

Karan's Story as Told by His Teacher



*Kalyani Gokhale**

Their school day began with an invocation to the Almighty. The eight-year-olds would stand beside their places in the classroom, heads bowed in earnest supplication, asking “God” to make their classmate a well child again. The cumulative number of appeals made to the good Lord would get totted up on the last page of the class monitor’s notebook with the exact count of children present in class added each day. No matter how often their teacher told them that the Mathematics didn’t matter and that their God would probably do all he could regardless of the count, they continued to do the computation with assiduous care. Every now and then, a cheerful query would arise—how much longer would it be before Karan attended school again, his health completely restored? “Not too long,” their teacher would say with forced optimism. Till that time, she said, they could continue to cheer him up the way they had these last few months—make him greeting cards with Get Well Soon messages, write little notes that told him what they had done in school that day, send him a story book to read, and every so often, make him a little paper box holding a birthday sweet that a child had shared.

The teacher understood the significance of Leukaemia and knew that her little ones’ hopes and prayers for their friend were unlikely to be answered. The unfairness of it all rankled - nobody deserved the debilitation and anguish that accompanied the illness, much less an eight-year-old child. She had often debated if she was doing the right thing in veiling from her third graders, the stark truth that each of us who has been blessed with life is bound to be granted death as well. She hated to blight their cheerful optimism and hoped, against her better sense, that her cynicism about divine forces and the fulfilment of prayers would be reduced to nothingness by the collective power of their unwavering faith.

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In the months that followed, Karan went through cycles of chemotherapy and medication, supported by an exemplary set of doctors and adored by his wonderful family. They were with him all the way, making sure that his short journey would be marked with as many happy moments and as many smiles as they could possibly gather for him. There was something about this little boy with his quiet smile and his eyes-that-knew that most people responded to and that included his classmates' parents. Out of the horrific perception of what it might mean to lose a child and from the desire to mitigate the pain Karan's family would eventually experience, the fathers and mothers formed a wonderful support group. Underlying this incredible fraternity, however, was the terrible knowledge that time was inexorably slipping by.

Little boys ought not to bear life's unjust moments with fortitude and tranquil acceptance, but Karan learned to do that. Happily, though, he did not let go of the innate positivity or the bubbling enthusiasm that comes so easily to children. His classmates received thank you notes, scribbled in his childish scrawl, for their drawings and cards, and the telephone was a great means of keeping in touch with all that happened in school. Even as he toggled between his hospital bed and the refuge of his own home, Karan not only remained connected with his friends, he helped them connect with each other and, more importantly, with themselves. He did more for them than a hundred school books ever would. He introduced them to pain and empathy, to courage and compassion, and became the reason for their learning to place the wellbeing of another individual above their own. The teacher often listened to her little wards as they discussed their feelings and perceptions about Karan's illness, revelling that she had the privilege of watching them evolve into better, kinder human beings and happy that she was witness to a beautiful process.

The academic year drew to a close with surprising quickness the way school years always do. It was time for the class to move on to a higher grade. It was also time for the end of the term class party that everyone always looked forward to. Excited plans were made, the spread discussed, and the school terrace decided as the venue for the do. All of them knew that much as they wanted Karan to attend, he would be kept away from close contact with the children, vulnerable as he was to infections. That morning, though, his mother called his teacher and said that he would attend the party, his doctor having given the go ahead. There was much anticipation as the class waited for Karan to arrive, and the biggest piece of cake, an extra chocolate, and the shiniest silver toffee wrappers were saved for him. When he entered, thinner than he was when

they had last seen him, a cap covering the baldness of his head, he was met with much cheering and jubilation. It was the most rousing of welcomes – such as even the biggest celebrity couldn't ever hope for. They vied to sit next to him, and with their easy smiles and their excited, high pitched banter, it was like Karan had never been away.

All through the class party, the teacher moved from group to group chatting with the children, her eyes never once leaving the cluster around Karan. Like a mother hen, she hovered around that group, regretting that she hadn't talked to them about Karan's baldness and petrified that one of them would ask him about it. She would be ready to step in the moment someone did that, and she would take care that Karan did not get hurt, no matter how inadvertently. After a while, sure enough, a little boy asked, "Why are you wearing a cap, Karan?" Before the horrified teacher could intervene, Karan had whipped his cap off, revealing his baldness. "No hair," he said in a matter-of-fact manner and smiled at everyone. "Wow!" piped up a dozen voices in much admiration and envy, "that means no more haircuts! Lucky you!" All of them laughed with unabashed glee and gave high fives to Karan who, in turn, laughed out loud and joined in the merriment. The teacher's eyes brimmed over; yet, through the mistiness, as she gazed at her children, the teacher knew she had just experienced something incredibly beautiful and infinitely priceless. No trouble was so distressful that you couldn't laugh at it, and it was the togetherness of today that meant so much more than the parting that tomorrow might bring. She, who had sought to teach her children a thing or two, had just been witness to one of life's biggest lessons.

Karan passed on to a better world a couple of years later – as peacefully as they knew he would. Today, his classmates are strapping young boys and girls enjoying the charmed existence of life in a college. His teacher has put away her red pen, her chalks, and her school apron forever. The few years of knowing a little boy, however, have shaped the lives of all those who shared his story, making them better people than they would otherwise have been. That's what makes Karan's story one with a very happy ending.

