

## SEVENTEEN



Discussions about the forthcoming midterm break sounded like music to our ears, which were by this point jaded with constant reprimands from the ustaads. While term breaks were undoubtedly the most awaited time of the year, we rejoiced at the approach of the midterm break with unadulterated enthusiasm. It provided us with a much required reprieve from an endless stream of tests and exercises. Although the break lasted for just four days, the optimists celebrated it as 96 hours of freedom. And for some exceptional GCs like Maachh and Porky, it meant 5,760 minutes of unfettered fun.

With a week to go for the much-awaited break, we began putting our plans into place. Like they say, planning for a happy event provides as much joy as the event itself. Post dinner, we gathered in Zora's room to finalize our plans.

Sandy was planning a trip to Chandigarh where his father was posted, while Zora looked forward to happy times back home at Jaipur. None of these places were too far from Dehradun, but for people like Maachh, the very thought of travelling to Kolkata was a nightmare. The same was true for Noble Thamburaj, who would have to travel all the way from the north to the south of the country.

'Almost four days of an ustaad-free existence,' Sandy's eyes glinted at the prospect of freedom. 'I am going to squeeze out every drop of fun and relaxation from those four days of our break.'

'What do you plan to do?' asked Porky, who seemed to sink into a moody silence from time to time.

'Sleep, eat, and sleep,' replied Sandy, intertwining his fingers behind his head as he lolled on the armchair. 'My dear chap, you don't look very enthusiastic about going home.'

'To be honest, I wish I didn't have to travel all the way home. It is a bigger pain than the morning drill.'

'What!!!' We were aghast at his announcement.

'Did I hear you right?' I asked.

'He's right,' endorsed Maachh. 'I have decided against going home for the

break,' he broke the news with nonchalance.

'You guys are crazy,' Zora gave his verdict.

'We are not crazy. If you can see beyond your nose, you will be able to see the reason behind our reluctance. The long journey will barely allow me a day and a half at home. What's the point of spending so much time and money if all I get is just 30 hours, much of which will go into narrating details about the training at the academy?'

We knew about his father's dream of seeing Maachh bag the Sword of Honour, which was an impossible feat for the poor sod.

His idea seemed to find an instant approval from Porky. The two jokers had performed dismally till now, and facing their ambitious fathers with the weight of that fact on their souls made them anxious.

'That's a wise decision. I think I will also forgo the journey home. Like you, I will get a little over 30 hours at home,' said Porky.

I dithered. The logic presented by the two clowns seemed sensible. For me, the long journey to reach home was a big deterrent. I would have to change two trains to get there and that would involve a tedious series of reservations.

'I have a great idea,' the Bong snapped his fingers. 'Why don't we all go to Mussoorie. It is a beautiful place and so close by. This is the best opportunity for the trip.'

Sandy and Zora looked up from the train timetable, which they had been consulting for the reservations of their tickets.

'I think it is a brilliant idea,' endorsed Porky. 'It will be a pity if we didn't visit the queen of hill stations during our training. Besides, I don't think it will cost too much.'

Turning to me, he asked: 'What say you?'

I thought for a moment and shook my head. 'I wish I could join you guys, but my mother will be very disappointed if I didn't go home.'

‘Buddy, think rationally. You will hardly get time to be with her. Instead, enjoy your long break at home and use the short ones for trips to nearby places like Mussoorie,’ suggested Maachh. ‘I am sure your mother will not mind. Besides, you won’t manage the reservations in such a short time, which will mean sleepless nights in unreserved compartments.’

‘...and when you get home, you will be too tired to converse with your mother. Before you can enjoy a good meal, the break would be over and you will be travelling back to the academy.’

‘Don’t think too much,’ Porky philosophised. ‘Thinking too much is a bad habit. One can never reach a decision.’

‘Now I know why the two of you never spend a moment of thought before leaping into trouble.’

‘What about the two of you?’ Maachh asked Sandy and Zora. ‘Why don’t you join us for a rollicking time at Mussoorie?’

The two of them looked undecided. While spending leisurely time with the family held great appeal, the thought of setting out on yet another adventure with friends seemed irresistible.

‘Alright, I will join in,’ Zora was the first one to decide. ‘But I warn you. I will disown you at the first instance of mischief.’

It took several minutes for Sandy to yield. The poor chap would have to explain to Mandy and Pinkky bhabi why he wasn’t going home.

In the end, he gave in and joined in the excitement of planning the trip.

‘I guess you are fence-sitting, as usual,’ the Bong addressed Noble Thamburaj, who, after making the arduous journey down South would be left with less than 24 hours at home.

‘I will let you know by tomorrow,’ he said.

Overriding his objections, Maachh inked him in as the sixth member of our expedition. Noble was the moneybags of our group, and the Bong was not likely to let go of him easily.

The next morning, when the chap telephoned his mother to convey the change in his plans, she dissolved into a flood of tears. A distraught Noble decided to ditch us and make the long journey home.

Maachh had some advice for us as we gave final shape to our trip – ‘If you really want to enjoy yourselves, I suggest that we avoid getting a haircut next week. Also, we must carry our caps. I don’t want to be identified as a GC if I commit an offence.’

‘So, you have already decided to commit an offence,’ rebuked Zora. ‘That is why I was reluctant to join you on this trip.’

‘Count me out,’ snapped Sandy. ‘If the news of your mischief reaches the academy, Mandy will not spare us.’

‘I didn’t say I would commit an offence,’ Maachh clarified. ‘What I meant is, in case...’

Zora balked. ‘Count me out, guys. If that joker goes east, I’ll go west,’ he said, pointing at Maachh.

‘Admit it buddy, you are afraid,’ Maachh challenged. ‘Some soldier you’ll make...’

‘Cut the drama,’ warned Zora. ‘If I go to Mussoorie, it will be to see the sights and not to chase girls.’

‘I want to see Kempty Falls, Company Gardens, and wander around Mall Road and the Tibetan Market,’ I spoke up.

‘Alright, alright,’ pacified Maachh. ‘Cool it, guys. I promise to behave.’

‘What about the money for our trip?’ Porky wanted to know.

‘What happened to the money your father had sent for the tickets to go home?’ countered the Bong.

‘He’s sent me the second-class railway fare. That’s not enough for a holiday in Mussoorie.’

‘Don’t worry, we will borrow the rest,’ Maachh reassured him.

‘Not from me,’ Zora threw up his hands. ‘You won’t get a penny from me.’

‘Nor from me, either,’ said Sandy, fully aware that the buffoons were planning to sponge him.

*‘Arre, all you have to do is to plead with Pinkky bhabi and she’ll give you the money. If I had a brother and a sister-in-law in the academy, I would never have refused anything to my pals.’*

It took all of Maachh’s convincing power to make Sandy agree for a soft loan. Some money from Noble fattened our kitty. As compensation for backing out, the repentant fellow lent us a hundred rupees and also parted with a huge bag of banana chips to keep us company.