

TWO



As we exchanged notes, the bus turned into the beautiful campus. After completing the required documentation of reporting at the academy, we strutted around the campus importantly. Our arms linked, we sauntered carelessly. Daunted by the impressive structure, we exhibited a self-confidence we were far from feeling. It was important to make an impression on the other cadets and so we declared, to all and sundry that the IMA was not half as impressive as the NDA campus. Secretly, though, even the most cynical amongst us had to admit that Chetwode Hall was quite striking.

‘I say chaps, this is awesome,’ whispered Porky. ‘Nothing like the NDA, though.’ He hastened to add, loyally.

‘Shut up,’ hissed Sandy. We were staring at Chetwode from a distance.

Till now, we had seen the imposing building only in pictures but the real thing blew us away. Almost immediately, a hush of reverence descended upon our group. The modest colonial structure, with its deep wooden tones interspersed with bursts of red and white, was a temple to all officers of the Indian army. This was the place where the stalwarts of the nation made their debut.

‘Wow...’ Zora murmured.

Chetwode never fails to stir one’s emotions. For this was the ultimate goal of every cadet training at the academy. With lumps in our throats, we observed it with a sense of reverence.

As realization of our enormous responsibility towards the nation sank in, the mood turned sombre. We were here to somehow mutate into efficient sentinels for the country, and not to indulge in tomfoolery. We had opted for a profession that called for an extremely disciplined life, and we were taking determined steps towards it.

Our spines automatically straightened.

Minutes later, sobered and dignified, we lined up for the allocation of our companies.

Earnest appeals were quickly transmitted to the man above in the hopes that we

landed up with close buddies living in the same company, instead of being scattered like wild oats all over the campus. The humongous IMA grounds, with its twelve companies, was an unwieldy sea; seemingly impossible to navigate. To be housed in different companies would amount to being incommunicado for months. It was akin to be thrown into the amphitheatre before hungry lions with not a friend in sight to commiserate with.

Each of us knew that it would be an extreme stroke of luck to find ourselves housed in the same company. Nevertheless, I continued to pray.

My delight in the present context can be imagined when I was told that I had drawn Meiktila Company of the Thimmayya Battalion. I knew that there was no better place to live than the Meiktila, which was situated at one corner of the campus, next to the Forest Research Institute (FRI). The sprawling and thickly-wooded FRI was the most popular escape route into the civilian world. Some of my friends, who had already passed out of the IMA, had told me that sneaking in and out of the campus was far easier from this company than from the others.

The day that had already started off so well became even more promising as the minutes ticked by.

‘Hey, I have also been allotted Meiktila,’ rejoiced Zora.

‘So have I. I say, we have hit the jackpot,’ Porky’s eyes twinkled excitedly. ‘I hope Maachh is also in our company.’

Porky was Maachh’s closest ally. Not many people looked up to Maachh, but for Porky, he was a role model.

‘Oh, yes,’ Sandy scanned the list, eagerly. ‘The honourable gentleman is destined to inhabit the Meiktila with us.’

Maachh was an antidote to all things depressive and blue; Manna from heaven sent to cheer grieving souls.

It couldn’t get any better.

With the Company allocated, it was time to inspect our rooms (cabins, as they are still referred to in the IMA). Riding the silver edge of cloud nine, I rushed into my new room. It was one of many in a British-era barracks, with a long

verandah running outside. Large, ancient trees spread their cool umbrella over the barrack, allowing a few happy rays of sunshine to filter through. Birds of all hues nested on the branches, chortling as if to enact a warm welcome.

More happiness came my way as I discovered that Maachh was to occupy the room to my left. But after this stage, my luck ran out. Instead of success in my enterprise to land Porky to the room on my right, I drew a blank. The room was already occupied by a cadet named Joseph Rodrigues. One couldn't get lucky all the time, I reasoned. With Maachh on my left and Porky on my right, the mischief we could create would have shaken the academy. Maybe, it was all for the best!

My thoughts flew to Maachh as I unpacked.

Most cadets didn't know that he had been named Manoj Mitra by his parents. Popularly known as Maachh (which means 'Fish' in Bengali), he had been one of my closest friends in the NDA.

With a torso that ended in a long neck signalling gene mingling with a giraffe, and a cleft chin set in square obstinate jaw, he was the perfect caricature of a soldier. The sleekly-styled hair parted in the middle, though trimmed in the regulation katori cut, gave him a Chaplinesque profile. He was probably the inspiration behind the creation of popular characters like Beetle Bailey and Sad Sack.

The clothes he wore were far from smart. They looked as though they had been tailored for someone a size bigger. I guess he took imaginary growth in consideration while getting his clothes stitched. Just in case! The chap's optimism knows no bounds.

Those who had seen him devouring the enormous meals served at the academy found it difficult to come to terms with his personality. At five feet ten, the fellow with perpetual hunger pangs had an unimaginably skinny silhouette. Where does all the food go? We had all wondered at one time or the other. I put it down to some genetic confusion between a tapeworm and man.

'It has all to do with Bengal's history,' was his personal view. 'It began with the Great Bengal Famine. The food insecurity caused by the famine brought about this tendency of tucking in as much as possible. Maybe we believe that like the camel which stores water in its hump for use during crisis, we could use the

excess food during emergencies. For who knows when a famine will strike the state! So deep is the insecurity that the changing affluence of the Bengalis has not been able to erase it even marginally. Mind you, this anxiety comes genetically stamped in babies born till date.'

Arguments, logic, and reasoning could do little to sway the Bong's opinion about the genesis of his perpetual hunger. The mere act of eating brought him incomparable bliss. Eating is orgasmic, he believed. Not that he had ever experienced the latter.

An irrepressible joker, Maachh did not fall into the category of the brilliant. Frankly speaking, he didn't even make it to the second rung of intelligence. With his knack of drumming up incredibly idiotic ideas and implementing them in the most screwed-up manner conceivable, it wasn't a wonder that he found himself punished constantly by his seniors as well as the instructors.

In fact, Maachh's life was full of tragedies. During our training at NDA, it was an accepted fact that if anything went wrong anywhere in the academy, it was the poor Bong who was singled out for punishment. Undeniably, he often had a part to play in the mischief, but his fellow conspirators almost always went scot-free while Maachh stoically suffered the punishments. He was Madame Calamity's favourite child and this earned him another epithet – 'Tragedy King'.

Together, we had shared many adventures with disastrous consequences. And the bond between us strengthened with each mishap. He was a perfect specimen of humour in uniform. Beetle Bailey come alive! The mere presence of this gentleman was a guarantee that there would be enough fun and laughter to see me through the tough training at IMA.

Twilight came and went but still no sign of Maachh. As always, he would be the last one to arrive, I realized. The fellow finally walked in at around midnight, looking like a famished monkey. The mess had already closed. With his innards emitting loud groans of protest, Maachh set about looking for victuals.

'Anything will do,' he begged. 'Did you know that the starving Russians had to eat the glue at the back of their wallpaper during the Russian famine in the 1930s? Nothing, not even cats and dogs, escaped the cooking pots of the starving Russians. They also ate grass for a change of taste. Lucky we don't have wallpapers in our cabins or I would have been forced to devour them.'

‘Where did you get hold of all this rubbish information?’ I asked, not having any knowledge about Russian food habits during famine.

‘I read it somewhere,’ he moaned, holding his angry, growling belly. ‘And now, can I have some food before I die?’

As usual, he was being dramatic.

I quickly offered him the snacks that my mother had packed for me before he decided to venture out hunting stray cats and dogs. He chomped through a jar full of cookies, a tin of cake, two packets of wafers, one box of besan laddoos, but his belly still growled. Unable to lay his hands on any more food, the poor Fish tanked it up with a pitcher of water and hit the sack. But before doing so, he solemnly took an oath that he would be the first man to get into the mess and the last one to leave. He almost achieved that feat right through the term.