

# The Hunt - Part 4

*The 3<sup>rd</sup> Musketeer...*

Blogger's Log: It has been six long weeks since the drive began. Mission? To cross over the finishing line, which only a few racers have traversed before! The never-ending road has been treacherous and the 'patience' tanks are running low. In fact, we lost a few of our racers in the last two blinding curves. But there is good news. Finally, the prized destination is just around the third approaching turn! We need to focus just a bit more on the curve ahead, maybe follow the wheel-steps of the racer who sped away? For there has been a winner who has navigated both the blind turns with an amazing precision and is now awaiting our arrival at the gourmet podium 😊!

*It's a little tricky to introduce the central character of my final tale. Perhaps the simplest announcement would be: This fellow, my wife, and my brother-in-law are maternal cousins. But no grand finale can have a 'simple' household introduction! The showbiz decorum dictates that climaxes deserve glittery openings. So let's try again. How about, this dude is an indirect link in the chain of events that led to the birth of Cybage? You see, his wife turned down a job offer from an Internet startup (Ruksun) and referred an industry outsider—me—for the opening. The accident inducted me into the Technology world, where I learnt the ropes of the trade, and subsequently Cybage was born! Sadly, now we have an irrelevant 'melodramatic' stretching! Maybe it's best then, to just leave the introduction un-introduced... For every now and then, we meet 'someone' in life whose identity is confusing to present. How do you introduce someone when you yourself are unsure of his role—is he family first or friend first?*

His name is Ashwani Keswani and everyone calls him Ashwani Keswani. But for this blog, we will call him AK. It's cooler, plus it saves me some typing. I first met AK about three decades ago.! It was Oct 31, 1984, I distinctly recollect the date. For the day has two historical significances: a) Indira Gandhi breathed her last; b) my sister got married to AK's cousin. Relatively, the encounter with AK was insignificant. No wonder, I have a near-zero recollection of that first rendezvous. I had to wait another decade before I chanced upon AK for the second time. Ironically, this day again holds a distinct importance. July 10, 1994. He had come to attend his cousin's (?) wedding! Delightfully, I don't recall

this second tryst either.

It was only a year later, when I became *Ruksunite* (courtesy Nita's reference) that I concluded that it was worth investing in a healthy rapport with AK's clan. Thereafter, AK stopped blending with the surroundings. How could he stay invisible? He was already up there by then. "AVP of Production" with India's forging bellwether—Bharat Forge—was no mean achievement. Definitely not for an undergrad who skimmed through embarrassing colors from a "C+" engineering institute in Bangalore! Fortunately for AK, Bharat Forge was gracious enough to sponsor his postgrad in the US. And it was this US stint that achieved the intended turnaround. By the end of his double-graduation in America, AK had received a few flowery accolades and lucrative job offers. The turnaround land held promising opportunities. But AK came back in '92. Why? He owed it to Bharat Forge.

It took AK eight years of hard slog on the manufacturing floor to repay his 'owing' obligations and resurface in the real world. It was 1998; around the same time Cybage had settled down, and I too had started breathing fresh air. The timing was opportune to forge a mutual socializing channel. But before our frequencies could mingle, a 'whirlpool' swept him away! You see, the world's leading white-goods manufacturer—Whirlpool—wanted to set up a production facility near Pune. They convinced AK that he was the perfect slogger for the job. So in the ensuing year, AK went submerging as "GM - Process Technology" at Whirlpool, followed by a six-month stint in Italy, and then a promotional relocation to Delhi.

Over the next three years, I heard folk tales of AK's accomplishments from the wandering 'cousinly' travelers from the northern frontiers. Then in 2002, Godrej Appliances offered AK an interesting dual-edged role: "VP of Manufacturing and Customer Service" for all of their plants in India. The offer also came with the attractive rider of relocating back to his hometown, Mumbai. This move resulted in us bumping into each other more frequently, often under unconventional circumstances. A few weddings in the extended circle, a couple of funerals in the extinguishing circle, and amusingly, once it was the *paanwala* stall in front of a business hotel in Pune!

Of course, by "attitude" I don't mean that Lester was turning out to be a snob. By the time he turned two, he had grown up to be the most handsome and eligible hero in the neighborhood. He refused to regard his walks as an exercise routine,

rather a royal, leisurely stroll that involved lots of socializing with many unsightly and uncouth friends. The racial and economic disparities didn't mean much to him. His annual birthday bashes were a neighborhood rage with a dozen invited breeds and a few stray gatecrashers diving into his birthday cake!



AK - the friend



AK The Brother-in-Law

Three years later, AK joined Mahindra & Mahindra as “VP - Business Development” with the ambitious charter of growing the group's auto component business to over a billion dollars! The role entailed extensive travel, often in the direction of our dwelling (Pune being India's Auto capital). And that's how our association received a late-blossoming booster. The thriving venue was the bar at my home. Somehow (& by sheer coincidence), the “bar” seems to be the common bonding theme between all the three musketeers 😊! Of course, my sessions with this knowledgeable new-old friend were not much about the clicking of glasses; rather, they provided for a profound source of useful tips. For instance, did you know when it comes to single-malt scotch, there is only a marginal difference between the smoothness of 12 vs. 18 year old? So the next time you acquire an 18 year old single-malt for triple the price, just remember—you have been swindled!

Then in 2008, AK ascended the summit. Oetiker, Swiss-based leading manufacturer of premium clamps, hired him as Country CEO to set up and run its business in India. There was no phone call, only an early morning SMS. “Today, I will walk into my new office as CEO. I need the good wishes of the CEO I look up to. I hope I have earned the position as well as he did.” I was amused by the intended compliment. Sure, AK had managed to mount all the way to the top, but his concepts were still not as clear as mine...

*AK doesn't realize that AN's CEO position is 'courtesy Cybage'. Cybage just gave it to him the day it was founded! Even if the early Cybage had turned out to be a disaster and crumbled, that title still belonged to AN! On the other hand, the modestly-blessed AK had to commit eighteen years of sweat on production assembly lines to "earn" his CEO's tag!*

*Today, AK has been promoted to CEO of the entire ASEAN region for Oetiker. Every three months, he flies to Zurich to attend the corporate board meeting! There is money, there is power, and there is pride. And somewhere in this triangle resides that 'intersecting' recipe of professional success! So let's give it our last best shot before the hunt goes for a kill! And those in a mood for less ferocious games, please cast your vote in favor of the musketeer whose achievement you rate the highest...*

- ☐ Navendu Mathur
- ☐ KRC
- ☐ Ashwani Keswani

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