

ONE



There are mornings in a chap's life when his heart spills over with joy and trills out a happy ditty. There is a bounce in his walk, a spring in his steps, and an expression of delight upon his countenance. His eyes sparkle and the very air around him feels celebratory. The grass is greener on his side of the fence. The glories of nature, never noticed by him before, suddenly float into his range of vision. The birds sing as he walks past and flowers bloom to the accompaniment of several hundred guitars strumming in the background. The sky is a cheerful blue with nary a cloud to mar its beauty, and the sun is a glowing, beaming ball of hope.

It was one such morning of my life. As Sherlock Holmes would have told a wide-eyed Watson, it was elementary. I was exhibiting all the signs of a lad who had lost his marbles. But it didn't matter what the fictional ace detective would think of me. What mattered was that I was on top of the world at that moment. To express my happiness, I coughed to clear my voice box of its impediments and launched my vocal chords on a flight of airy tunes.

Modesty be damned, I have to admit that a few heads turned my way. Up and down the compartment of the train I was seated in, curious eyes took note of the tall and lanky youngster, and mind you, not all the looks thrown at me were disapproving. Although the temperature was a tad unbearable and my sweat glands were hyperactive, this handsome chap was not mopping his brows with annoyance, they noticed. They didn't know the reason, of course, not that I owed them any explanation.

The train lumbered slowly towards the Dehradun railway station and I craned my neck, my eyes happily scanning the melee of passengers. Although there was a full forty minutes before my wait would end, I was eager to meet the four scoundrels, my best friends – Maachh, Porky, Sandy and Zora. They were my best pals at the National Defence Academy (NDA), and now we were on the brink of taking the Indian Military Academy (IMA) by storm.

As the train chugged to a grinding halt, I disembarked and joined the group of jostling travellers thronging the platform. It wasn't long before I spotted at least twenty cadets headed to the IMA, their trademark katori-haircuts being my clue. Amidst much revelry, back-thumping, and hugging, they made their way towards the exit. I was eager to join them and start the next chapter of my career.

But Porky, unfortunately, was nowhere to be seen.

Impatiently I began striding along the platform, after assigning my signature black trunk and bedding in the care of a kindly matron with a brood of bawling kids.

Damn Porky! Where is he? He was supposed to have reached Dehradun much before me. He was to receive me at the station.

The four of us – Sandy, Zora, Porky, and I – had planned our journeys so we could reach our destination within a couple of hours of each other.

The bugger's train must be running late, I deduced. Resigned, I sat down on one of the platform benches to wait.

Filling up my lungs with fresh air and hope, I decided to enjoy my last morning of unfettered freedom, notwithstanding the sizzling heat that seemed to bake everyone else but me. Those envious of the calmness please note – the immunity to the weather and all things uncomfortable comes from the rigorous training at the NDA. The sweat shed in those six terms is enough to last a lifetime. We just don't sweat any more. Not over heat nor over stressful surroundings.

A guy just out of the NDA after six terms of torturous training will rejoice in his freedom like a guy out on parole, and if he is on his way to the next two terms of rigorous imprisonment at the IMA, he will strive to extract as much joy from his brief period of freedom as a man in the death row will in the last hour of his life.

With the arrival of the next train, I spotted about fifty excited fellows jumping off from different compartments of the train that had just chugged into the platform. Of these chaps, all sporting the katori-cut, five were from my squadron at the NDA.

The tales about the ties between squadron types are legendary. Brothers may sever their bonds but fellow felons will stick together even at the cost of their own lives. The bond is a sacred one, strengthened by an unstated code of honour. The mafia-like oath of allegiance is stringent and binding – no squealing, no snitching, and no back-stabbing, even under the most compelling circumstances.

Their signature black trunks lay ignored as the cadets embraced each other like long-lost brothers in a Bollywood movie. Although just five weeks had passed

since our parting, the reunion was not an iota less than ceremonial.

‘Hey there, Pessi,’ hollered Jess, the hefty Surd, who had been with me at the NDA. ‘Let’s storm the bastion.’

‘You go ahead,’ I told him. ‘I am waiting for the gang.’

‘Oh yes, of course, the notorious gang. You guys had a ball at NDA, didn’t you? Are you guys planning a repeat of your deeds at the IMA?’ he joked.

‘Time will tell,’ I replied cryptically. ‘We don’t court trouble; it comes seeking us.’

‘I am not surprised. With Maachh in your gang, you couldn’t expect anything but trouble. Anyway, see you later at the academy.’

He sauntered off importantly.

Half an hour later, the arrival announcement of another train caught my attention and a train slid into another platform disgorging its passengers. The first chap to jump out was none other than my much awaited pal, Zora, short for Zorawar Singh.

‘Zora,’ I yelled, running up to greet him.

Zorawar Singh was the kind of man girls swoon for. Urbane, gallant, and handsome, he was blessed with a nose that belonged to the era of Aristotle. His lips, half covered by a no-nonsense moustache, were forever creased with a sardonic smile. To put it in simple terms, paint the image of a Rajput prince with a pair of twinkling eyes and a good-humoured expression and put him in modern garb and hey presto! You would have created a likeness of our pal, Zora.

‘Hey buddy,’ he threw his bags down and hugged me enthusiastically. ‘Good to see you, man.’

Arms linked, we moved to a side allowing the other passengers to disembark.

‘Where is Sandy?’

‘He’s saying goodbye to a girl he met on the train.’

‘Fast worker, I must say.’

A resounding thump on my shoulder announced the arrival of the devil. Many eyes on the platform turned to Sandy, aka Satinder Singh. The tall, statuesque Sikh, with a peaches-and-cream complexion, could have been a model had he not opted for the arms. Seeing him in the formal uniform brought to mind images of regal personalities of bygone years.

‘Zora tells me that you have managed to strike up a friendship with a girl on the train.’ My voice was a mix of admiration and envy.

‘Nonsense, cadet,’ he mimicked the voice of a typical NDA instructor. ‘She made my journey more interesting. Forget girls and tell me how’s life been treating you?’

‘Now, that’s a problem. Forgetting girls, I mean,’ sniggered Zora.

‘Should we wait for Porky or should we move to the academy?’ I asked. ‘I don’t know about Maachh’s arrival, but Porky should have been here before me. The buffoon must have missed his train.’

Zora and Sandy exchanged a secretive look. It was plain that they were hiding something from me.

‘What?’

‘Oh nothing.’

And then, I spotted him.

Weighed down by his bags, the guy was marching toward us with a wide grin on his face.

‘Bloody hell,’ I swore. ‘How did Porky get on to your train? He was supposed to have been here six hours ago.’

My pals burst out laughing. ‘As you had rightly guessed, he missed his train and had to change twice before he got on to our train.’

I rushed towards Porky and gave him a tight hug before standing back and

scrutinizing him. His thick mop of unruly hair sat incongruously on a rather large head that rode low over his brows. His big ears, which he could wiggle at will, were his USP. He had often used the wiggling technique to amuse members of the fair sex quite effectively

‘Stop inspecting me, and don’t you dare tell me that I have put on more inches around the waist.’

‘That goes without saying, doesn’t it?’

‘I tried hard to drop the lard, but it seems to love my waist.’ He laughed self-consciously.

Pradip Purkayastha, or Porky had an incredible affinity for flab. While most chaps got a lean and mean look during the six terms of training at the NDA, he steadily gained weight. That was his only achievement at the academy. With just five feet seven inches to spread the fat, it was an uphill task for the genetically plump chap to maintain a semblance of fitness. The roll of flab around his middle was his biggest sorrow.

‘I am famished,’ he announced and we rolled our eyes.

‘To the academy,’ Sandy commanded. ‘Before this guy faints with hunger.’

‘....and to a sumptuous breakfast,’ seconded Porky and we marched towards the olive-green bus that was to take us to the campus.

‘How did you manage to miss the train?’

‘Don’t ask,’ Porky’s expression told the story of his tragedy. ‘The journey was such a pain. Imagine, running all over the platforms trying to find a train going to Dehradun and then travelling without reservation. I couldn’t even find a place to sit on the train.’

‘Poor Porky,’ tut-tutted Zora sarcastically. ‘We must get him some rest before we are forced to rush him to the hospital.’

I glanced happily at my buddies. These were the chaps who had been by my side for six long terms sharing the sorrows and joys of life. Together, we had suffered faith-destroying episodes of ragging, enjoyed stolen moments of fun, faced every

curveball that was hurled at us and braved death-defying escapades. When the going got tough, these were the guys who bailed me out. Their hands held mine through hours of utter hopelessness, and the moments of triumph were celebrated by the collective tattooing of our hearts.