the strain of the innings and the weather a bit hard to handle, my breathing began to fall apart. I felt a spasm run through my chest. My heart was pounding at the slightest exertion. The palpitations became so unbearable that on one occasion when I ran 2 runs, I thought my heart would simply stop. I lost concentration and couldn't clear the ball over the ring fielders' heads. We lost the game.

I think about it now and wonder why through all this I did not really panic. Why did some casual, natural panic not kick in and send me straight to a doctor? I think it is simply because I am not that type of person. I have had problems and difficulties in my life, and my way of dealing with them is to compartmentalize and look at different segments rationally. In my totally uninformed but quite confident analysis, I figured I had breathing problems. It was a cough, I thought, it would go just as it had come.

As the IPL drew to a close, I sat back and thought about where I was and where I wanted to go. The World Cup was meant to bring closure to many things going on in my life. My own doubts, my father's doubts. I had cried, I had laughed and I had become, and was *always going to be*, a part of a World Cup champion team. Now the next step was: crack Test cricket.

I have always been aware that my position in the Test side is not secure. I have scored 169 in a Test match, and have been a part of big victories—Rawalpindi 2004, Chennai 2008—but in Tests I don't have the kind of relaxed confidence I bring to the field in the one-day game. Test cricket tantalizes me. I think if I crack it once—completely and truly crack it—the right mindset will snap into place. Test cricket mattered to me before I had cancer and it matters to me that much now. I felt I had to play it enough to find a constant equilibrium. Coming from the World Cup, I was feeling more confident and peaceful than I had in a

long time. I thought maybe if I got around five Tests in a row, it would be enough time to prove my worth to others and my determination to myself. If I achieved that, finally, the two problems that had dogged my life—finding my spot in the Test team and getting Dad to stop talking about Test cricket like it was unfinished, incomplete business—would be taken care of.

VVS Laxman says he has seen two Yuvraj Singhs on the field: one who plays ODIs and a completely different guy who plays Tests. We call VVS 'Mama', as in 'uncle', because he is like that young uncle in the family you go to when you need someone to understand what you are going through. He knows what I go through in the two formats and says that the more relaxed I am the better I play.

It's not that I don't get anxious playing ODIs. I do. As hell. But at the back of my mind in ODIs, I know that if I get set, I can win the game for my team. All I need to do is get through the first 20-odd runs and I am fine. I know how to set scores, how to chase totals. In Test cricket, my mind races, thoughts rush in like a flood and wash away any equilibrium I hope to achieve.

First, there's the game situation. Then I start thinking about my technique—are my feet moving properly? Is my balance fine? Then I tell myself I have got to concentrate hard. Then I begin worrying about being absolutely clear when I'm going to leave the ball and when I'm going to play my pressure-releasing pull shot. In the middle of all this is the nagging idea that if I don't score many runs in *this* game or the next, I might be out of the team.

After the IPL I poured my focus into the upcoming Tests. This is how my plan went: become solid in the West Indies and then play a Test at Lord's in the next series. I had never done that and I told myself I could make it happen. Over the past two years, had I not made winning the World Cup my lone focus? That should be the lesson I told myself—if I want to get stuck into my Test cricket, I should make it the centre of my life and so I did.

As athletes we are trained to deny pain, to train and nourish our bodies lifelong so that the body will leave the mind alone. If it demands our attention, we are conditioned to make excuses to it and go on, play on, play hard, play harder. Sport is full of heroic stories of players and sportspeople winning *in spite* of injuries. Take Anil Kumble's heroic, brave decision to fight on with a fractured jaw in 2002 in the West Indies. The point is that always in sport there is a chance to be brave. What is a little coughing and breathlessness then? At the same time,

when we are in trouble with our body, we want to trust the people who bring us good news. Sometimes, I have to admit, we only want to hear the good news.

One of my most trusted allies in the business of sickness and health was Jatin Chaudhry. Jatin, who describes himself as a physiotherapist and acupuncture specialist, is around my age and a fit man himself. He made his reputation with what looked like miracle cures for athletes like the tennis player Sania Mirza and the golfer Arjun Atwal.

I first met him for an ACL tear on my left knee in 2006. The ACL or the anterior cruciate ligament (I told you, if you are a cricketer you know all this stuff) is one of the four major knee ligaments that holds the knee joint together, keeps it stable, supple and moving. An ACL tear can be brutal because torn ligaments can't be fixed, like fractures, with casts. The torn ligament usually requires surgery, which all athletes hate because it means time away from sport. Despite an ACL tear I was able to hold off going under the knife because of Jatin's acupuncture and, with it, the hours of work that I put into strengthening the knee. On the outside it can look like a miracle cure but miracles don't happen if you don't put in the effort.

My faith in Jatin grew when I had a shoulder injury in 2008. When there seemed to be no other solution, Jatin sorted out my shoulder with acupuncture.

For anyone who does not understand acupuncture, let me explain. Acupuncture means targeting with fine needles, at points, the pathways through which the blood flows into the centre of the problem area. In the case of my injuries, most of those points were in my hands so my treatment meant sitting in the clinic with thirty, forty, fifty needles stuck into my hands. I am one of those people who is very bad with needles. I can shout, howl, curse, but eventually I calm down and take the pain if I believe it will make me feel better.

Over the years I went to Jatin for various problems, from problems of the knee, to issues with the shoulder, to a fracture to the fingers. In the most difficult years of my career, I had greatly relied on and trusted Jatin.When the stuff about a tumour started to come up I gave his opinion and his therapy far greater attention than others' and more than I probably should have.

Of course, hindsight is 20–20.

If I have to front up to a timeline of my denial, the end of May 2011 is the place to start. The IPL ended in the last week of May and with the first breather in more than six months, I had promises to keep with many people. Including one that I had made to Jatin that I would inaugurate his new sports injury clinic in collaboration with Dr PDS Kohli's G-Scan Imaging and Diagnostics Centre in

East of Kailash in New Delhi.

The day after the inauguration, I went to the clinic to meet Jatin to deal with some problems I was feeling in the fingers. I had been coughing during the inauguration and throughout the session with Jatin so, the following day, Dr Kohli advised me to get an X-ray. It could get done right there at their new sports injury clinic.

I asked Dr Kohli to phone me with whatever they found out when the X-ray was ready. X-rays don't take very long and as I was leaving, Jatin stopped me at the door and said they wanted me to take a look at the X-ray plate. When I went into Dr Kohli's room, he was frowning. Jatin himself looked a little worried.

They held up the X-ray to show me what was supposed to be a negative of my lungs. Except I could see one lung, the one on my right. On the left side there was nothing. Only a white cloud about 7–8 cm large in the place where my lung and my ribs should have been, as on the right side they were. It was the only thing visible, this white blur. Right away I knew I was looking at the reason for the coughing, the ragged breath, my fading endurance. The problem was right there in front of me, staring back at me. My stomach sank and I said, 'What the hell is this?'

Dr Kohli's reply was that whatever it was, it was 'not good'. He advised me to get an FNAC test. The full form of FNAC I found out was fine needle aspiration cystology, so I knew it would involve needles. It would tell me more about the white cloud blocking my left lung. On the way home from the clinic, Jatin was in the car, and he fixed an appointment for an FNAC the following day, and we even stopped at a radiology clinic for a CT scan.

At the outset, our opinion on the white cloud hovered over 'maybe it's a patch of pneumonia, maybe bronchitis or tuberculosis'. Going by what Dr Kohli's expression had said, the X-ray appeared to have ruled out bronchitis and pneumonia. The CT scan was to check if doctors could put it down to a bad case of tuberculosis.

When I compartmentalize my thoughts of that time and try and sort through them rationally I realize I was caught between two things. On the one hand there was the C word that inevitably comes to mind when you see a cloudy X-ray, and the dread attached to it: cancer is incurable, and even in better scenarios the side effects of the chemo that will be used to deal with it will surely end my working life. On the other hand there was the hope: even if it is a tumour it could be benign, there are benign tumours after all, and if it is benign we can deal with it through some other kind of therapy and medicines. Hope, even if its answers are

ridiculous and vague, is a very powerful emotion. We all hope to find solutions to our most difficult problems, our worst nightmares. Your mind lurches for its solutions. It gathers information from here and there and starts to present the ‘facts’ to you as worst-case scenario, best-case scenario, and this begins to feel like quite a scientific thought process. Then it holds on to the best-case scenario.

But without hope, what is there to life? We are all human, and that means we want to hear good news.

The next afternoon with my mother, some friends and Jatin, I went to a south Delhi clinic for the FNAC test. On any other day, a group of us can make a racket with our chatter and jokes. That day, it was quiet. No one spoke, there was nothing to say. We entered the imaging centre from a side entrance so we wouldn’t be noticed and were taken to a small ante-room. The waiting had already got my mind whirling. I wanted everything to be done quickly and the results to come out once and for all, conclusively.

The doctor doing the FNAC told me that the procedure required local anaesthesia because they were going to use a syringe to go right into the white area that had shown up in the X-ray. From it they would extract some fluid and send it off to a lab.

When the FNAC test began, I thought my body had become so used to needles that the pain would be distinct, yes, but familiar. It wasn’t. As the needle went into my chest, as it pierced skin, tissue and muscle, it wasn’t a mere syringe at work. It was as if the doctor had pulled a knife out of a fire and stabbed it right into my heart. I don’t know what the local anaesthesia was supposed to do but it couldn’t be this. Surely it wasn’t supposed to feel like torture or hell or death. In those few minutes, I felt trapped between living and dying. The doctor found me shouting at him, asking for the needle to be removed as soon as possible.

When I stepped out of the room, my face was white. As we drove home, I was numb, trying to absorb what had just happened but also wishing to forget it. Absorb but forget. Like I mentioned before, as a child I was always accident-prone. As a cricketer I had been through enough injuries that by now I knew I had a pretty high pain threshold. That afternoon in the imaging centre, the threshold was crossed. I experienced what I thought I would not be able to take again. It had lasted only a few minutes but it was terrifying.

That night sleep evaded me. Not because of memories of the FNAC but the dread of the result. A voice inside me said that things would be horribly bad. I fought it by telling myself that being negative never helped, and better days lay ahead. To sleep I tried all the tricks in the book. I counted sheep even though no

one has ever explained why sheep, why not dogs? Or goats? I counted backwards from 1,000.I tried breathing exercises. Whenever the worst-case scenario popped up in my head, I tossed and turned. I told myself it cannot be, not to me, never ever.

I'm not sure what time I fell asleep but the next day unexpectedly, in the last week of May in Gurgaon, where I live when I am in Delhi, it started raining. The first day of pre-monsoon showers. From the time I can remember, I have waited eagerly for the first rains which come and put an end to the roasting of our north Indian summer. I opened the French windows of my living room, walked out into the open, took off my shirt and stood under the rain. The sky had darkened, the earth had begun to let out its unique aroma of relief and welcome to the water after dozens of hot, dry summer days. I turned my face to the sky and let the rain hit my skin and soak it. For a few precious moments, I lost myself, before being interrupted by the ringing of my phone.

Dr Kohli didn't waste any time.

'I've got bad news.'

'Tell me, doc.'

'It's a tumour.'

'What kind of tumour, doctor?'

'It could be malignant.' Before I could work out what he meant, his next four words were: 'It could be cancer.'

A fist into the gut. Everything slows. The rain slows down. Is this the last rainfall I will feel on my skin? I hope he has not told Mom yet. It should be me. I have to find a way to tell her.

Dr Kohli doesn't know. He hasn't told her but he has told Jatin. Jatin may have told her.

I waited for the rain to stop before I went back indoors. At that moment I wanted to be twenty again, sticking my head out of Sandy's car, shouting, 'I am Yuvraj Singh, you know.'

Only this time what I really wanted to shout out was to the Gods above, that this cannot be happening to me. At one level I was confused. I thought, I am young, I am a sportsman, I am living my life full-tilt. I have just won a World Cup. How can I have cancer?

My mother was in the gurudwara when Jatin called her. When she came back home, she took one look at me and started to cry. Then Aneesh Gautam, a friend of nearly ten years whom I met when I started handling the earliest of my sponsorship deals, walked in through the front door. I told him and as soon as he

heard he turned his face away to hide his tears. I decided to stay calm. On the surface I kept it together for the sake of Mom and my friend, who was visibly shocked and distraught.

Before other people close to me got the news from some other source, I had to tell them myself. I concentrated on that. So, I called Dad. I called Sandy. Sandy was driving in Delhi's crazy traffic, caught in a gridlock at the top of a flyover somewhere. I told him I had bad news. In his comforting elder brother's voice he said, 'It's ok. Tell me what's happened.' It's a tone he uses with me to tell me it is ok, we can handle it, whatever it is, because we will tackle it together.

I took a deep breath. 'The FNAC report has come through, Sandy-pa. The doctor told me it's a tumour, and it could be cancer.' Sandy's response was completely disbelieving and mildly irritated. 'Uff,' he huffed, 'I'm going to give you a slap, *yaar*. Be serious.' When I told him I was serious, there was silence at the other end. Sandy wouldn't speak. His wife told me later that he was crying.

Earlier, Dad had asked me if I was ok. I had said yes. He said I should make sure that the news was correct and that the treatment would be correct. Over the next few months he would become very upset about my illness and so would I when I would hear him talking about it on television and in the newspapers. It might take a while for our relationship to return to what it was but he is my dad and I will always be there for him.

With everyone to whom I broke the news, I was upbeat. Don't worry, I said, I'll be fine. I had no idea how I was going to be fine. My breathing had forgotten what fine really felt like.

After the initial shock, panic started to set in. If I lost my life to cancer, which I genuinely believed could happen, it would affect a lot of people around me. I would leave behind my parents, a younger brother, my friends. Financially, I had done enough for my family to be looked after well but look at how much I had upset everyone now, brought so much stress and grief on them. I have always wanted, and I guess I will always want, people around me to be happy. Maybe that makes me a grown-up kid or maybe it makes me a carefree soul. I think of myself as a positive person, who wants to help others. If people around me are laughing, it is a source of my joy.

That day we sat at the dining table wondering where to go next, what to do. Nishant, who at the time was still working in TV but who would soon become my manager, had been informed by Mom. He left office and joined us at the table. A friend of the family, Rajeev Bakshi, 'Bunny' or 'Chacha', was also there. The two of them would soon move to an adjacent room so they could work out ways

to send me into treatment as soon as possible. Bunny and Nishant searched the internet, called up doctors they knew. By now Jatin was over too. He became a part of the discussions as we formed a core group of family and friends. I tried to keep it together but secretly I felt as if the walls were closing in.

In my family, my mother's mum, my Nani had survived breast cancer but it had been attended to without chemotherapy. I heard people around me talking about radiation and chemotherapy. Other stories of cancer came up. A friend's son had had cancer and the little child had to keep going into hospital for a year. Someone spelt out the side effects of chemotherapy. Nausea, vomiting (well, I'd had my share of that), hair loss.

Playing in a big way at the back of my mind were the horror stories I had heard of incorrect diagnoses and what it did to families. A few years ago my mate Murali Kartik told me about what had happened to his wife Shweta's mother and the trauma for the family. Shweta's mother was admitted in one of Gurgaon's leading hospitals for the removal of her gall bladder due to gall stones. What was to be a laproscopy was suddenly changed into a full-scale surgery. When the doctors emerged from the operating theatre they declared that her gall bladder was in a 'prime stage' of cancer. They had taken material from it for tests, which they were sending to their lab. They said chemotherapy and radiation would have to start within three weeks. They gave her a year to live. Naturally the world came crashing down around the family. It took a lot of negotiating with the hospital to get them to hand over the samples and later the entire 'block' so as to have it tested again at the Tata Memorial hospital in Mumbai. Tata Memorial got back saying they had tested the block three times and could see no trace of malignancy anywhere. The family then moved her to another hospital in Delhi, where the gall bladder was removed through laproscopy and sent again for a biopsy. They found no trace of cancer.

I had never been able to shake the memory of this story out of my head. Probably there were far too many opinions and far too many theories and with it far too much confusion but everything sounded awful that day. By the end of the day I believed undergoing chemo was like living inside a dead body. It made me resort to the care of someone whom I had known for a while and who had successfully helped me in the past. That person was Jatin.

The FNAC report said that something was very wrong but they were not conclusive results. The FNAC report is not always the final word or the last step in cancer detection. I needed further tests.

Here Jatin stepped in decisively like he had done with many of my illnesses,

and it is probably where I lost my bearings. His suggestion was that we try to tackle the tumour with alterative therapy, with acupuncture. He was able to convince me that his medication and treatment would reduce the size of the tumour and spare me the brutal effects of chemo and radiation.

I considered Jatin one of my friends. The door to my home was always open for him. He would surely always wish the best for me.

At some point in those first chaotic days it struck me that I was expected to be in the West Indies as one of the senior guys of the Indian team. I needed time off, away from cricket to deal with this thundercloud that had broken over my head. I needed to tell the Board, the BCCI president N Srinivasan, that I couldn't make the tour. When we spoke, he was shocked but without a pause he promised me full support and said the news would be kept confidential. And it was. Despite the insanity of Indian cricket, it was clear right there who my people were. Indian cricket looks after its own and in that regard I now felt looked after from the get-go.

As usual though a controversy was waiting in the wings. Dhoni had asked for rest and Suresh Raina had been named the captain to lead the team in the West Indies. When it was declared that I would rest too, the media discussions got heated up. They said I was not on the tour because I did not want to play under my junior. What can one say to these things? How could I tell them that it was illness, not ill-feeling. A cricketer's job is to play cricket. I have played under Dhoni, under Gauti, who are my juniors. My job is to play cricket and I will play under any captain.

It was June when Jatin began his treatment with the promise that things were going to be fine. I felt the same, not worse. As the days passed by, I would sometimes switch on my computer and ask Mr Google, 'What is cancer?' When nearly 175 million answers popped up in one-twentieth of a second, I would baulk, shut my laptop and say forget it. It is being handled. During this period I was taking up to fifty tablets every day, Vitamin C, multi-vitamins, to boost my immunity. Over the coming months I would often run a temperature. Every three-four weeks I'd be down with 100^0 F, an aching body, a bad stomach. About the tumour I told myself and everyone who asked that it was a kind of lump, a generic kind of tumour, and repeated what I had been told: it would shrink and go away and I would be fine.

Now I look back, I suppose a lot of this was driven by fear. I worried about what my life was going to be like if it was cancer. Of what people would say, what would be their reaction. They would have completely crazy theories about why I had cancer (and, predictably, when I did make the news public, a favourite conclusion was that I had lung cancer caused by heavy smoking. I try to stay away from newspapers and television but how can you keep away from those people whom you know who don't hesitate to call or email or text about whatever is the latest theory doing the rounds).

At this time I turned into a complete gym rat. I was determined to be tip-top, in good shape and good humour. Cancer? Cancer happens to old people, cancer doesn't happen to athletes. I was not yet thirty, I had a full life to live, there were appointments to keep, dreams to fulfil. The English summer and our Lord's Test was there to look forward to. I had to find my peak. It became a diversion. You may wonder what everyone around me—my parents, my friends, my teammates—were saying. Well, whatever it was, I didn't listen. Since I turned sixteen, I have been very independent. I have lived my life on my own terms. Maybe it made me pigheaded. Whatever caused it, the fact is that in the middle of 2011 I believed that the England Test series was my priority, and when I start to believe in something, that's that. No one could get me to budge.

England could be the first step that I would take to establish my place in the Test team. Since Sourav retired in November 2008, the no. 6 spot had not been decisively claimed. Whoever did well in England and Australia this year could make it his own. In the year gone by, it had seemed so close, but injury and illness kept me out of one Test in 2010 and then I found I was dropped from the next when I was fit. I was done with missing Test cricket. I thought I had to play Test cricket because, whatever this was, tumour, lump, whatever, I did not want to die wondering what could have been.

In the meantime, the doctors who my friends and family were consulting about the test results, had not yet got to the bottom of my illness, and I thought I must live life normally as much as I could. I did not want to keep waiting for them, expecting the worst. Normalcy meant playing cricket, finding challenges, overcoming challenges, decoding the secret of Test success for myself, and thinking about things like how does one do well in alien conditions. In the gym I was doing well, and physically I was fit for international-level cricket. So if Jatin and the other doctors were giving advice against going to England, I didn't much heed it. My attitude was, guys, I'll do my job, you do yours. I have never played a Test in England and I want to. End of story.

I did manage to go to England. Some of my friends on the team—Sachin, Bhajju, Ashish, Zak, Laxman—knew about the tumour. When they heard about the possibility that it could be cancer and what the doctors were saying, their faces would go pale and their immediate response was always the same: ‘Yuvi, you shouldn’t be playing, what are you doing?’ Then I would switch to my ‘don’t worry be happy’ mode and tell them that it wasn’t all that earth-shatteringly serious, that I was taking medicines to tackle the tumour and was involved in doing therapies so I would get out of this soon.

It was confusing for everyone. When the physios looked at me, they saw a physically fit cricketer, involved in team football, in daily japes, in beating fitness tests. Then there was this tumour which was sometimes a tumour and sometimes a rumour. When I look back I see something I never really considered before: between being physically fit and medically fit there is indeed quite a big gap. ‘Fitness’ is mistakenly used as a catch-all term, a one-word concept, but it does not always translate into a good health condition.

In England my symptoms didn’t look any different from what they were during the World Cup. When someone saw me coughing and retching he would ask me what the matter was. I would say that it was a minor tumour, and we would all go back to our routines because this was a mighty important Test series.

In the Taunton tour opener, I had an awful game, leg before to Charl Willoughby for a duck. It put an end to my dream of a Lord’s Test. The Lord’s Test was the 2000th Test in the history of cricket, the 100th between England and India. We lost by 196 runs.

When we moved on to Nottingham for the second Test we found out that Gauti would not be playing. At Lord’s he was hit on the arm while fielding. With him out of the playing XI, Rahul Dravid was moved up the order to open and everyone moved one slot higher. This meant a slot in the batting order had opened up.

Trent Bridge is a beautiful ground but at the same time a beastly place for batsmen. The conditions and the wicket are very challenging. England batted first and we had them at 124-8 but their tail hung on to take them to 221. When it was our turn to bat, I fell into my old Test match habit of lapsing into a mental state that I will call insensible.

As I sat on my chair in our Trent Bridge dressing room, the Test match-me took over. This is what went on in my head as always: maybe I am not good enough. Why haven't I tasted success in Test cricket like I have in ODIs? In a limited-overs game I carry my self-belief into the ground like I carry my bat. Where is it now? What if I fail here? Are these the last five months of my Test career? Clearly, by now it is no guess that I had a fixation about becoming successful in Test cricket just as I had been in one days and Twenty20.

It was like butterflies stampeding in my stomach. I tried to remind myself of the positives, that my highest Test score was 169, that I had three centuries and that they were not bad centuries. Instead what was easier to remember was that I had not played an innings since the World Cup and the IPL. I hadn't played enough days-cricket. It was a feeling in my bones. In the field, when England were batting, I had pushed hard and at the end of every session I felt winded.

As I watched my team bat, I tried to settle my restlessness with a round of visualization. I closed my eyes for a few minutes and reminded myself that we had just won the World Cup for India, I had played with a lump in my chest and that I had been the Player of the Tournament. There was only one way to beat that achievement, and it was here and now. It was a grey and cloudy day. England's bowlers had hit their stride and their fielders were all over the place. I was thinking, what if I score a century here. What if we win. What if I score a century, we win and I die. How would that be for a fairy-tale ending!

At 139–4, it was my turn to bat. After more than a year, I was finally going to play a Test match. As I walked through the gates of Trent Bridge, my legs were shaking a little. The ball was swinging. I could feel a shiver go up my spine. As I was walking out I looked around the full stands, heard their rumble, saw the fielders, the green turf, the scoreboard and the thought flashed through my head: I could have cancer. What am I doing here?

The moment I got to the crease and knocked gloves with Rahul, I felt good again. That old familiar feeling, a feeling I love—here is a job; come on, let's go—settled over me. The ball was over fifty overs old and Rahul and I were able to get a good partnership going. When the second new ball came on, I was convinced that if I could see my way through the first seven or eight overs, I would be fine. If I could push through we could take a decent lead.

Rahul and I had batted together for more than two hours and put up 128 runs, and we had survived the new ball for about five overs. Then on the last ball of the sixth, I nicked one. I had scored 62 when I got out. We lost the next five wickets for 21 runs. The lead was 67.

In the second innings, we had to chase 478. The England bowlers were on top. I was facing Tim Bresnan, who got a short ball to jam into the index finger of my bottom hand. I should have walked off right then but I stayed put. I didn't score too many but endured about fifty minutes of bruising Test cricket. Finally, Bresnan got me to fend one awkwardly and Alastair Cook took an easy catch. That was it. When I got back to the dressing room, Ashish Kaushik, the physio, took one look at my hand and told me my finger was broken. Just like that my Test series was over.

It took a month for the fracture to heal. Back at home, I watched on TV as India lost the Test series in England, and with it went our no. 1 Test ranking which we were so proud of. Barring Rahul and Sachin, no one had a good time. I knew I would get another chance during the home series in the three Tests against the West Indies.

I got back into the world of cricket. I watched the match telecasts, and I trained. We lost the one-day series that followed. Jatin's 'treatment' wasn't having the kind of impact it was supposed to have. Unlike my knee and shoulder problems, my breathing problem had not reduced even by a fraction. I thought about that a lot. Was the lump getting bigger, what could it do to my body, how the hell could I have cancer, what would it mean to go to an oncologist, what would they put me on: chemotherapy, radiation or surgery? What would it do to my career—affect it deeply, finish it? I could not imagine not being able to play cricket again. It was the one steady love affair I had had since my teenage. Would I be normal again? With the number of queries that played around in my head, I could have set a 100 marks exam paper with no answers. Only questions.

The stigma of cancer can perhaps defeat you more than the disease itself. Months later my oncologist Dr Nitesh Rohatgi told me that my refusal to admit the possibility of cancer was typical. The type of cancer I had largely affects young people, and he had seen that young patients who came to them almost always came in three or four months late.

As the weeks passed and I heard varying diagnoses for what I had but nothing changed in how my breathing felt, I finally grew restless about the situation. My friends, so far very respectful of my chosen therapy, now would tell me the same thing every time they saw me as they were saying goodbye and leaving the house. It would be, listen, Yuvi, don't get annoyed, the treatment with Jatin is

fine, but what is the harm in just getting it checked? I finally decided I needed to go through a biopsy.

That visit to the clinic became like a top-secret military operation in which every move had to be precisely planned and perfectly executed. An advance party would be led by Nishant and Dinesh Chopra, another journalist who is a friend. It was ironic: these two wonderful people whose job it was to break stories were doing their best to hide mine. Nishant and Dinesh would check the entry and the exit for any TV crews or reporters lurking around the clinic. They would explain to the clinic staff who were going to deal with my case that secrecy was paramount. Then they would find a side door, direct us to it on our mobiles, and that's where we would drive up. We would enter the clinic quickly. If anyone did see me passing, they would see me in a tight group of people, and before he or she could confirm the recognition in his or her mind, I would be too far down the corridor.

My biopsy was conducted around midnight, and I made it a point to tell the doctor that he had to give me general anaesthesia. After that FNAC shock, no more local anaesthesia surprises for me. The tumour was in a sensitive area so they decided to send a camera down first for which they made a small incision in my chest. When I regained consciousness, there were two stitches. Everyone around me was looking worried when the drugs started playing their tricks. Half-conscious, I said, 'Where is the pen? I need a pen?' Everyone's mouths fell open. When the pen was finally produced, I said, 'All right, now bring the paper.' When they produced a sheet, I signed my autograph and, before they could ring up the psychiatry unit, went back to sleep. (I know, I know, but at least I did not ask for a teddy bear. Or a burger!)

Two days later, I left the house in Gurgaon with my stitches still on to travel 88 km to Rohtak. My plan was I would take part in two matches of the north zone leg of the Syed Mushtaq Ali T20 national tournament. Along with the biopsy, I had had a PET scan as well, in order to have an idea as to what exactly was inside my body and what it was doing to me.

Here I have to take a moment and say this. As I write my story, I think of how every lab, every clinic or hospital I went to kept their promise to me. We asked for absolute confidentiality and every doctor, senior and junior, lab technician, ward boy, assistant, receptionist, telephone operator kept his or her word. I wanted my troubles to be private and not one person who helped me get closer to a diagnosis ever leaked a word of it to anyone. So many people, everyone kept their promise. The news did not hit the media till I was in the USA for treatment.

When it was leaked, what was to hurt me the most, was where the news came from.

The PET scan confirmed that the tumour was not on the lungs but in between them. It showed that it was pressing down on the pulmonary artery, which was affecting the blood flow to the lungs. Once again, I was told to take it easy, not exert myself. Once again, I did not listen to the advice. Till I got a precise definition of my illness and a planned schedule for cure, I would not sit around feeling sorry for myself. My normal life demanded more respect.

For two consecutive days I commuted. To play for Punjab against Services at the DPS Ground in Rohtak and versus Jammu and Kashmir at the Bansi Lal Stadium in Lahli. They were low scoring games. Punjab lost to Services but beat J&K. In the first game I scored 2 and in the second game I was a joint-top scorer with 27.

With my finger healed, I was trying to prove my fitness and eagerness to anyone who might be looking. I was desperate to play the Tests against the West Indies. It paid off. I was selected to play in the first two Tests, in Delhi and Kolkata. Being back with the team was pure joy, because that has always been my work place, but I'm not sure what the boys thought of me throwing up between training sessions.

We won the match in Delhi. I had two largely forgettable innings there. I played the Kolkata Test with a fever where I found myself vomiting over and over again till it reached a point that the umpires began to get worried.

It puzzled the team management, and I heard that people around me were saying, 'he is vomiting again and again, he can't bat and he can't bowl. Why is he here?' By then I didn't have any answers for anyone because I barely had answers for myself.

Of the many kinds of doctors that passed through Jatin's clinic, Dr Ashish Rohatgi was hard to miss. An intenselooking, plain-speaking chest specialist, he was as strong and steady as those 10 kilo girders or *sariyas* that you see loaded on open trucks with red danger flags hanging from their ends. He chose to drop the doctor's usual 'bedside manner' and never stopped badgering me about tackling my problem seriously. With the PET and biopsy reports in hand, he spoke with many of his peers and every time he would come back with grim findings. One doctor had suggested that I may have lymphoma. Every time new

words were thrown up. Thynoma, thymoma, sarcoma. An independent cancer institute studied the results of the PET scan and offered ‘seminoma’. It would be an accurate assessment but it would be two months more before I confronted its truth.

What was seminoma, I asked Dr Ashish at one point. A rarest of rare kind of germ cell tumour, he explained, a manageable tumour. I asked him to explain further and this was his reply: Look, he said, your tumour may not be Sachin Tendulkar, but Virat Kohli it is. He can also be dangerous and after all you do need to get him out. I still laugh at this analogy. Later one day I remembered to tell Cheeku about this and he couldn’t believe how much respect the doctor had given him.

To show Dr Ashish Rohatgi the respect he deserved because he was showing great concern, I would nod my head and give him my verbal agreement. However, in my mind I would be shaking my head, ‘no way’, because my heart was set on succeeding in Test cricket.

What would have happened if someone had really put their foot down and given me the most awful bollocking of my life? What if someone had said, Yuvi, this is nonsense, let’s go and sort it out …

Maybe I wouldn’t have listened to them anyway. Or maybe I would have. I know I am a *dheet*. Not easy to translate into English but it means I am the kind of person who can make the stubborn people of the world look flexible and obliging.

The only person to have ordered me around in my life is Dad. Once I left his home, I took my own decisions. There was never a ‘you can’t do this and you can’t do that’ attitude from Mom. Mom and I were more like friends who discussed a lot of stuff. When I went into denial such was the force of my *dheetpana*, obstinacy, it swept everyone else along.

With poor scores of 23, 18 and 25 against the West Indies, I didn’t play the third Test at the Brabourne Stadium in Mumbai and was clearly in no position to tackle the ODIs either. We informed the BCCI that I would need a little more time to get fully fit again. I decided my target would be the ODI series in Australia which was two months away. At the same time I put out a statement which said that I had an ‘abnormal tumour’ on the lung, which would need to be treated through proper medication and therapy. Privately, I compartmentalized my days

and segmented my life once more: between things that I was required to do, *i.e.* training, practice; and the things my body made me do, *i.e.* coughing, vomiting.

Then one day everything collapsed. Ashish Kaushik, the Indian team physio, forwarded me a letter he had received from the ICC asking for an explanation about the unusual parameters that had showed up in my anti-doping test results. During the Delhi Test, the ICC had carried out one of their random checks. It was in compliance with WADA rules and I had no problems giving them the required samples.

In their letter to Ashish Kaushik, however, the ICC wanted to know how my blood sample had showed up Beta-HCG, a hormone never found in healthy men. It is usually considered a pregnancy marker in women. It would have been funny if it had not been so serious.

The ICC's letter became the first time that a formal explanation was sought for what was harbouring in my body. It was the first time everyone around me, and I myself, was forced to face the fact that acupuncture was in fact not working.

June to November, it had been more than five months. I would go to Jatin's clinic and get the needles in my hand—sometimes fifty, sometimes forty, thirty. Sometimes it was uncomfortable and most times it was unbearable. It was my choice to go with Jatin's therapy. I will put my hand up and admit that every time. It was no one else's decision but mine. But after his treatment didn't show results for one or two months, I think maybe it was my friend's responsibility to say to me, look, I can't cure you. Even if he was in denial too, Jatin could have stopped giving me the non-stop false confidence that good days were round the corner. Vomiting and coughing blood? That was the emission of all the toxins. The lump, he said, was shrinking.

When the ICC letter came, the tissue culture slides had been in various hospitals. The same answers that I had so deliberately not heard, I had to demand now to be shown to me again.

We could not tell Jatin to respond to the ICC because he was not a qualified medical practitioner. It was left instead to Dr Ashish Rohatgi to draft a reply.

During these disturbing weeks, I divided my time between Mumbai, where I have an apartment in Bandra which I love, and Bangalore at the National Cricket Academy. While all this was going on I tried to segregate my worlds again. I upped the level of my training. I trained harder; then I trained my hardest. I was going to be fit for Australia in January. If Test cricket had been a distraction earlier, the Australia ODIs worked to take my mind off the paperwork going back and forth with the ICC.

At the NCA, Ashish Kaushik was happy with the numbers I was beginning to turn out after his drills. We were working on endurance and strength, so we did running drills, yo-yo drills (where you do short bursts of sprinting and recovery) and work in the gym. I was doing weights and 100 kilo leg presses like Mr Universe. In terms of endurance and power, it looked like I could be put on the next flight to Australia.

Meanwhile, the year turned over and brought bad news for the team in the Border–Gavaskar Trophy. Once again we had lost every Test match in the series. But there was a belief that the team could get back into its groove with the tri-nation series that was going to start in the first week of February. I was determined and believed that if I kept up my training no one would stop me from getting on the plane to Australia. One day, after I passed his tests with flying colours, I told Ashish Kaushik I was done with the scans, I didn't need to have any more scans. His simple response was silence.

I didn't know at that point that there had been meetings in Delhi without my knowledge. Dr Ashish Rohatgi had spoken to Nishant and convinced him that more needed to be done. Together they had demanded answers for why the therapy was not working from Jatin, and Jatin finally had no answers. Dr Rohatgi had got in touch with Ashish Kaushik. He had told him that he may have been supervising the hardcore physical training of a cancer patient.

Ashish Kaushik, always a kind and gentle soul, had heard enough. Quietly and firmly he informed me, as I made my grand declaration, that there was no way he was letting me out of the country without one final, independent scan at a lab of his choice. This was required by the Board so he was going to do his job and make sure I got it done.

Meanwhile, oblivious of this tussle, the media was of the impression that I already had a foot on the plane. I had given interviews all around that I was 'raring to go' to Australia. The date for the Puma ad too had arrived. With Alonso and Bolt it was going to be the coolest ad I would have done till now, I thought. I planned carefully how I would shoot the ad in Europe, jet back to Delhi and be off to Australia within the week. Stuck now with Ashish Kaushik's immovable insistence, I said ok, let's go get that damn scan out of the way. That evening I had a jam-packed diary: after the scan I needed to get a massage and then a television interview that I had committed to. When I headed out with Ashish to the Manipal Hospital for the last CT scan, I was virtually buzzing with excitement thinking about the week ahead. I was about to be set free.

Manipal Hospital was packed with patients and their visitors and families,

doctors and nurses and wardboys. Once again we went through the side entrance and charged through the corridors. The doctor doing the CT Scan was Dr RV Parmeswaran, the head of Manipal Hospital's nuclear medicine and PET-CT department. With specs and a moustache, smiling, he was a kind and welcoming man, and he looked at all my documents efficiently. It seemed as if everything would be tied up in double quick time.

After the scan I waited for Dr Parmeswaran and while I waited I had something to eat. CT Scans are done on four to five hours of fasting. In a while Dr Parmeswaran came back into the room where we were waiting and the face he wore told me immediately that he had just seen a catastrophe. Sometimes in life you can see the bad news before you hear it. Dr Parmeswaran spoke softly to Ashish and I saw Ashish's expression change. Then Dr Parmeswaran turned to me and with considerable emotion said, 'What are you doing? Do you not know what is wrong with you? You have to be admitted. Now.'

My instinctive reaction was I would pretend I hadn't heard him. I would shake his hand and thank him, and tell Ashish Kaushik that I was on my way. Before I could open my mouth, I saw that together they had joined into a wall. There was no going through, there was no slipping past. There was nothing I could do but listen. They told me what I didn't want to hear. The lump was 15x13x11cms. It had grown in the chest cavity and was pressing hard on the pulmonary artery and had squeezed the left lung. Ashish told me my heart could have burst.

So. Here it was. This was it. My cancer. I had cancer. It was not lung cancer, it was not lymphoma, it had not spread; it was a tumour and it was growing. The doctors now believe that my heart didn't burst despite a compressed pulmonary artery because I had trained so hard.

Australia? What about all the fitness tests I passed? Laying it down as clearly as he possibly could Ashish said there was no way I could take part in any cricket until I had got my cancer treated. I was gutted.

Then I remembered the impending TV interview. How stupid would it be, dishing out this raring-to-go bullshit in front of the camera? The TV anchor had flown down from Delhi for the interview and we explained my situation to him in clear terms. He sat there looking sorrowful. He sympathized and offered solace for ten minutes. After which he told us that his channel had spent a lot of money to get the entire camera unit set up at the hotel. So why didn't we do the interview anyway?

I gave the interview. So why were India doing so badly in Australia I was asked. I did my best to defend my team. What about my future, my immediate

plans? I avoided giving a straight answer. My head had just been shoved into a drain. I had a tumour in my chest the size of a small melon. What was I being asked, what was I supposed to say. That interview was an out of body experience. My mind was elsewhere and from some other place, some other person, not the distraught, shattered me, kept dishing out the clichés.

When I returned to my room after the scan and the TV interview I was empty and angry. Bhajju came over to my room to talk rubbish and lift my chin and spirits. He did his best and Bhajju's best is side-splitting funny. Would we miss out on Australia or would the wilder parts of Australia miss out on us, eh? As long as he was around, he made me laugh even in the middle of a gloom that threatened to overtake me.

A few hours later, he had to leave. My room went silent. There was no one else there but me and my cancer.

I knew somewhere in the background people would be on the phone, booking flights, hotels, fixing appointments, finding options, researching them. I would be looked after. My mother had been told. When we spoke she was completely in control. She wasn't panicked, she wasn't crying. But later that night I did. I cried like a baby. When no one could see me or hear me. Not because I feared what cancer would do but because I didn't want the disease. I wanted my life to be normal, which it could no longer be.

Chapter 4

The Test of My Life

I SAT IN A QUIET ROOM looking at a shining floor in which I could inspect my teeth, waiting for the distinguished Dr Lawrence Einhorn in his consulting room in the Indiana University (IU) Simon Cancer Centre in America. It was the 24th of January 2012. From denials, doubts to decisions it had taken me a long time to begin my treatment.

With me were Mom and Dr Nitesh Rohatgi. Dr Nitesh was the first oncologist to see my test results. He was recommended to us by many as a skilled and compassionate doctor. Apparently it took him moments to identify the cancer as seminoma based on the biopsy results presented to him. I was in Munich at that time, shooting the ad for Puma, and before I even met him I spoke to him on the phone. His voice was friendly but firm when he broke the news. He told me that probably it was a rare germ cell tumour called mediastinal seminoma. It belonged to the group of testicular tumours, which formed 5 percent of all cancers. What I had was 0.1 percent of those kinds of tumours, so it was very rare. He said I had only one option to get better and that was chemotherapy and three options where to get treated, India, London and the USA. 'For now, since you are in Munich, Yuvi, go to London and meet Dr Peter Harper there,' Dr Nitesh said.

I cleared my throat and said that I thought what I needed right now was the familiarity of home. I would come back and we could all get together and decide what to do. I did not immediately realize that Dr Nitesh was not *asking* me what the future course of action should be. He was telling me what to do.

You would have gathered by now that I don't take orders well. Imagine my surprise when he continued without any hesitation to tell me that he had spoken to Dr Harper, who was a very good oncologist. He had worked with Dr Harper for many years in London before he returned to India to practice in Delhi. Dr Harper had a clinic in Harley Street and he was expecting me for my appointment tomorrow and things would move ahead from there.

No 'Do you mind?' or even a 'please'? I cleared my throat again to protest but Dr Nitesh sweetly said, 'Not to worry, Yuvi, your mother will be on her way for

your treatment soon. Everything is being taken care of. Everyone is working on tying up your pending issues.'

What was going on?

I was feeling mildly irritated but I obeyed. I flew to London the next day. When I got there I called up my two closest friends in the city, Babar and Naeem Amin, aka 'Tintin'. I told them that there was some doctor business to be taken care of and I did not feel like going. They are used to my instinctive and sometimes stubborn dislike of discomfort. As friends they are also used to coaxing me when I get moody. Tintin and Babar encouraged me to go and see Dr Harper. I was here in London after all. Wouldn't it just be logical to go?

If I had seen Dr Harper in civvies near a cricket field, I would have thought he was one of those county cricket umpires you instantly get along with. He had a round face, round glasses and talked gently but was clearly a man in charge. In cricket he would have been the kind of umpire who doesn't have to be dictatorial or head-masterish to keep a match under control.

At the clinic in Harley Street Dr Harper put me through an X-ray and a few blood tests. He went through my papers, which had arrived by email. Then he looked up and for the first time, face to face, someone said to me that I had cancer. This was a seminoma, he confirmed. The good news was that it could be treated. But not with surgery. The lump was sitting on the pulmonary artery, which carries blood from the heart to the lungs. To try to remove the tumour through surgery from where it was located would be dangerous. The lump could not be carved out and removed from my body, it had to be melted away. As Dr Harper casually mentioned 'chemotherapy' my insides froze and my mind went numb.

Dr Harper was doing his best to keep me assured. He took me on a short tour around the clinic. We went to the basement to see the chemo stations. I would need four cycles of chemotherapy, he said, if things went ok. In the basement, I noticed there was no sunlight coming into the room. I saw a child leaving his chemo station, stumbling out, walking slowly. It was clean and organized but for a moment I thought I was going to throw up in shock. I could hear Dr Harper trying to reassure me—after four cycles my life would be normal. It would be bad for two to three months, but I would recover after that. I would lose my hair, but it would grow back.

No matter what Dr Harper said, I didn't feel reassured in any way. I wanted to run out of the clinic, hail a cab to Heathrow and jump on to the next plane to India. Delhi, Mumbai, Bangalore, any place would do.

We mumbled our thanks to Dr Harper and left the clinic. Until that point Tintin had no idea of any of this and these words, 'cancer', 'chemo', 'seminoma', tripped him completely. When we came out of the clinic, he was so disoriented that for a long time we hunted for his car in the car park because he couldn't remember where he had left it.

That night the last thing I wanted was to be alone in a hotel room, so I crashed at Babar's house.

When I spoke to people at home, I tried again to push them to bring me back to India. But my mother and Dr Nitesh were firm. They felt London was the best place for me for now. Dr Nitesh knew Dr Harper very well, and I had good friends in the city.

'After years of visiting London regularly, I was quite familiar with the city, and comfortable too. That was the only positive thought I had in my mind as I lay awake in the dark that night, confused, feeling that every time I closed my eyes a black pit was growing bigger and bigger in my stomach. A slim ray of hope had lingered in me privately till the meeting with Dr Harper. That too was gone now. There was a monster in my body, on my heart. I wondered whether I would beat the cancer or the cancer would beat me. Dr Harper had assured me that I would be normal after chemotherapy. I played with the word in my head. What was normal? Would I be 100 percent fit? What about cricket? Would I be fit for international cricket? Would I be fit for Test cricket? What if I couldn't play anymore? Was that a normal life?

Over the next few days I was told the treatment with Dr Harper would begin once my mother reached London. We would rent an apartment close to the clinic and let the chemo begin. Then Mom called me and said the treatment was not going to happen in London.

Mom had gone to meet my Gurujis in Hansali and Dupheda Sahib before leaving for London and Guruji in Hansali had told her that I should go to America. Well, in a sense. What he had said was, 'When Yuvi comes back from America he will be all right.'

Looking back, I suppose it works out logically too. America is at the forefront of cancer research and treatment. At that time, though, this last minute change of plans scrambled everything. Now we had to find new tickets, new visas, make new enquiries into American medical facilities, new doctors. I heard that they

were looking into Sloan-Kettering in New York. Then, no, now they were looking into a big cancer hospital called MD Anderson in Houston.

What finally brought me to Indianapolis was the great man at the head of the IU Simon Cancer Centre. Dr Einhorn had treated more athletes suffering from cancer than anyone else and had a reputation for putting them back on the field. Most famously he had treated Lance Armstrong. While the other hospitals were bigger and located in big cities, Dr Einhorn at the smaller centre in the smaller, quieter city of Indianapolis was a specialist in testicular cancer. He was also the man who had discovered how platinum could be used in chemotherapy to improve survival chances from 5 percent to 95 percent for patients with testicular cancer. I remember Dr Harper's words when I apologized to him for all the confusion and told him I was going to Indianapolis. He said the treatment that I would have got in London would have been identical as in Indianapolis. 'But if it happened to my son, I would send him to Dr Einhorn.'

We had been sent. This is how I came to be in Indianapolis. In front of us sat a small, kind, gray-haired man in his late sixties, whose specs were cutely crooked on his face but who was dressed in what I thought was quite a funky coloured shirt. There was no sign of a white coat and no serious expression on his face.

Dr Nitesh had met Dr Einhorn the day before with my case papers. No more tests would be needed he told me. There was no doubt about what I was suffering from. Similarly, there was no doubt on the treatment. Chemo. He had spoken to Dr Nitesh about the game of cricket and its rigours, so he could know how to design the chemo course for me to ensure minimum damage to my life as an athlete. I would be able to handle the chemotherapy he said and smiled. 'It is going to be difficult. But you will need to remember you are going to get better.' Everyone around me would have to be strong for me. My mother, my family, my friends.

Next, he explained the course of the treatment, what are called the cycles of chemotherapy. My cycles would work in 21-day periods. Days 1-5, on each day three drugs would be injected into my system. Days 6 and 7, I would get a break. On day 8 I would return to the hospital for a single injection of drugs. Then days 9-14 would be a gap. On day 15 another single injection of a drug followed by another 6 days' gap. End of cycle.

In these gaps the body would deal with the after-effects of the cycle and brace

for the next round. I would have to undergo three cycles. I made a mental calculation: 15 days plus 6 is 21. Three cycles would be 63 days. No; minus six days at the end because the last cycle would simply end on day 15. There was no gap after that. No six days between the end of chemo and the beginning of life.

Fifty-seven days it would be. Almost two months starting tomorrow. Fifty-seven days, I thought. Like a busy tour. Maybe even like a rare break between two series. Fifty-seven days. A little longer than a World Cup. Who remembers fifty-seven days in a year?

'After three cycles,' Dr Einhorn said, 'you could walk out of here like a man who never had cancer.' I never forgot those words. In the storm that came afterwards I often felt that his words were the lifejacket that kept me from sinking into the ocean that was roaring around my head.

Our questions rushed out. About side effects first. The most visible side effect would be hair loss. It would definitely happen. There was also the possibility that for a short period of time I would not be able to hear certain tones, like a young child or a woman speaking to me—my hearing would become affected but it would recover eventually. When he said this, I could not help grinning. 'Doc, that's great. I won't be able to hear women screaming at me? What could be better?' Dr Einhorn laughed.

Dr Einhorn is a brilliant man, who has saved thousands of lives and yet he remains full of empathy and humility. I noticed it right away and over the weeks I would experience it again and again. If anyone asked him why he was doing what he was doing, why a certain treatment, the answer was never 'because I say so'. There was always a clear, patient explanation from him. He had genuine respect and admiration for the strength to be found in all human beings.

So I asked Dr Einhorn something about the long-term prospects of the treatment that I was really keen to know. After chemotherapy could I ever father a child? I did want to be married sometime in the future and I wanted to have children and I wanted to see them grow up.

He looked me straight in the face. Fertility was affected by chemotherapy, often temporarily, sometimes permanently. Earlier there used to be a 60 percent chance of being able to have children after chemo but more recently, because of advances in medicine, the chances had increased to close to 90 percent in some cases.

In the months after my first scan I had gone back to reading Armstrong's *It's Not About the Bike*. In a way, it had come back to me. When I first picked it up years ago, I found it too depressing and mostly about medicines. However, in the

past year I had re-read it entirely and in the book Armstrong had written about banking his sperm and fathering three children after his recovery.

Could I do the same? Again, Dr Einhorn spelt it out neatly. A good thought, a forward-looking thought, but too late. The procedure to bank sperm would take too long. There were many formalities and a lot of paperwork. ‘We don’t want to wait anymore, Yuvi. It’s important we start your chemo tomorrow.’

It was the first time I had an indication that my cancer was at a stage where every day was valuable. Many months later, when the treatment was over and I had returned to India and was on my way to regaining a spot in the India team, I found out what stage the doctors thought I was in that day in Indianapolis. If there was no chemotherapy and the platinum drug that I received did not exist, Dr Einhorn said I was down to three to six months. Since it did, Dr Nitesh said, ‘many weeks to a few weeks.’ He added, ‘Weeks are months but months are not years.’

The IU Simon Cancer Centre chemotherapy station didn’t look like a hospital to me. There was natural light inside the building and greenery outside on the campus of the Indiana University. I saw patients walking around going to get some coffee, chatting to other people and I thought, this is not bad, this can be done. I had no idea how tough it was going to be.

Before the chemotherapy began, I had to sign a form that said I understood and accepted its consequences. It is called ‘informed consent’. It fell to Nurse Jackie Brames to read out the form to me. She stood next to me and started speaking. The drugs could impact fertility. The drugs could cause liver damage. The drugs could cause kidney damage. All there was to read on the paper was damage, damage, damage. Jackie always found reading out that form difficult. Halfway through, she said, ‘I can’t read any more. You just sign it.’ I said, ‘Jackie, are you giving me confidence here or what?’ She laughed. Her face beamed. I told her, ‘Whenever you see me, meet me with a smile on your face. I don’t want to see you brooding.’ I signed the form and went out of the centre with Mom and Dr Nitesh.

Soon it would be time to begin.

Before I go on, because I know you may want to turn the pages or run away, I

must say this right at the start. Here's the thing about chemotherapy: it comes very close to being the worst thing to happen, as it is the most severe treatment to deal with cancers, tumours, malignancy, but it is not the worst thing that can happen to you. The worst is to live half a life with the illness. Chemotherapy may feel like death but it is the only way through to life again for many people when they have cancer.

It begins simply. You sign the forms and go home. At night you psyche yourself up for the most important fight of your life. The next day you reach the hospital and you sit in a chair or lie down and you get hooked up to a drip. In the beginning there's an hour of sitting around getting saline into the system for proper hydration. Then come the drugs. Into the body, drop by drop by drop. They have complicated names like Ifosfamide, cisplatin, bleomycin, etoposide. They are clubbed together under abbreviations like BEP and VIP.

The first time I watched the liquid drop down the tube and into my arm I wondered what would happen when it finally did its business. I took about two days to find out. On day 1, I was just sitting around waiting for the three drugs to go in. It took five hours. On day 2, I felt my face swell. On day 3, I was back in the hotel watching TV when I suddenly felt a horror catch hold of my throat. I can't describe it. It was a feeling in the throat that plunged me into terrifying gloom and filled my mouth, the back of my eyes, my mind, with the sensation that only bad things would happen from now on. Cancer, chemo, the hospital, the hotel, Indianapolis, everything closed in on me and there was no mental place to escape to. I was filled with the sensation that I could not manage this. I was groping for other thoughts, good thoughts, but none came. As if there never had been any good times before, ever. I felt my face crumble, and before I could stop it, I felt hot tears of immense sadness burn my cheeks. I was crying. My mother came rushing to ask what had happened and the only answer seemed to be that the drugs had begun to kick in.

As the first cycle began to press down on my mind and body, I began to understand the scale of the chemotherapy and its terrifying power. I was told about its power over cancer, but I had not expected its force over the human body and mind.

As my chemo progressed, it started taking away my appetite and my sleep. Suddenly I didn't want to eat anymore. Or I wanted to eat till I saw the food and then no more. With every passing day, I got used to the chemo station, began to recognize the doctors and nurses and my fellow patients. Patients went about their days trying to look as normal as they could. Some even returned to work

after taking their dose. There were patients whose chemo sessions had become a part of their daily lives. There was a patient who had been on chemo for the last six years. When I spoke to her I realized that there were people here battling it out day in and day out.

There was a bronze bell in the chemo room. It was rung by a patient when he or she was leaving after finishing the treatment. To the person who rang it, it must have meant such joy and relief. To me it was a reminder that I would still have to stay.

I took three drugs on day 1, then two of the same drugs on days 2, 3, 4 and 5; then the first drug again on days 8 and 15—three drugs in all. But including my supportive medicine I took fifteen to seventeen drugs in all. At the chemo station I sat around watching movies on my iPad and surfing YouTube videos of my cricket. Outside the day would come to an end and the university campus would turn dark by 4 p.m.

One day the nursing staff watched me checking out YouTube videos and became curious. One of the nurses was a sporty young girl called Elizabeth, who chatted with me about sports in India and asked what was my ‘line of work’. Once they discovered I was a professional sportsman, they wanted to know in what game. I tried to explain cricket to them. A hard job in America. They wanted to see it on YouTube so I pulled up my six sixes. It was the simplest way to explain I thought. I saw myself young, healthy, confident, sending the ball and poor Stuart Broad’s mood out over the Kingsmead boundary, into the inky blue Durban sky, and I found myself torn. Between joy and pride and a sense of total loss. Elizabeth’s reaction: ‘Wow, man, that’s six home runs!’

Mom would talk to me a lot those first few days. It was just the two of us far away from everyone else, trying to keep our spirits up. During one of my early days of chemo, I fainted. Mom is strong as hell but she is smaller than me and panicked that day. She dragged my limp body to a chair and called India frantically. That was when Nishant decided that his cousin Ritesh who lived in Canada would have to come down to help us move out of the hotel and into the apartment that he had found for us in the Cosmopolitan on the Canal. Ritesh drove from Toronto with a car full of Indian groceries and Indian household goods, non-stop for nine hours, though he had barely got back from India himself. When he reached Indianapolis we went out and bought a new Xbox for me. Then with all this stuff we moved into the apartment in the first gap of the first chemo cycle.

By day 13 I was exhausted. The chemo shot they had given on day 8 had

made my body hurt real bad, especially my bones. But on day 14, one day before I went back to the hospital for the day 15 shot, I felt slightly better. I know this because I had started to keep a video diary. In London I had picked up a Handycam. I have always had a great memory and I remember every score of every match and what happened where and how and when. Like I remember when I met Sachin for the first time in my life, what I was doing and what he was doing and what he said to me. (We will come to that later, hang on.) I remember things from the past as if they are in a film I am watching. So when Dr Harper confirmed that the treatment would involve chemo, I went out and found a shop in London and bought myself a Handycam because I knew the chemo might mess up my brain. This was going to be the most important period of my life and I had a gut feeling that I would not be able to recollect it properly because of the drugs, and of course there would be no YouTube videos of it. I thought that later, maybe much later, I might want to look back on those days. So whenever I could raise myself, when Mom had gone shopping and I was alone in the apartment, I would set up the camera on the dining table and tape my thoughts. I did not know how quickly my will to keep this video diary would collapse, as would my will to keep up the gymming or my will to go cycling. Then when my friends came to Indianapolis to fill up my time and the house, which sometimes made me happy and sometimes made me angry, depending on what the drugs did to my mood, the camera became a toy for everyone to play with. We would film the ducks on the canal as we fed them; or a guy in a kayak paddling down on a freezing windy day two days after the surface ice had melted —wearing shorts! In my darkest days the camera became a way to have a little bit of fun.

It was around this time that the news about my cancer broke in India. As usual the Indian media went into a frenzy. Luckily for me, I was far away from it but sometimes Mom would get off the phone with Nishant or someone else and if I was looking up and about she might give me an update about what new theory was going around. In that state I couldn’t care less and I didn’t really want to find out who knew or did not know my condition. The people who needed to know, personal friends, professional friends, they knew. The media, though, would not let it go. I understood that mainly there was speculation that I had lung cancer. Then one day I got to know that two guys who I thought were my friends had helped themselves to some publicity on the back of my cancer. One was an Indian journalist whose name I don’t wish to take because it’s just the kind of publicity he would like to feed on, who used my BlackBerry updates to

deliver this bit of breaking news on television as an exclusive scoop. Among the many roles he performed, this man was also some kind of an extension of the Pune Warriors management, which was now the IPL team I played for. As we needed to stay in touch, I had shared my BBM pin with him. He used my BlackBerry Messenger status to update the entire country that I was so weak I couldn't even type, and that I had cancer.

The second was Mr Jatin Chaudhry. He went on a news channel and talked his face off on it. Whatever came to his mind: about my condition and about what his treatment methods could do for cancer patients.

Now that confirmation had arrived from sources perceived to be close to me the Indian media erupted. I was so grateful that I was away at that time or I would have been absolutely miserable. Sitting in cold Indianapolis I saw this as more evidence of what the world had come to. Publicity-hungry people who were in a race to show off who knew more. People piggyback on you when times are good but they don't let go even when you have cancer. Amazing.

To scotch the rumours of lung cancer and to set the record straight, Nishant hurriedly organized for Dr Nitesh to address the press. He gave three hours' notice and fifty media outlets turned up. After the story played, there was a flood of love from around the world. Cards, messages on Twitter, from little kids, from famous actors, from ministers, from fans and well-wishers, messages of love and more love and support. I was touched. I decided from now on I would address the world directly through Twitter.

The Super Bowl final was played out in the Lucas Oil Stadium, Indianapolis on the 5th of February. You cannot keep a sportsman away from sports for too long and this was too tempting to resist. The final had never been held in Indianapolis before, and this quiet, serious town went berserk.

I was so excited that I wanted to tell everyone I was going to the Super Bowl, the biggest, noisiest, richest sports event in the US and maybe in the world. But I didn't share this outing on Twitter. Dr Nitesh's press conference was the next day. On Super Bowl Sunday I was not sure whether I was ready as yet to talk to the world about where I was. Anyway, I couldn't do it then, but I can do it now. Let me tell you, the Americans are at another level with these things. Madonna performed on stage and off stage. I read somewhere that thirty-second ad spots for the Super Bowl had crossed the $1 million mark years ago. After the press

conference I decided I would come out on Twitter in a big way to share my feelings, my struggle and anyone who cared for me would have the news from me first hand. If anyone was going through cancer themselves and wanted to reach out to me, I would be there and we could share our experiences. Since then I have been sharing my feelings, moments and moods on Twitter.

As a cricketer, you are bound to feel physical pain. Getting hit by the ball as a batsman is painful, tearing the webbing of your hands as a fielder is extremely painful, the shock of colliding with a teammate going for the same catch is shock first and then pain. During a tournament, our bodies get sore as expected. Getting over the soreness is also more or less as expected. X-ray, pills, steroid shots, magic spray, massage, heat pads, cooling pads, ultrasound treatment, interferential therapy. There are physios, doctors, trainers, coaches, teammates to get you through it. This is familiar turf for a cricketer.

Chemotherapy introduced me to unknown, scary shades of pain. I remembered what Kapil Dev had said to us in the dressing room once when he came to speak to us. He said that there is an old adage which is annoying to hear in good times and wonderful to hear in bad times and it is: ‘This too shall pass.’

But somehow time stood still for me. The hospital was next to the apartment which was fine, but every day I would sit, just sit, and find it really boring. Just a few months back my life had been so eventful. I wasn’t used to sitting and doing nothing. I couldn’t hit the gym much anymore, my body would hurt a lot. I worried about my hair which was going to start falling next week. I played video games, *Gears of War* was my favourite but other than that, and surfing the web, there was nothing more to do. Mom would go out to buy groceries, which she would come home and cook for me. She catered to whatever I wanted. If I couldn’t change my socks, she bent to the floor and changed them for me. I felt two years old again. If she looked across the room and saw tears in my eyes, she quickly came over and softly stroked my head and patted my back. At 10.30 in the morning or 2 in the night, if I wanted something she ensured I had it. She used to wake up much before me to ensure my stuff was in place: my ginger honey syrup to improve the taste in my mouth, my breakfast options from bread rolls to paranthas to French toast. All the prep done she would wait for me, wondering what I would ask for when I woke up.

After my shot on day 15, I woke up in the morning to find my bed was

covered in hair. All night long my hair had been hurting me like crazy. In the morning I called my mother to show her the bed. Her comment was, ‘It is like two bears have been fighting in here.’

I decided to take matters into my own hand and just be done with it. On day 16 I positioned myself over my bathroom sink and to running commentary from Bunny, who was the first of our friends to arrive in Indianapolis, saying, ‘Ladies and gentlemen, presenting our very own Yuvi Brynner,’ I put the electric razor to my head. We quickly realized this was going to take some time because even with substantial hair loss my hair was really thick and wavy. Bunny suggested we go to a barber. Barber? How absurd. A bloke goes to a barber to get his hair styled, not to go bald! Because Mom and Bunny were there with me I was entertained throughout.

I realized the sink would get clogged in no time and picked up the dustbin and started razing into it. My hair was so soft, it burned as I clipped. If I just raked my fingers through my hair, dozens of strands would fall out in my hand. Despite the burning sensation I carried on. At various stages I looked like a punk, a Brahmin, and finally I would like to think Vin Diesel.

After the deed was done, I put on my yellow Oakleys and took a profile shot of my bald head. And I shared it on Twitter. Handsome is as handsome does!

A few weeks later I was sitting out on the landing outside our apartment door, watching the joggers and the walkers and the ducks and all the people going about their lives on the freezing banks of the canal when two young black guys passed by, did a double take and came back. They looked at me and said, ‘You know what? You look like a banana!’ and hooting they ran off. I looked down at myself. Yellow track top, yellow bottoms, a yellow *siropa* on my head, yellow Oakleys on my face. I fled indoors.

Sometime in mid-February Nishant had arrived with the *siropa*, a length of cloth not the full length of a Sikh turban but enough for wrapping around one’s head. My Guruji of Dupheda Sahib, Sant Baba Ram Singhji, had sent it as a blessing. With chemo the sensitivity of my scalp only grew worse. I would struggle to keep my hands from scratching my head. I realize now that this is why cancer patients cover their heads. Not just because they feel shy to be bald but also because it gives comfort to the scalp.

Pain can be a confidence killer. My pain ate into me. It came from unexpected places, not merely body ache but nausea, vomiting, shivering, headaches, the inability to smell anything, the absence of taste. My hands weren’t my hands anymore. They became the hands of an eight-foot giant in a fairy tale. The body

I knew was gone. The hair from my body had fallen off. My mind was in pieces and it had still to deal with what was left of my body.

If the pain in the body was hard to deal with, the mental agony was as tough. The nausea and vomiting ruined my relationship with food. The chemo was eroding the person I was: more than a cricketer, a fun-loving foodie, who loved talking to people, not just to beautiful women, which I certainly did, but everyone: going to parties, listening to music, watching movies, dancing, being the prankster of the party. Instead I met my new self: Yuvi, the shell. This person who didn't want to talk, whose world only looked inward, who found it awkward to start a conversation with a woman.

My bedroom upstairs was meant to be my private resting place. It is where I could cry without Mom rushing over to console me. As the chemo progressed it became the place where my limitations became most stark. I could not reach the bathroom in two easy strides. Instead I had to take stumbling, slow steps. I couldn't get downstairs to the living room to greet every new day. Everything had become slower and difficult to do.

I have never been the philosophical, introspective type but in Indianapolis I thought hard and long about how my life had turned out. I had been a part of the team that had won the World Cup so *that* had gone well. But that was the past. The team was on the other side of the world in Australia, things weren't going well and it made me mad that I couldn't be around them.

Sitting in my room I often wondered how people went through chemo sessions for years at a time. How did they fight the cancer that wouldn't go away? How did those in India without resources possibly manage an illness like this?

I thought about many things. What it would have been like to have a partner, a companion—call her a girlfriend or a wife—to share what I was going through. Then I thought what the hell. I have my friends and even at my most reclusive time in life, I had made a whole lot of new ones.

There was Kiran Aunty. She had moved to America from Gurgaon nearly forty years ago and we met her at the Walmart near the house while hunting around for a Subway. She offered to help my mom with household work and she would bring me things I wanted to eat, like *kheer* and *khichdi*. She would tell me that she told people that Yuvi is not like the media paints him to be. That always made me laugh.

One day, trying to find an Indian grocery store, Mom and I bumped into Basil, who had looked out of the restaurant where he worked as a chef and recognized

me. Basil started coming over to make me the best dosas I ever had. I couldn't always taste the food but I could taste the love.

The manager of the Marriott, where we stayed when we first arrived, not only turned out to be from Chennai but was our neighbour at the Cosmopolitan. Every time I needed to be taken around in a car, Kumar Anne would make his car available.

Paroon Chadha, a friend of Dr Nitesh based in Indiana, quietly started keeping an eye on us. Paroon was like a typical NRI fan, who would travel the world to watch cricket and then would be harshly critical of our performances. But something clicked between us instantly and we became very good friends. He was our Man Friday in Indianapolis.

I did make new friends but I missed my old mates too. I longed to see them. I was really lucky that my wish came true; one by one they started dropping in soon. Rajeev Suri from Chandigarh said he heard my voice on the phone sounding low and depressed and flew all the way because he couldn't bear it. Mr Suri has a grocery store in Sector 9 in Chandigarh. It was to his shop that I used to go as a kid to drink milk and sometimes to get myself a chocolate. Nishant and Sandy-pa had practically moved to Indianapolis. While I lay flat and finished on the drawing room sofa all day as Mom cooked, washed clothes, consoled me, hosted our friends, or tried to think of new ways to make me feel better, Nishant and Sandy-pa would try to keep me engaged and cheerful.

By the middle of the second cycle there were more bad days than good. Every morning I struggled to motivate myself to get into new clothes. My bones were killing me. I felt impatient with the chemo, irritated. There were days I refused to get out of bed to go to the hospital. Once Mom indulged me and called up IU Simon Cancer Centre to ask if I could get a break. They said they could delay the dosage by one hour but there was no question of interrupting the cycle. Mom came back to me and said, 'Yuvi, we have to go.' She pulled me out of bed and watched me as I got up to go to the loo—for days I had not been able to hold down even a sip of water—and then as I fainted and started falling to the floor she ran for me, so I fell straight on to her.

There were days during the second cycle that I wanted to walk from my chemo station to the taxi but had no legs. Inside them there was no bone, no muscle. My legs felt like empty bags of tired skin. I fought the wheelchair. I would tell everyone I'll walk. A few steps and my knees would begin to fold and I would have to sit down in a corner. In my mind I would consider crawling on all fours to the centre's front door. When I couldn't get up someone would go

fetch a wheelchair and, as we went through the corridor, I would feel as if everyone's eyes were on me and they were thinking: who is this young man who needs a wheelchair? The judgement however is only going on in your head. When you have cancer, you just have it. You are not old or young, you are simply a cancer patient. You collapse, you puke, you get angry, you cry, you bombard your caregiver with requests for this dish or that, and the moment it is produced turn away from it, you throw up the dish so carefully prepared seconds after eating a tenth of it.Then as you lie in bed at night, your face burns with shame. What must they be thinking of me? Why am I behaving like this? How can I do this to the people that love me? The tears come flowing out and soak your pillow. During such moments all you can hope for is that 'this too shall pass'.

You promise yourself that when you are on the other side you will make it up to everyone. But when you come to the other side you realize no one expects anything in return. What you did for everyone who loved you was do the chemo.

About ten times a day, Mom, Nishant and Sandy would say, 'Let's go for a walk.' Most times it was after I'd eaten. Their plan would be to uplift my mood, and get me some 'fresh air' to bring me out of my shell. The clean sharp bite of the Indianapolis oxygen was always a nice shock to my system and often it kept my post-food nausea under control. But they weren't very successful. Their strike rate must have been once in ten tries. The outdoors was both my friend and enemy. The scenery was pretty but I started hating the silence of the winter and walking along the canal with a barf bag in my hand. Always there was Nishant or Sandy or Mom for company but my thoughts were my own and they walked beside me quietly.

Once I sent them outdoors for a change. I wanted to spare them the agony of seeing me throw up again. With every meal I would throw up, the thought of how bad my mom and friends must feel burned at the back of my mind.

The Indianapolis days remained short, and the night closed in early. On the street from the window I would occasionally see a jogger run by. I started missing the chattering crows, the cycle bells, the honking of traffic, the call of namaaz, the putt-putt of scooters, the sounds of India. Mumbai's night is a song of the sea putting you to sleep. From another apartment somewhere you can hear laughter or you will hear loud voices from the road. Under the tree outside my

house in Mani Majra, the man who irons the entire neighbourhood's clothes has his radio on throughout the day, playing old Hindi film songs.

As I sat at the dining table with my head in my hands, or stood at the window watching the canal, I felt pangs for India, for my life in India that I had been missing. Hundreds of boys would be going off to cricket practice and the boys I knew particularly well would be heading out into the field in Australia, encouraging each other, that *today, this session*, we *can* perform better.

The world was moving along fast but my life had come to a standstill. I was in an island of silence, no longer a part of the team I had once belonged to. Indian cricket had moved on and I had been left behind. Then one day Anil *bhai* turned up.

Nishant had told me Anil Kumble was in Boston and he had asked if he could come to visit and spend the night. I didn't think it would happen, but I should have known better. When Anil *bhai* gives his word, he really means it. Just so you know, I'm like a schoolboy in his presence. To us younger ones Anil Kumble was like a headmaster. When I first played for India, he was the most senior bowler on the team. Mohammad Kaif and I were two frightened guards at point and cover in that first series. If he was bowling and the ball went past us, we knew we were going to get his special full-volume bollocking. As scared as we were on the field, off the field we found he was the nicest guy, low-volume speaker, no unnecessary baggage. Oddly, it was this side which came as a shock to us, because on the field his 'Howzzat?' could blow apart a stump mike. When we misfielded, that was the decibel level at which we got it. No umpire had a chance of stepping in.

When I saw Anil *bhai* in our living room, I actually thought at first that he was going to lecture me, give me a nice dose of ol' Anil *bhai* wisdom. Instead, he settled into the sofa, unrattled by the huge shelf stockpiled with medicines on the opposite wall, and chatted about his work at the Karnataka State Cricket Association and what was going on at the NCA and in Indian cricket generally. When he suggested we take a walk, I was out of the door before anyone else. Even my stomach behaved itself. Anil *bhai* was majestic, his presence calming, and of course the next day he laid down the law.

He said, 'Stop watching YouTube videos of your matches. Cricket will come back one day, concentrate on your health, focus on your recovery.' There was a time a shoulder surgery had kept him out of cricket for a year. He spoke about that time when he was operated in South Africa. At times he was alone in an apartment near the hospital. At times he could not lift a thing with one hand. He

put every ounce of his energy and every second of his attention simply into getting better. Not into playing for India again, taking wickets, but getting his shoulder stronger. This is what I would have to do with my body.

It was great advice at the right time because the truth was my mom and friends could not stop me from watching those videos even though they only made me sad, reminding me of what was not there. Here was cancer, my opponent at this time and I had to fight it first. How was it like fighting cancer? Well, honestly it was like facing the toughest bowling of my life in the worst possible conditions. Losing the fight, giving up my wicket, was entirely up to me. I decided I could not and I would not succumb to it. I would put up a fight. I would try not to keep myself in this shell, shutting off people, torturing myself about something I could not have. I would make an effort to be outgoing again.

During the second cycle the apartment security passed on a gift that was left for me by some Indian students of the University of Indiana. They had found out that I was being treated for my cancer in their town. They made me a giant card. A lot of kids took the trouble to mention that they were *not* cricket fans. *Very bad*! When Nishant got in touch with the student association to thank them, they said they wanted to meet me for a few minutes and all they wanted to say to me in person was that I was going to get well soon.

If I was still in the state I was in before Anil *bhai* came—shy, unsure—I would have just said no to meeting strangers, going through the drill of shaking hands and smiling for photographs. Now, the idea of meeting with young Indians appealed to me. Indian youngsters have such great optimism and energy. Then, on the promised day, I didn't wake up in great health. I was in the days 9-14 gap of the second cycle. I was puking all morning. It was tough to stand for a few minutes. I looked out of the window and saw that it was probably the worst day of the winter. The wind howled outside. Even the few Americans who were out and about, for a change, looked like they might be feeling cold. (So far I was convinced that they were made of ice. No matter how cold it was someone would pass by the window in shorts!) Today everyone had turned up their jacket collars, covered their heads with caps, and their ears with muffs. It was sub-zero temperatures outside. I put on layer upon layer of warm clothes. I didn't want to disappoint the gathering, who were dealing with intense cold weather and shivering in the blasting winds.

It turned out to be the right decision. When I stepped out there were at least one hundred and fifty kids there. When they saw me, they let out a huge cheer. People started whistling, catcalling and then they started chanting my name.

At first I was taken aback. I could not believe it. They were students, probably much younger than me, and here they were standing with arms full of flowers, gifts, cards. Many of them had packed boxes of Indian food: biryani, *rajma, aloo-gobhi*, chicken curry, dal. They must have realized I was homesick for India, that Indian food would make me feel happy. After a little hesitation, they started talking all together. Some called me, 'sir', many called me 'Yuvi', and *no one* called me 'uncle'. Suddenly for a moment I felt as if I was in a cricket stadium somewhere in Jaipur or Rajkot. They made such a noise that the building security called us to figure out what was the matter. Residents had complained to them about the noise and thought there was a political rally happening.

There was a group from the cricket club in Bloomington, 90 km from Indianapolis, which was also there. Everyone took photos, Mr Suri filmed the scene and after a long time I felt happy, surrounded by faces that felt familiar, joking that I had forgotten how to sign autographs.

The students had kept track of my chemotherapy cycles. One boy wished me best of luck for the lung function test and the CAT scan that I had to go in for before beginning cycle 3.

Ah, the third cycle. On the day before the last chemo cycle I went to the centre to get the tests. I said to myself that this was the time to be strongest and then I entered the hospital and threw up. We did the tests and left.

The next morning I reached the hospital prepared to roll up my sleeve and present my arm once again to a nurse, who would tap it repeatedly and hopefully find a vein without too many tries. But Dr Einhorn took me into his consulting room and said there would be no chemo that day. He said that the tumour was out, only scarring tissue was left, the cancer cells were dead. Scarring tissue was acceptable in patients of seminoma testes cancer. Looking at the results, he had decided to change the drug regimen for the last cycle to preserve my lung capacity. The third cycle would not be fifteen days. It would be just five days, straight through to the end, and for this cycle I would be hospitalized.

As I left Dr Einhorn's room, I found I could suddenly laugh, sing songs, have a coffee! I was dying to walk along the canal, bask in the sun which had come out, tell everyone that I was GOOD, GOOD, GOOD, make a tape on the Handycam. I had expected the third cycle to be frightening. But that was tomorrow. What was

five days as compared to two weeks?

I was in a good mood after a long time. Paroon Chadha used to light the fire under me with his boasts of, ‘Look, Yuvi, no matter how good you are at any other sport, you cannot beat me at ping-pong.’ I can’t bear people saying that they can beat me when we haven’t even had a fair game. So the best way was to play and find out. So that night before the third cycle, I was raring for some action. The nearest table tennis centre was forty-five minutes away. I made Paroon book a table and challenged him to a match. By the time we reached the playing centre, my nausea was getting worse. Paroon beat me in straight sets 3-0, with much chuckling. I didn’t have the energy to retrieve the ball and Sandy and Nishant were helping me as ball boys. All I could do was cover my end and hit it.

Sandy-pa said, ‘You will go away from here defeated? *Chal, koi nahi* … (Doesn’t matter, no big deal).’ The old instinct kicked in. Physically I was fading but I did not want to give up. We started a new match. After one set I was gasping for breath. All the guys began to worry. ‘Why are you taking this so seriously, Yuvi? Let’s go home,’ they said. I went to the washroom to throw up and listened to the voice inside my head that was getting louder and louder.

‘Fight, Yuvi,’ it said. ‘Fight. This is what you do. You know how to fight.’ Only when I had won the second match with a 3-0 scoreline did I agree to stop. What a long day it had been. What a long day tomorrow would be. But tonight? Tonight I would sleep properly.

Next morning came the double whammy. My chemo could not be started as my blood count was too low and an alert radiologist had spotted a blood clot in the lung.

Dr Nitesh had come to Indianapolis to see me into the start of my last cycle. Thank god he was there when I got this news. We came back home slightly disappointed. Mom was upset about this new problem. I could not understand it either. A clot? Would the clot travel to my brain? Had my luck gone bad? Had I done anything to cause this? He sat us down at the dining table and opened up a diary. And in the diary he drew charts and diagrams so that I could understand systematically that the problem was a problem only if I chose to look at it as a problem. He said, ‘What you see is what they are able to pick up. It seems like a lot of problems are there but that’s because you are at a good centre. It’s like this.

In a village, people can't even tell its cancer. In the city, we can pick up on cancer because the diagnostic tools exist.'

'This is a good centre so they can pick up the problems. Don't see it as a problem, just think that you are lucky.' I felt lucky to have him there.

There was an injection I was told I had to take every day to thin the blood and this injection I would have to give myself. I prepared myself for it. Dr Nitesh took me to my bedroom to show me how to do it. Pinch the skin of your belly, then go in as perpendicular as possible. In time I would call out to my friends, 'Oye, Nishant, come and help me with this,' and giggle as they turned pale and scooted as if I was coming to inject them. How far I had come. Remember those days when I was scared as hell of the needle? Life was teaching me the lesson well: no pain, no gain. Over the last few months my mom had taken almost every challenge in her stride. She never cried, never broke down or regretted. But this challenge that I used to set for her by asking her to inject me used to make her run. She could never watch me taking that injection.

In a fight resistance is better than surrender. During the past few months, there was a lot I had learnt, the hard way. I was forced to deal with things I hadn't had to face before. Weakness, but to overcome weakness one could put one foot in front of the other and repeat the action; dizziness, one could hold onto something or someone; nausea, just let go and deal with it. Anger, an emotion which I detested in others—now the smallest of things made me angry: the colour red, people talking loudly or crowding into my space, people talking about the hospital or chemo, people giving me pity.

In the first cycle I was taking 'Neulasta' to boost WBCs, and it made my bones scream, the spasms made it impossible to move as the Neulasta injections expanded the bones. When the bones expanded, it would feel like my muscles were wrapped over knives. There would be fever and for two hours constant shivering. No pain-killer could make the pain go away.

I tried to cope by adding on tablets. Lack of sleep. Tablet. Appetite. Tablet. Ulcers of the mouth. Tablet. Need to build the immune system? Tablet. Feeling like death? Tablet. Can't go to the toilet. Six tablets. Feeling low? There is definitely a tablet for it but I thought it was better to cry and let it out. While we waited for my body to be ready for the last cycle of chemo, we celebrated Dr Nitesh's birthday in Indianapolis. I tried my best to rub some cake on his face. But the cake didn't have enough cream. Never mind, doctor. Some other time. All these people, Nitesh, Nishant, Bunny, Sandy, who stayed with me, left their problems and their families behind to be with me and my problems. For them I

was their family, and for me they were my allies. Relationships made in these times seldom change.

My final chemo started five days after it was originally scheduled. Bleo was omitted because it was believed to be causing me mild lung toxicity. Ifosphamide replaced Bleomycin. So far I was on BEP. It became VIP: Etoposide (also called VP16), Ifosphamide and Cisplatin.

If the first two cycles had given me ups and downs, the third cycle was like a boxing match, getting hit all the time, but holding on, trying not to fall down. For five days the chemo pounded me and when we got to the end and I saw that I won, I felt I had won without any gloves.

During the cycle I had two gears: drowsy and asleep or drowsy and nauseous. Dr Nitesh tried to get me on to a jigsaw puzzle on day 1 but my hands had become fat paws. I tried to pick up those small flat pieces, and I couldn't. To get movement in my legs, I tried to walk around with the IV drip. I walked so slowly I thought I shouldn't. Around me there were friends all the time. More visitors from India, Manish Malhotra, Vivek Khushalani, and of course the core team: Mom, Ritesh, Dr Nitesh, Sandy-pa, Nishant, my friend Charan Shetty. My core group was good, I was lucky, but if I managed to open my eyes, I saw my pain in theirs.

On day 4, I got my spirits up for one last excellent prank on Paroon. It was a prank played to perfection and Paroon was almost in tears by the time we revealed our hand. Revenge! For all the critical things he said about my team! And then I collapsed and hardly again opened my eyes.

If you guys want the prank here it is. A very senior journalist from India rang Nishant and wanted to write a story on my condition. Nishant gave him the story but was reluctant to attribute quotes to himself in the story. But the senior journalist wanted someone to give quotes. I asked Nishant to attribute the quotes to Paroon. Later when the story was published I asked Dr Nitesh to call Paroon and tell him how dejected I was that he had given his quotes, that he too turned out to be one of those guys who make the most of a famous guy's friendship. Paroon had no clue about how my story with his quotes had landed up in one of the leading dailies in India. He was sad and furious with the Indian media and equally bemused as to how they had attached his name to the story. The next day Nishant and Paroon were supposed to go to Austin to see how Livestrong

worked. He was coming to the hospital to pick him up. I very strategically placed the Handycam in my hospital room to record Paroon's long, stuttering clarification about how he was innocent. Nervous, sweating like a pig, and almost reduced to tears, defending his integrity and friendship, Paroon was too funny. Then he saw my mom laughing in the corner. Within minutes everyone who had one by one left the room because they couldn't control themselves burst into the room rolling with laughter. Paroon couldn't believe it and yet he insisted he had smelled a rat! Oh boy, that was a funny one. He was so relieved, he was wiping his face by the end. I called him my chemo bakra.

It was the last day of my chemo. I had now gone through three cycles and had been in Indianopolis for two months. As I lay on my hospital bed, the hours slowed down to a trickle. With my eyes closed to the room—its four walls, the bed I was on, the IV drip, the cabinets, the medicines—I tried to think of the view outside the apartment. The canal, the sky and the trees. The branches had become totally bare in the winter. Just before I came to the hospital I had noticed they had begun to sprout small light green leaves. As I slept with my head wrapped in my yellow *siropa*, in Hansali, Guruji got the severest outbreak of a rash like eczema. His skin cracked up into infected boils. No doctor could treat him successfully. We have this belief in India that when a guru blesses your journey through an illness he diverts some of the poison towards himself.

Six days after I had entered the hospital for the third cycle of chemo I left the IU Simon Cancer Centre leaning on Mom. That day I did not have the strength to say goodbye to Dr Einhorn or the nurses. I could not bring myself to ring the gong. But two days later I beat Charan Shetty in a game of pool. He had bet $100, and after I got it I didn't let that note out of my sight.

Chapter 5

Taking Guard Again

HALF-CAREFUL, HALF-QUICK, I heard Sachin's footsteps before I saw him. When he walked into the room, he almost knocked me off my feet the moment he was through the door. Such was the fierceness of his hug. I could tell he was fighting back tears. He may not be very tall but Sachin is strong as a giant (and his friendship is as strong too). He is a cricketing giant, of course, but that day I was meeting a friend, one of the first to come and see me after my treatment in Indianapolis. I was on my way back home to India. At Dr Einhorn's suggestion we had stopped in London for a few days of rest, to get my immunity up and to break the long journey from Indiana to India.

Like I mentioned earlier, I still remember the first time I met Sachin. Dad had just introduced me to the gruelling life of cricket, cricket and more cricket. It was during one of those winters that the Indian team was in Chandigarh for a match. Dad thought the time was right for me to see a proper game. He took me to the Chandigarh Sector 16 stadium for my first international fixture and himself wandered off somewhere, maybe to meet his friends in the Punjab cricket administration, I don't remember. What I remember from that day is hanging around quietly and alone. Soon I found myself in the players' area and in front of me Sachin and Vinod Kambli, who were best friends and teammates from childhood, were teasing each other and joshing about. Two young heroes.

I stood by the snacks table fidgeting with the tablecloth, watching them. Then Sachin turned around and, addressing me, said, 'Excuse me? Biscuit pass *karna.*' Mutely, I handed him a biscuit.

A few years later, Dad invited Sachin and Kambli home for dinner during the Challenger Trophy, which is a fifty overs domestic competition. Leaving the Mohali ground in the evening after the day's event was over, Dad piled them into our car. He remembered me too late, when the car was already full. 'Yuvi,' he said, 'you walk back home,' adding for good measure, 'and don't you dare be late.' Which dad leaves his kid behind to walk home like that!

Now here was Sachin after all these years with me in London, on the brink of a wobble. As we chatted, he would get up often and hug me. I could tell he

wanted to cry probably from a combination of relief, shock and overwhelming affection. This happens when you see another human being looking weak. I must have looked very weak, not to mention bloated and bald. I may have *looked* like hell and I may have felt feeble but that day my mind was free. I was with my friend. I felt that from here on I would be ok. I was on the mend. I was finally on my way back to the steaming sun and rough dust of our Indian greens.

I will always be grateful to Indianapolis. It gave me my life back. It was beautiful, clean and the best place I could have gone to get rid of my cancer. The doctors and nurses at the IU Simon Cancer Centre were brilliant, dedicated and wonderful people who saved my life. They saw me at my worst and put up with me. But when the end came I wanted to leave Indianapolis as quickly as possible because it would mean I had put the illness and the treatment behind me. This chapter of my life would finally, finally come to a close.

It had been many years since I spent more than a month in one place. On cricket tours, we move around constantly, changing cities and towns. Even if it is a swift-moving series that throws up one airport, hotel and ground after another to the point of monotony, the scene is continuously changing.

In Indianapolis a time had come of an endless monotony: of what I had to do, what I could do and what I could possibly see. Tests at the hospital, medicines in the chemo station, back in the apartment at night. My bedroom on the first floor, the slow trudge down the stairs, the living room, my mom cooking in the kitchenette. More chemo. Some recovery. The canal, the ducks, a stroll, TV. The months far away from home and from friends had worn me down. When I finished the third cycle, I left the hospital as if I was fleeing, saying bye to only those who passed me on the way out. I wanted to pack my bags and head for the airport immediately.

But when we went to him the next day Dr Einhorn told me that I had to spend ten days in ‘recovery,’ dealing with the after-effects of the last and the toughest chemo session. I was on blood-thinning injections, my WBC count was low; I could not just climb into a plane and fly halfway around the world under these conditions. By now Dr Nitesh was gone, Sandy-pa was packing up to leave; soon Nishant would have to get back too. I felt distraught. I felt desperate for friends, for variety, devastated that it was not yet over, that I was not being allowed to leave. At the same time, I felt sicker within, if I am honest, than I had before or during the final cycle of chemo. I was battling to leave for home but it was like my body had been snapped into half, broken from the inside. Those last ten days of recovery were incredibly hard. I was not prepared for it and I was left

crying on the sofa. For two days I could not get up. From my video diary I know that I felt suicidal. I was in physical pain but I could no longer separate physical pain from mental disintegration.

While waiting for recovery after the chemo cycles, time dragged more slowly than ever. The weather became warmer, we started wearing sandals and cottons again, the days became longer—and everything felt too long. Every minute took too long to tick out. On the canal I would see the joggers and it would irritate me that other people were running while I couldn't. For how long had I been watching these lucky people? How much longer?

Nishant and Mom would encourage me with words like, Yuvi, it's the last over, the last ball, just bat this out. At some point I realized I had to let it go. I had to accept that this was bad but it was going to be as it would be. I wasn't going to be able to make time go faster.

Then one day, after the ten days that must have felt like ten thousand, Dr Einhorn looked up from my test results and smiled. 'You are good to travel,' he said.

I had to stop myself from leaping off the examination bed, giving him a hug and running out of his office. That day when I left the hospital—even though I want God to always, always, bless everyone in it—I felt I was being let out of jail. I gave the good doctor and Jackie a signed cricket bat each. They looked amused. I doubt they had seen a cricket bat before. I gave a demo on grip, stance and how to play a glorious cover drive!

On the 27th of March 2012, Paroon came to the Cosmopolitan on the Canal with his big car and we started on the four-hour drive from Indianapolis to Chicago, which was the most pleasant drive I had been on for a while. I sang songs, cracked jokes. I looked out and enjoyed the scenes from my window almost free from nausea. I could see the colour creeping back into life.

Once I reached Chicago I didn't take long to get out of the car and get into the plane. I felt like the plane was flying me to a new life. The possibility of seeing the world through the little window of the British Airways flight was exciting me literally as if I were a kid travelling by air for the first time. On the phone a friend had suggested that I might want to check out New York. I laughed. No chance. Lady Liberty, next time! Madame Tussauds, here I come! Right now London would do just fine.

Inside the flight, I couldn't wait for the plane to take off. Mom looked at me in that way she sometimes does, like *Yuvee!*, when I asked a flight attendant who was walking past for a glass of red wine. I raised the glass and said, 'Cheers,

Mom, we're going back home.' Two sips and I had to return the glass. I couldn't drink it but I had wanted to mark the moment. As the plane taxied out from O'Hare, I couldn't stop smiling.

In London, it was back with Tintin and Babar. Tintin and Babar looked at me, looked after me, as if I had come back from a war. Mom left for India after a couple of days. It was Tintin who took me to see Peter Marcasciano, a nutritionist who had been a professional boxer and worked with a lot of athletes. Peter advised me to switch to organic, unprocessed food, completely free of preservatives. It would help my sugar levels and my immunity. It was he who suggested that I better be gentle on my body, start eating normally first and then get into an exercise regimen.

This was, I might confess, the opposite of the plans bubbling in my head. I had thought now with cancer out, cricket was definitely in. I was waiting to feel slightly better and then I would start training again. But when Peter spoke I really listened. It is the reason that I did not end up impatient and frustrated with myself.

I was staying in central London, amidst surroundings that I knew well and loved. The Indian team often stays at the Taj in St. James. Among my happiest memories as a young player are those of returning to the Taj in 2002 with the NatWest Trophy, adrenalin still pumping, walking into the lobby jampacked with fans. Nowadays they have apartments and suites in those beautiful old mansions around the quadrangle, with pillars and porches and a fountain. The buildings are more than a hundred years old. This was where I settled in for these last days away from home.

Dinesh Chopra, a journalist friend who had helped me earlier when we were running the rounds of labs in Delhi, came to London to be with me. While I was in Indianapolis he was covering the cricket series in Australia. I used to tease him to tears, saying that for him professional matters were bigger than personal relations. Poor guy. To make up for all of that, he came to stay with me. My energy was still fairly down so I wouldn't go out much or do any of the tourist stuff. Instead, Tintin and Babar would drop in with food from their homes and we would watch IPL matches in the afternoons and evenings in my hotel room. When we ordered food the Indian chefs at the Taj would send me meals according to my new dietary demands: organic, unprocessed, more protein, minimum oil, nothing deep fried at all.

Although I had still not reached home, being around friends was like coming up for air. For months I had made an effort to keep things light. I had stayed

positive and tried my best to hang onto my real self. What an effort it had been. But now I felt I could be in my natural state again, without worrying about depressing anyone or worrying that depressed people around me were worrying about hiding their sadness from me. There was also an unexpected mega-bonus. My chemo brain could now very readily supply such memory lapses that everyone fell to the ground laughing.

For instance, one day soon after I was back in India, I walked into my Gurgaon house and found a man there waiting for me. My Gurgaon house is always buzzing with activity, with people coming and going all through the day: my friends, my mom's friends, Zora's friends, our common friends, aunts, uncles, cousins, architects, travel agents, chartered accountants, engineers to fix faulty air conditioners, domestic help, security guards, event organizers, couriers carrying gifts, postmen with fan mail, young cricketers, old cricketers. I had recently come back home after my treatment so when I saw this man with a big, friendly smile and he didn't look familiar to me, I said, 'Hi there, nice to meet you. Tell me your name,' and cordially shook his hand.

The man was stupefied. 'Sir,' he said suddenly panicked. I looked more closely. 'Sir, I'm your lawyer!' Of course he was! If I had seen his name on a piece of paper I would have recognized it instantly. For some reason, I couldn't recognize his face. It was, as I had been warned, the short-term memory loss that was one of the after-effects I suffered.

I apologized and described to him the state of my memory. In Indianapolis I would forget what I had eaten the previous day, who I was supposed to call back, what my friends told me. The memory loss was a side effect of chemotherapy and temporary as the doctors reassured me it would be.

In London, on the days when I felt stronger, I would get the guys to take me out. At first it was very unsettling to walk into the busy parts of the city like Oxford Circus with its bustling streets and crowded Underground steps. The world was moving at its own pace but my world had slowed down. I found myself laughing at the idea of clinging on to a whirling world. Nevertheless, it was exhilarating to step out, to be on the street, without hair, without eyebrows, but overloaded with joy.

Once we wandered into a food court at the top of a mall and wondered if we should stop by at the Indian cafe. We got close and within minutes people began to recognize me and started approaching me. Cooks, waiters, the guys who cleaned the tables, regular shoppers. They had recognized the hairless, eyebrowless me. They came to shake my hand and tell me that they were

praying for me. Total strangers came from the back of restaurants, offering packets of food. ‘Please take this,’ someone said; someone else said, ‘I ordered this for you.’ Everyone asked, ‘How are you feeling?’ And always: ‘Come back to the field soon, Yuvi.’ It was overwhelming. I can’t explain how much I was moved.

We left and went on to a Japanese restaurant because I love the food, and it was light and good for my stomach. But all evening I could not shake off what I had felt at the Indian cafe. I called Mom, who was getting the house sorted out and putting things in order for my return. I told her about what had happened. I was itching to be back home I said. I heard her laughing on the phone. ‘I knew it!’ she said.

A house is a haven and all of us want to get back to its comforts, obviously. That is a cliché. But for me at that time in London I felt like my soul was craving it. I needed to begin healing in full and I could only do it at home. I was still weak but I could only be strong if I dived headlong into life again. It made me even more determined to come back to India and all its madness. I could not be happier to take the plunge.

As the plane circled over Delhi, I looked out with excitement. My sprawling city, packed with ribbons of roads full of crying cars, shouting buses, weaving scooters, slow cycles. Houses rubbing against each other, monuments hundreds of years old, small huts. It was April and the sun was already beating through the umbrella of haze. From the sky I wanted to take it all into my arms and hug it. I felt so greedy.

As the flight landed, butterflies rose in my stomach. Would I disembark and step into another life? Would I ever be able to get back to my normal life? When I left India, only the people closest to me knew I had cancer. Hell, even I did not know *for sure* that I had cancer, or at least I had not completely accepted it. Now I had been through it and I was returning to a place where more than a million people knew I had cancer. I felt unsure of myself. Of course I had been on Twitter, posting my feelings and pictures, connecting with my fans. I had smiled, positioned the angle of my bald head, taken a photo and told the world I was doing all right. A million people had cheered me for it. But a virtual million is one thing and being in the middle of hundreds of real people is something else totally. I had gone public with my illness and now I was no longer Yuvi the son,

brother, buddy, sometimes a national hero and sometimes a national punching bag, coming off a plane in victory or defeat. That life, my old life, I had perfected. I knew the expressions I would make: what people would say to me and what I would reply and whether I would smile as I spoke or look stern. Now my cancer had taken all that away. The guy coming off the plane this time would be Yuvraj Singh, Indian cricketer, World Cup Player of the Tournament, cancer survivor. I felt nervous and elated at the same time. When I stepped off the plane, what would it feel like?

On the flight back to India, the Jet Airways crew was surprised to see me there. They remained thorough professionals, went about their duties of giving safety instructions and handing out towels, food and drinks, not paying me any special attention. In the middle of their duties, though, they went off and put together a lovely handmade greeting card signed by each one of them and then came and surprised me with it. Welcome home, it said, get well soon.

The moment I got off the plane, I was swept back into the life I had left behind by the sheer force of its pull. I was surrounded by smiles and greetings, wishes and blessings. I have often noticed while travelling across the world how only Indians feel at ease giving out free blessings no matter what age they are, no matter whether they know you well or not. That afternoon I walked through corridors and corridors of benediction. I heard people calling my name and saying, ‘Come back soon!’ Some quietly, some shouting. Make your comeback soon, they meant. Officers at immigration, staff at security, baggage handlers. My mother was waiting for me inside the terminus and it was hard to tell whose smile was bigger—hers or mine.

Out of the terminal and into the melee seemed like a time from the past, like landing at an airport after a good series. A bank of TV cameras, flashlights going off, people pushing, shoving and shouting. There may have been about fifty people there, but at first glance it looked to me like two hundred. Thank god I was wearing dark glasses or without them they would have seen me looking quite startled. No matter how nervous I’d been earlier, I quickly found my stride. Cancer was the bummer, this was easy!

The rest of the day was a blur. The neighbours welcomed me with flowers and my mom handled the media outside the house. I went out to the terrace and talked briefly to the TV crews. When I saw Zora again, I felt a load lift off my

shoulders. Zora, the gentle, quiet soul, my baby brother. He had done without Mom and me for weeks. Now that I was back, freed of the burdens of cancer, repaired and recovering, I was ready to look after him once more.

That night, when I lay in my own bed, I felt truly happy and blessed to be back. There was peace and quiet within me, and it did not come from the silence outside. During the day, people from all walks of life had come to see me.

Mr Rajiv Shukla came the very day I landed. That week the BCCI president N Srinivasan flew down especially from Chennai to see me. My teammates Viru, Irfan, Bhajji and many others took the first opportunity they could find. KP was in Delhi for the IPL and he spent an evening with me. I was touched and exhilarated.

Cancer turns you upside down. In body, in mind, in spirit. You have to get used to retaining food in your stomach again before you go about expending energy. It would take me six weeks to get my system functioning well. In this period it was important for me to eat the right food, not only to make up for what I had lost but to regain my health condition as a sportsman as fast as possible. What Peter had said was that a lot of good fat had been lost during the illness and I had to get that back. It was like leaving a child in a candy shop with a prescription for toffees. From the day I returned home, I attacked Mom's *gobhi* parathas. Some of the organic stuff Peter had suggested wasn't the tastiest in the world. I kept up with it but mixed it up with samosas and parathas. To be able to taste these things again, I was glad just to be alive! I tried to be active, playing table tennis (what Paroon called ping-pong in the USA) and pool. But I was off strict or regular training and I ate to get used to eating again. Gradually, the frequency with which I threw up began to decrease. My metabolism, always with a mind of its own, like a fast bowler with a temper, decided to switch off. As days turned into weeks, I put on weight. The more time passed, the freer I felt. The lighter my heart was, the heavier I got.

The truth was that I had realized that cricket had moved away from the centre of my universe. In my life, cricket had come to be replaced by cancer and although I followed our series during chemo and then the IPL on TV, after the treatment the cancer was replaced by something like contentment. The pressures of cricket were far from my mind, and the cancer had stopped eating at my peace. My world was full and I wanted to enjoy every minute of it. My friends

and family were around me. I could eat, I could sleep … Maybe it was enough. I knew I was grateful.

A few days after landing in Delhi, I did my first press conference in more than a year. Walking into a packed room at the Pathways School near Gurgaon where we run an academy for kids called the Yuvraj Sngh Centre for Excellence, I realized my last press conference had been at the Wankhede stadium after the World Cup final. Talk about life coming full circle. After the Cup final, I had marched into the conference room nearly at midnight, bursting with joy, energy and humour. I had shouted out, '*badhaaiyaan ho*!' (congratulations to you!) to everyone in the room.

Now I could only walk slowly, I needed to wear dark glasses to keep out the glare from the camera lights which hurt my eyes, and I had to find the energy to speak if only for about half an hour. The journalists gave me a standing ovation, everyone, the sensible ones—you know who you are, and even the nutcases—even you know who you are! The session went on for close to an hour. By the end I was exhausted, but I was glad that I had done it and managed to talk for so long.

During my first couple of weeks back home, I didn't want to think about cricket. By now one month had passed since my last chemo cycle. The IPL was going on in full swing and I used to catch the games on TV in Gurgaon. Then, as fate would have it, this time cricket reached out to me. The Pune Warriors got in touch with me, inviting me to come to a game and to meet the team I had captained the year before.

At the new Subrata Roy Sahara Cricket Stadium in Gahunje, a village about 30 km from Pune, the noise of the crowd was so loud that the stadium was shaking. This new stadium is like the Mercedes Benz of Indian grounds. As the arena throbbed I could feel my doubts and detachments beginning to go away. This is where I belonged. The crowds were cheering. Bats were swinging, balls were bouncing. I wanted to grab a bat, jump onto the field and hit the ball out of the ground.

When they asked me to hold a bat and knock a few balls around for the TV cameras I realized with a shock how far I was from that vision. The stands were raining claps but my body began to shake. With the bat in hand, the brain was communicating the right messages to the body, but the muscles and tendons

coiled inside waiting to be released instead curled up more tightly. No one else could see this. Only I could feel it. Oh boy, there was a lot of work to do. My muscles had to be shaken awake again, their memory unleashed.

Watching the IPL at home on TV and being so close to where all the action was brought back fond memories. As Chris Gayle slapped one flying six after another, and I sat in my Lazyboy and clapped, I felt a pang. Soon the frustration began to kick in. After months of being a patient patient, impatience caught me.

On Sachin's birthday, I spoke to him and he ordered me to relax. '*Yeh koi* hamstring *ya* quad *nahin hai jo phat gaya*.' (This is not like your hamstring or quad that just tore.) Still, I thought, I should take myself to the NCA ASAP, get tested, see where I stood.

After my test results came in, I decided I would target the shortest format. Less than a month after taking that plane from London, and returning to shouts of 'Yuvi, come back soon', I hit the training button. Starting with sessions in the pool of lunges, high knees, back flips.

I notice it feels good in the water, my body is flexible, pliable, energetic but I climb out of the pool and I think I am going to fall down on my face. My legs are made of jelly. An electric current runs up and down my legs. This jelly can conduct electricity.

We don't really remember what it was like to learn how to walk as babies, do we? The moment I finished that pool session I was trembling, like I had never walked before. The date was the 1st of May 2012. India was going to play the first World T20 match in Sri Lanka on the 19th of September. Ashish Kaushik at the NCA had given me a small batch of exercises to start with. In six weeks I would have to dive into full-blown training.

I decided to use this time to take care of some pending things and wrap up my other commitments. I travelled to Chandigarh to meet my gurujis, held meetings for my cancer charity YOUWECAN, attended the *Sports Illustrated* awards where they awarded me the Sportsman of the Year for 2011. At the awards I met people I had not seen for months. Bishan Singh Bedi gave me the best hug he has ever given me. During his camp in the hills, I remember Paaji shouting at us, making us run around the ground. 'Run ten rounds, run twenty, keep running till you collapse.' I thought about my T20 target. Could I be cricket-fit within four months?

Among people who won awards that night were the footballer Baichung Bhutia, boxer Vikas Krishnan, the Rajasthan Ranji Trophy team and the ICC World Cup winning team as well. But the Sportskid of the Year award went to Karthikeyan Murali, an eleven-year-old chess player who had won the world under-12 championship. His smile was the size of a dinner plate.

My mom goes to temples and gurudwaras every week, and now with some time in hand I started accompanying her. When I met Guruji in Hansali he gave me a prayer. He told me it would help me if I recited it every day. It is called the '*Chaupai Sahib Ka Paath*'. It was written by Guru Gobind Singh, the last of the living Sikh gurus. Guru Gobind was a warrior, a poet and a philosopher and he first recited it when going into battle. Let me share two lines with you:

Hamri karo haath di raksha

Let your protective hand shelter me

Puran hoye mere man ki ichcha

Help me fulfil what my heart aspires for

The prayer goes on, asking the Gods above for protection and assistance in times of conflict and hardship. I've been reciting it every night before I sleep and I find it calms me and brings peace to my soul. I don't know if I've become more spiritual since the cancer or simply more humble. I say the prayer to still my mind and strengthen my purpose. It is my way of thanking God for His gifts, not merely the good things I have in my life, but for also giving me the will and persistence to fight cancer.

Before I realized it, the six weeks I was told to wait before going hardcore on the training were drawing to a close. I wanted one proper holiday before getting on the treadmill of life again. Not a trip snatched over a weekend between tours and tournaments but, for the first time, a proper vacation. Ten days with the boys. Tintin and Babar from London, and Ashish, Zak and Bhajji. We decided to go to Spain. We drove around, saw the sights, chilled in the hotel pool, stepped out for dinners, talked rubbish non-stop. Ash and Bhajji were out of the team and Zak was about to return after injury. There was enough time for every man to air his angst and double the time to have fun.

This was a holiday of plenty: friendships, jokes, laughter and food. I exercised

for about three days out of the ten that we were away and that too for the heck of it. Zak was like, what is this, Yuvi? So I said, ok, no more half-hearted bench presses. After the holiday, I'll get on with my training earnestly.

When I got back from the holiday and put myself on a weighing scale I saw the digits racing past 100 and my jaw nearly hit the bathroom floor. Hundred and three kilos! At my heaviest I had been 95 kilos. Right away I stuck myself into a schedule that I couldn't budge from. I knew my mission had to start here. These numbers were crazy. What was I doing wandering around in the hundreds of a bathroom scale! This is it, Yuvi, I told myself. Get ready to get down and dirty. Far from me having to go around looking for direction, inspiration, motivation, it found me. Like Zak had said, it has to come from within and it will. And it did. Now it was time to get from a set of numbers on a scale to a set of numbers on a scoreboard.

Chapter 6

The Battle for Confidence

ONE AFTERNOON IN AUGUST I went out to the terrace in Gurgaon to check if there was some hint, at least a little smell of rain. Anyone who has lived on this side of the world knows that August is sticky and uncomfortable. If you are playing in India, be sure you will sweat and trickle till there is a puddle in your shoes. The weather is suffocating and you crave a refreshing breeze and a sudden burst of rain.

As I stepped out there was a gust of wind and to my surprise a peacock stood right in front of me. It walked around the terrace completely at ease. I had no idea where it came from. In our mythology a visit by a peacock is a mixed sign. There are many superstitions around it. Depending on what you believe in it can be a good or a bad omen. The peacock walked around my terrace, its crown perched on its head, blue neck glowing, like it was on a business visit. Its feathers were shimmering in the light and I saw streaks of orange and green. The peacock moved with a balance and a lightness of the feet that we batsmen dream of.

Just then I heard Mom shouting for me. 'Mom, upstairs, on the terrace,' I said. From below, I heard her cry, 'Selection, selection!' When she got to the terrace her eyes were shining with joy. She told me I had made it to the Indian team for the World T20. She had seen it on the news. I pointed to the peacock on the terrace. The peacock is a noisy bird and I took it as a representation that in my life cricket would not be silenced. It had been a good omen for me.

Cricket and I. Here we were again. What a difficult journey it had been to this point, and now here we were standing at the start of the old life.

When I first came back from the US, Ashish Kaushik visited me in Gurgaon. No doubt he found a heavy, slow, lethargic Yuvraj. He came as a friend, not as a physiotherapist, but inevitably our talk turned to the comeback. He asked me if I wanted to come to the NCA immediately but I was just too weak at that time. 'I'll come,' I said, 'but after a few weeks, and maybe we could do some tests to see how far I am from …'

From what? In my most private thoughts, I knew that the future looked to me

like a road that runs towards the horizon in a flat open desert and there is no way of knowing the distance to wherever it goes.

Ashish said, ‘What I want is for you to look towards being a normal Yuvraj Singh again. That’s all.’

But normal? Did I really have the courage to come back to the Indian team? It felt a mountain so high and my body felt so feeble that I could not imagine the climb. Being in shape, hitting the ball cleanly, running around on the field easily, being able to last forty overs a day, ninety overs a day, hundred overs a day. How would I ever be able to do it? We talked quite a bit but Ashish said nothing about the plan he had up his sleeve. He said come when you are ready and gave me a few exercises to do on my own. After he left, that night I remembered that Dr Einhorn had taken the trouble to speak to Dr Nitesh about cricket and its demands. He had designed his treatment plan especially for me. The doctors had been thorough and faithful in the mission to give me a treatment that would deposit me back into the normal world as a worldclass athlete. Medicine had given me the body that could do it. Now somehow, somewhere, I had to find the mind.

In the middle of May I decided to make a trip to Bangalore. The summer had begun and soon it would end and the home season would begin with New Zealand in India in August. The World T20 was right after that. It was at the World T20 that I had hit my six sixes in 2007. If I had a big poster I would have put it up on my wall to motivate myself. It was these sixes that I tortured myself with in Indianapolis and it was sixes that I had to get set to hit again. I made up my mind. I told myself, normal is: hit it out of the park. And after that if a friend asked me, ‘So, when do you think you might play again?’, I would grin, ‘Twenty20 World Cup,’ and watch the jaw drop. ‘But … But isn’t that, like, just now? In September?’ ‘Yes sir, it is.’

It so happened that Ishant Sharma was at the NCA in May for rehab following an ankle injury and Ashish asked us to play a match-up with each other, bat versus tennis ball. With his thin, tall frame, flying hair and generally downbeat expression, Ishant reminds me of a moody rock star. I call him Lambu. (Not very original, I know.) At our tennis-ball match-up, as the bright yellow ball left Lambu’s hand, my eyes picked up the line, and my feet and arms moved as if on their own. I found myself hitting through the line; and the ball? It flew over the

ground and over the boundary. From the pit of my stomach rose something that must have been pure joy.

What had just transpired is called ‘muscle memory’ by doctors, but for me it was as if my old life was linking arms with the new one. As that match-up went on, I hit Lambu for seven sixes and he went ballistic. ‘Paaji’, he shouted like fast bowlers do, ‘you are a cheater!’ All I could do was laugh with relief. Whatever else my arms and legs and back may tell me, that day I knew that my mind was all right. I better mention here that Lambu hit me for six sixes when it was his turn.

In June I took my holiday in Spain. Immediately afterwards I checked into the NCA. In Spain when I tried to swim in the hotel pool I would be winded in half a lap. Before cancer, I could clear ten-fifteen breaststroke laps before my breathing changed. At the NCA it became clearer than ever that the parameters I had built around the 2011 World Cup had bottomed out. My endurance levels had gone down drastically and my stability and cardio-vascular strength was practically at zero.

At the NCA a three-man team was in place for my Project T20. Along with Ashish, there were two strength and conditioning coaches: Anand Date and Nagender Prasad. They were smiling and friendly and then they didn’t let me go. They were told, ‘Forget about his cancer’, and they did. They were to think of me as just a regular guy who had not worked out for six months and, boy, did they.

Ashish and I have had an excellent working relationship for a long time, by which I mean I play pranks on him all the time and he never minds it. I have fiddled with his mobile phone several times and sent out prank messages but he still keeps leaving it around. We have nicknamed him Ghajini after the superhit film since he is a habitual offender in forgetting things. He gives me the strictest workouts and routines and if I resist, he totally ignores that. So for all his sweetness and forgiving nature, and his college boy face, Ashish takes no crap when it comes to training.

Before I could return to my cricket skills, I needed to rebuild my fitness around its core, through Pilates, swimming and running. The first few days, my calves were set on fire. In the middle of a set my knees would shake as if I was eighty years old and knives were being thrust into my back. That’s what it felt

like. Often I would haul myself out of the pool and tell Ashish I couldn't do it anymore. Sympathetically he would say ok, take a break, get back your breath. A moment later he would order me back into the pool again.

The Bangalore monsoon came and began its drip-drip. I found the humidity draining on my energy and my general mood. After hours of body-busting training at the NCA, I would go back to my hotel room wiped out. Every evening I felt I was running uphill and my lungs were completely burnt out and I was finding that the uphill track was never going to get to the peak. The road in the desert had become a road on a mountain and still on the sides there was nothing but cactus. Many days I wanted to pick up my bags and go home. I asked myself what were my reasons for wanting to return to competitive cricket. Was I forcing this upon myself for no good reason? If my career were to come to an abrupt end right then, wouldn't I have already got more than I ever dreamt of?

Then I figured that the mind's questions were actually the body's protest. A few hours of rest and the body would be silenced and the mind could easily win the debate. No one had forced me to come to Bangalore or made me give myself a target to go at. I was doing this for myself and for the people around me who had believed in me during cancer and had lived through my pain with their love and patience. Their belief had fuelled my belief and made me want to return to cricket. As much as I loved my life playing the sport and living the life of a sportsman, and as much as cricket had given me my identity, I knew that this time my attempt to come back was not only about me. That this time if I came back, I would be changed. It was not the old life I was trying to get back to. It was a new life that I was trying to reach out to.

Count your blessings, Yuvi, I would tell myself when I crashed on the hotel bed in the evenings feeling sorry for myself. The NCA, Ashish and his team, the work going into me; the BCCI … What if I had been a hockey player, or a runner, or a boxer, or a TT player? What if I had been one of the hundreds of Indian athletes who sacrifice so much for their sport—their youth, their family's entire finances—and what if then I got diagnosed with cancer? What if I had been any Indian sportsman but a cricketer?

There would have been a few articles in the newspaper and some stories on TV. Federation bosses would have perhaps made the right noises and everyone would have clucked in pity. After that my family and my friends would have had to run around trying to get me treated. They would have had to put their own lives on hold. Had I been that other Indian sportsman diagnosed with cancer, I would most likely not have been able to bear what my loved ones would have

had to go through. It would have been easier to give up and walk away from the sport I loved.

My good fortune was to be a cricketer. The BCCI and everyone in it had looked after me like I was someone from their immediate family going through a bad time. They had gone out of their way to guard my privacy, monitor my progress, keep tabs on my treatment, welcome me back, pay for my expenses and then do their best to ensure that I had every possible chance to come back into the game. The BCCI had shown such a large heart that it made me grateful and proud to be an Indian cricketer. In the NCA they had created for us state of the art infrastructure that made it possible for us to rehabilitate ourselves and work on our recovery.

Every day this was why I turned up at the NCA even if I had left the previous evening a creaking mess in the foulest of moods, wanting nothing more than to take a taxi to the airport. Every day I would arrive at the NCA to find Ashish and his team dead set on their schedule. 'Give me a break!' I would say but on no day would they lessen my workload or change it to suit my complaints and pleas. There was a schedule set down for me and that was that. No matter how long it took to do the exercises set out for that day I would have to complete them that day. On some days what should have been over by four in the evening went on till dinner time.

When the guys at the NCA paid no attention to my protesting body, I hit on a clever way to buy time between workouts. I would be at the weights or on the field, and Nagender and Anand would be counting reps or laps, and I would suddenly say, 'Ok, guys, now you explain to me exactly the science behind what we are doing here, and how it is going to help me.' As they struggled, I would rest, rest, rest, my muscles screaming for a warm bath and a soft bed. But Ashish caught on soon enough and orders were given: 'Just ignore him.'

Ashish and I argued a lot about what he thought I could do and what I thought I couldn't. He kept saying *ho jayega*, it will happen, I kept saying *nahin ho sakta*, it is not possible. He kept pushing me and occasionally he would dangle a carrot, tempt me with a small prize. If I finished a really beastly workload on one day, I could take time off another ghastly set the next day. These variations were all a part of their plans actually, but I would think *oh wow!* and work extra hard to get through the first day's stuff. Nice carrots for me he thought up, nice *gajar ka halwa!* And I ate it up gladly.

The plan meant everything. If I did not finish a set of exercises on the day I was meant to, I would have fallen behind on the schedule they had made for me,

and the schedule was based on the deadline I had set for myself. The schedule was so tight that the slightest slip and everything would go haywire. Maybe I would not be ready in time for the home season. Once the season started, and gathered its usual hard momentum, who knows if there would be a chance and when.

So hands to the bar and go, go, go. Weights I found easy, even though right at the beginning my body would quake. But running I would hate. When I was asked to run the first single lap around the Chinnaswamy Stadium, the ground looked enormous, five times its size. I could barely finish the round for the ache in my calves and the burning in my lungs. We began with one lap, then added more, *and* more, a bigger and bigger number, then laps with gaps for other training. The team wanted to take me to a point that I could complete eight rounds of the ground with ease. When I could finally complete those rounds after weeks of slow, tiring, lungripping, muscle-burning attempts, I remembered being in a wheelchair and marvelled at the human body and what it could achieve.

July came. It was our cricket month but I was finding it hard to get past the fear of the ball and of getting hit by it. A goblin sat in my head and told me to back away because if the ball hit me, I would get injured again. To deal with my fear, we decided that I would first do my catching practice with tennis balls and graduate later to the cricket ball. It was like being a kid again but as a kid learning cricket I was not allowed to fear the ball! Wet tennis balls and hard plastic balls were bowled at my head so I would never fear the ball. Who would have thought I would ever fear the ball? Life has a funny way of coming full circle.

In July my weight began to drop too but everyone who saw me, journalists and commentators and my seniors, had one worry. What is the hurry? Aren't you trying to do too much too soon? Take it easy.

I understood the concern so I stopped myself from saying out loud my most truthful answer, because it would have been rude. That was: this is my body and I know what it can do. Instead, when people asked me if I was ready, I said I was training well, my body was responding well, and if they didn't believe me they should take a look at my NCA report.

As for the NCA guys, they knew halfway into August that I would be 100 percent ready for the World T20 but they didn't offer me that comfort so I

plugged away. In addition to the gym and training rehabilitation I started playing in friendlies as well. I played in a friendly practice for a scratch Karnataka side against the India under-19s who were setting off for their World Cup (which they won). I held up ok. The harder twos made me a little breathless but given that two months earlier I couldn't go around the Chinnaswamy even once without gasping and coming to a wheezing halt, hands on knees, head hanging like a shaking leaf, I knew this was not bad. I was getting better and better.

So in August that day when I was in Gurgaon on a brief break and the peacock turned up, as emotional as the call-up was, when the selection committee announced the World T20 squad, it was also not that simple. Comments about my 'emotional' (meaning sentimental) selection began going around on news channels and websites. I thought my selection should be called 'emotional' only because I was so emotional about it. I had been working for this for three straight months and I had met every parameter that Ashish and his team had set for me. I had passed the fitness tests. I had played the matches. What was 'emotional' about my selection?

I wasn't at my leanest but for a short spell of time there I felt at my meanest. I hated being thought of as a charity case selection. What annoyed me was that the people who were throwing the words 'emotional selection' around had not tried to find out what I had been doing. It would have been too much work I guess to make a phone call and ask me or Ashish Kaushik what my state of fitness was.

At twenty years old I would have been driven by my anger. Cricket would have turned into a point-scoring exercise. I would have worked myself into a fit of rage, wanting to prove those guys wrong. Now I am older, and I hope wiser, and I know it is a waste of energy to wake up every day and try to prove yourself worthy to the whole world. And so the anger ebbed away. I decided to live in the moment and enjoy the fruits of my labour. At the same time, I was receiving congratulatory messages from strangers who said they had been praying to see me back on the field. I thought it was best for me to ignore those who did not like my 'emotional selection' and take greater joy from those who celebrated it. I was blessed. I couldn't waste my energy. At this time I needed to concentrate on my cricket. September 8 was knocking on my door. I had a match to play.

The glitch in my memory that was the side effect of chemo continued to create funny and sometimes embarrassing moments for me. I had given a name to it,

calling them my *Ghajini* moments. When I goofed up, I would say I have had a *Ghajini* moment. Ashish used to laugh, saying these moments were his sweet revenge. On the big day when it finally came, SEPTEMBER 8, in the dressing room of the stadium in Visakhapatnam I had a spooky *Ghajini* moment. I got overdressed and realized I had fallen out of touch with my own team's routines. (I'll come to that in a moment.) No one caught on or they would have taken the mickey out of me forever and ever. I would never have lived this one down.

It was a few hours before the match and my return to international cricket. The welcome back into cricket was as if all of India was giving me a giant hug. The guys had been great. There was hugs and back-slapping. They were curious about the cancer and the treatment. What does chemotherapy mean? Why can't one take the medicines orally? Did it have to be intravenous? How the hell did you manage!

When we landed in Visakhapatnam, the large sign outside the airport which says 'Welcome to the City of Destiny' made me smile. It's been there for many years but I had never noticed it before. Now I have started noticing these things. In the City of Destiny, welcoming me was every gateman at every door I walked through, the driver of the team bus, waiters at the hotel, the man on the street, children shrieking and rushing past cops to shake my hand. Buzzed, that's what I was. So highly buzzed that on the day of the match I didn't realize what I was doing. Visakhapatnam's wide indigo sky was filling with clouds but I was pulling on my shoes and my match kit. Normally, on match days, we reach the ground in our training gear, we take our seats, relax, get a bit of food, and then go out for warm-ups. That is the normal routine. But that day I was in such a high state of excitement that I had my playing shoes on and was about to change into the full match uniform when I looked up and saw everyone else around me. They were relaxed, chatting, grabbing a bite, getting their kits sorted out. Outside it was raining.

Whoa, Yuvi. Chill. Take a deep breath. Quickly I slunk back to my spot, changed out of my playing shoes and got ready for the warm-ups. But it kept on raining.

When it rains in Visakhapatnam it is like the rain god has organized a show. The previous evening the sea had been churning up the surf opposite our hotel. When the rain started, it came down in heavenly buckets. Nothing like drizzles or showers here, it was a full stereophonic surround sound concert. The guys started playing one-tip cricket. This is one of the ways we entertain ourselves in the dressing room. We used a tennis ball, batting single-handed. Even on one tip

if the ball is caught, but only with one hand, that is out, so you better hit straight and down. I threw myself into it, everyone else threw themselves into it and soon there was chaos.

A TV floor manager knocked at the dressing room and asked for me. Could I do a live interview with Ravi Shastri? From the sealed off dressing room to the outside was like changing planets. Despite the rain, there were about fifteen thousand people still in the stands and no one was going home. Everywhere I looked and as far as I could see, people were holding up banners with messages for me. 'Goodbye Cancer, Welcome Sixer' said one. Another one wanted me to hit six sixes in an over again. These people had been so patient and kind that later with a helper holding an umbrella over my head I took a lap around the ground waving and waving my hello and thank you to the people in the wet stands. The field was total slush. I stepped out in my chappals but they would get sucked by the mud and stuck to the ground. It had poured for three hours and the ground had turned into a pool. So I took my chappals in my hand and walked all around the perimeter barefoot. I wanted to embrace the stadium, every person in every stand who had stayed back. The last time I had done a lap of honour, it was the 2nd of April 2011, at the Wankhede. As I walked around, the Visakhapatnam crowd got up from their seats as one and started clapping and clapping and clapping. As the sound of people clapping and cheering intensified, I thought my heart would burst.

When we were told that the weather had forced the abandonment of the game I was crushed because I had felt so ready. My family and friends were in the stands. They had come from all over the world to see me play. We had twenty-seven guests that evening; it was like I was going to my wedding. The night before the match, I had emailed the people back in Indianapolis. To Dr Einhorn I said, 'Before starting my next innings, I wanted to thank you for saving my life. Without you this wouldn't have been possible.' I emailed Nurse Jackie and told her that her 'support and smiles' had pulled me through. She wrote back, 'winning hugs coming your way'. I wanted them to have the satisfaction of knowing that I was playing again. I wanted to show them that what they had made me believe could happen had come to be. I wanted them to tell my story to their new patients just like they had told me stories of the people they had treated successfully, which gave me hope. I wanted my story to be a part of the arsenal

in their armoury as they counselled others just stepping into chemo. You will recover and live normally. I wanted that story, my story, to give hope to someone else.

Dr Einhorn's room is decorated with many awards and the citations that he has received for his outstanding work for humanity. His most precious wall he says is the one on which he has messages from people who have survived and gone back to their lives after treatment. I wanted my small story to be there.

In Visakhapatnam I was aching to play, to feel the thump of ball on bat and the racing heart. But all of us have to bow before nature and live with it. I consoled myself thinking I had been given another shot at living and I would have another shot at playing.

Four days later at the Chepauk, I had got to grips. I had sorted out the sequence of training and playing gear. India won the toss against New Zealand and we were going out to field. As the team gathered itself to leave the room, I found myself both heavy and light, excited and anxious, worn down by what I had been through and lifted by where I was. My friends were watching me. One by one Bhajji, Cheeku, Rohit and Zak came up to me and gave me a hug. They were trying to keep it cool and trying not to look emotional, so there was much laughter and much boy-type blabbing: 'good luck, champ', 'king *hai tu, yaar'*, 'go get' 'em', 'welcome back', 'well done'. I knew that if I started to tell them what that gesture meant to me, I would start blubbering.

Out on the grass at the centre of the stadium in the well of the cheering and whistles that Chennai is famous for, I found tears rushing up into my eyes. It's the chemo and the cancer. They've made me emotional. I don't hold back from crying anymore and I will admit to even crying more than before. I also don't believe in the rubbish that it is 'manly' not to cry. Regardless, being seen doing so on a giant electronic screen at the ground would not be cool.

For the rest of that afternoon, I ran like I was fielding everywhere. I wanted to be everywhere—point, short square leg, cover, mid-off, mid-on—and raced around like one of those battery-operated toys that go mad and bang into furniture because you've wound them up too much.

Despite what I thought of as my lightning fielding, New Zealand put up a very good score thanks to Brendon McCullum's fast and furious innings. When it was our turn to bat, I went in at two drop with the score on 86 and less than ten overs left out of twenty. As I stepped into the lights at Chepauk, I was hit in the gut by the sound of the crowd. It was thunderous and tremendous and the stadium was filled with whistles. No crowd in cricket can give an Indian cricketer such a

loud, long and high-pitched whistle of approval as Chepauk does. It is not enough to call the sound whistling in fact. That sound is Indian cricket's *seeti* symphony, performed by an orchestra of about fifty thousand.

That night Chepauk was at its best and the ovation from the crowd almost knocked me off my feet. The occasion, the noise, it made a little jittery. From the corner of my eye, I saw a sign that read 'Yuvi is Back', and I wanted to repay the confidence the crowd had in me with a performance to match.

Mom was in the stands, having missed out on seeing me take the field earlier because her flight to Chennai was diverted for an emergency landing in Nagpur. A little boy was unwell and the non-stop flight had to make a halt. She was sitting in the plane getting fidgety until the flight got clearance to leave Nagpur. She didn't see me first step out on the field at the start of the game but she was there when I went out to bat and she heard the crowd's reception. When she talks about it, she gets goosebumps till this day.

As I started playing, I was a bit edgy for a few balls. The moment a couple hit the middle of my bat, it was like being snapped awake. The doubt and anxiety slipped away. A demanding situation in the middle of a cricket ground with thousands of people cheering. I could do this. When Daniel Vettori floated one outside my off stump my body was moving on its own again. I took a decisive step across the crease, down came the bat and met the ball, my arms following through, and the ball was sent over wide long-on. Six.

I heard the roar of the crowd only in the background because my mind was on the score and the memories in my head were loud. The last time I batted in Chennai, it was March 2011, and we were playing the West Indies in the World Cup. It had been a hot, sweaty day and I had been wobbly. I had been coughing and puking. I remembered the discomfort of that day like it was yesterday.

As MS and I tried to crank up the run rate, it was hard to time our shots and we found we couldn't keep up with the climbing run-rate. We needed 32 from 18 balls, and then 25 from 12, I hit a six and yet we needed 12 in the last over. I was out swinging and missing against James Franklin and eventually we lost by one run. The result did not go our way, but it had been a good game for me. I had bowled two overs for 14 and scored 34 off 24 with a four and two sixes.

A week later the World T20 started in Sri Lanka. It didn't go well for the team. We couldn't get through to the semi-finals. It was a big event. I felt

apprehensive. Would I be all right on the world stage? I realized, yes. There was no stomach-knotting tension. There was no retained memory in my cells of the chemo that six months ago had battered me. I felt cool, calm, confident. I felt ready for victories and defeats. I felt prepared to win but also, and this is important, I felt prepared for the rough days that cricket is full of. It's the rough days that are more daunting. You play cricket for the victories, of course, but the down days are no less significant as a percentage of the life you will spend in the game. I've been through some significant downs in my playing career and have learnt the hard way that appetite is a two-way stretch. You have to want to land the blows but you have to be prepared to take the blows too and you have to be prepared to let them hurt you. Or else work with a briefcase not a bat.

Against Pakistan, I got two wickets, and a direct hit run out which gave me much inner glee, and I hung around at the finish with Cheeku in an eight-wicket victory. The tournament format was such that we needed to win the next match against South Africa by a big margin. We won, but by a single run, and we were out. In that last match I was named Player of the Match. The TV presenter who gave me the prize said, 'There have been some questions about your inclusion …' I kept my emotions in check.

It was from here that I *knew*. I would be ok. I would play, I would be hurt, I would be happy, but I would play and I would be ok.

In cricketing terms, my next step was the longer formats. The Duleep Trophy semi-final game of North Zone versus Central Zone was going to start in Hyderabad. I went there to get the switch mentally and to see myself do ninety overs a day for four days.

Before I went we did the yo-yo cardio test at the NCA. The yo-yo routine tests if you can get through very high amounts of cardio activity with only short breaks in between. It is not a pleasant way to spend your time but I passed it and went to Hyderabad to play in my hundredth first-class match.

North Zone batted first on a run-scoring wicket. My turn came at 2-100 and my first target was to get to 50. If I played around 80-90 balls that would be a good span of batting after so long. Time in the middle, remember, is everything. Once I had crossed 60, I figured 100 would be good to get. As the day wore on, towards the end I started feeling a bit shaky. During a break I called for Ashish, who was in the stadium to keep an eye on me. He gave me a banana to eat. As a matter of habit I don't eat much before batting. He thought my sugar level could be dropping. The banana was like rocket fuel. At stumps I was batting at 133. The next morning, I felt fine, did my stretches and began batting again. In no

time I was past 200. When I got out I had 208, one run less than my highest first-class score. I was out to my good friend Mister Murali Kartik.

Central Zone's batting performance made us stand in the field for two days. I got through one hundred and ten overs, fielding in the slips but not needing any special breaks for a sit-down. At one point we had Central Zone at 9-342. Then Bhuvneshwar Kumar in the tail got stuck. He scored his maiden first-class 100 and with Rituraj Singh took the Central Zone score to 469, past our 451, and they got the points that took them into the Duleep Trophy final.

The next match on my schedule was India A in a three-day practice game against the England team which had arrived in India for the Test series. You may have climbed out of your coffin to return to the field but at the international level you will get no extra sympathy. There will be a lot of respect off the field but on the field the game is the game and everyone's in it to win it. When the game is on, no friendship and no extra yards. In that match I scored a 50 and earned a five-for (including Kevin with a yummy pie). After that came the selection for the Test side against England.

October was coming to an end. Within weeks cricket had consumed my life again. But I noticed the change in me. It was not like it would be when I was younger. Before cancer cricket would have become everything in my life at once. How had I been the entire time when the cancer diagnosis had not come through? Cricket, cricket, cricket. Only wanting to play. Not sparing a thought for my health or the disease. Desperately trying to stay inside the cricket bubble. Once the Test call came the guy I was earlier would have immediately disappeared into the cricket bubble, grateful for its noise and fast-paced life. T20 had started, Test cricket was on the way, I would be in the one-day squad too I could pretty calmly hope. But this time cricket—the cricket life—did not displace everything else. It did not edge out the memory of the battle against cancer and the battle for confidence after that. I did not hold on to the madness of cricket to run from the memory of cancer. Instead I held the legacy of cancer close and got my strength and inner peace from it.

In America, on the way back, and after I returned, I had a lot of time to think. I reflected on my luck. I thought often about that period of confusion before the detection, of being in denial, and then the difficulties of the treatment, and all the help I had got from people around me. When I came back the officials of the

Indian Cancer Society told me that I had unwittingly become the face of cancer and cancer survivorship. This one thing motivated me in my bleakest moments of self-doubt. When I was totally down, I would claw my way to the space where I could ask myself did I not owe it to someone who was sick and watching me, or who had prayed and watched over me when I was sick, to pick myself up and dust myself off and run again? When I was ill I had felt that hope is the rescue rope out of the disease. When the chemical sadness hit me and I cried, when my scalp and skin was covered with the stinging sensation of a billion hairs trying to fall off and I cried, when I had to use a wheelchair and would have preferred to crawl and cried, it was only the hope that this would get over and life would come around again that took me out of those moments of despair.

Back in India I wondered, if I could get back to hitting long and hitting strong, would someone lying in bed watching the game on TV after a long day in a chemo station feel a flicker of excitement and hope, even for a second? I thought they would. For that I had to play my cricket. For them who don't live in cities with hospitals and cars, the millions of poor people in the villages who have no way of detecting what is wrong with them, I would do something else.

I decided to start a cancer charity and named it YOUWECAN. We *can* fight and we must. We *can* win back our lives and our passions. The charity was up and running by July. I went on TV to speak about cancer, to speak to people who had cancer. I wanted to be out there. No hiding, no dodging. I met a lot of families who lived with patients or had lost their loved ones. I started visiting cancer wards in hospitals in the towns I happened to be in. Sharing the pain with the patients was sharing an understanding of what we had been through.

In the course of this work one day in August I was in Mohali on a hospital visit when I met a gentleman who was fifty-eight years old and suffering from liver cancer. He told me, 'Yuvi, it's because of you I am in hospital today.' I was taken aback. What did he mean? He said when the doctors told him he had cancer of the liver he decided he would not get treatment. 'I am fifty-eight. I thought I have lived my life. I won't put myself through the pain of chemotherapy. I will die in peace. Then I was watching the news and I saw that you have been selected for the team. And I thought if this young man can fight cancer and come back like this, how can I give up? I called up my doctor and told him I am ready for chemotherapy.' I was shaken to my soul. From the time I came back from America I had heard so many stories of courage, from young and old, and they each gave me strength. I had to repay that debt of inspiration.

As I wind up this book, we are already in the middle of a busy season of international cricket at home. YOUWECAN is a strong part of my everyday life and my team and I try to do promotional events in the off-days between matches. In the background YOUWECAN is working all the time to see through its plans for mobile cancer detection units for rural India. We think we will do up vans with diagnostic equipment and staff first, which can go to rural areas and hold free screenings. The effort involved is huge. But we will get there. When I am done with cricket, as one day I will have to be, YOUWECAN will become my full-time job.

For now this is the plan. I want to raise awareness about the fact that cancer is not a death sentence. It is not. I want to raise funds for the detection centres. Early detection is half the cure and if people can get simple tests done, it could increase survival numbers by leaps. Getting more detections will help set up a more widespread cancer registry in the country. An in-depth registry will give our doctors a better understanding of our country's cancer map and how the medical community could target treatment infrastructure.

Underlining these plans is this mission: for the rest of my life I want to try to remove the stigma around cancer in India.

I am ready to talk my head off about how ridiculous some preconceptions around cancer can be. Is cancer infectious? Can you go into a house that has a cancer patient and 'catch' it? If a parent has cancer does it mean the children also will? Then should we be marrying our children into a family where there has been cancer? If a businessman has cancer, it must be a bad omen and surely it means his business is going to go bust? Should we do business with someone who has had cancer? Idiotic? Absolutely. The ignorance and superstition around cancer crosses all boundaries of blindness. Even from the most educated and wealthy I have heard this kind of talk. Not to mention the fact that even the cleverest, most intelligent, most well-travelled will often not want to deal with their cancer, preferring to take some quack at his word that alternative therapy has a cure rather than submit to straightforward medicine. Cancer is bad enough. Why also get silly?

Dr Nitesh once said something to me that was funny and at the same time sensible. He said human beings by and large are basically stone-age people. Or when he wants to be kinder, he says, 'We are not very far from stone-age people.' He means we find it as hard to deal with our normal stresses as at any other time in human history. Cancer patients, he says, are different. They have

faced and come through the fear of death and they learn from that experience to simplify their lives and often find themselves emotionally in a better place. I notice that cancer has made me a less anxious person. More than one cricketer who survived cancer and returned to the game didn't succeed. It could happen to me. I can deal with this thought and not feel weakened by it.

Meanwhile I can look around me and appreciate my life today. It is filled with happiness and gratitude. I have my family, my friends. Over and above that I play the game again. I have received the gift of joy and opportunity in abundance and I tell myself now you can't be angry and you can't be greedy. I went into my first match for India with no expectations. If I fail, I fail. If I succeed, I succeed. I really want to succeed but if I fail, it will be without any regrets. If I succeed, it will be without any swagger.

It has been a few months since then. I have been wearing my blue India jersey quite a lot this season and note happily that it fits me perfectly. In this time Test cricket has given me a glimpse of its hardships and its treasures. I will have to prove myself all over again. But I see that I have been given a second chance in life and I know that I intend to spend it running. If I fall, as I will, I look forward to dusting myself off and running again. That I can do.

There you go, folks. Yuvraj Singh 2012 is a post-stone-age man. If Yuvi can, you can.

A Note on the Author

YUVRAJ SINGH is an Indian cricketer and a cancer survivor. He was born in Chandigarh in 1981. He debuted for India in 2000 during the ICC Knock Out Trophy, still only nineteen. In 2011, he emerged as Player of the Tournament in the ICC World Cup, which his team won. That same year he was diagnosed with cancer. He returned to international cricket less than a year after his diagnosis.

This is his first book.

A Note on the Co-authors NISHANT JEET ARORA used to play cricket with Yuvraj Singh from the time they were thirteen. He is an award-winning TV sports journalist, having worked for 11 years with *CNN IBN*, *NDTV*, and *Aaj Tak*. He quit television journalism in 2011 to work with Yuvraj as his manager. He currently manages Yuvraj and is head of operations at Yuvraj Singh's cancer charity, YOUWECAN.

SHARDAUGRA is senior editor for ESPNcricinfo.com, the world's biggest independent single-sports website. She has been a sportswriter for 24 years, working with Mumbai tabloid Mid-Day, national daily the *Hindu*, and *India Today* magazine. She has worked with former New Zealand captain John Wright on *John Wright's Indian Summers*, his memoirs of years coaching India.

A Note on YOUWECAN

CANCER. The very word conjures up visions of pain and suffering. If any disease has made itself an enemy of man, it is this. Cancer may come in many forms but its outcome has always been damaging. The medical fraternity counts cancer as its greatest foe. It is the second largest life taker disease today and kills over 12 million people every year.

There is, however, a silver lining. Cancer, like other diseases, *can* be cured. If diagnosed early and treated right, its effects can be reversed, lives can be saved. This sounds simple enough until you realize that only the privileged few have access to the best doctors and care. The underprivileged have to face cancer without much care and help. Their ignorance and their helplessness often leaves them with no hope of cure. Which is where we come in.

Yuvraj Singh Foundation (YSF), through its initiative YOUWECAN, aims to work for the early detection of cancer, for one and all, so that no one has to fight cancer alone.

YSF, aims to create consciousness on cancer prevention, early detection, and fight against stigma. YSF is a non-profit organization registered under the Bombay Trust Act 1950.

Don’t I look like a prince? That’s what my parents thought when they named me Yuvraj.

In the safest hands. With my mother Shabnam Singh.

My love affair with skating didn’t last long. Don’t miss the BMW behind me. Wondering when my Dad will give me the keys.

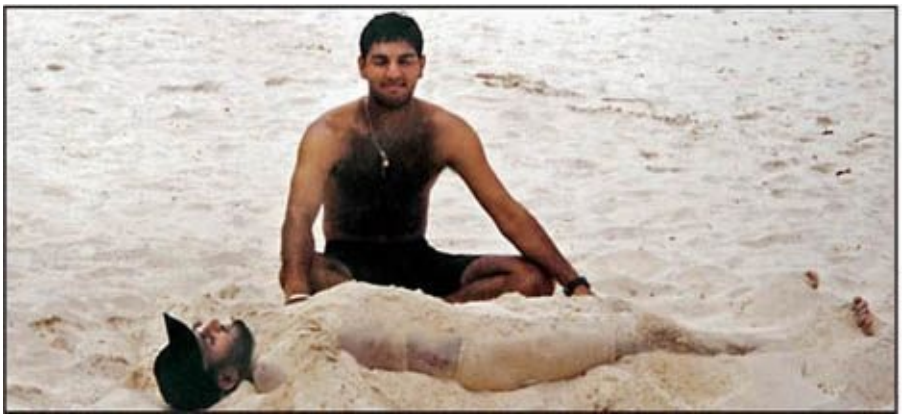
My favourite picture. Happy times together—Mom and Dad.

In a serious mood. I get serious at times, seriously.

Playing the husband (right) in a school play, ‘Naukar Biwi Ka’.I hope this doesn’t happen in real life.

My eleventh birthday and the world around me is about to change. Bye-bye childhood, welcome cricket.

Dream debut. My first taste of success in India colours against Australia in the ICC Champions Trophy 2000, Nairobi.



Harbhajan Singh is scared of water. So this is the best we could do with him at the beach. He can make you laugh—anytime, anywhere.

NatWest Final at Lords, 2002. I so wanted to remove my T-shirt like Sourav Ganguly but Rahul Dravid stopped me.

© Pradeep Mandhani

Letting it all out. My emotions burst through after I hit the winning runs against Australia in the 2011 World Cup quarter finals in Ahmedabad.

© Pradeep Mandhani

My biggest moment on the cricket field. With the Player of the Tournament trophy after the 2011 ICC World Cup final win against Sri Lanka in Mumbai.

We are the world champions. The Indian team with the cup at the Wankhede stadium.

Sharing the trophy with two best buddies—Harbhajan Singh and Sachin Tendulkar—in the Wankhede dressing room.

From the highs of World Cup to the lows of cancer as reality is about to sink in.

The view from my apartment in the Cosmopolitan on the Canal, Indianapolis.

My moment of reckoning—time to shave the head.

Even in trying circumstances I wanted to be a cool dude. I announced to the world that I am alive and fighting hard—that I am not going to fight this battle privately. I posted this picture on my Twitter handle.

A shoulder to lean on. With Mom, waiting for the chemo session.

At the chemo station.

© Dainik Bhaskar

Cancer helped me discover how much the world loved me and cared for me. Really touched by this picture. This giant wish board was put up in Chandigarh and signed by thousands of people.

© Nishant Arora

My buddy Rannvijay Singha flew from the West Coast to spend some time with me.

So did Anil bhai, who spent a day with me. It made me feel very special.

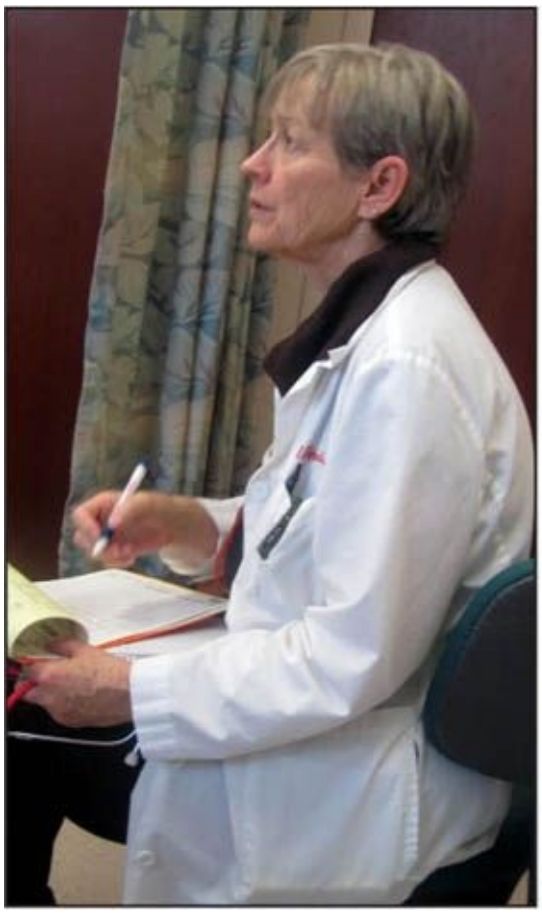
My companions in this battle—Nishant Arora (left) and Sandeep Sharma.

I was in the best hands. Dr Lawrence Einhorn, my oncologist, who has

revolutionized the treatment for germ-cell tumour and saved many lives. His mere presence reassured me that I would recover and get back on my feet.

My smiling Buddha, Dr Nitesh Rohatgi. He showed me the way and stayed there all through to guide me. The doctor with a heart of gold.

Paroon ‘Actually’ Chadha—my Bakra who did all he could to make my battle a little easier in a foreign land.



My nurse Jackie Brames. She promised she would always meet me with a smile.

It’s the small things in life that are beautiful. Basil’s dosas always made me smile.

Signing autographs after a very long time. With a group of Indian students and NRIs in Indianapolis.

There were only a few days when I could smile—then I didn’t shy away from smiling.

When I was crying I hated being photographed.

The gang. From the left: Kumar Anne, Mom, me, Rajeev Bakshi, Nishant, Dr Nitesh, and the man who is not in the picture because he was taking it—Sandeep Sharma.

I don’t think there is any gurudwara or temple Mom has not visited to pray for my recovery. Here she is at the Indianapolis gurudwara.

Lung-capacity test. The results altered my chemo cycles.

Preparing for that one last cycle of chemo. These six days in the hospital were the toughest days of my life.

At last it’s over. Back in the hospital to say goodbye and take permission to fly home. I waited for this day for months that were monitored minute by minute.

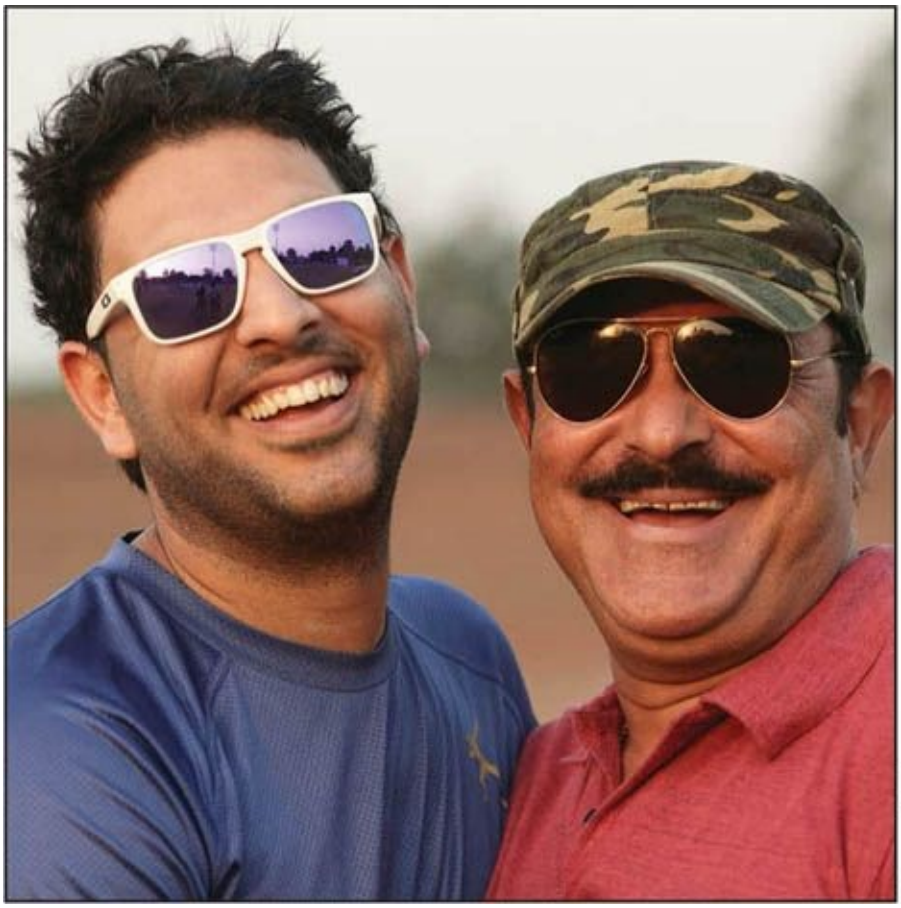
My first time in a big gathering of people after the chemo. I watched the NBA match between Miami Heat and the Indiana Pacers. I went to watch the game for LeBron James.

Happy to see Zora and I am sure he is equally delighted to see his brother.

Working out with Ishant Sharma. My long stint at the NCA started with baby steps.

Small gestures made me work harder. My first coffee at the KSCA club was full of surprise and love.

Proud recipient of the Arjuna Award in 2012—a special honour.



Proudly realizing my father Yograj Singh’s dreams, with some still to be achieved. We are more like friends than father and son.

My spiritual healers. Taking the blessings of Sant Baba Ajit Singhji Hansaliwale with Mom.

With Sant Baba Ram Singhji Dupheda Sahibwale.

Posing with my new team at the YOUWECAN lunch for cancer survivors in Delhi

on World Cancer Day, 4th of February, 2013.