

"No. Just come back and let us go down. I have had enough," Ryan said.

Alok continued to look down as he replied, "For once Ryan, I agree with you. I've had enough too. I think I'll just go down."

There was something messed up in the tone of Alok's voice. I turned around to look at him. He stood straight, then one jump up and then straight down. In half a second, he was out of sight. Gravity had done its job.

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The Longest Day of My Life VI

I HAD NEVER BEEN INSIDE AN AMBULANCE BEFORE. IT WAS kind of creepy inside. Like a hospital was suddenly asked to pack up and move. Instruments, catheters, drips and a medicine box surrounded two beds. There was hardly any space for me and Ryan to stand even as Alok got to sprawl out. I guess with thirteen fractures you kind of deserve a bed. The sheets were originally white, which was hard to tell now as Alok's blood covered every square inch of them. Alok lay there unrecognizable, his eyeballs rolled up and his tongue collapsed outside his mouth like an old man without dentures. Four front teeth gone, the doctor later told us.

His limbs were motionless, just like his father's right side, the right knee bent in a way that would make you think Alok

was boneless. He was still, and if I had to bet my money, I'd have said he was dead.

"If Alok makes it through this, I will write a book about our crazy days. I really will," I swore. It is the kind of absurd promise you make to yourself when you are seriously messed up in the head and you haven't slept for fifty hours straight...

The ambulance took us to AIIMS, the biggest hospital in Delhi. The blood and two sleepless nights had made me numb. I don't know who called the ambulance, or who made the choice of hospital. Maybe it was the security guard. Everyone around me seemed to be acting urgently.

More medical professionals at the AIIMS emergency ward. This was a government hospital, so lots of people but little service. Ryan screamed at a few of them, shaking them into action.

"Nine stories?" one of the stretcher-bearers asked, probably wondering if it was even worth it to carry this heavy weight to the intensive care unit.

The doctor told us to leave the ICU and wait outside. Damn, I was tired of waiting. I sat outside on a wooden stool. Relatives of patients fighting for life inside sat around me; mothers, daughters, sons and fathers. I tried fighting sleep, but it wouldn't work.

Ryan woke me up at noon. My entire left side had cramped.

"He is going to make it! Doctor said it is pretty bad, but he is going to make it!"

"What? How? I mean really?"

"Yes, he fell on his bottom, right into the fountain by the insti building. Can you believe that? Doctor said his fat bottom and the six inches of water cushioned the impact."

Thank god Alok was a fatso. And thank god they made that useless fountain by the insti building. Eleven fractures in the legs and two in the arms isn't so bad. Given how much Fatso eats, he could probably build his bones back in a day.

"I thought he'd die, I really thought he would," I said and hugged Ryan. And then I started crying. I don't know why I did an Alok then. It was embarrassing but kind of okay in a hospital.

"Is he awake?"

"Not much. But mostly because he hadn't slept for two days. Let us go pinch his butt," Ryan said.

We went inside the ICU and saw Alok asleep.

"Patient needs time to rest," the nurse said and signalled us to keep quiet. We left the ICU and took a bus back to Kumaon.

On our way back in the bus, Ryan turned to me. "You know Hari, I owe Fatso a lot."

"Really?" I said.

"If it weren't for him, I would have never studied to even reach a five-pointer," Ryan said.

I guess he was right. It was only he who brought us to our books. And now as he lay there, we didn't have any books to study from.

"You think he will be okay?" Ryan said.

"He will Ryan. He will," I said and hugged Ryan. For the first time, he felt more heavy than strong. He hugged me back tighter.

"I am sorry Hari," Ryan said and his voice sounded like he was fighting back tears, "I am sorry."

"It's okay, we can get through this," I said.

All of us needed time to rest. And we had time – four months of it – to take all the rest in the world.