

TWENTY-FIVE



Kiki was back in town. She had returned to Pinkky bhabi's home for a fortnight of leisure and romance. It was the holiday season for colleges. Most of Delhi's denizens, much like Kiki, had rushed to the hills.

During her last visit, Kiki had made a considerable impression on some cadets. Many of them were still mooning. This time around, the competition for the post of her satellite was likely to get stiffer.

Amongst the hopefuls for that post were Maachh and Porky. The last time she was in town, the two clowns had vied for a centimetre space in the ravishing girl's heart, and failed miserably.

Lady luck decided to smile on us the very next Saturday. It was Zora's birthday, and we had gathered at the local bakery for a party. The place was popular with the cadets who flocked there to enjoy its menu of pastries, patties, burgers, and samosas. The party was just warming up, when in walked Pinkky bhabi and Kiki. While some smart alecs dismissed the two giggly sisters as pea-brained, there were others who were ready to lay their lives at Kiki's letterbox-red toes. It was a matter of immense concern to me that two of my close pals stood to be counted amongst those fools.

Kiki was clad in bell-bottomed jeans and a flimsy top of an indeterminate colour. A pair of large dark glasses sat on her pert nose. The huge hoops in her ears dangled prettily and her curly hair danced as she walked.

Porky gagged on his samosa and his face took on a lovely shade of purple. He went into a bout of coughing. Noticing his condition, Pinkky bhabi, who was waving her elegant hand at us, quickly came over and gave him a huge thump. Kiki also reacted with alacrity. She picked up a jug of water from the table and proceeded to drown the chap by emptying the contents on Porky's head.

'The best anti-choke treatment,' she declared happily, looking around for applause.

'Thanks for saving my life,' bleated poor Porky.

While for Porky, Kiki's largesse spelt happy tidings, Maachh took it in poor spirit. Not willing to be left out of the race, the bloke did some quick thinking.

Even before Porky could shake out the water out from his eyes, Maachh swallowed a whole green chilli and made choking noises. In his enthusiasm to grab a bit of attention, the buffoon had not taken the effectiveness of the tiny thing into account. Not one of the harmless varieties, this inch-long mirchi turned out to rate high on the Scoville scale.

Pinkky bhabi, concerned, administered one of her trademark wallops on poor Maachh's back.

The guy doubled over and waited for Kiki's water treatment but the girl didn't oblige him. Pinkky bhabi, however, rendered a series of heavy thumps for good measure. Despite Maachh's attention-grabbing tactics, Kiki gave him the cold shoulder and switched her attention to Porky. Using all the paper napkins on the table, she wiped Porky's face gently. For once, Maachh was at a loss for words, what with his mouth on fire after having bitten on the red hot chili.

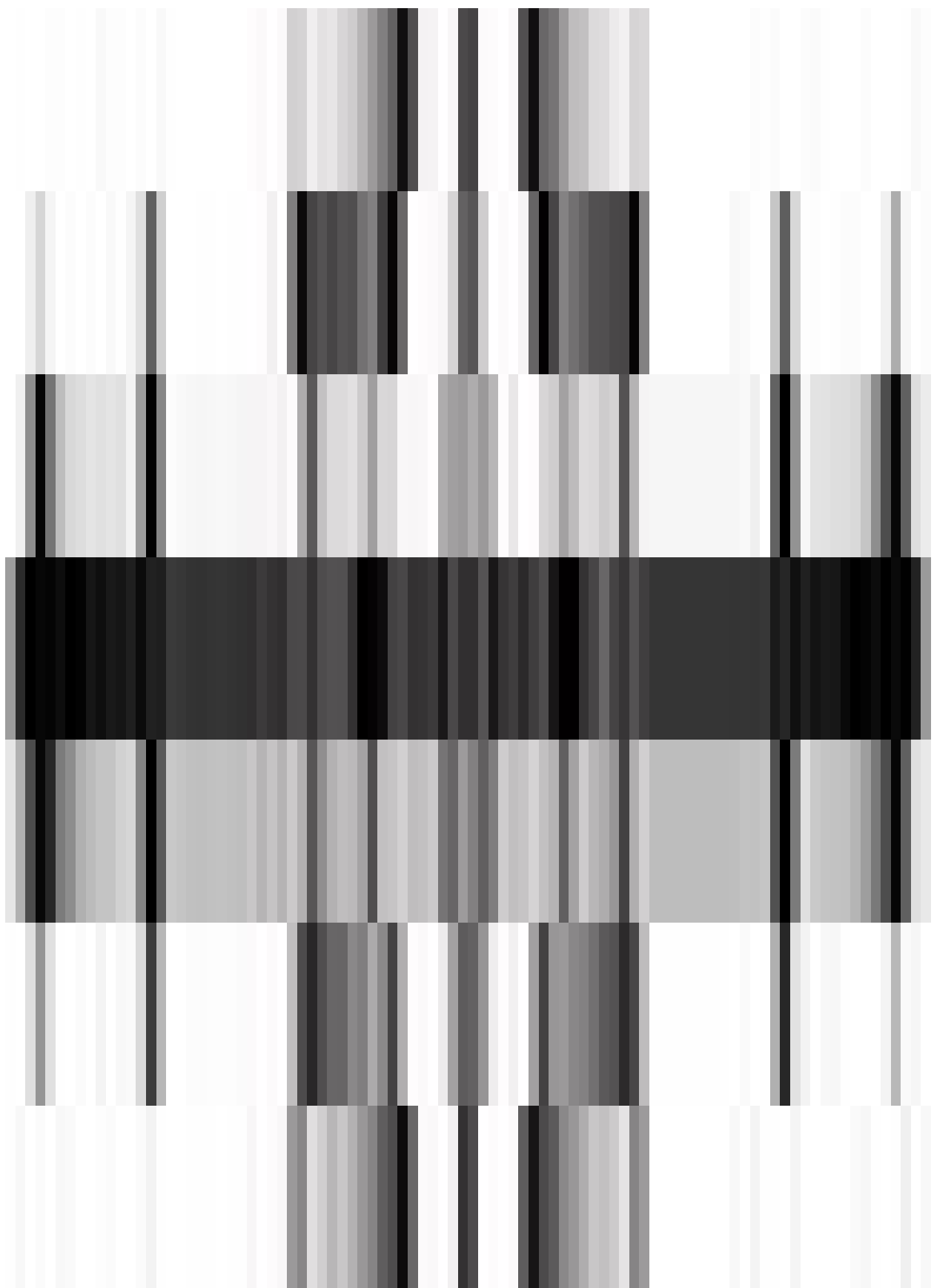
'Love can make a fool choke on his thoughts,' I commented, and the guy threw me a dirty look.

In the meantime, Pinkky bhabi pushed Kiki towards Sandy. 'Go and sit next to him,' she whispered, intent upon throwing them together. With that she plonked herself near Maachh, motherly concern writ large on her pleasantly plump face.

Sandy shifted and made place for the girl, but she surprised everyone by squeezing herself into the tiny space next to Zora. The birthday boy quickly extended his invitation to the sisters and ordered some pastries and colas for them. Kiki threw him a dazzling smile as she wished him many happy returns of the day. Maachh choked on water this time.

Her patent partiality for the Rajput didn't surprise me. I had noticed the sidelong looks she threw at him during our last meeting. Plainly, the girl was smitten by the good-looking Zora. Here was a strange situation – Maachh and Porky were smitten by Kiki who was smitten by Zora but her elder sister wanted her to be smitten by Sandy. The complexity of the matter didn't escape me.

TWENTY-SIX



Mooli was over the moon. Not in his wildest dreams had he imagined that a girl as beautiful as Nilofer would be interested in him. Till now, only his mother had believed him to be handsome. At five feet eleven, he carried himself like a bumbling bear. His thinning hair was genetically geared to disappear before he turned thirty. Skin prone to pimples, a beak-like nose, and hawkish eyes couldn't be termed handsome by the longest yardstick. Add to that his rustic mannerisms and language combined with a not-so- illustrious academic record, and the chances of attracting a girl's attention were zilch. The guy was honest enough to admit that he was no Casanova and knew not the ways to a girl's heart.

Rumour had it that he had made great inroads into pretty Niloo's heart, and she was dangling a bait before his bulging eyes. 'The day you get your commission, we will get engaged,' she told the incredulous fellow, who was wondering how he could convince his conservative folks back home for a marriage with a Muslim girl.

We were aware that Mooli continued to romp around town with his Kashmiri babe. Not a Sunday passed when he didn't wave his out pass under our noses. He had seen every movie playing in town, enjoyed lavish candlelight dinners with madame Colourful Eyes. On weekdays, he rushed to the phone booth to coo into the receiver and exchange telephonic sweet nothings with his girl. All this rendered him pretty broke, and he sponged money off every friendly GC. We eyed him with envy as well as pity. To date Niloo was not easy on the pocket.

To the above, add expensive gifts and the result can only be disastrous. We watched him squirm each time he was unable to pay off his loans, sympathised with him when he was hard-pressed to celebrate Niloo's birthday at an upmarket cafe, condoled with him as he grieved over his overdraft.

'What can I do?' he wailed. 'I love her so much.'

Given his largesse, even our combined kitty was depleting rapidly. Most of us had got used to seeing the girl hanging on the buffoon's arm as they haunted the cafeteria. The initial scepticism about Niloo's intentions vanished as days passed.

'Love is blind, indeed,' was all we could say.

A couple of times, we spotted a young and brawny chap accompanying the love birds. 'He is Zafar, Niloo's brother,' Mooli informed us. 'He has come from Kashmir to visit her.'

'Look buddy, it is not our business to interfere, but this brother of hers looks like a slimeball,' Sandy warned Mooli. 'It is in your interest to keep away from him.'

'Who, Zafar?' laughed the besotted guy. 'Arrey, he is a harmless chap. He is doing a PhD from Jammu University.'

'It never hurts to be careful,' Zora advised. 'Keep an eye on him.'

Mooli, however, scoffed at the suggestion.

It was the Passing Out Parade (POP) season. POPs are an exciting event for the proud parents, the cadets who are passing out, as well as for the wannabe cadets.

As the days for the POP drew close, one guy who didn't share in our excitement was Mooli. He went around the campus looking like Atlas, with the weight of the world on his shoulders.

'What ails you, buddy?' Zora asked him, one evening. 'You look as though a meteor has landed on your head.'

'Niloo is insisting on two passes for the POP.'

'Why two passes?'

'One for her and the other for Zafar,' Mooli confided. 'I don't know if I can get them.'

'Why don't you tell her it is not possible? There is heavy security during the POP and it is impossible to get extra passes.'

'She wants to attend the POP with her brother. It is absolutely necessary, she told me. He has come all the way from Srinagar to attend the event. It is his long-cherished desire and all that...' Mooli sounded worried.

'Why is it absolutely necessary? I don't understand,' Sandy asked. 'You are not passing out this time, so why is it necessary for them to attend the POP?'

None of us could understand the logic behind Niloo's insistence on attending the parade.

When Mooli told her that it may not be possible to get a pass, she almost burst a blood vessel. 'You can't get a couple of passes for me and you profess to love me,' she vented her ire. 'Nothing is impossible. If you try hard enough, you can definitely manage the passes.'

Even as poor Mooli was licking his wounds, Zafar sprinkled a dash of salt.

'... And you were getting serious about this person?' he rebuked his sister. '...a guy who cannot manage a simple thing like this!'

'I am trying,' Mooli explained. 'Give me some more time.'

'Time? How much time do you want? The POP will be over by the time you manage to get the passes.'

The two of them joined forces to berate the troubled chap. Mooli couldn't tell them that he was too small a fry to dictate terms at the academy. Tight security conditions required a cadet to know the guests very well before he could ask for a pass to the POP, and he barely knew the two Kashmiris. He was sure that CoCo would ask for details about his guests before granting the passes. It was an uncomfortable situation.

No matter how much he brooded, poor Mooli could find no solution to his dilemma.

The next morning, Mooli was found pacing the corridor with a litre of mustard oil in his centimetre-long hair. He smelt like a pickle and we knew that the Jat was terribly troubled. Mustard oil on the scalp was his panacea in all stressful situations. During his oily days, we maintained a respectable distance from the guy. However, this was not one such day.

Zora whistled to draw our attention to the guy, who seemed to be wrestling with imaginary demons.

'By Jove, the guy is terribly stressed,' exclaimed Sandy. 'Let's find out what's bugging him.'