

Kartik Gandhi

Forty Steps to God

The body lay sprawled on the road. His hair -- thick, black, and curly -- a cast iron bridge that connected the two pools of blood on either side of his head. Flies swarmed around his head, buzzing.

“He’s not breathing,” one of them said.

“I think his skull cracked,” said another.

The two men looked objectively at the victim’s white shirt that had a few patches of color. One of them bent down to look at it closely. The man had seemingly left home in a hurry. “Yellow *dal*¹,” someone said finally.

“Has someone even called the ambulance?” a coarse voice echoed the sentiments of the many present.

“Yes, yes. Ambulance is on the way,” came the reply.

A miracle was needed to save this man. But a greater miracle would be if the ambulance actually managed to enter the colony. An array of cars were parked on either side: Honda Accord, i20, Hyundai Elantra and Honda City. White, green, blue, and pink-- the colorful spectrum of cars parked across most of the road made the road almost inaccessible to any large vehicle. The temple bells had started ringing furiously. The evening had started to envelope the light blue sky. It was almost 6 pm and the *aarti*² had started.

“*Om Jai Jagdish Hare, Swami Jai Jagdish*³,” the chants continued. Finally, a white van with a red beeping siren entered the vicinity. The traffic on the narrow road made it impossible for the van to come closer to the accident scene. Two men wearing green capes rushed towards the body.

“I’m a doctor. Let me through,” screamed one of them. The people moved backwards, allowing for just enough room for the doctor to enter and reach the man on the floor. The young man’s black leather shoes were laced with wet mud. The blue trousers, very poorly ironed, stuck on him tightly. Finally, the doctor reached out his hand to check the man’s pulse.

“He’s no more,” the doctor’s almost mechanical voice broke the silence.

The fall would have been strong enough to crack his skull, the doctor thought looking up at the stairs leading to the temple. The body was turned around, face facing upwards. The forehead was soaked with blood, the nose crumbled, and pieces of teeth had slipped out. Through the disfigured face, one could see what looked like the face of a young, handsome man. He had a fair complexion, a sharp jawline; the doctor looked at the man for a second and a half and then gasped. This face had been all over the news recently. Karan Singh Tripathi, a rather distinguished alumnus from Sri Dev College of Commerce, Delhi University, had built a business empire worth seventy-five crore rupees in the past four years.

“Cafechino-The Finest Coffee in India,” his company, was one of the fastest growing startups in the food and beverage industry. But Karan was special for another reason. For four weeks, the entire country had prayed for the recovery of this man. Karan had survived a major avalanche while trekking.

¹ *Dal*: Lentils.

² *Aarti*: Hindu ritual of worship.

³ *Om Jai Jagdish Hare, Swami Jai Jagdish*: First few words of the Hindu religious hymn that mean O Lord of the whole universe.

At a height of 8526 m, the route to Kanchenjunga, the third highest peak in the Himalayas, was treacherous. The eight climbers, among them, Karan Singh Tripathi, had managed to reach Camp Five, at a height of 6200 m from sea level before disaster struck. The snow had collapsed on the team of eight. It took rescue workers six days to break through the layer of ice. There was almost no chance of finding anyone alive after they had been buried for a week under twenty-two feet of snow.

However, miracles do happen. Although, seven of the trekking team members had died, one man survived -- Karan Singh Tripathi. He was in critical condition when he was found. His brain had suffered severe oxygen deprivation. Both his lungs showed signs of pneumonia. Karan remained in coma for weeks following the accident. Finally, after four weeks he recovered completely with a sliced middle finger on his left hand being the only evidence of his horrific ordeal.

The doctor slowly regained his composure and walked back to the ambulance. Two men picked up the body and placed it on a stretcher.

Sixty meters ahead a man wearing a torn shirt and black trousers stood on the sidewalk with a stack of magazines in his hand. "Thirty-rupees only," he said, as a young woman rolled down the window of her car.

She could see an ambulance along with two police cars in front. "What has happened?" she asked.

"Apparently, some man fell from the temple stairs and died," he said, giving back a twenty-rupee note.

Aparna rolled up her window and looked at the magazine with interest. On the front page was the image of a man dominating the snowy Himalayas in the background. As she gazed at the wide smile of the dashing young man, Aparna felt like she was developing a new celebrity crush. Suddenly, she noticed something. The man had his left palm open and the middle finger was missing. She peered in the dim light of the car to read the title: 'Karan Singh Tripathi: Awake.' Faith ... she got off the car and went towards the temple, stopping at the little stall next to it which sold *laddoos*⁴ and some flowers. The shopkeeper transferred the sacred offering onto the magazine she was holding.

Faith ... she thought. God works miracles. A man can survive in twenty-two feet of snow.

Moving towards the temple steps to make her offering, she again allowed herself to feel the presence of the omnipotent all-powerful God.

The crowd had now thinned where the man lay. Poor man, she thought, taking a glance at the body lying in the pool of blood. She turned. Then, through the corner of her eye, she saw the palm raised upwards with the middle finger missing. Shocked, she turned to look at the face and then again at the steps to the temple.

⁴ *Laddoos*: Indian sweets given as offerings to God.

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Locked In

The church bell rang ferociously. Another few hours had passed, and it was now 6 pm. The sun had dimmed and was settling down behind the mountain. He looked away trying to distract himself with his phone.

A phone call would not have been very difficult. He was just three clicks away. Yet, the call never came.

“Hey!” a message pinged his phone, and he waited anxiously as he watched the sender *typing*... “We’re trying to get to you. Please stop ignoring us.”

“I’ll be there in forty-five minutes,” he read the message loudly to himself.

No, they would never get to him. He would not let them.

He looked at the door momentarily as sweat started accumulating on his forehead. His eyes turned to his suitcases that he had pushed under the bed. Frantically, he started pulling them out one by one. They were heavy, not something that he was accustomed to lifting. Nevertheless, he picked up the first one on his back and raced to the door. His skinny arms ached under the weight, and he was now sweating profusely. He placed the bag right under the door handle. To his dismay, the second bag was much lighter. One by one, he placed four bags next to the door.

No, they would never get to him, he told himself as he walked back to the bed and lay down. He slipped his hand to the other side of the bed and hysterically searched the dark and damp surface under the bed. He finally felt it. Goosebumps erupted on his arms as his fingers felt the metal surface. He wiped the moist gun on his bedsheet and placed it by his bedside.

He drew the blanket over his head and breathed heavily. “Meditate when stressed,” he remembered constantly telling himself as a child. “Breathe.”

Tears streamed down his eyes as he calmed himself down. His fingers clutched onto the gun, as his hands turned red from the pressure.

“Stop it,” he said, letting out a loud gasp. “Stop it! Stop it”, he screamed again, only to realize there was no one around.

There was only so much pain that one could bear. His grip on the gun loosened as his eyes slowly closed shut.

The sound of loud footsteps nudged him awake and he stared around bewildered. The blanket had slipped off him and he was aggressively clutching the pillow.

“Don’t move,” he said, half asleep.

There was a knock on the door and James froze. He began to question his meticulous planning as the door handle shook eerily. The door was being pushed, and the suitcases began shaking.

“Don’t move,” his voice was loud this time, as he stood next to the door with the gun in his hand. “If you move, I will shoot,” he said, using his scrawny body to hold the suitcase next to the door.

The slamming stopped immediately as the door calmed down. Then silence.

James looked cautiously at the door handle. Could someone be looking through? he thought as he positioned himself next to the wall.

Five long minutes passed by without a whisper.

“Who is there?” he asked, his voice half crying, half shouting. “Tell me! Who is there?”

Nothing. The silence was broken by the sound of a mobile vibrating in his pocket. His sweaty palms clutched the phone as he picked it up.

Ismer, the name read blinking mercilessly on the screen.

James fell down to the floor as he gently let the gun slip from his slender fingers. He covered his face with his hands and started sobbing uncontrollably.

The ringing drowned in the sound of his cries, and within a few minutes, the vibrations died down. He placed his head on the desk and before long, he was fast asleep.

Nightmares... monstrous ones-- never ever leave you, cling to you during the brightness of the day. James had had them for as long as he could remember. He would wake up in the middle of night hearing the loud screams. The pillows covering his ears could only drown the sound so much. The woman's scream piercing through the feathery pillow would sting a little less as the days passed by. He dared not venture outside; the scars on his face were painful enough. There would be days that would go by without him leaving the room. He was not missed.

"James," his father's rough voice echoed through the house.

"James, come here" he shouted again.

"Leave the boy alone," his mother protested, only to scream in agony as his father slapped her once again.

"James! James!" The voice became louder and the little boy heard footsteps getting closer.

He held onto the blanket tighter, knowing well that it could not save him from the monster that was about to enter the room. The door shook violently.

"JAMES! I will break this open."

A loud thud and silence.

The bright sunlight shining through the window beamed on James face as he opened his eyes to the view outside. The slight drizzle had stopped and the wet roads shone brightly under the sunlight. The leaves rustled slightly as the winds slowed down. He opened the window as much as it would allow.

He walked up to the door and pushed the suitcases away. The gun lay motionless on the floor. James picked it up as he peered through the keyhole. Clutching it tightly, he opened the door with his left hand. There was no one around. A tray with fruits and toast lay on the floor. He had missed dinner again. He pulled the tray into the room and slammed the door shut.

He smiled as he put the gun below the bed. There were no bullets, but no one would ever know. James placed the plate on his desk as he munched onto the toast. A breeze slightly stroked his hair and he smiled again. They would never get to him.