

EIGHT



Sometimes, even a dull chap can come up with a brilliant idea. Maachh's idea about collecting data on the instructors, especially the SWOT strategy, was accepted unanimously by the gang.

The hierarchy of staff within each company was simple and linear. Right at the top was the Battalion Commander, under him was the Company Commander, and then the Platoon Commander.

We began collecting information about the three men. Gathering intelligence, however, turned out to be an uphill task since the staff's residential areas were out of bounds for the GCs. Immense patience, cultivating accessible sources, and ingenuity were put to use to etch out the dossiers.

The Platoon Commander, Captain Vikram Sharma, generally called Paltu by everyone, was given a new epithet by Maachh. 'Have you seen the way he struts around? He could easily impersonate a peacock if he had any feathers.'

Whatever his faults, Maachh had the gift of gab and a certain visual expertise. It was easy to visualize Paltu preening and flaunting his feathers on a monsoon morning after our pal drew the picture. So, Paltu came to be known as Peacock to us.

Major PVR Reddy, the Company Commander was called CoCo by the cadets.

Our Battalion Commander, Colonel Jasbir Singh, was a prim and proper officer. Affectionately called Batty, he was a member of the old school of thought and a strict disciplinarian. No one had ever seen a smile cross his face. Circumstances in his life had led him to take a grim view of almost all events, whether they occurred in his life or in that of another. Whatever his principles, Batty was a large-hearted guy. It was to him that the cadets turned when they faced major upheavals in life. Never had a guy gone to him and returned without finding a solution to his problem.

Guardian angels have a habit of sneaking up unannounced. Ours snuck up on us from totally unexpected quarters.

A year ago, Sandy's elder brother, an exemplary officer on all counts, was posted to the academy and he took charge as the platoon commander of the Naushera

Company. Mandy, short for Maninder Singh, an astute planner, had paved a strategic corridor to a glorious career soon after his commission. His break came when the Commanding Officer's daughter fell in love with him.

The Colonel's wife played cupid, and over a few dinners and dance parties, love blossomed in the young hearts. The astute mother, with her long experience of army life, had learned that a husband could make or mar a woman's life. Not somebody to allow the wrong man into her daughter's life, she had been on the lookout for the right one.

She discovered great potential in the young captain, who walked into the spider's snare unsuspectingly. Miss Pinky, aided by her mother, trapped the ardent young officer in her charming web. Their romance flourished near the lonely river bank, under the resplendent gazebo of the garden, in dark alleys of the town, over long drives on a noisy motorcycle, and in the privacy of the Colonel's lavish living room.

Within a year, the besotted captain was on his knees, begging Miss Pinky to tie the knot with him. 'I will make you happy,' he promised rashly, unaware of the enormity of such a promise. 'I will give you no reason to complain.'

No sane man made such promises to a woman, but Mandy was not in his senses. Love has a peculiar habit of making men insane.

Blushing a delicious pink, she accepted him with the enthusiasm of a maiden who doesn't have faith in fate's proverbial second knock. Her mother had warned her that men didn't risk a second proposal.

And so, Mandy wed Pinky in a big fat Punjabi wedding with the ecstatic bride's parents shaking their hips to the beat of the dhol. Seated on a highly-strung and nervous ghodi, resplendent in his gold-embroidered maroon ensemble, the shaken groom tried desperately to appear dignified as a set of firecrackers caused the frightened mare to rear. Perhaps it had been newly inducted in the wedding business, or was filling in for another ill horse. Whatever the reason, it was definitely uncomfortable with the boisterous behaviour of the wedding party.

It took all of Mandy's riding skills to restrain his nervous horse from bolting down the street. All his lessons in horse riding at the academy proved helpful at this juncture. Unaware of his predicament, tipsy uncles and cousins continued boogying to the peppy numbers belted out by the brass band.

The bride peeped from behind her silken veil as she threw the garland of red roses around his neck, and Mandy's heart lurched uncontrollably.

Two years have passed since that day, but the magic in their marriage endures. The captain had no reason to complain. Having made rash promises, he tried his best to keep his wife happy.

Two things worth knowing about the lady – in a larger capacity, the lady personified the stuff most officers' wives are made of. She was equally at home whether at an official function or a social get-together. When asked to throw cocktails and parties at the drop of a hat, she would oblige; expect her to play mah-jong with senior officers' wives and she would comply; and whether it was to conduct welfare activities or other official matters, she did it all with equal aplomb. The second interesting aspect of her personality was that with her close friends and family – she was the stereotypical Punjabi belle, prone to gossip and obsessed with matchmaking. She spoke to her loved ones in endearing 'Punjabi-fied' English.

Pinkky bhabi recently added another k to her spelling to appease malevolent stars, after consulting a numerologist. 'Your husband will rise up to become the Chief,' the sly numerologist promised. 'All he has to do is to add an extra S to his name.' The suggestion was unceremoniously tossed out of the window by an indignant husband.

'Bullshit! You can add as many vowels and letters to your name as you wish but don't expect me to do so. Whoever heard of "Ssingh"? Do you want me to become the laughing stock of the army?'

'But Mandy....'

'Not a word more on the subject,' he warned stomping out indignantly.

The best of us have chinks in our armour. Pinkky bhabi had her chinks too. Her love for gossip was her undoing. The lady was privy to every little event that happened around the campus. Her loving tentacles reached into every crevice and corner to dig out juicy tidbits. Be it a budding romance or a flaring argument, an elopement or a broken heart, everything deserved milady's attention. Not even the incidents that happened in the conjugal life of a fellow officer were considered sacrosanct. Smacking her lips gleefully, Pinkky bhabi whispered intimate secrets into willing ears. Like a game of Chinese Whispers,

the gossip changed colour and intensity as it did the rounds of the cantonment.

A die-hard romantic, she loved matchmaking. Truth be told, she was good at it and could boast of several successes. Quite a few couples in the cantonment owed their wedded bliss to her effort. With her success rate, she could easily have opened shop for matrimonial services to supplement the family income. For now, the lady was seriously trying to kindle romance in Sandy's loveless life. One of her fondest dreams was that her younger sister, Kiki, should be married to him. She spared no opportunity to push them together, much to Sandy's horror.

'Two brothers married to two sisters is a perfect recipe for a big and happy family,' she lisped to her husband one night, jerking him out of his stupor.

'Stop at once,' he wagged his finger at her. 'I don't want you trying your tricks on Sandy. He is too young to marry. Besides, he has not yet completed his training.'

'Arre, I am not asking for Sandy to stop his training. The training shraining will go on,' said Pinkky bhabi, 'They don't have to marry right away. I just want them to meet each other.'

'Meeting can wait,' replied Mandy. 'Let him concentrate on his career first.'

'Oh darling, you are so forgetful. Have you forgotten the days when you were preparing for the crucial career advancement and yet you followed me like a shadow?'

For a moment Mandy sauntered dreamily into the past. 'Those were the days!' he sighed. 'You were so lovely. I just couldn't concentrate on my studies.'

'Am I not lovely now?' Pinkky pouted sexily.

'Of course you are still lovely. There is so much more of you to love, now that you have doubled your weight.'

'Reaally....' she feigned annoyance. 'Getting back to Sandy, I am not giving up.'

'I warn you Pinkky.' He shook his finger threateningly. 'You will not distract Sandy.'

Mandy being a strict disciplinarian believed in following the rules to the letter. One of his rules was that his brother should be treated just like any other cadet, and not be given preference over others. Although he lived in the campus, Sandy was prohibited from visiting the bungalow unless there was an emergency.

The 'emergency clause' was tactfully exploited by the homesick Sandy and his wily bhabi. Our pal not only barged into the bungalow whenever he wanted comfort food, he also managed to drag some of us for a meal to his brother's house. Of course, all this was done in complete secrecy during Mandy's absence. The delighted Pinkky bhabi doled out chicken soup for our starved souls even as she fed the fodder of gossip into our willing ears.

To cut the long story short, she turned out to be the perfect guardian angel for Sandy and his cronies.

Two months of her whining finally yielded some concessions in her husband's rules. Mandy promised to loosen his purse strings for a family dinner at a respectable eatery in the city, once a month.

'Only once a month,' he warned his wife. 'No more and no less.'

'Okay, once a month is alright with me.'

On special occasions, Sandy was allowed to take his close buddies to dinner. We were thankful for the small mercies Pinkky bhabi managed to lob into our lives.

The GA (guardian angel) turned out to be our most fruitful link to the other instructors. She single-handedly provided the required fodder for our invaluable dossier on Peacock, CoCo, and Batty. Through her, we learnt about the efforts Peacock's mother was making to locate a suitable bride for him.

'What to do? His mother has very high hopes for him,' sighed Pinkky bhabi, sharing the details with us over crisp pakoras and elaichi chai at her home. 'I brought so many proposals but she rejected them all. She wants nothing less than Miss World for her son. But, of course, the Miss World should also be the most obedient slave.'

'Bhabi, some people are very hard to please,' we supported her views. It never paid to disagree with Pinkky bhabi. She would sulk and withdraw all invitations. A bit of maska worked like a charm on her and we laid it really thick.

‘You are right. He will end up an old bachelor, at this rate.’

The unstinted labour of chaps like Maachh and Porky brought to us the juicy details that inflated the database. Some of the nuggets we had collected about Peacock were:

1. He was a workaholic. One of his favourite pastimes was to creep around the barracks after midnight, looking for evidence of our misconduct.
2. He spent hours in the library, his nose buried in books, cramming his brain cells with more and more information about military matters.
3. He was ambitious and likely to go up many steps in the pyramid of military hierarchy. A Sword of Honour recipient, he was one of the best instructors in the academy.
4. His most prized possession was a gleaming Premier Padmini, which he valued above many other things in life. Each evening, he spent a good hour tinkering with the car. Keeping it in mint condition was an obsession with the Peacock.
5. His mother had been on the lookout for a suitable bride for him. Pundits were spotted going in and out of the bungalow performing various havans and pooja-paaths. Maachh and Porky once stumbled upon a bride viewing session at a restaurant where Peacock, his mother, a young damsel, and her parents had gathered. They returned with exaggerated tales about the blushing Peacock and his aggressive mother.
6. Peacock hadn't found a suitable wife because of his mother's interference in the matter. His mother, a war widow and an experienced lady, knew the worth of her son and would not settle for anything less than a beauty queen. She was hunting for someone with the curves of Zeenat Aman, the eyes of Hema Malini, Sharmila Tagore's dimples, a complexion like Saira Banu, and a smile like Madhubala. Not just these, she was expected to be a competent homemaker, a well-placed professional, and someone who would meekly follow the orders of the old lady. Naturally, such a woman was impossible to find and Captain Vikram Sharma remained a bachelor. The hunt continued and so did the pooja-paath et al.

In CoCo's dossier, we jotted down some priceless points:

1. Like Peacock, CoCo had been a trailblazer in his salad days. The chap had slowed down a bit after his marriage to a girl from a rich business family.
2. Mrs. Reddy had come with a boxful of gold jewellery, which she treasured more than her husband. CoCo, however, loved his sambhar and dosa more than the gold.
3. The lady had no exposure to army life and was finding it difficult to adjust to life in the cantonment. She missed the carefree chatter of Hyderabad where she had lived all her life. The staid and formal parties were a painful experience for her.
4. Mrs. Reddy was often heard lamenting about her marriage to a dull man with no money, and boasting about her family and their huge, three-storeyed house in Hyderabad.
5. A string of embarrassing blunders committed by Mrs. Reddy during several formal parties had embarrassed the poor officer, so CoCo was trying hard to educate the reluctant wife about the protocols and social etiquettes followed in the army, but the task was proving more difficult than training the GCs of Meiktila Company.

The dossier on Batty was a thin one. Not a social person, he kept away from parties. Even Pinky bhabi knew very little about him.

1. The straightforward officer had been divorced by his wife after a few years of marriage since he paid more attention to his profession than to her. While he didn't miss her much, it was his six-year-old son he missed the most.
2. For the past year, many matrons in the academy had tried to get him interested

in their sisters and nieces, without any success.

3. Though not the partying kind, the true makke-di-roti and sarson-da-saag-te-ik-glass-lassi guy was a man who loved his Patiala peg in the privacy of his den.

4. Caged within the stern exterior was a kind and compassionate heart. Any cadet who had mustered up the courage to seek Batty's help had never returned empty-handed. His bark was never followed by a bite.

5. The love of his life was Fireball, a motorcycle he had bought as a young captain. Although he now drove a white ambassador, the vintage bike remained his prize possession. Sundays saw Batty sitting astride the machine, his photographic equipment slung across his shoulders, on his way to the nearby hills in search of creative snapshots.

6. Batty's passion for photography was a well-kept secret. No one knew where he went on Sunday mornings, riding his Fireball with a secret smile playing on his lips. Pinky bhabhi sighed and made a telling statement, 'When a wife is not there, where does a man go?' Her cryptic words did the rounds of Chinese Whispers and ended with the surmise that Batty had a luscious mistress in town. It was only when he won a prize in a photography contest that the mystery of his Sunday morning sprees was unravelled. Everyone agreed that he had an alternate profession just in case he wanted to quit the army.

We collected the tiny bits of information that came our way and gloated over our achievements, pleased with the thought that not many GCs in the academy were privy to such vital information about the instructors.