



ON THE DOUBLE

DRILLS, DRAMA, AND DARE-DEVILRY AT
THE INDIAN MILITARY ACADEMY



TANUSHREE PODDER

ROLI BOOKS



ON THE DOUBLE

DRILLS, DRAMA, AND DARE-DEVILRY AT
THE INDIAN MILITARY ACADEMY



TANUSHREE PODDER

ROLI BOOKS



Tanushree is a self-confessed word-a-holic and a traveller. When not reading or writing books, she's sure to be packing her bags and boots to zip around the world. A true maverick, she stumbled through many career choices before settling on writing.

A chocolate addict with a penchant for the unusual, she has collected dozens of interesting certificates that range from a wine-master's assistant at Australia, an international reindeer driving licence from Lapland, to one from 'The School of Hard Knocks' at Royal Selangor.

After leading a nomadic life for several decades, thanks to the Indian Army, she has finally grown roots at Pune. Tanushree can be contacted on her website – <http://www.tanushreepodder.com>

OTHER BOOKS BY TANUSHREE PODDER

Boots Belts Berets

Escape from Harem: A Mughal saga of romance, revenge and retribution

No Margin for Error: A Tale of Bravery and Brotherhood set in the Indian Army

OTHER INDIAINK TITLES

Anjana Basu	Black Tongue
Anjana Basu	Chinku and the Wolfboy
Anuradha Majumdar	Infinity Paper: A mysterious quest, an unforgettable adventure
Boman Desai	Servant, Master, Mistress
Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni	Shadowland
Claudine Le Tourneur d'Ison	Hira Mandi
C.P. Surendran	An Iron Harvest
I. Allan Sealy	The Everest Hotel
I. Allan Sealy	Trotternama
Indrajit Hazra	The Garden of Earthly Delights
Jaspreet Singh	17 Tomatoes: Tales from Kashmir
Jawahara Saidullah	The Burden of Foreknowledge
John MacLithon	Hindutva, Sex & Adventure
Kalpana Swaminathan	The Page 3 Murders
Kalpana Swaminathan	The Gardener's Song
Kamalini Sengupta	The Top of the Raintree
Lavanya Arvind Shanbaoug	The Heavens We Chase
Madhavan Kutty	The Village Before Time
Pankaj Mishra	The Romantics
Paro Anand	I'm Not Butter Chicken
Paro Anand	No Guns at My Son's Funeral
Paro Anand	Pure Sequence
Paro Anand	Wingless
Paro Anand	Weed
Rakesh Satyal	Blue Boy

Ranjit Lal	Bambi Chops and Wags
Ranjit Lal	The Life &Times of Altu-Faltu
Ranjit Lal	The Small Tigers of Shergarh
Ranjit Lal	The Simians of South Block and Yumyum Piglets
Sanjay Bahadur	The Sound of Water
Sanjay Bahadur	Hul: Cry Rebel!
Selina Sen	A Mirror Greens in Spring
Shandana Minhas	Tunnel Vision
Sharmistha Mohanty	New Life
Shree Ghatage	Brahma's Dream
Sudhir Thapliyal	Crossing the Road
Susan Visvanathan	Nelycinda and Other Stories
Susan Visvanathan	The Visiting Moon
Susan Visvanathan	The Seine at Noon

ON THE DOUBLE

DRILLS, DRAMA, AND DARE-DEVILRY AT
THE INDIAN MILITARY ACADEMY

TANUSHREE PODDER



ROLI BOOKS

This digital edition published in 2019

First published in 2015 by

The Lotus Collection

An Imprint of Roli Books Pvt. Ltd

M-75, Greater Kailash- II Market

New Delhi 110 048

Phone: ++91 (011)40682000

Email: info@rolibooks.com

Website: www.rolibooks.com

Copyright © Tanushree Podder, 2015

All rights reserved.

No part of this publication may be reproduced, transmitted, or stored in a retrieval system, in any form or by any means, whether electronic, mechanical, print reproduction, recording or otherwise, without the prior permission of Roli Books. Any unauthorized distribution of this e-book may be considered a direct infringement of copyright and those responsible may be liable in law accordingly.

eISBN: 978-81-939846-8-0

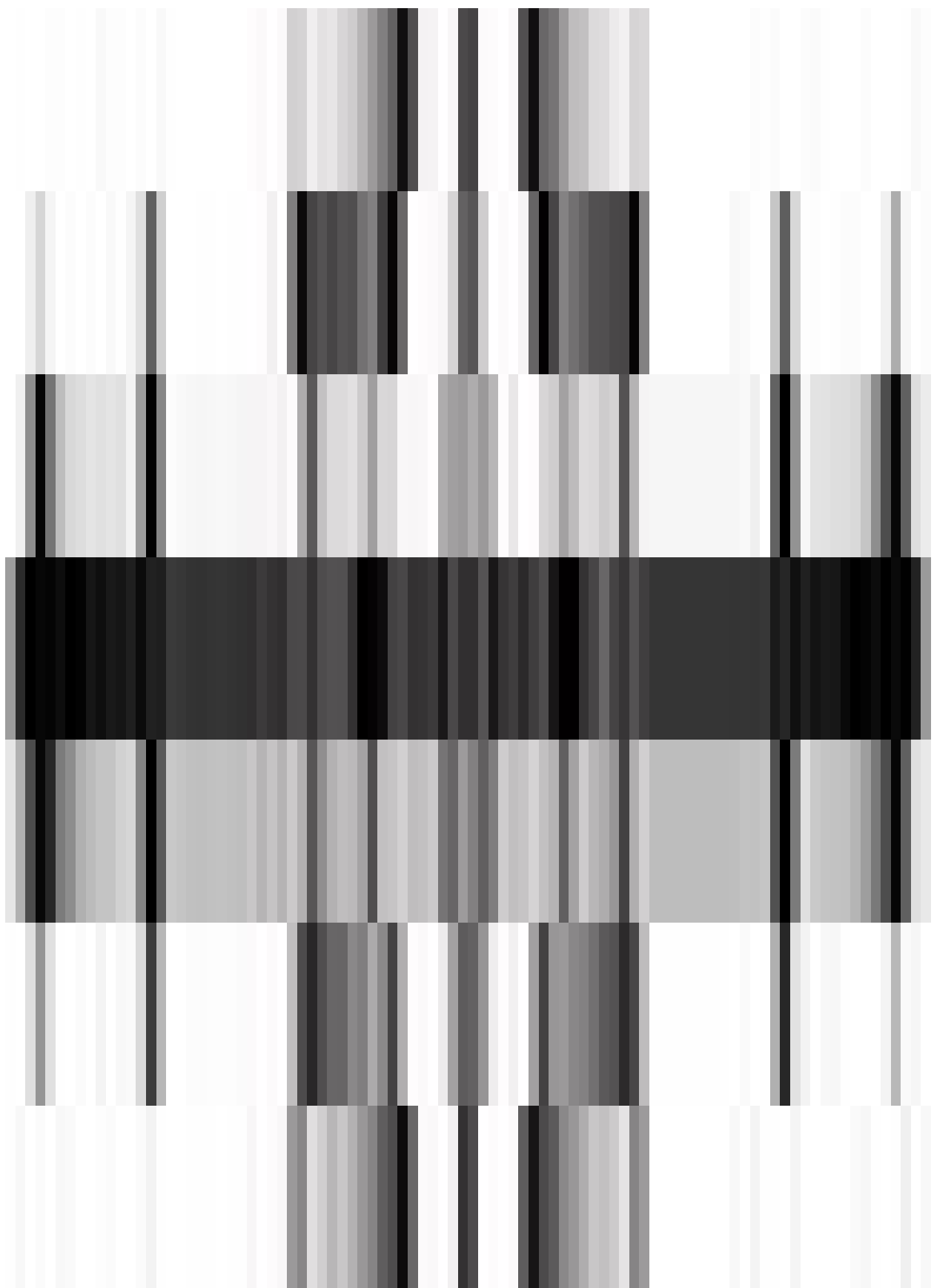
All rights reserved.

This e-book is sold subject to the condition that it shall not, by way of trade or otherwise, be lent, resold, hired out, or otherwise circulated, without the publisher's prior consent, in any form or cover other than that in which it is published.

Ours not to reason why, ours but to do and die

–Alfred Lord Tennyson

PROLOGUE



Not every book has a sequel and not every author writes one. I consider myself fortunate to find the opportunity to pen a sequel.

Not long after *Boots Belts Berets* hit the stands, I was asked by countless readers if I had plans of writing a sequel. And when I went for a book reading at the Indian Military Academy, a lot of Gentlemen Cadets posed the same question.

The logic was simple. While NDA prepares the young men for the profession, it is at the IMA where their skills are honed and polished. So, any book that speaks about the life of cadets-in-training has to cover both the academies. The training at NDA and IMA is comparable to the best in the world. And I would say, better than even Sandhurst in the UK, and West Point in the USA. A tour of the academies and interactions with the cadets reinforced that belief in my mind.

Boots Belts Berets was conceptualized as a platform to dispel some stereotypical images from civilian minds, created mainly by the movies. It was geared to provide the readers with an idea about what goes behind the making of a smart, dedicated, and efficient soldier. Most books about the army are serious in nature. It was here that I decided to differ. My book was cool and humorous so that youngsters could relate to it easily. The result was achieved when many cadets told me that they gifted the book to their friends, girlfriends, and families to familiarize them with life in the academies.

Although I have been flooded with requests for a sequel, it took a while to write since I was working on *Escape from Harem*, which being a historical romance, was far removed from the world of cadets.

On the Double came to my mind during the reunion of my husband's course at the NDA. When we stayed for a weekend in one of the squadrons with his course-mates and their wives, where they recalled memories of their training days, it was an eye-opener. The officers dropped their ranks and greeted each other just like teenaged boys. Among them were the soon-to-be Chiefs of the Indian Army and Air Force – General Dalbir Singh Suhag and Air Chief Marshal Arup Raha – a factor of pride amongst the course-mates.

The camaraderie and unpretentious behavior impressed me and the ball was set rolling. I began working on *On the Double*. Several story lines and discussions with the husband followed. In *Boots Belts Berets*, the characters were very clear

in my mind. Although there was a protagonist, his friends were equally important to the story. The character of Maachh was an intrinsic part of the book. His mischief and misfortune have been interwoven so intricately into the story that it was impossible for me to identify the real protagonist. It was difficult to visualize the sequel without Maachh and his pranks. His optimism and reckless attitude, along with his irrepressible spirit forms the crux of the story in *On the Double*.

Some of the original characters, like Bertie Rebello and Natty, have been replaced by others. This was necessitated by the fact that the NDA cadets who are chosen for the air force and navy continue the advanced training at their respective academies, while the ones who are selected for the army go on to the IMA.

On the Double begins where Boots Belts Berets left off, though it is not necessary to read the first to enjoy the second. Each chapter is a humorous account and each character is a memorable one.

Like the previous volume, this book is also set in the seventies. This was when my husband was training at the academy. There were twelve companies in the IMA at the time. The average age of the young men who passed out from the NDA and arrived there was nineteen. The young cadets had the same natural tendencies and obsessions as their counterparts elsewhere. They strove to steal moments of fun while going through the rigorous training. Although there was no ban against ragging, in *On the Double*, I have created a commandant who disliked ragging because of painful personal experiences. Much to the displeasure of Maachh and his associates, ragging was forbidden.

Much seems to have changed in the academy, and yet, nothing has actually changed. The ethos, training, and attitude remain the same. Young cadets enter the hallowed portals of the Indian Military Academy with stars in their eyes, patriotism in their hearts, and a never-say-die attitude. They go through the same experiences and escapades, suffer the same hardships with a smile, and find ways and means to distract themselves and deal with their natural instincts.

I am sure all the officers who have gone through the academy will identify with the episodes, and the wannabe officers will hopefully find them inspirational.

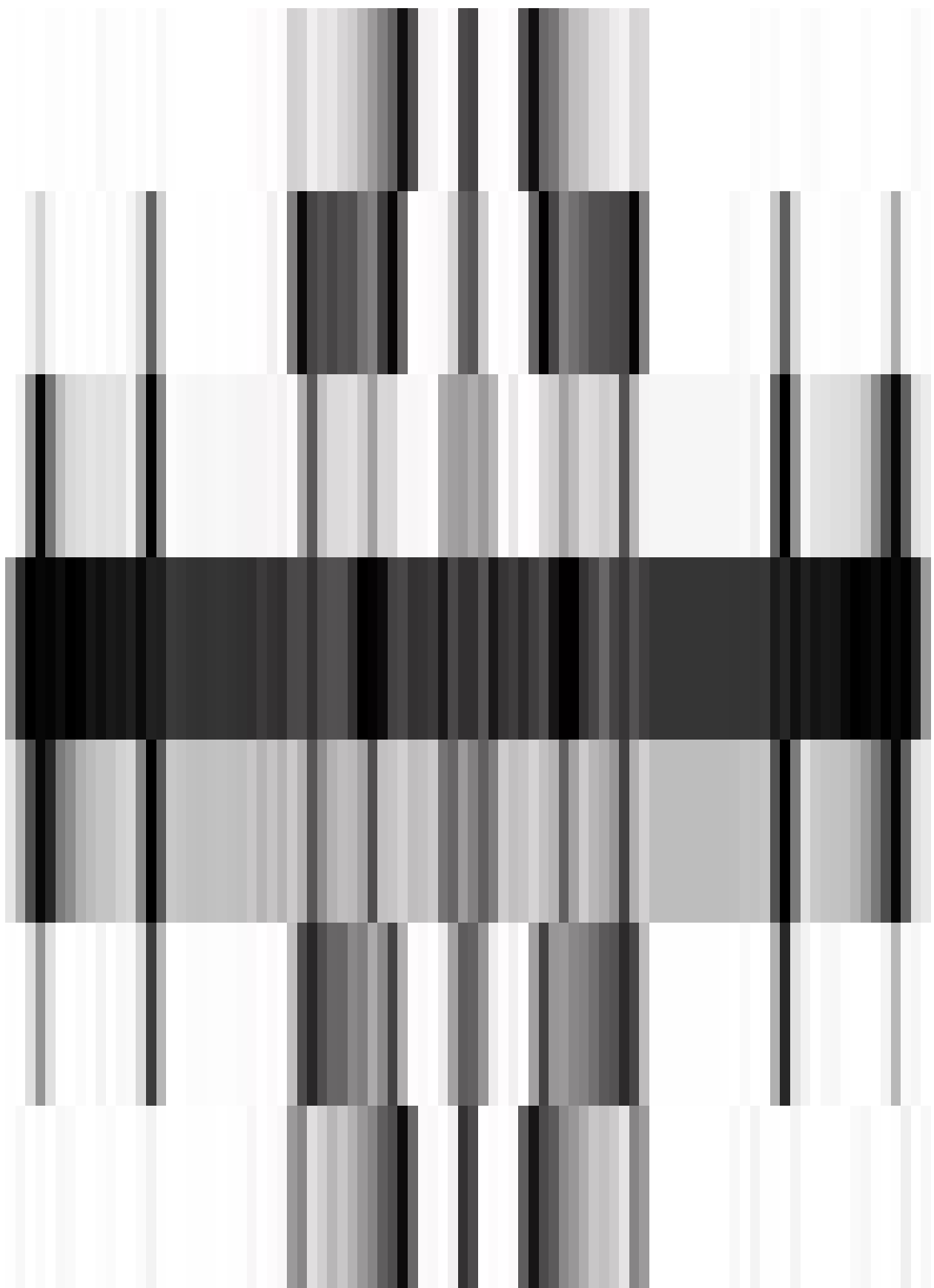
To the query, will there be a sequel to the sequel, let me reply – who knows what

may happen?

Tanushree Podder

2015

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?’

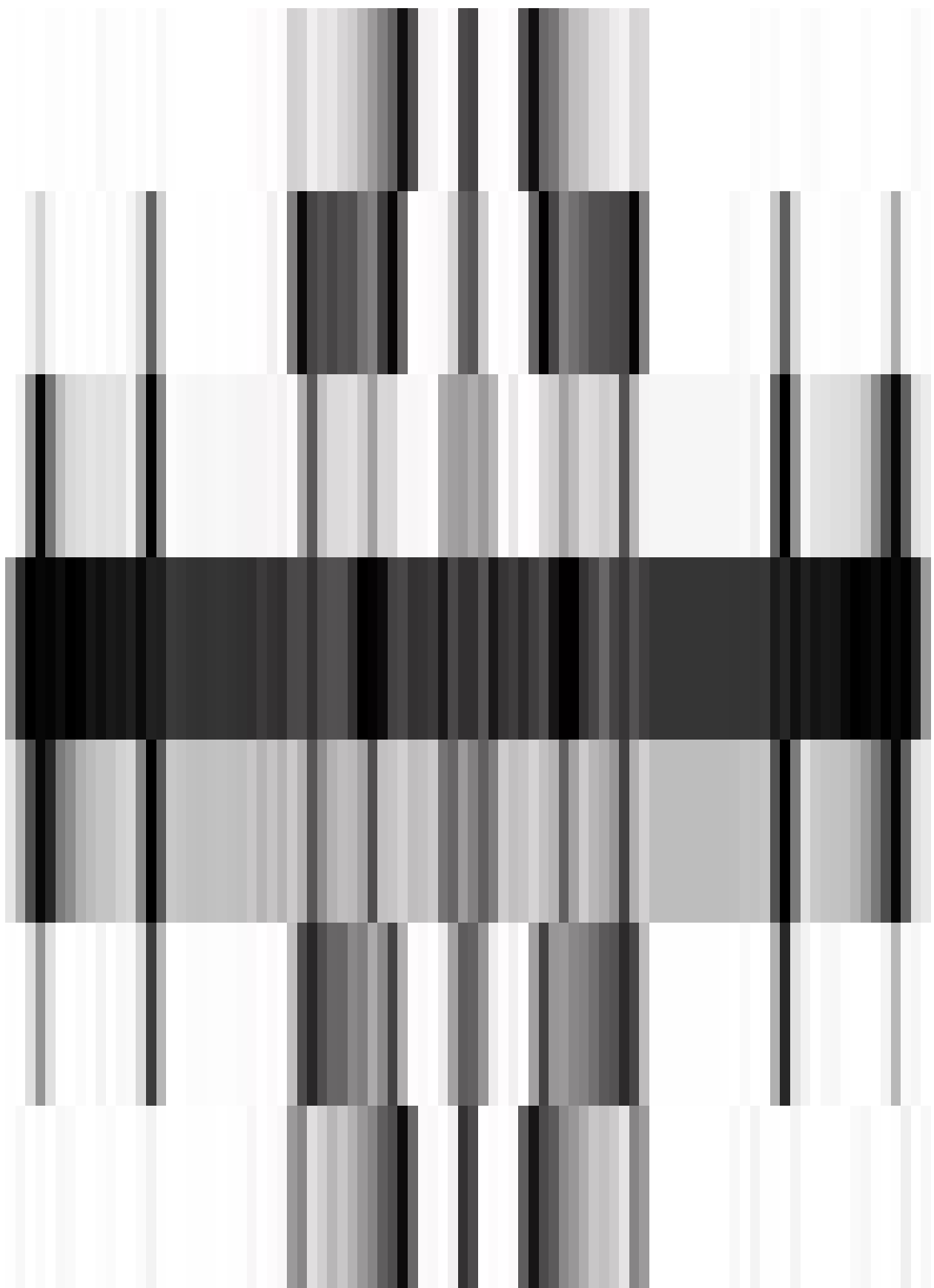
‘Don’t ask,’ Porky’s expression told the story of his tragedy. ‘The journey was such a pain. Imagine, running all over the platforms trying to find a train going to Dehradun and then travelling without reservation. I couldn’t even find a place to sit on the train.’

‘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.

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.

THREE



A study on moustaches in the academy would have resulted in a rather enlightening thesis. The variety could easily fetch a doctorate for a diligent researcher on whiskers. Porky's attempt to grow a Clark Gable moustache resulted in a scanty pencil style, much to his frustration. His fascination for the rakish actor peaked after he watched the Hollywood classic *Gone with the Wind* seven times in as many weeks, not to mention his obsession with Vivien Leigh. That was before he discovered Omar Sharif's *Dr. Zhivago*. Post *Dr. Zhivago*, he switched loyalties from Vivien Leigh and Clark Gable to Omar Sharif and Julie Christie; this entailed switching over to a Sharif-like moustache.

Zora had a stylish growth that defied imitation. As for Maachh, towards the end of our time at the NDA, he took to sporting a beetlelike thick growth on his upper lip, which failed to bring the desired distinctive touch, but it definitely helped in filling the gap between his lips and nose. It was as comical as the rest of him.

While on the subject of moustaches, it would not be amiss to mention the one that adorned my upper lip. The impressive butterfly was my strength and my pride.

Just as we had opted for different kinds of moustaches, each of us had a unique personality. After the six terms at NDA, there was nothing we didn't know about each other.

Porky was an unadulterated optimist. He never could spot the thorns in the rose bush. The path of life was paved with sweet smelling roses as far as he was concerned. Nothing, not even the toughest times could splinter his dreams. It was his generosity that made most cadets sponge on him for whatever funds and resources he possessed. He was steeped in the milk of human kindness and no one who knew him could deny that. Good humoured and tolerant, Porky was the stuff loyal friends were made of. When his exuberant laughter echoed across the corridors of the academy, the dullest of souls rejoiced and sprang up like sunflowers sighting the sun. No exaggeration here!

What made Porky and Maachh an unusual combination was the steadfast way the former would follow the latter's foolhardy plans. Their affinity was indeed a perplexing phenomenon as the two were as different as brinjal and beef. Perhaps

it was their common passions – food, girls, and pranks – that drew them together in the first place. The endless punishments during the six terms spent in the NDA did nothing to sober up the duo.

Each of us had a different reason for joining the army. Maachh joined the academy to fulfil his father's dreams. During his youth, Maachh's father had failed to clear the medicals for the NDA because of his flat foot. The ambitious father did what every ambitious father sets out to do – ensure that his progeny fulfil his own dreams. And so an unwilling Maachh found himself appearing for the examinations to join the academy. Unfortunately, he cleared all the tests and made it to the NDA. The poor sod, who had all along nursed an ambition to don the chef's cap, ended up wearing a beret.

For Porky, it was the love for his motherland that landed him in the academy. The guy truly believed that he was capable of ushering in good times for the country by joining the army. Quite an idealist, he believed that a handful of good people could reform the country.

'I am not brainy enough for the IAS, so the army is the next best thing,' he told everyone. 'At least I can protect the nation, even if I can't administer it.'

Though many believe that the poor sod had been dropped on his head by a careless nurse the day after he was born, I didn't subscribe to that notion. A bit rusty in the brain department, he had amazing stamina and could outrun everyone in the NDA, which earned him the moniker ghoda.

As the only son of an army JCO (Junior Commissioned Officer), the burden of uplifting his family's social status rested on Porky's shoulders. The weight of their aspirations would have taken a toll on a lesser soul, but not our pal. The dutiful son's single point agenda was to make his parents proud. Although he was making huge efforts to get there, it was not likely that he would take any laurels home. The onus to prove himself was too much for poor Porky, who at the best of times was barely capable of keeping himself afloat.

Sandy was the perfect pal, always willing to help a friend in trouble. Apart from being an honest, upright and a dependable person, the chap's ability to crack jokes had diffused many explosive situations at various stages of our training. His wit and humour came in handy whenever we fell out with rival gangs.

His grandfather brought home a Victoria Cross during World War II; his father's

uniform was decorated with a string of decorations and now he was expected to do his bit for the country. Sandy was the third generation alpha male from his family serving the Armed Forces. Unfortunately, he was not the first in his generation to do so. His brother, Mandy aka Captain Maninder Singh, had beaten him to the job.

As luck would have it, Mandy, the smart young Captain, was posted as the Platoon Commander in Naushera Company at the IMA. Mandy's presence was both a fortunate and an unfortunate matter depending on one's interpretation of such situations in life – much like the half-full glass, I would say. The fortunate part was that Sandy had a morale booster in the vicinity, and the unfortunate matter was that the two rarely met socially, since Mandy believed it would be considered improper if they did.

Even the infrequent meetings during special occasions, like birthdays, was arranged at a restaurant, outside the campus. Captain Maninder Singh never entertained his brother at home for the fear of being labelled a biased officer.

Named after the famous General Zorawar Singh, an Indian war-hero, Zora was perfect officer material. The Rajput excelled at the NDA, beating all of us hollow in almost all subjects – academic and practical. Our Zora was his family's pride and hope.

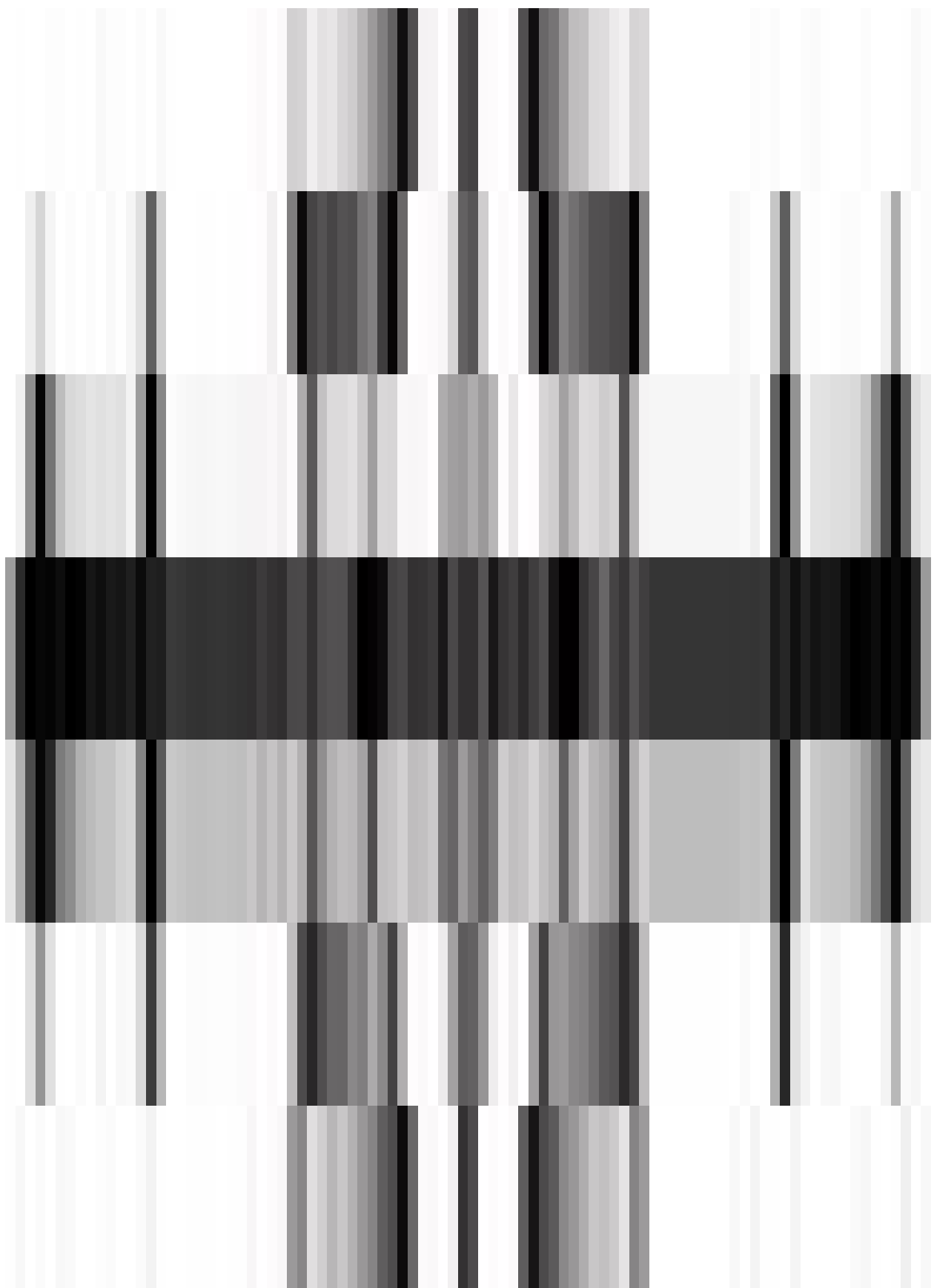
Like Sandy, Zora had a regal bearing; maybe it was his Rajput ancestors that passed on some royal genes to the chap. Once he was in his cups, the guy was given to boasting about a lineage that sprouted some relatives close to the throne in an obscure part of Mewar.

At this point, it is necessary to explain my reasons for being in the academy. Mine was purely an act of defiance. Born into a family of doctors and engineers, I refused to follow either of these professions. Just after school, while my father insisted I sit for medical entrance examinations, I filled up the form for the entrance examination to the NDA. With that single act of rebellion, I found myself listed as the first black sheep of the family to be quoted as an example for generations to come. For this reason alone, I had to prove myself time and again to my disapproving pater. While others could afford to be lackadaisical, I had to sweat it out through the training at NDA and now through IMA.

From five feet two, I had shot up to six feet one in the three years spent at the

NDA and attained a physique of a starving man through no fault of my own. It was genes again, I guess. The nervous energy required all the calories that I consumed. According to Maachh's Great Bengal famine theory, I was guilty of the same insecurity that hounded all Bengalis. He also felt we both shared an intense intellectual look, which, in his opinion, was the reason for our bonhomie.

FOUR



Along with our gang, there were three other familiar faces in the Meiktila Company.

The hefty and serious Jat, Shamsheer Chand – a.k.a. Mooli – named after the root vegetable for many reasons, was an uncomplicated but obstinate fellow. Once he got stuck on an issue, no argument, however sane, could untangle the knots in his head. From an early age, Mooli had veered towards brawn, giving a wide berth to anything that required the exercise of brain. The Jat was a loyal friend and proved to be an ideal companion if one could avoid getting into an argument or a brainy discussion with him.

The most lethal mix was Maachh and Mooli in a boiling cauldron. When and if they got into a squabble, it was safer to remain no closer than a kilometre away from the duo.

Sabby, the fun-loving Punjabi, a show-off and a braggart, was next. His only pastime was to ogle girls. Age didn't matter to him. Any woman between the age of 12 and 50 could occupy his mind for a reasonable period of time. Material pursuits were Sabby's mainstay. Intellectual goals were absolutely insignificant. Although not a handsome fellow in the strictest terms, he was passable when smartly attired. Since he did have an impressive wardrobe and a big collection of after shave lotions, it was not too difficult to attract the opposite sex. Or so we thought.

His mastery over the national language, sprinkled with a few couplets in Urdu, could make women swoon. Sabby was justly proud of his knowledge of Bollywood, and excelled in parroting dialogues from the latest blockbusters. All this added up to a fairly impressive personality as far as some girls were concerned. For long, Maachh had tried to replicate Sabby's skill without much success. The couplets that the Punju could recite flawlessly sounded comical when repeated by the Bong in a hilarious accent.

And then, there was 'Makkhi' Sharma, the guy who held the record of having won every single boxing bout, in the makkhi (fly) weight category, at the NDA. Makkhi was immune to every distraction. Single-minded in the pursuit of a boxing championship, he had decided to defer all other matters for a later date. He was obsessed with the sport. Be it diet, exercise, or reading – everything was

aimed towards bettering his punch. ‘Knockout’ was the only word in his dictionary.

Women, pranks, movies... nothing could sidetrack the guy. The only concession he made was to music. Makkhi’s collection of music was every cadet’s envy.

Each of these guys was a character beyond description, with funny quirks and foibles. The pseudonyms were just an extension of their personality.

It was as though nothing had changed since the days at the NDA; only the set-up was different. Here we were, looking forward to another session of high-grade training designed to turn us into loyal and brave soldiers. Together, we had metamorphosed from lanky teenagers into lean, mean fighting machines at the NDA.

It was a perfect morning as we chatted and back-slapped each other, ribald jokes pepping up our spirits. Truth be told, we were kicking up quite a ruckus when the door to the room on my right opened; the very same room on which the nameplate read ‘Joseph Rodrigues’.

He entered the scene like a hero. Throwing us a serious look, he strutted closer and held out his hand.

One by one, we shook his proffered hand, grimacing over the hard clasp. The chap was a hefty six footer with a body like Dharmendra. A mop of tight curls clasped his scalp like an ardent lover; the once fair skin was sunburnt with constant exposure. His sharp features made him look like a film star. The macho aura he exuded was enough to calm us down. The thin moustache went well with the ruggedly-handsome features. With a nose, broken – probably during a boxing bout – he looked tough yet vulnerable. He didn’t walk; he glided majestically. We gaped reverently.

We belonged to rival camps. We, from the NDA, considered ourselves elites and superior to the likes of Rodrigues, who was a direct entry (DE) into the IMA. While we had gone through three years of military training, the direct entrants had graduated from various colleges and opted for the army. Unlike those from the NDA, who entered the third term directly and trained for two terms at the IMA, the DEs had to undergo four terms of training.

The rivalry between the two groups was legendary. While the DEs thought that

they were more educated, the NDA cadets took pride in their six terms of professional training.

The sole advantage the NDA cadets had over the fresh entrants was that they were a large group and already shared a steel-strong bond, while the direct entrants operated in the solo till they formed their gangs. In fact, the entire lot of cadets coming to the IMA from NDA were my course mates. We were 170 in number and that made us a majority group amongst the 350 odd Gentlemen Cadets in our batch.

After exchanging pleasantries, Joe sauntered off to his room. As soon as his door clicked shut, we began venting our opinions about the guy.

‘Some body, that!’ remarked Sandy, who had long been working out to attain a six pack and managed just four. He sucked in his belly and examined himself. ‘I would love to get those muscles.’

‘He looks cool, man,’ said Makkhi, who considered himself an expert on the subject. Though puny of body, the fly prided himself on his vast knowledge of muscle-matters. ‘One day I want to have a body like Joe’s,’ he sighed.

‘What confidence!’ I added.

‘Must not have got a job in the Civvy Street, so he decided to join the army,’ was Maachh’s acrid opinion. ‘He is not in the same league as us so I don’t think we should give him undue importance.’

Clearly, the Fish was jealous of Joe’s physique and would spare no effort to run him down.

As expected, Porky agreed, ‘Yeah, I am sure of that. That body has come from many months of having nothing to do except juggling weights.’

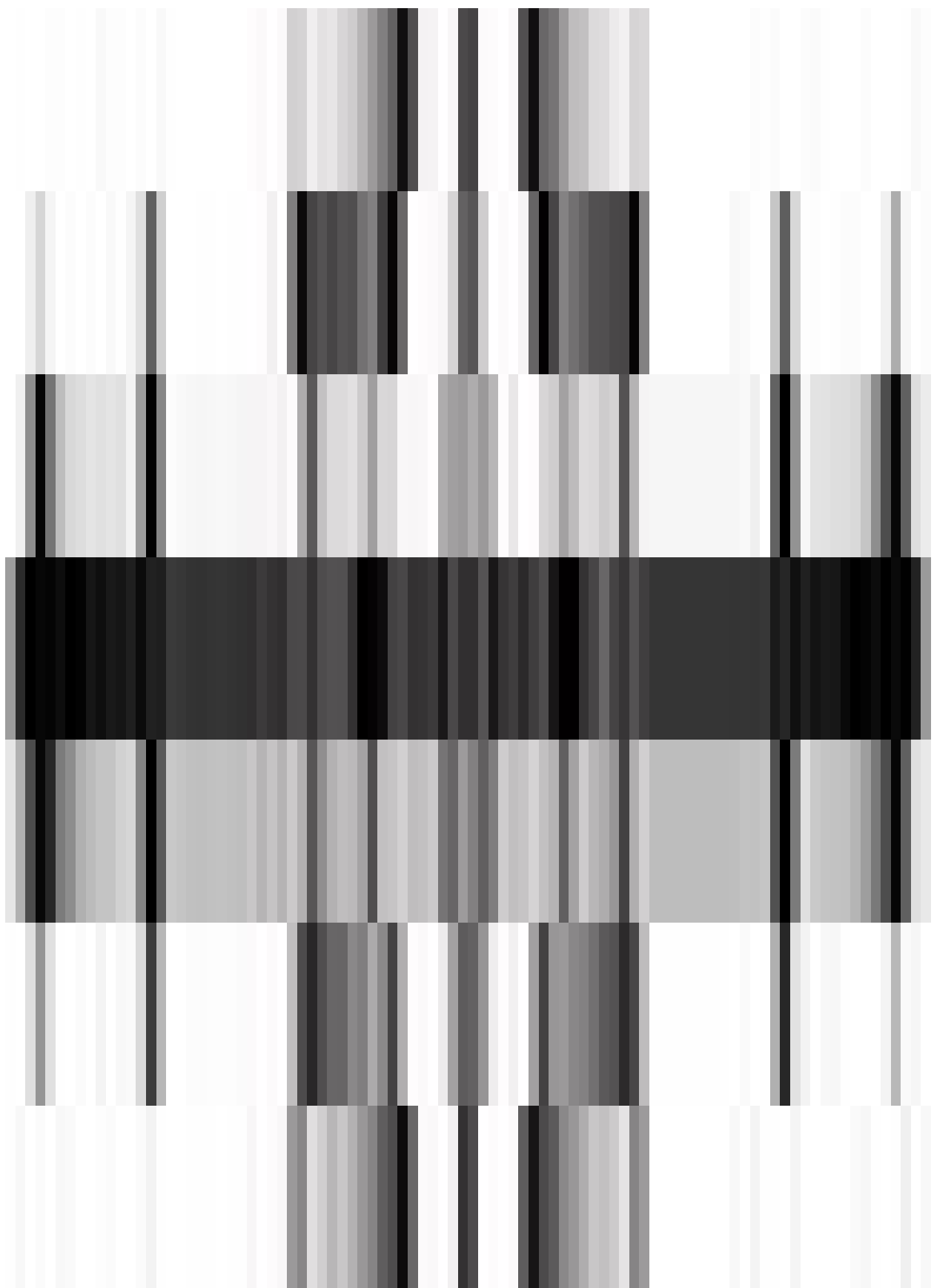
‘Such show-offs should be banned from joining the army.’

‘I agree, totally.’

‘Shut up you morons! He has an impressive personality and that’s that,’ came Sandy’s rebuke. ‘I know of guys who would give their right arm for a body like that and you know it, too.’

Sandy's statement silenced both Maachh and Porky, but only for the moment.

FIVE



‘We are always on the double,’ lamented Porky, munching on wafers a couple of evenings later.

The four of us were sprawled across my cabin, resting our exhausted bodies after a gruelling hour of running around the campus. In fact, we had been on our feet the entire morning.

Porky couldn’t have been more precise. Life had to be lived on the double at the academy. Whether it was the morning classes or the meals, we were literally on the run all the time.

‘My knees have become wobbly, and with the adrenaline perpetually rushing through my body, I feel like a junkie on a constant high,’ Maachh stated dramatically.

‘Welcome to the mice club,’ smirked Sandy. ‘All ye lazy and pooped mice be warned; you will soon be exterminated.’

‘Is this a Nazi camp to push the bushed ones into gas chambers with music playing at crescendo?’ countered Maachh.

‘Don’t complain,’ Sandy admonished. ‘Think positive! All this running is not a waste. It will build up your stamina. If nothing else, you will be successful in running in the opposite direction when the enemy arrives.’

‘Hmmp!’ Maachh’s snort expressed his view tersely.

Fatigue was a word that couldn’t be whispered even in our dreams. It was taboo. Soldiers didn’t get exhausted, we were told. They are supposed to have been born with an inexhaustible supply of energy.

By the end of the first week, we had settled down into a newfound groove. The ruts were getting deeper, anyway. Despite it all, we complained incessantly, because complaining about the regimen was the only way we could let off some steam.

In our spare time, we dissected the traits of our course-mates and instructors. Jokes were swapped on their weaknesses, and their strengths were admired.

There was nothing we didn't know about our NDA course-mates; in some cases we knew them better than they knew themselves. We were thick as thieves, but the DEs were an alien lot. We knew nothing about them.

'The only way to defeat your opponent is to do a SWOT (Strength, Weakness, Opportunity, Threat) analysis on him. Knowing his strengths and weaknesses is your best armament,' Maachh spouted his theory; the guy had a theory on everything. 'I have been doing some research on the subject and it is really effective.'

To a large extent, this was true. Whether in war or peace, discovering the chinks in the armour of one's opponent could make the difference between winning and losing.

Most of the cadets were transparent and easy to read, except Joe. The guy maintained a low profile, making it impossible for us to analyse him. He remained aloof and didn't pair up with anyone. A man of few words, he was different from the rest of the cadets. While all of us spent time playing pranks, malingering, and avoiding tough tasks, he worked hard at becoming an ideal cadet. 'No mischief and no fun' seemed to be his motto. We couldn't complain since he was always polite and helpful.

The guy, as Maachh deduced, was a born moron who didn't know how to enjoy life. Good in academics, outdoors, and physicals, he was unbelievable.

In my opinion, most of the cadets were a little scared of him. No one wanted to cross his path. He was never rude; in fact he was too polite for a cadet. His language was not as colourful as ours, nor was his attitude anything other than that of a tolerant elder brother. Even if we studied him under a microscope, I doubt if we would have been able to discover anything fishy about him.

I guess it was his stand-offish attitude that caused his unpopularity amongst the more boisterous cadets. No one likes a cold fish, and Joe was exactly that; a cold fish, a wet blanket, a spiked wall.

As we had expected from the very first day, Maachh turned into his bitterest critic and enemy. The guy could be trusted to find some bones to pick with almost everyone, and in this case, he found plenty of them. He spared no opportunity to run down the poor fellow. No two adversaries could have been more dissimilar. Joe – brawny and fair – stood heads taller than the slight and

dark Maachh. While the Goan slogged like an ant before the monsoon, the Bong was like the grasshopper that sang through good weather and lamented later. The handsome hunk was a loner, while the Fish was born with a herd mentality.

‘Look, that guy has done us no harm. There is no point in needling him,’ I rebuked Maachh after he had spent fifteen precious minutes running him down.

If the Fish had any trace of grey matter in his pea-sized brain, he would have kept out of the Goan’s way. But given his preference for lobbing stones at sleeping dogs, he never heeded my advice. That he got bitten each time is another story. For some strange reason Joe had become his favourite foe.

My reply didn’t please the Bong.

‘You are taking his side?’ he asked belligerently. ‘Et tu Brute! ...And to think that you were amongst my best friends in the NDA!’

He looked comical as he quoted Shakespeare. I couldn’t control my laughter. That proved to be the last straw. Infuriated, he stomped off to his room vowing to get the better of his foe – Joe.

The passing of years had not brought him any maturity. He was a mischief-maker and destined to remain one, forever.

Nothing comes easy in this world. Joe’s muscular body hadn’t come easy, either. It was the result of years of sweat and snot. I learnt this on the second morning, when rubbing my eyes in the semi-darkness, I watched him working out with his weights on the verandah outside. Wearing just a pair of shorts, his muscles rippling in the faint light of the dawn, he spent an hour groaning, snorting, and panting as he went through his exercises that included a hundred sit-ups and some weird twisting of the body in yoga postures.

Since we got more than our fair share of exercise at the IMA, no one wanted to expend a single extra calorie on working out, but then again, Joe was not one of us. He wanted more out of everything in life. We had heard rumours that he had joined the army because his father, Colonel Sebastian Rodrigues, was killed while tackling insurgents. Despite all opposition from his mother, Joe decided to follow in his father’s footsteps because he wanted to eliminate insurgency from the face of the earth.

Gurpreet Bhatti, Gary for short, who occupied the room next to Joe, was in complete contrast to him. Another DE, the guy was candid enough to admit that he was here because he couldn't get any other job. Towering over the others, the hefty Sikh walked like Bluto and talked like Gabbar Singh. Whether it was for effect or some other reason, we never did learn why he copied the actor's mannerisms to perfection.

'Yaar, tell me honestly – with so much unemployment in the country, who would give job to a mere graduate? It is only the army which does so,' he drawled. 'This is the only place for the illiterates.'

That did it! The last statement got Maachh hopping mad. He didn't relish the idea of being clubbed in the illiterate category.

'Is that what you feel about the army? I pity you. Why didn't you join the ranks of other literates and grab a degree in management or something and push files for the rest of your life?' Maachh retorted angrily.

'Take a serious look at me, my friend. Do I look the studying kind?' the stupid Surd continued to needle the Bong. 'Besides, I would die of boredom if I had to push files for the rest of my life. No sir, this is the best option for me.'

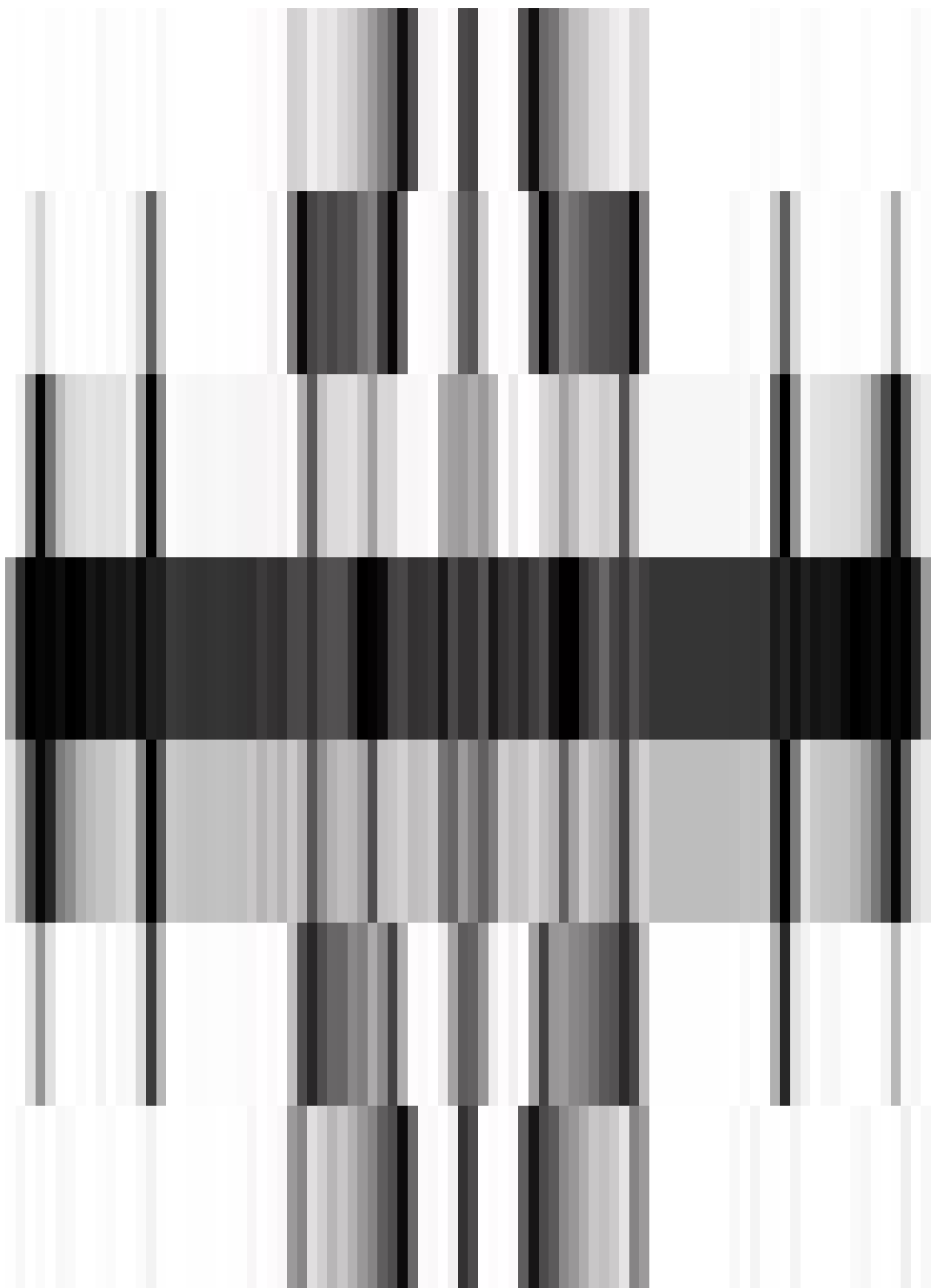
The loyal Maachh took any criticism against the army as a personal affront although he himself cribbed about the army all the time. 'You need not oblige the army, dear friend,' he hissed through clenched teeth. 'It is doing quite well without your priceless contribution.'

'Wrong! The army needs cannon fodder and guys like me are best suited to serve as cannon fodder.'

A self-professed lazy bones, Gary had the amazing skill of sleeping while standing, something that I had only seen cows and horses doing. Gary also had the biggest collection of porn magazines, which he kept hidden under his mattress.

But more on those magazines later.

SIX



Just two weeks old in the academy, Maachh's list of enemies was growing. The two DEs – Joe and Gary – had been allotted premium slots in his hate list. Joe, because he was better than most of us, and Gary because of his politically incorrect views about the army.

The only DE who managed to dig deep inroads into the Bong's heart was Noble Thamburaj from God's Own Country; a docile guy with a dimpled smile. A genial gent, the chap was as noble as his name. Generosity was natural to him. Be it sharing his shaving gel or his guitar, he was willing to lend everything to everyone. His room was like a tiny store, stocked up on things most needed by the cadets.

What vanquished Maachh was the generous supply of banana chips that came from Kerala in a steady supply. Thambi, as he was called, was the heir-in-waiting to a small chips shop started by his grandfather, and now owned by his father. The Thamburaj family fortunes grew as the crisp chips travelled all the way from Idukki to Dubai to grace the plates of the expats in the Gulf countries. Why he had decided to join the army was a complex question that baffled all of us at the academy.

It wasn't long before we became addicted to the chips. Come tea time, and we were to be found with big bowls of the delicious stuff before us. The number of addicts grew steadily, with Noble Thamburaj presiding over his brood.

'The only decent guy amongst the DEs is Thambi,' Maachh stamped his approval. 'The rest are not worth cultivating.'

'He should have been in business, what is he doing at the academy?' commented Sandy, who hated all things oily and 'coconut-ty'. The coconut oil used to fry the chips turned him off. 'Besides, why can't his father peddle good old potato chips fried in regular oil?'

'Just because you can't eat the banana chips doesn't mean that Thambi's father should switch his products to please you,' retorted the loyal Maachh. Won over by the crisps, the Bong was determined to defend Thambi.

One evening, Maachh walked into my room and began venting his spleen.

‘That guy on the other side of your room is a joker. He thinks he is Dharmendra, pumping steel right through the morning outside his room.’

‘What’s wrong with that?’ I asked. ‘He is not harming anyone. Besides, where should he work out, if not in front of his room?’

Frankly speaking, I had no intention of getting involved in this Maachh vs. Joe battle. With our lives careening crazily in the highest gear, it was important to keep all roadblocks at bay. The slightest bump could have us skidding uncontrollably. At the moment, Maachh was the biggest speed breaker and had to be avoided at any cost. His mad ideas could cost me a term.

‘What I mean is that he should exercise silently, without drawing attention to himself. Also, should he not wear a vest, and not snort like a bull? Come to think of it, the guy snorts all the more when he sees me.’

‘Just leave him alone,’ I gritted my teeth to get the message across. ‘I don’t see what his snorting or wearing a vest has got to do with you?’

‘That bloody DE thinks he is one up on the guys from NDA. You don’t understand; he is bent upon humiliating us.’

Maachh could be very exasperating at times, his logic as twisted as a cork screw.

Drawing a deep breath, I tried to reason. ‘Look, it’s time you grew up. This is the IMA, not NDA. And we are GCs, with the G standing for GENTLEMAN so behave like one,’ I counselled.

My response angered Maachh. He was not likely to give up. ‘Go ahead and support him.’ He jabbed a finger in the air and crossed his eyes comically. ‘You will never grow up either, dear Pessi.’

Pessi (short for pessimist), was a moniker I had earned at the NDA because of my cautious nature. Maachh and his group of reckless monkeys had coined that name for me.

That evening, we spotted an angry Maachh snorting as he marched up and down in the verandah, past our rooms, trying to imitate Joe while the Goan continued with his workout. Maachh’s puny efforts at needling Joe were nothing but hilarious and it failed to provide him with the desired result. The hefty cadet

knew that the Bong was trying to provoke him, but he was in no mood to oblige.

He finished his exercise and went back to his room without any sign of irritation. There is nothing more maddening than being snubbed, and an agitated Maachh was determined to further needle his foe. Stepping into Joe's room, he snorted loudly, twice, and drew back quickly. Even that had no effect on Joe.

'Please do not disturb me,' was all that the Goan said.

Knowing Maachh, I was certain that he would not give up.

It was the peak of summer and the nights were hot and unbearable. Not a leaf stirred on the trees around the barrack. Most of the cadets were forced to sleep with their windows open to catch any stray gust of breeze. With a day that began at the crack of dawn, and a hard regimen that drained us of words and vigour, we needed all the sleep we could get.

Our alarms were set for 5 am, and there was a virtual stampede in the morning as we rushed about our routine. Anyone who woke up even a couple of minutes late had to pay a heavy price for tardiness. A missed breakfast was their reward. It was worse for the jangoos (juniors) who got up an hour earlier and ran through their ablutions to make the bathrooms available to us. We started the day on the double.

It was almost midnight, and loud snores resounded as the cadets rested their weary bodies after a hard day. Even an earthquake couldn't have stirred us from our blissful sleep.

There was, however, one cadet who kept himself awake for he was on a mission of his own. Satisfied that everyone was fast asleep, Maachh slipped into Joe's room through the open window. For a few minutes, he stood watching Joe as he slept soundly. Then, smiling devilishly, the wily Fish picked up the table clock and advanced the time by three hours before slinking back to his room.

Maachh knew that a storm would break at 2 am, so he bolted his doors and windows from inside and went to sleep, happy at the thought that he had accomplished his mission. Joe was up at two instead of five in the morning. Rubbing sleep from his eyes, he dressed and emerged from his room for the morning parade without a clue about the time. When he walked out, he found everyone snoring away peacefully. Not a leaf stirred. Not a soul could be spotted

on the grounds.

Joe headed straight for Maachh's room and a storm struck the poor Fish. The entire barrack was awakened by the loud bangs that rained on my neighbour's doors. By the time I emerged from my room, a couple of GCs were trying to pull Joe away from Maachh's door. He was fretting and frothing at the mouth. He knew it was the irrepressible Bong who had played the mischief.

This was the only instance I saw him lose his shirt in the year-long training at the academy.

Thank god for the sturdy doors. Had Joe been able to break it down, it would have been the end of the Bong that night. This time it was not just Joe who wanted Maachh's pound of flesh, but the entire lot of cadets staying in the Meiktila barracks also wanted a tiny bit of his soul. Being woken up at an unearthly hour after an exhausting day was unpardonable. For once, wisdom dawned on the Bong. Sensing the public mood, Maachh refused to emerge from his room.

SEVEN



As the days flew by, life became increasingly gruelling. The training began in earnest, the physical activities revved up far beyond healthy levels. The pounding in our brains grew more pronounced as we tried to cram in the principles, ethics, and values of being an officer. Apart from the physical acrobatics that we were expected to perform, there were the complex and confusing lessons in administration and other tactical matters that needed to be drilled into our heads. From the primitive to the contemporary methods of warfare, we were expected to become walking encyclopaedias on the subject.

Limits were pushed every day till we began to realise that there are no limits in this game; the body just adapts to the demands made on it. As the miles we had to run each morning increased, the physical pain seemed to diminish and our tolerance levels surged. We pushed ourselves some more.

The hours rolled into days, weeks, and months. The mind-numbing physical sessions each morning were geared to push us towards a zero-ego state. For us, zen came at a premium.

As we slogged through the exhausting classes on the finer aspects of warfare, our brains went into autopilot. Words like attack, defence, patrolling, ambush, rescue, and strategy haunted our dreams. There came a stage where I could recite strategies in my sleep.

When we finally hit the sack at the end of the day, we didn't know if we were dead or alive.

A cadet's arch-enemy is the humble alarm clock. It intrudes into his pleasant dreams with a jarring effect. The urge to snatch a few more minutes in bed is irresistible, but we knew the repercussions of succumbing to the bait of the bed. Groaning, we jumped out of slumber each morning, our moods as dark as thunder.

Jogging up to the ground, we would begin torturing our protesting bodies at an unearthly hour, when all other intelligent life was still fast asleep. Stretching, bending, pushing, and pummelling the body to every possible extent, we cursed the instructors and ranted about the injustice of it all.

Once the morning ordeal was over, we dragged ourselves towards the mess for a

quick breakfast, which rarely lasted beyond five minutes. Within seconds, an enormous amount of food disappeared down our gullets. Chewing food was a luxury. We swallowed our food like pythons.

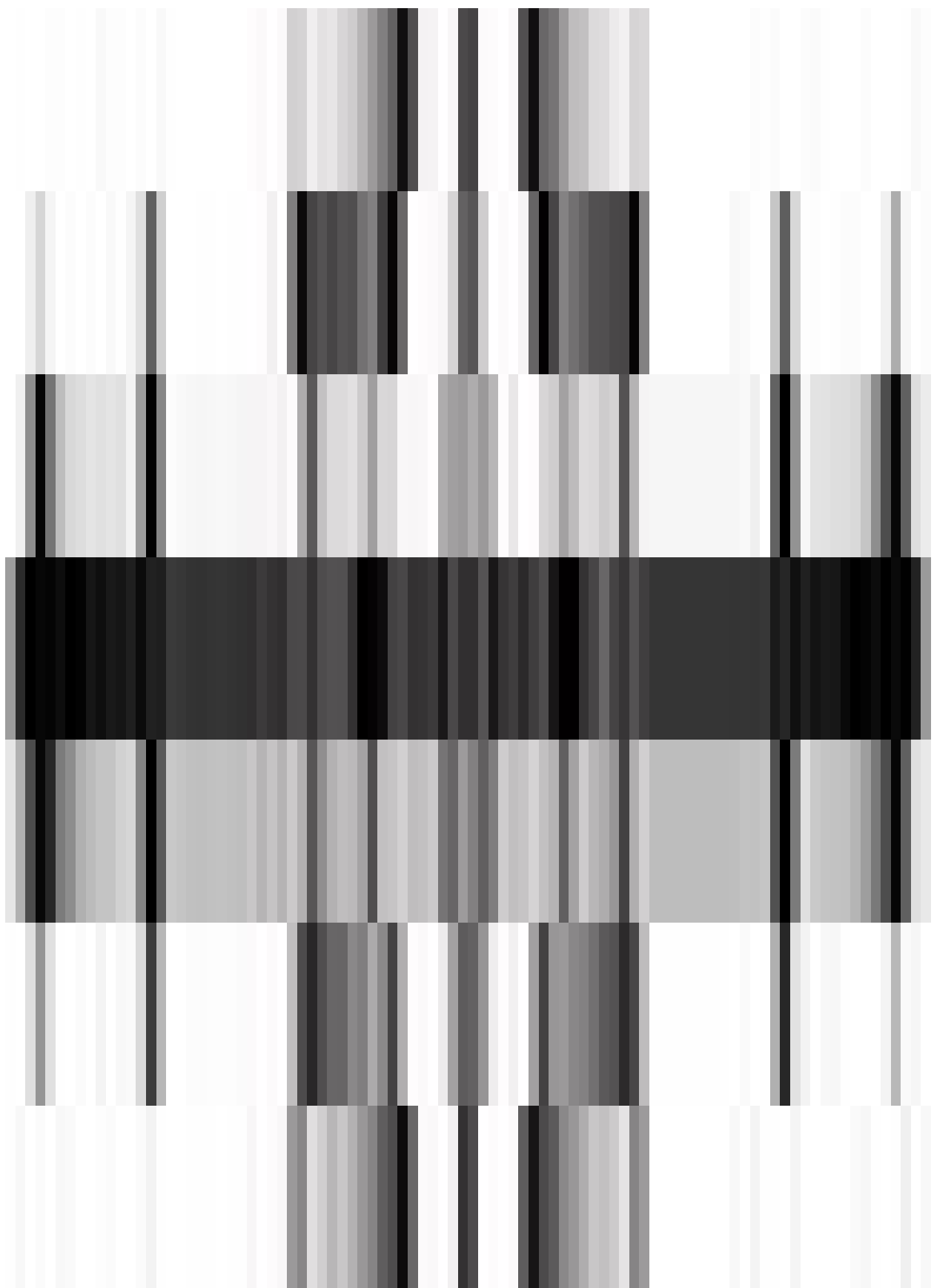
The bicycle issued to us turned out to be our most precious possession. They came with the name of our company and the bike number painted on the rear mudguard. There were, however, a few unfortunate cadets whose bikes were confiscated by the seniors. The seniors, never one to run or walk, had the habit of taking away some jungoo's (fresher's) bike whenever their machine was malfunctioning. The unfortunate jungoo had to run to his classes whenever a senior commandeered his bike.

Getting to class was just half the battle won, keeping one's eyes open was the other half. The weakest amongst the lot gave in first. Within the first few minutes of the class, they could be found snoring gently in the last row struggling not to collapse in a heap over their desks. Those who somehow managed to remain upright for forty minutes without letting their heads hit the desk deserved applause, and those who actually managed to listen and learn deserved laurels.

There were some who had learnt to sleep while keeping their eyes half-open in sitting, standing or crouching positions; while a team of instructors bombarded us with information on tactics, weapon training, night navigation, military history, and a range of other subjects. These stealthy sleepers were the happiest of the lot.

Free time was precious. It had to be used judiciously. This was also the time we could exercise authority on the jangoos. Those with deep pockets spent the time relaxing in their cabins while they ordered some jangoo to run errands for them. The poor chap ran between the cabins and the cafeteria fetching sandwiches, hot dogs, or samosas and cola to satisfy the whims and fancies of the seniors. In return he would be allowed to share the feast with us.

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.

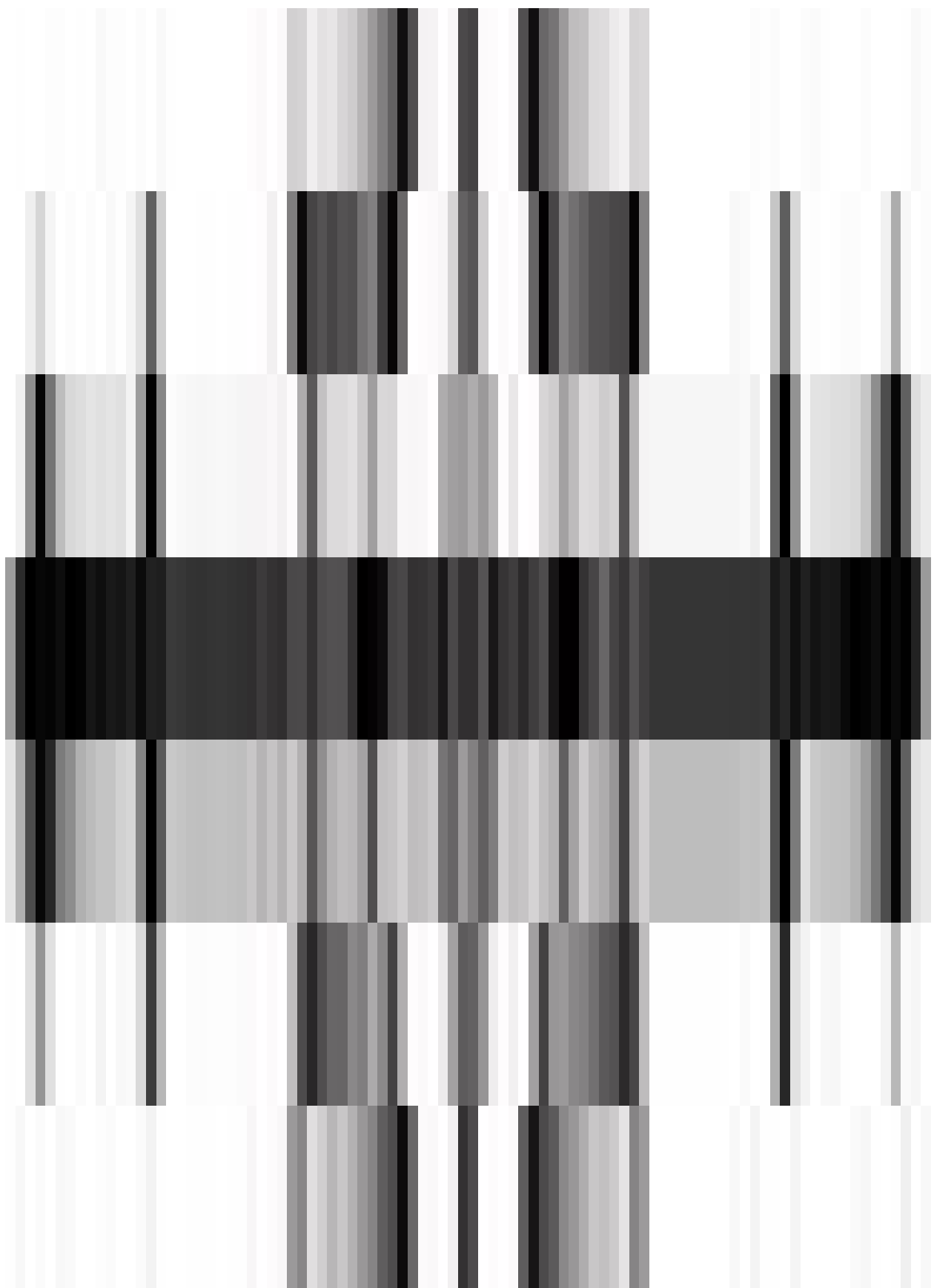
4. Caged within the stern exterior was a kind and compassionate heart. Any cadet who had mustered up the courage to seek Batty's help had never returned empty-handed. His bark was never followed by a bite.

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.

NINE



Though fresh into the academy, we were seniors. Since all the NDA chaps joined directly into the third term, we were automatically granted the privilege of lording over the DEs who were in the first term. To Maachh's frustration, we could not indulge in ragging the jangoos because of the new commandant's anti-ragging dictum that had suddenly come into force.

'I am sure the present commandant's son is joining the academy next year and that is why he is an anti-ragging advocate,' he theorised. 'What is the point in protecting them so much? We went through our share of ragging at the NDA without complaining, and are we not much better for the experience?'

Porky shared his views – 'Yes, now that it is our turn to have a little fun, ragging has to be avoided.'

We all agreed that a bit of fun was harmless, and that it built bridges between the nervous jangoos and the seniors.

Much to our alarm, the Bong was adamant about ragging the juniors.

'I am going to satisfy my ragging urge,' he declared. 'A few rules have to be broken for the sake of my mojo.'

We didn't remind him – mojo or no mojo – he was always breaking and bending the rules anyway.

It was obvious to all of us that Maachh had recently picked up the word 'mojo' and wanted an excuse to use it. His vocabulary had accumulated over a thousand words over the course of our training and he brandished them without blinking. It had begun with Shakespearean phrases and ended with a stray expression in Spanish, Italian, and German, thanks to the movies he watched.

Actually, it was all Porky's fault. He was to be blamed for getting Maachh started on the topic of ragging. He decided to channel his inner William Tell, one night. With infinite patience, the fellow had crafted a bow and some arrows during his carpentry classes at the NDA. Proud of his creation, Porky protected the articles with fierce possessiveness. Not even his closest pals had been able to wheedle him into parting with them for a practice session.

One night, he was suddenly seized with the desire to use one of the jangoos for target practice.

‘It will prove my expertise without doubt,’ he smirked.

‘We could all try our hands,’ seconded Maachh. ‘I bet I can shoot an arrow to a decent distance.’

We were aghast at the idea. This was not NDA where you could get away with some ragging. Using a junior as a target was unheard of. It was a criminal idea.

‘Are you crazy?’ I said, trying to change his mind. ‘If anything goes wrong, you will get thrown out of the academy. You may even land up in prison if the guy gets hurt.’

‘Don’t worry, Pessi,’ Porky replied. ‘Nothing will go wrong.’

With Maachh cheering him on, the joker set out on his mission.

It was a moonlit and peaceful night with not even the hoot of an owl breaking the quiet. The wind rustled softly through the gigantic trees, casting dark shadows on everything around us. It was the witching hour and that made the experience all the more eerie. Certain that the two chaps were on a calamitous path, Sandy and I followed them to the end of the barracks. We were the self-appointed watchdogs.

Maachh and Porky knocked on a few doors and commanded the jangoos to step outside their rooms and line up. There were about eight of them, clad in their pyjamas, rubbing sleep out of their eyes.

‘Good evening guys. It is nice to see you alert and smiling,’ began Porky, addressing the grim faces around him. The fact that not a single face creased in a smile didn’t dent his enthusiasm. ‘Tonight, two of you are going to get lucky. Now, let’s see who are the two lucky bastards who will get to share the experience of a lifetime.’

I felt sorry for the chaps. They didn’t know what was coming. The poor sods fidgeted nervously as they waited for Porky to make up his mind.

The joker, his hands clasped behind him, circled around them importantly,

studying their posture. He rebuked a slouching cadet and straightened him.

After he had gone around twice, Porky singled out two nervous looking jangoos and ordered them to follow him to the clearing near the mango grove beyond our barracks. The rest of them went back to bed, heaving a sigh of relief at having escaped his attention.

Maachh herded them towards a tree. He drew a circle on the ground with a stick and made one of them stand within the circle he had drawn.

‘All you have to do is to remain standing at that spot without moving a muscle,’ Porky instructed. Maachh went ahead and placed an apple on the poor chap’s head. The fruit had been especially brought from the mess for the archery practice.

Holding our breath in suspense, we watched as Porky took out his bow and arrows with the aplomb of an ace archer. He strode across to the line marked on the ground, took position, and aimed. Barely had the arrow whooshed through the air when the jangoos serving as Porky’s target collapsed in a heap on the ground. We rushed to the poor chap and checked his pulse. Sandy, who had the foresight to bring a bottle of water, sprinkled some on the chap’s face. We were worried but Porky wasn’t. While we were ministering to the guy, the other jangoos made his escape.

Porky was furious when he found the junior missing.

‘What kind of soldiers are these guys going to make when they can’t be brave enough to trust a fellow officer?’

‘Would you stand there with an apple on your head and allow Maachh to pull the trigger of his air gun?’ asked Sandy.

‘But I am an excellent archer,’ protested Porky. ‘I wouldn’t have hit the guy.’

‘He doesn’t seem to know that,’ chuckled Maachh, pointing towards the jangoos who were sprawled on the ground.

‘Are you guys insane?’ Sandy admonished them. ‘If this guy has a heart attack, all of us will be behind bars.’

The thought had a sobering effect on the jokers.

Together, we carried the semi-conscious jango back to his room and laid him on his bed, but not before Maachh had delivered a stern sermon to the unfortunate chap. He made dramatic gestures to enliven the speech while we tried hard to suppress our smiles.

Relieved that Porky's moment of madness had passed without any serious mishap, we made our way towards our rooms.

Sandy, who had been quiet all through the drama, now spoke up.

'It wasn't really a bright idea to drag those chaps to the ground. They are sure to squeak tomorrow morning and we will be in hot water.'

'They wouldn't dare.' Porky grunted.

'Let us keep our fingers crossed that they won't know your names,' said Sandy.

We trooped back to our rooms yawning tiredly. The idiotic idea had robbed us of a couple of hours of precious sleep.

'This is not the end of the matter,' announced Maachh. 'No one can cheat me of my right to rag the jangoos. Next time, I will have a foolproof plan. We can't have these piddly chaps fainting on us.'

'Exactly!' seconded Porky. 'What will they do when they have to go to war? Collapse in a heap at the first sight of the enemy? They need guidance.'

Appalled at their audacity, we wondered what stupid plans the guys were concocting in their pea-sized brains.

We didn't have to wait long.

On the very first moonless night, Maachh knocked on our doors just as we had begun a cacophonous orchestra of snores. Peering sleepily into the dark, we wondered what misfortune had struck the Bong this time.

'Pssst,' he whispered mysteriously. 'Assemble near the swimming pool if you want to catch some action. Hoot like an owl when you get there and if I hoot

back, it means everything is alright.'

With that, he disappeared into the darkness. The guy knew that none of us would want to miss out on the action.

The swimming pool was guarded through the night, and it was not easy to reach it undetected.

'It is no big deal,' snorted Porky when we expressed our concern. 'Aren't we trained to evade the enemy?'

'That's a different matter altogether,' objected Sandy.

'Well, this is an opportunity to use the evasion tactics.'

Maachh had assured us a full quota of entertainment and none of us was willing to miss the fun. Entertainment in any form was always welcome in the lacklustre life of GCs, so the three of us stole silently under the cover of darkness towards the swimming pool.

Standing in the shadows, we did the owl hoot as agreed upon and waited for the joker to arrive. There was no responding hoot. Tension grew as we wondered if the idiot had been caught by the guards. Just then, a clear owl hoot rang out in the dark and we spotted him slithering silently towards the pool with a jango behind him. The macabre tableau unfolding before us was as interesting as a high-octane thriller.

For good measure, we hooted again, and Maachh replied with a counter hoot. Three minutes later in a series of rapid actions, Maachh had prodded the jango up the diving board of the swimming pool. Even as we wondered about his intentions, he instructed the fresher to jump from the 10-metre board.

To his credit, the Bong had selected well. The jango turned out to be perfect soldier material. Whether it was the fear of being pushed by Maachh, or the need to get over with the ordeal, we will never know but the chap closed his eyes and jumped from that height without wasting a minute. There was a loud splash as he hit the water.

Within a few seconds, the sound of whistles rent the air and we could hear steps running towards the pool. We sprinted towards our barracks without a backward

glance. Swimming at night was prohibited. We knew that the jangoo would spill the beans if he was caught by the guards.

Fortunately for him, the jangoo was smart. Darting like a rabbit, he snuck into the shadows before the guards could catch him.

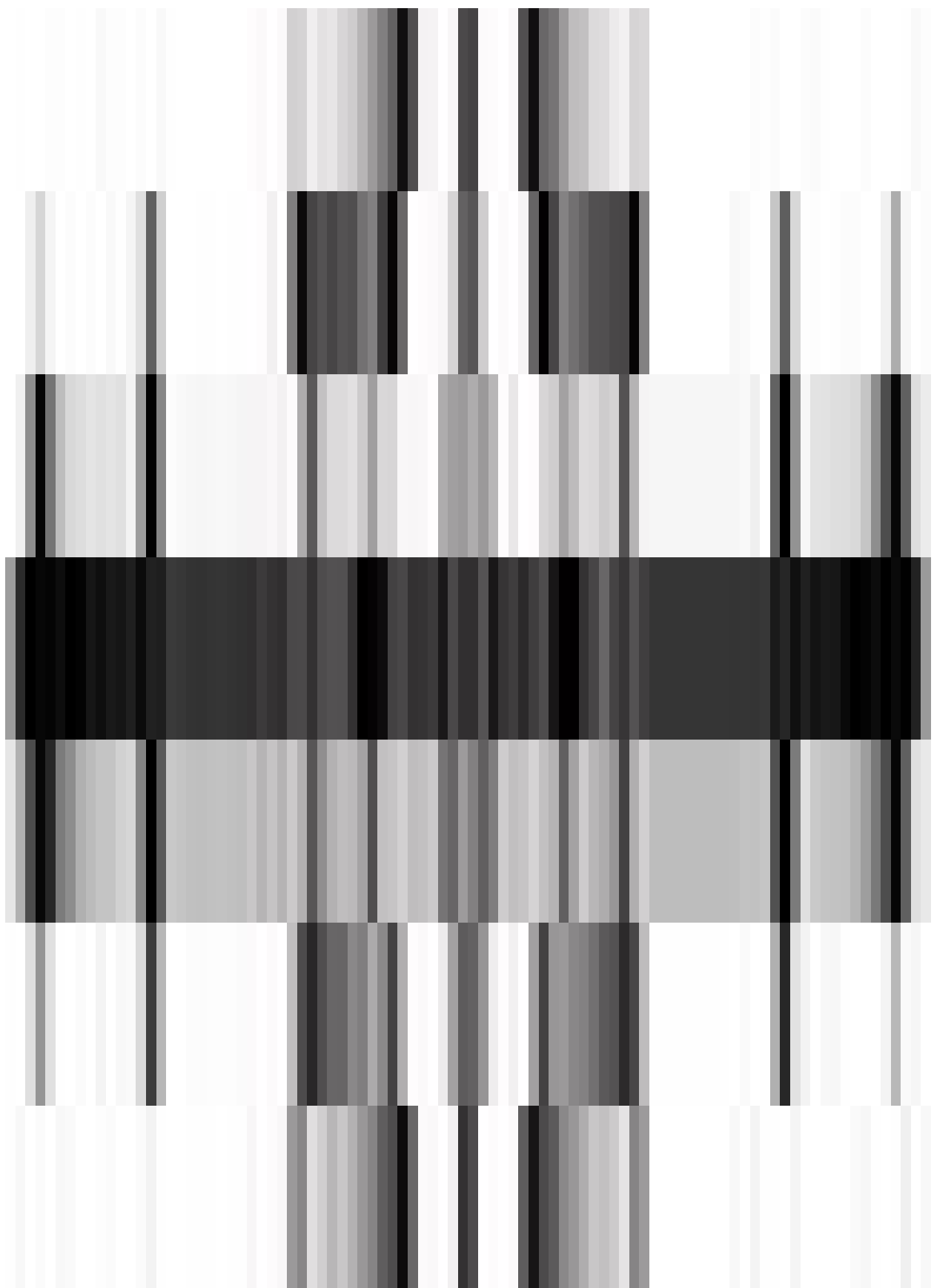
From a safe distance, we watched the sentries switching on the flood lights to search for the errant swimmer. Exhausted after the futile search, the guards finally switched off the lights and departed from the swimming pool.

All was not over for Maachh, who insisted on carrying out his duty towards the brave jangoo.

‘Bravo!’ he clapped. ‘You are definitely officer material and I am proud of you.’ Maachh declared proudly. ‘From tonight, you will be my protégé.’

We heaved a sigh of relief and hoped that Porky and Maachh had gotten over their mad ideas of ragging the freshers.

TEN



It was waiting to happen. After the ragging scheme, Maachh and Porky came up with another absurd idea. It was a balmy Sunday morning and we had some time to spare when Maachh announced he had a brilliant plan. Sighing audibly, we waited for the duo to enlighten us.

Come summer, Dehradun is flooded with lychees and mangoes. With umpteen orchards dotting the place, the city is a fruit lover's paradise. While everyone was happy to buy the fruits from the vendors, the Bong had different ideas.

'The fun lies in plucking them off the trees. Unless you have climbed up a tree and eaten the lychees, you haven't tasted them at all,' stated Maachh, with Porky nodding his head vigorously in affirmation.

'True, it is much more thrilling to steal them than to buy them from the market,' he agreed. 'What is life without adventure?'

'Don't you dare,' warned Zora, smelling the fetid odours of a foolhardy plan cooking in the Fish's head.

'I have an idea,' Maachh snapped his fingers brightly. 'The Nemi Road area is full of orchards. I am going there this morning to try my luck.'

After the announcement, he looked around in a challenging manner, expecting us to rise to his bait. 'Does anyone have the guts to join me in the adventure?'

Zora and I threw up our hands in surrender.

'Sorry buddy, I have a prior engagement,' I excused myself.

'I have booked a ticket for a movie,' said Zora.

'I expected you to say that,' chided Maachh, his voice cold with contempt. 'You guys have no guts. As far as Pessi is concerned, I can understand his reluctance but Zora, I didn't expect you to make excuses.'

Unmoved, Zora replied, 'There is a difference between guts and wisdom. Only the foolish tread the prohibited paths. Anyway, good luck to both of you.'

As expected, Porky exclaimed breathlessly. 'I have no prior engagement nor have I booked a movie ticket. I'll be happy to accompany you.'

'Don't expect us to share the fruits of our labour,' was Porky's parting shot as the two of them galloped away excitedly – shaved, shampooed, dressed in their Sunday best, reeking of their favourite deodorants.

It took them a couple of hours to scout for an orchard full of lychees and mangoes. Entering the deserted lane, they quietly scaled the wall and climbed up a tree. Barely had they begun enjoying the fruit when, brandishing his danda, the watchman rushed at them while spouting the choicest abuses.

The speed with which the duo made an escape would have earned them a couple of medals at the frontier, but it did not impress their pursuer. For good measure, the watchman brought his rickety stool and settled down near the wall. Alert and angry, he took out his pack of bidis and lit one.

'He is not going to go away,' hissed Porky from behind the gate of the orchard, where the two of them were hiding.

Maachh examined the stubborn Gorkha and nodded his head. 'The chap seems to be the dedicated kind. I don't think he could be bribed.'

Undeterred by their failure, the two jokers shrugged their shoulders and began looking for another orchard to carry out their mission.

Maachh quickly found another deserted lane and within minutes he was sitting astride a lychee tree while Porky stood guard below. All of a sudden, the Bong spied a scene so interesting that his eyes popped and a bunch of lychees almost slipped out of his hands. Right across the boundary wall was a playground that belonged to the hostel of a famous girls' school. It was the play hour and a score of girls, clad in short skirts, were milling around the ground. A game of basketball was in progress.

It proved to be a tremendous challenge for Maachh's jaw muscles to hold his gaping maxilla in place.

'You bloody pig; hogging the fruits by yourself? Why don't you throw some down?' Porky was getting impatient.

There was no reply from the gaping Fish, who had forgotten all about the lychees and sat riveted by the flying skirts and bouncing bosoms of the girls.

‘I say, you selfish chap. Throw some lychees down for me.’

There was no reply from his stupefied pal. This annoyed Porky, who gave up his post and clambered up the tree. One look at Fish’s open mouth and Porky directed his glance towards the playfield. The sight excited him so much that he lost his hold and fell off the tree.

Dusting himself, he quickly climbed up once again and perched himself near Maachh. The lychees were forgotten as the two of them stared at the girls.

As luck would have it, the duo had upset a beehive with their movements. Angered at their privacy being invaded, the bees decided to take action.

Attacked, the two of them fell off the tree and ran with the angry bees chasing them till somewhere near the end of the lane. Stung by the bees, their faces were swollen and painful. By now, the two of them looked like they had arrived from another planet. They drew the attention of the girls with all their screaming and shouting.

In a matter of minutes, the girls crowded around the two jokers, their faces creased with concern.

‘Oh no, what is wrong with them? They look as though they have dropped from Mars,’ commented a pretty lass.

‘I think they are suffering from some deadly disease. It’s better to stay away from them,’ said another. Her friends tittered with amusement. ‘No disease,’ screamed Maachh. The very thought of them going away seemed dreadful to him. ‘It is the bees.’

His mouth swollen twice its size made speech difficult.

‘Bee-attack,’ Porky slurred. ‘Please help.’

‘Heavens, they have been stung by bees.’ The girls got the message.

‘Let’s call Miss Reena. She will know what to do with these two.’

Miss Reena, their physical education teacher, arrived on a run.

‘What’s going on? Why have you crowded here? Disperse immediately!’ she ordered, but the girls were reluctant to miss the fun.

Once she saw the condition of the two boys, she knew she had an emergency on her hands. She blew on the whistle hanging around her neck to summon help. The duo was led to the infirmary in the hostel. There, they were given first aid and served a dose of sermons.

A kindly teacher brought them soft drinks and some snacks.

Another asked them for their address, and summoned an auto rickshaw. After being issued dire warnings against raiding lychee trees by a stern nun, the two of them were put inside the autorickshaw, to be delivered at the IMA gates.

Maachh, in a rare display of quick thinking, had managed to gather a significant number of sympathy votes and some phone numbers. Porky, afflicted with discomfort, lay supine enjoying the ministrations of a kind-hearted girl.

‘Since they have suffered so much for the sake of lychees, it is fair that we get some for them,’ whispered one of the girls and the rest of them agreed that it was the right thing to do.

Carrying a huge bunch of lychees in a bag, the two idiots exchanged notes.

‘I think it was worth all the suffering,’ opined Maachh, caressing the fruits reverently. ‘Just think of it. None of the chaps in the academy can dream of getting so close to those girls.’

‘I am willing to go through the experience once again just to be in the company of those babes,’ Porky endorsed his views. ‘Imagine, they were tending to us.’

‘When the guys at the academy learn of our adventure, they will go green with envy.’

‘Do you think they will believe our story?’

‘Why won’t they? Look at our faces! The evidence is for all to see.’

‘We literally stirred the hornets’ nest, didn’t we?’ Porky chuckled.

‘Guess what! I managed to get the phone number of one of the girls.’

‘You lucky swine,’ Porky punched him playfully on the chest. ‘I wish I had thought of it.’

There was a tinge of regret in his voice.

‘Never mind, we will find someone for you,’ consoled Maachh. ‘Maybe she has a friend.’

Pleased with the thought, they relaxed as the autorickshaw raced towards the IMA. For the moment, they forgot the pain and discomfort.

Back at the academy, the two rogues presented themselves at the MI Room and complained that they had been attacked by a swarm of bees from a beehive in front of their barracks. Since there were umpteen beehives around the campus, no one doubted their story.

Lying on the sofa with swollen red faces, the two were groaning in pain as the medical assistant administered first aid. The intensity of the bee stings was so great that medicines were of little help. The poor fools were miserable for the next two days. Sympathy and help poured in from all quarters.

The two were excused from parades and lolled around in their room, daydreaming and catching up on their beauty sleep while we slogged in the summer heat.

The worst part was that the two jokers were totally remorseless. They went around bragging about their escapade to all the cadets who were willing to lend them an ear.

‘You should have seen those girls, man. They were real sexy. What stunning figures, not to speak of the tight tees and short skirts. I am going back again,’ declared the Bong as soon as he had recovered from the bee stings.

None of his well-wishers could successfully convince him of the foolishness of repeating the escapade. The determined guy chalked out a foolproof plan (according to him and Porky) to raid the orchards and meet the girls once again.

The subsequent Sunday, the clowns were looking for excitement. It was too soon to repeat the orchard rounds so they began thinking of other ideas.

‘Let’s call up the phone number I got,’ suggested Maachh. ‘Who knows we may have a date on our hands.’

‘It would be your date, what about me?’ groaned his pal.

‘Don’t despair when help is here,’ Maachh mouthed pompously. ‘She is bound to have an obliging friend. Never underestimate your worth.’

Porky, however, had lots of doubts of his worth. ‘Do you think they will be interested in us?’

‘Buddy, it is high time you knew a thing or two about women. Let me give you some gyaan. Girls have a thing for men in uniform.’

‘You mean we’ll have to wear our uniforms to the date?’

‘Of course not, you stupid bugger,’ Maachh threw him a pitying look. ‘It is just a figure of speech.’

‘What is a figure of speech?’ Porky was perplexed. Everything Maachh said seemed to have hidden meaning.

‘Oh, forget it! Let’s hunt for the number.’

With Porky breathing down his neck, the guy began searching the pockets of his clothes. Since he had forgotten what he was wearing the fateful morning, his task seemed to take a long time.

‘You were wearing your black trousers,’ Porky reminded him. ‘The one you equate to an LBD.’

Not that Porky knew what LBD meant. He had tried to demystify the letters quite unsuccessfully and asking his pal had been of no use.

‘Ah! Why didn’t you say so earlier?’

The LBD equivalent, however, was untraceable.

‘Shit, man!’ Maachh cursed. ‘The dhobi was here this morning and I gave him those clothes for washing.’

‘We could try getting it back,’ suggested Porky. ‘I think he is still collecting clothes in the next barracks.’

The two of them sprinted to the next barracks, and then the next, till they finally located the dhobi who was bundling up all the clothes.

‘Halt, emergency,’ shouted Porky, shocking the old dhobi. ‘There’s a bomb in the pocket.’

The poor chap almost fainted.

Just then Maachh came around the corner.

‘Open the bundle,’ he ordered. ‘I have lost my wallet. It must be in the pocket of my trouser.’

For the next few minutes, they rummaged through the mountain of dirty clothes till Maachh salvaged the chit with the telephone number on it.

‘Hurrah! I found it,’ he announced breathlessly. ‘It has her name on it. Her name is Annette and she’s a bomb,’ he declared to the stunned dhobi who was still trying to figure out the connection between the pocket, wallet, phone number, and the bomb.

‘It is almost lunch time. Do you think, we will have time to fix up a date?’ Porky’s face wore a despairing look.

‘Of course! We have the entire evening before us,’ Maachh’s words cheered him up.

Rushing to the phone booth, Maachh queued up behind some impatient cadets. The small piece of paper was tightly clutched in his hand. With trembling fingers he dialled the number and his heart did a somersault as he heard the telephone ringing at the other end. Controlling his shaking limbs and voice, he waited. The ringing stopped and a feminine voice floated over the line – ‘Hello.’

A pleasant tremor rushed rapidly through his body. Tiny waves of electricity

pricked his limbs. The voice held promises of many kinds. He cleared his throat and tried to speak. All that emerged was a croak. He cleared his throat and tried again. Yet another croak followed the attempt.

‘Hello,’ the voice at the other end was now tinged with impatience.

He got lucky the third time. His vocal chords finally obliged.

In a fake baritone, he began – ‘Hi, this is GC Manoj Mitra.’

‘Manoj Mitra?’ the voice floated in through the receiver, stern and unyielding.

A tad disappointed with the tetchy tone, Maachh continued hopefully – ‘Don’t you remember me? My pal and I were attacked by the bees...’

There was an ominous silence at the other end but it failed to dampen the guy’s mood. The idiot hadn’t realised that in any school hostel, it was the warden who manned the phone. He had expected his lady-love to have her own direct number in the dormitory.

Breathlessly he continued – ‘Had you girls not helped us out, we would definitely have been killed by those bloody bees.’

‘Excuse me!’ the voice at the other end sounded unsympathetic. ‘How did you get this number?’

‘You gave it to me.’ He explained patiently. ‘You pushed the slip of paper into my pocket. I found it when I got back after the incident. It has your name on it.’

‘What nonsense, I gave my number to you? Are you out of your mind, young man?’

‘Of course not! How would I get your name and phone number if you didn’t give it to me? Don’t you remember putting it in my pocket?’

Although he continued to blabber, his confidence was draining out fast. He couldn’t understand why she was feigning ignorance. Her behaviour was baffling.

‘You are Annette, aren’t you?’ he asked doubtfully.

‘I don’t know any Manoj Mitra, and I don’t know how the number has come in your possession. Young man, if you don’t put the phone down immediately, I will report the matter to the police. And I forbid you to call this number again.’

The harshness in the voice surprised him. Women! He could never understand them!

‘I don’t understand,’ he mumbled uncertainly. ‘First you give me your number and when I call the number, you threaten to call the police. Are you trying to play games with me?’

It was time to move from the cajoling stage to a belligerent one, he decided. It was time to push the envelope. The girl couldn’t be allowed to play fast and loose with him. He was not at fault. It was she who had started the game.

‘Look here, I am a very nasty fellow,’ he threatened, ignoring the medley of snorts and snarls at the other end. ‘I am warning you not to push me too far. You will be sorry if you do.’

Pleased with the implication of his words, he waited for the response. It came like a tsunami, drowning him into a whirlpool of fear.

‘Listen, I am Sister Felicia, and this is the phone number of the warden. I do not know what kind of a game you are playing, but one more call and you will be behind bars.’

Sister Felicia’s threats flew thick and fast. Pale and shaken, Maachh quickly disconnected the phone and stumbled out of the phone booth.

The mention of police had distressed the poor chap. He couldn’t dream of getting involved with a girl who was mean enough to threaten him with police and prison.

Porky, who was hanging outside eagerly, rushed to him with the light of expectation shining on his face.

‘So? Do we have a date?’

‘Date? You idiot, we will go to the prison if we follow this lead.’

Porky looked stricken as the two of them walked back to the barrack. Sitting in Zora's room, Maachh vented his indignation. 'Those girls played a trick on me.'

'So, you thought only you could play tricks!' laughed Zora. 'Those girls are smart cookies. They gave you the number of their warden. One wrong step and you will land up in prison for sure.'

Drawing deeply on his cigarette, Maachh reflected, 'I have always believed that girls are deceitful.'

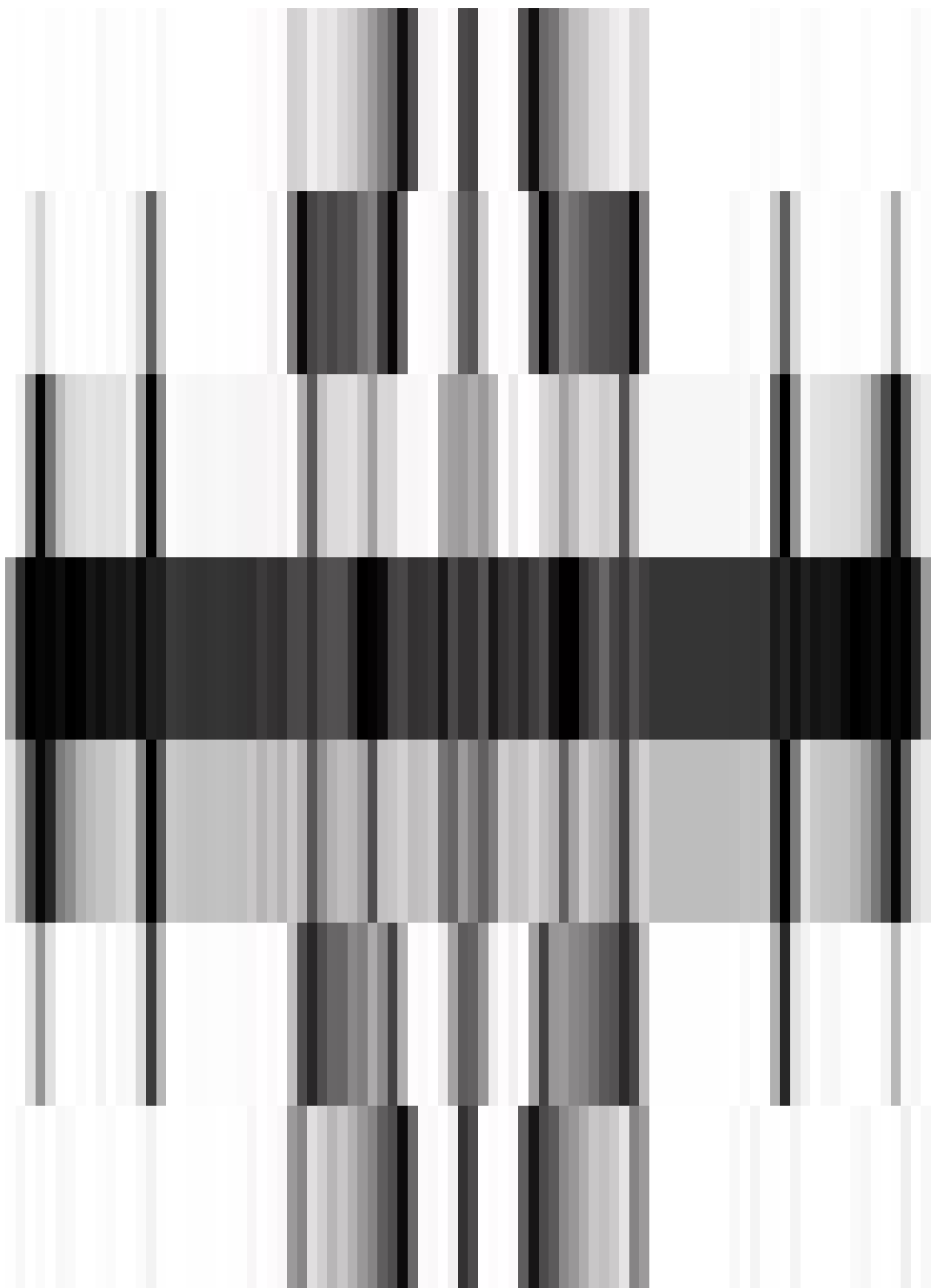
'Then why did you call the number?' humoured Zora.

'Wine, weather, and women are never to be trusted! I went against my instinct. That's where I made a mistake,' he philosophized.

'You are a nut,' surmised Zora. 'I bet, in a couple of hours you'll forget all about your instincts and run after the first girl who smiles at you.'

'Lesson learned, I will never trust them again,' Maachh swore, but we knew better.

ELEVEN



We needed the silliest of excuses to have a good time. This time around, the fact that I had topped a surprise test on 'Defence', an operation of war, was touted as the reason for a celebration. That the result came on Saturday made it easier to party.

For once, the treat was on me.

'Look, I have no money to waste...' I tried to wriggle out, but my mates were not in the mood to oblige. For once, even Sandy and Zora joined forces with Porky and Maachh.

'Don't worry, dear chap,' assured Maachh. 'I have a nice plan whereby we can have fun without spending much money.'

'What exactly do you plan to do?' I probed. His plans never failed to worry me.

'We will have a gol gappa party.'

'Gol gappa?' Porky's face registered disappointment. Clearly, he was expecting an exotic meal.

'Yes; paani-puri also known as gol gappa.'

'But...'

'Let's be fair. It is the end of the month and Pessi's wallet is not too healthy.'

Satisfied at his modest demand, I nodded my head gratefully.

'All you have to do is to arrange for the paani. I will arrange the puris,' asserted Maachh.

'Certainly,' I agreed, surprised at his simple demand.

'Gentleman's promise,' insisted the Bong.

'Gentleman's promise.'

'The paani in this case is beer, by the way,' Maachh dropped the bomb. Smiling

wickedly, he declared – ‘We are going to have a beer-puri party.’

To cut to the chase, I was ordered to procure half a dozen bottles of beer while Maachh returned with a bag full of puris from one of the local gol gappa wala.

Sunday evening saw us get together in my cabin, dunking the puris in beer. Half a dozen puris later, all of us were in high spirits. While Zora and Sandy had the good sense to stop at that number, Maachh and Porky continued the revelry.

‘Pessi, here is a challenge,’ Maachh slobbered as he stuffed yet another puri into his mouth. ‘If you can beat me by consuming more puri, I pay for the beer.’

The drain on my wallet had been substantial, and I was eager to recover the expenses on beer. By then, I was also feeling a tad reckless due to the alcohol. Cheered on by the rest of my pals, I accepted the challenge.

It wasn’t an easy wager. Stuffed to the gills, I gave up after ten puris. The Bong won hands down with a record of thirteen beer- filled puris, with Porky at his heels. All I could manage was the third position.

‘Let’s take a trip to town,’ suggested Porky. Luckily, there were no takers for his idea. We were too drunk to scale the walls and go to town.

The party wound up soon after.

Monday morning, like for everyone in the world, is the worst day of the week for the GCs. After the leisurely Sunday, the first day of the week drew groans and curses from all of us. Gluttony has its pitfalls, so say the wise. They also say that a foolish friend is worse than a clever enemy.

I was learning it the hard way. The beer-puris had not gone well with my innards. Three visits to the toilet before six in the morning did nothing to ease the discomfort in my belly. By seven, the cadets had left for their classes and the barracks were deserted, but I was doubled over with stomach cramps.

Deciding to report sick, I mounted the bicycle and began pedalling hurriedly towards the MI Room. Barely did I cover twenty yards when the bumpy road created a fresh wave of pressure on my intestines, forcing me to return to base.

Luck had deserted me that morning. A wily ustaad, on his prowl for errant

cadets, spotted the bike parked outside the toilet door. A fiendish smile graced the ustaad's face. He loved nothing better than laying his hands on a malingerer. As per the drill, he locked the bike and slipped the keys into his pocket.

Hearing the sound of someone tampering with the bike, I hollered from the toilet – 'Who is there? Meri bike ko haath mat lagana, don't you dare touch my bike...'

'Nahin to kya? Come out, I will show you who I am,' the Ustaad shouted.

My goose was cooked, I realized. Pulling up my trousers, I peeped out to ascertain that it was indeed the Ustaad. There was no escape.

'Oh, it is you.' The ustaad was surprised to see me. I was known for my exemplary record among the instructors.

'Theek hai, go quickly to your class,' he warned, handing over the bike keys. Relieved at being let off easily, I pedalled feverishly towards the classes. Unfortunately, the bumpy road took its toll again and by the time I reached the building, my belly was once again lodging furious complaints.

There was nothing else to do but run across the corridor and head for the toilet. Five minutes later, I stood at the door of the class, seeking the instructor's permission to enter. The class was about to end, and having finished the portion for the day, Major Murthy was doling out last minute instructions.

The Major had spotted me running past the classroom minutes ago. 'You are too early for the next class,' he commented sarcastically. 'By the way, where are you coming from?'

It was an embarrassing question. 'Sir, in my hurry, I missed the class room and went past.' I tried to ignore the broad smiles around the room.

'Don't you have a time table?' persisted the instructor.

'I do, sir.'

'Well, show it to me.' Major Murthy walked up to me.

Shuffling through the satchel desperately for the time table, I found myself

holding one of Maachh's prized porn magazines. Drunk on the beer-puris, we had been leafing through them the previous evening and a couple of them had found their way into my satchel.

'What is that?' The instructor was staring at the magazine in my hand. The cadets in the classroom were sniggering.

'My notebook, Sir,' I replied, trying to cover up the offending magazine that was quickly snatched from my hands.

'I don't think it is a notebook, unless you are in the habit of covering your notebooks with pictures of nude women.'

At that moment, the bell rang, marking the end of the class. Fingering the porn magazine, the instructor warned, 'First, you run past the class and make an entry at the end of the hour, and then you are found with offensive magazines instead of notebooks in your satchel. I will make sure that your Company Commander hears of this.'

Ignoring my rumbling stomach, I doubled up to CoCo's office, and praying fervently, I peeped inside. My eyes popped at the sight of CoCo flipping through the same magazine that had been confiscated by Major Murthy. There is truth in the saying – 'Boys will be boys, age notwithstanding'.

I waited a few breathless minutes till the man had drawn a long sigh and placed the magazines inside his drawer. Then, clearing my throat, I asked for permission to enter the room.

'GC Nikhil, I have a serious complaint against you,' began CoCo. 'It comes as a shock for me. You have an impeccable record and I don't understand what has come over you. I guess it is the company you keep...' He paused and stared at me.

There was nothing to do but hang my head in shame and hear him out. How does one explain that X-rated magazines are a part of growing up? Or that the GCs, like the other young men, have normal urges and instincts.

'Why were you late for the class? And why are you carrying porn magazines in your satchel?' CoCo asked.

While it was a known fact that most cadets had a cache of such magazines, no one dared to carry them to class.

‘I am sorry, Sir.’

‘I don’t understand...’

‘Sir, something I ate last night disagreed with me. I have to report sick, Sir.’

Perhaps the pitiable look on my face, or the probability of his office getting soiled, prompted CoCo to dismiss me without further delay.

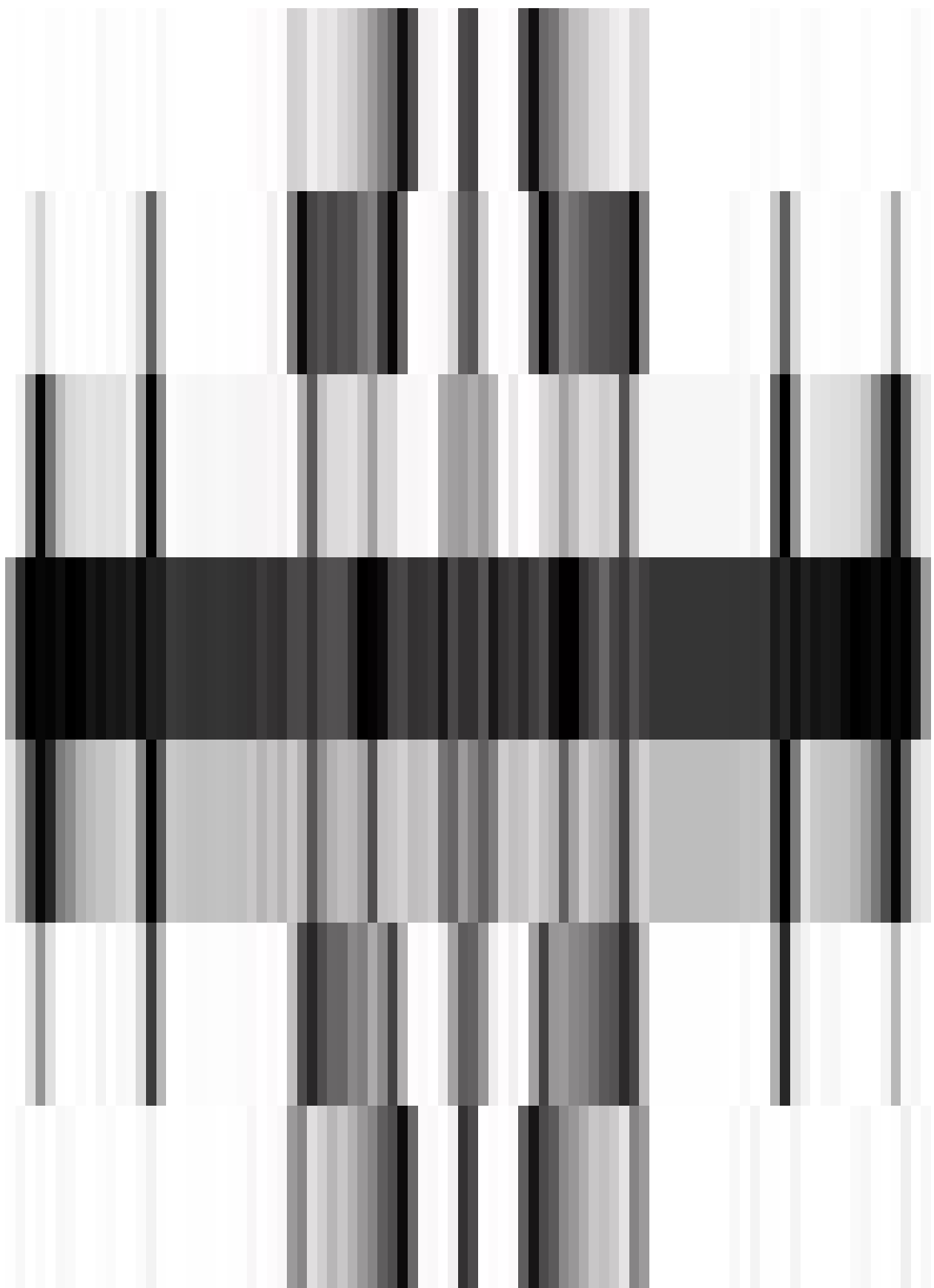
‘Get lost. Go and report to the MI Room immediately,’ shouted CoCo.

‘Remember, one more complaint and I will not let you off the hook.’

The next class had already begun. Grateful at being let off with a warning, I scooted towards the MI Room without a second’s delay.

It was only later that it occurred to me that CoCo had not returned the magazine. I chuckled at the thought of Mrs. CoCo catching him red-handed with the X-rated glossy. He would certainly fare worse than I did.

TWELVE



As the weeks flew by, we found ourselves in distinguished company. Along with hundreds of Indian cadets, two dozen foreign cadets began training with us. In our Company was a chap who was some kind of prince from Tonga, and had a tongue twister for a name. We called him Jomo for convenience. Then there was Chinouyazue from Zambia and Lehloenya from some unfamiliar country called Lesotho. Since the names didn't roll easy on our tongues, we called them Chin and Leh.

Their hold on the Queen's language was a bit precarious, and they believed in the maxim – silence is golden. Nods were aplenty, though. A sideways nod meant 'no', and a vertical nod meant 'yes'. Where the nods didn't work, their wide smiles definitely did.

Communication between the three and the ustaads was impossible, since they had no knowledge of Hindi. Most ustaads kept out of their way, which was a happy situation for the trio as no tasks were assigned to them. Expectation was low and punishment was an unfamiliar word. They certainly would never hear the word 'relegation', we knew. All the academy had to do was to train these guys (to the best of their capability), commission them, and send them back to where they belonged. Their training was a bit of formality, we felt. On their part, the three foreigners tried their best to keep up with the others.

One morning, while we were going through our WT (weapon training) classes, Maachh was in one of his mutinous moods.

'I am not going to do anything today,' he declared. The guy had been on the receiving end the entire morning. After having had to run around the huge playground twice, with his weapon on his shoulder, he had strained some tendons and was in pain.

'GC, dhyan kidhar hai?' Ustaad Jung Bahadur bellowed.

The ustaad had been posted recently to the academy, so he was not yet familiar with our faces or names.

Twice the ustaad shouted at Maachh, and twice the Bong ignored him. We knew his goose was cooked when we saw a very angry instructor marching towards our pal.

‘Kyon? Sunayee nahin deta?’ the ustad asked. His tone was unmistakable and everyone knew that Maachh was in trouble but the Bong continued to behave in a pig-headed manner. He stood up and gave a moronic look in reply to the ustad’s question.

Fearing dreadful consequences, Zora stood up. His ever-fertile brain had come up with an idea.

‘Ustad, yeh Malaysian cadet hai,’ he said with his most solemn expression.

Taking the cue from him, Sandy stood up and added, ‘Isse Hindi nahi aati hai. Yeh aapki baat nahin samajh sakta hai.’

A few snorts at the back were quickly muffled. Tension rose as everyone waited for the ustad’s reaction.

With a deadpan expression, Maachh nodded his head vigorously up and down, side to side, imitating the Zambian chap. Our bellies ached with suppressed laughter. The ustad threw an exasperated look at Maachh and walked away.

For the next one week, the ustad let Maachh enjoy his leisure while the rest of us slogged. The wily chap was exempted from all kinds of duties and punishments, much to his delight.

‘What bliss! This is the life,’ he declared, lolling around on his bed with a plateful of banana chips by his side. ‘Not knowing the language certainly has its benefits. I would love to become a Zambian to earn these perks.’

The charade couldn’t last forever. Doubting his credentials, the ustad had been sneaking up to him at unexpected moments. To Maachh’s misfortune, one morning, the suspicious ustad stole up behind him while the Bong was busy abusing Porky in chaste Hindi.

Unaware of the instructor’s presence, Maachh caught Porky by the scruff of his neck and said – ‘Saale, tu mujhe ulloo bana raha hai?’

Not even Porky’s furious eye rolling could alert the Fish of the impending danger.

The burly instructor, who was standing behind the two, landed a solid thump on

Maachh's shoulder.

'Saale...' Still using colourful language, Maachh turned and found himself staring into the furious ustaad's face. What followed was a string of punishments that had the Bong sweating through the week.

It wasn't just the WT ustaad who became Maachh's enemy. At the NDA, he had managed to set a record by earning the wrath of almost every instructor, and now he seemed to be keen on setting a similar kind of record at the IMA. Time and again, he rubbed the ustaads the wrong way.

Not long after his 'Malaysian' episode, Maachh proved his talent at needling the ustaads, once again.

It had been a long night for us. The night exercise had lasted till the wee hours of the morning, and most of us had not been able to grab our forty winks. Almost everyone was groggy, and Maachh was in a grumpy mood. A sleepless night had done nothing to improve things.

As we walked towards the huge ground where the classes were scheduled under the massive banyan tree, we grumbled and let off our steam. 'I am going to catch some sleep at the back,' Maachh announced even before the start of the morning training session.

We occupied the squad posts that had been set up under the tree. A single word had been scrawled across the chalkboard – 'Chaal'.

The ustaad arrived spruced up and smart, refreshed after a good night's sleep while we stared bleary-eyed at the blackboard. He then proceeded to straighten the blackboard, and stood at attention between the board and the table while we watched him with as much earnestness as our sleep-deprived brain cells permitted. With dramatic deliberation, he looked at the board, seeming to study the words written on it.

Finally, having finished his inspection, he was ready for the lesson. He drew in a deep breath and asked pompously, 'Cadet, soche aur bataien, aaj ka lesson kya hai?'

A moron could have answered the question. It was there right in front of us, written in block letters on the chalkboard, but we decided to play along.

The ustad paused dramatically near Sandy and asked: ‘Gentleman Cadet, you tell.’

‘Chaal,’ he said, eager to get back to his snooze.

‘How many types of walks can you name?’

‘Bhed chaal,’ came the tongue-in-cheek reply from Sandy.

Although dying to break into laughter, we managed to maintain a serious expression.

‘Takreeban theek, sit down.’

Next, the ustad pounced on Mooli, ‘Aap batayen?’

‘Murgi chaal.’

‘Takreeban theek, baith jayen.’

‘Morni chaal,’ the reply came from Zora. He also imitated a peacock walk for added effect.

Makkhi said, ‘Battak chaal,’ mimicking a duck’s waddle quite skilfully, much to everyone’s amusement. His attempt at doublespeak didn’t escape the cadets.

Deer walk, crow walk, duck walk, elephant walk... imagination sprouted wings as answers flew thick and fast from the GCs, who were looking for a bit of laughter.

The ustad, despite silly replies, tried to maintain his equanimity. To his credit, the ustad never declared any answer as wrong. His ‘takreeban theek’ was geared towards motivating the cadets. He was practicing his own version of a brainstorming technique.

After having asked a couple of questions, the ustad shrugged and strode back to the table, pretending to be exasperated with our stupidity. His strategy had not succeeded in extracting the correct answer.

‘Gentlemen Cadets, today, we will learn different types of chaal, meaning walk,’

he announced in broken English to a tittering group. ‘Note please, no bhed chaal here,’ he declared pompously. ‘We will not do duck walk, elephant walk, or crow walk. We are soldiers and we will learn the soldier walk.’

He then took us through the different kinds of walks that could be adapted to suit different terrains and situations. There were the day walks when the light was bright and vision clear, depending on whether one was carrying weapons or not. Then there were the night walks when vision was limited due to total darkness. He took us through the descriptions of the monkey walk, cat walk, leopard crawl, and ghost walk. The ustaad used Hindi words to describe these walks, so monkey walk translated into bandar chaal, leopard crawl was cheetah chaal, and cat walk was billi chaal. The funniest one was the ghost walk which was referred to as bhoot chaal.

‘The Ghost who walks,’ muttered Zora, under his breath. Then, carrying the joke forward, he raised his hand and asked – ‘Sahab, aapne bhoot chal bataya lekin bhavishya chaal kaisa hota hai?’

Clearly, he was using the words bhoot and bhavishya to mean the past and present, while it meant a ‘ghost’ in the current context.

The ustaad muttered – ‘Nonsense cadet!’

Maintaining his solemn expression, the instructor refused to be drawn into an argument and continued with his lecture on the subject.

After taking us through the different kinds of walks adopted in various situations, the ustaad picked up a GC to demonstrate the walk.

It so happened that Maachh, seated in a corner, slept peacefully in an upright sitting position, his eyes half open. It was only because he was not snoring that the ustaad failed to catch him in the act. After Sandy had demonstrated the bandar chaal quite effectively, it was Porky’s turn to do the bhoot chaal.

With a flourish, he raised one leg high up from the ground, stretched out his arms, put the leg down with deliberation and lifted the other leg, all the while pretending to be groping blindly in the dark. After all, this was a walk to be adopted in a pitch dark environment. It was a perfect parody of a ghost walk. The assembled cadets roared with laughter.

The ustad appreciated his efforts rather half-heartedly. This was not the ghost walk he desired his pupils to emulate.

He then went on to pick on his favourite prey. Maachh had earned the trainer's wrath a few weeks back for some minor offence or the other.

'GC Mitra, uthe and dikhaye ki billi chaal kaise kiya jaata hai,' barked the instructor.

Maachh, who had slept all through the class, had not heard a word of the lecture and knew nothing about the kinds of walks the ustad had taken us through. His brain was as blank as the sheet in his notebook, the fellow stood up and looked around for a cue.

'Cat walk,' whispered Porky, helpfully.

'Don't worry, I can do a perfect catwalk,' Maachh hissed back.

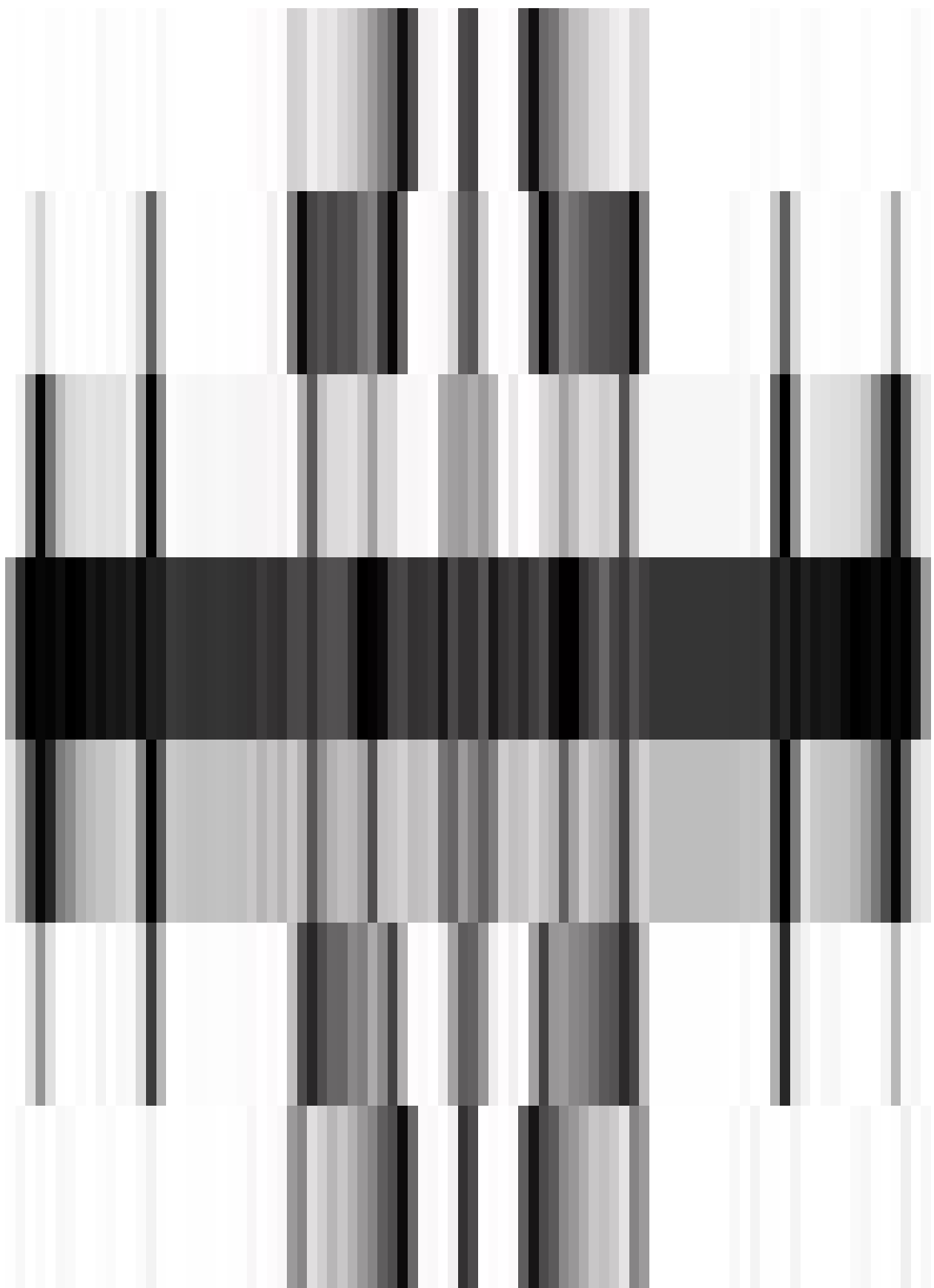
Grinning and confident, Maachh went on demonstrate the only catwalk he knew. Executing the perfect imitation of a ramp walk, the guy walked with mincing steps around the tree, much to the delight of everyone. Clad in his uniform, the giraffe-like neck held high, chest thrust out, pelvis swivelling, the Bong walked as though he was wearing the latest couture creation. Only the music was missing. It was too much of an effort to stifle our laughter. Loud guffaws echoed across the grounds even as the ustad fumed.

'GC, sawdhan!' he roared.

The poor Maachh didn't know what hit him. To the best of his knowledge he had just done a perfect cat walk, which would have elicited wolf whistles from a discerning audience. Instead, he had an irate ustad ordering him to run around the ground with the rifle held high over his head.

'Some people can never appreciate a good thing,' he muttered, 'Morons!' Sighing, he began jogging.

THIRTEEN



For the GCs at the Indian Military Academy, if there was a bigger pain than the academics, it was the Sand Model Exercises (SME). Even the brainier ones floundered while dealing with the mind-boggling possibilities of SME. For lesser mortals like Porky and Maachh, hovering on the fringes of insanity, confusion was the usual outcome. Naturally then, cheating became an accepted part of the rigmarole.

However, just like everything else in the army, there was a set procedure for the SME. The setting of the exercise, which included a list of resources like troops, weapons, and equipment available for planning the solution, was provided to the GCs a day prior to the actual exercise. For some strange reason, this list was known as the 'Whites'; and the 'Pinks' were the correct solutions to the exercise. The Pinks were kept in safe custody with the instructors conducting these exercises, and remained a secret till we finished our work and presented our strategy.

One thumb rule followed in the army for all exercises was that the enemy always belonged to the 'Red Land', and the defenders were from the 'Blue Land'.

On the designated day, we trooped nervously into the hall, the voice of our seniors ringing inside our heads.

'Beware of the SME,' we had been warned. 'It is the most important facet of war planning and ranks high in importance. A bad performance here can ruin your chances in the final reckoning. A lot of cadets have missed the Sword of Honour only because they didn't perform well in this exercise.'

Divided into small syndicates of six members each, we occupied three sides of the hall while the instructors sat alongside the fourth. The dreaded sand model sat in the centre. My eyes strayed time and again towards it.

Once the problem was assigned, each syndicate had to work out the solution in detail. This involved an in-depth analysis of the problem, recounting details like how we planned to deploy our troops and weapons, and also the strategy we could use to overcome the enemy. Most of the GCs looked baffled and feared the outcome of the exercise. Only a few ambitious ones, who had prepared well, appeared overexcited. Our foreheads beaded with perspiration, our hearts hammered with anxiety, and we waited for the problems to be doled out to us by

the stern-looking instructors.

I looked around and spotted my dear pals, Porky and Maachh looking relaxed as though they were on a picnic.

They were the real winners, I realised. Keeping calm in crises is the first step to becoming a great soldier, and they were doing just that.

The first exercise was called Sam Bahadur. It was an exercise with the Kashmir Valley as background. The solution to a hypothetical enemy attack in the mountains had to be worked out. We were issued details about the setting (Whites) soon after lunch, and we had time till the next morning to prepare our solution.

The countdown had begun!

As soon as the Whites were distributed, the GCs went into a tizzy. Like a clutch of frenzied chickens, the GCs ran around looking for answers. The solution could undoubtedly be found in the PCK (Previous Course Knowledge). These were the readymade solutions to the exercises. The SMEs, like test papers for most examinations, were usually repeated after every few years. Most of them had already been solved by the cadets who had graduated before us. Maybe it was the lack of creativity which made it impossible for the instructors to come up with fresh ideas every other term.

‘It is like the solved answers you study while preparing for competitive exams,’ Maachh explained to Porky.

Catching Porky’s confused look, he elaborated – ‘Arre yaar, the one in which the previous year’s questions have been solved. It makes life easier for all successive courses. All we have to do is find a PCK and we can sleep in peace.’

His assurance wiped out all signs of stress from Porky’s face and the two idiots took off, arms linked, in search of a PCK.

Those who had contacts with previous batches managed to get the solutions from them. If someone had a brother, father, or relative who had gone through the training at IMA, he would have good access to PCK.

‘Didn’t your brother graduate last year?’ one cadet asked another.

‘Come on buddy; share the PCK with us,’ requested a third.

Everyone knew that a brother or a friend who had graduated earlier could make or break the jinx of the SME.

My only solace was that I had Zora and Sandy in my group, although the inclusion of Maachh was causing us a lot of anxiety. The opposing syndicates were delighted. They were banking upon him to botch up the chances of our group. Thankfully, Porky had been assigned another syndicate. It would have been impossible to endure the two jokers in our group.

Although Sandy’s brother had handed over the PCK to him after graduating from the academy, the stupid fellow had misplaced it.

‘What kind of an officer will you make?’ Maachh chided him sternly. ‘You have lost the most precious thing. You should have guarded it with your life.’

He clapped his forehead dramatically and sighed. ‘If not for your foolishness, we would have been the winners.’

‘I will definitely make a better officer than you,’ retorted Sandy.

‘Stop bickering, you idiots,’ interrupted Zora. ‘You are just wasting time.’

And so Sandy, Makkhi, Zora, and I slogged the entire night to work out a solution, while the irritating Bong needled us with the most ridiculous plans. His fertile brain seemed to be hit by brainwave after brainwave; all of them ranging from comical to ridiculous.

He spent close to half an hour pacing the floor instead of working on the problem.

‘Stop pacing,’ Zora yelled. ‘You will wear out the floor.’

‘Why don’t you just sleep?’ I suggested. ‘You will wake up refreshed.’

‘My brain is actively engaged in the task of finding solutions,’ the Bong replied as he resumed his pacing. ‘If you guys can keep awake, so can I.’

Suddenly, he halted and clicking his fingers dramatically shouted: ‘I’ve an idea;

I'll sneak into Joe's room and steal the solution. That chap is very intelligent and hard working. He must surely have worked out the right solution. All I have to do is to steal it, copy it, and put it back while he is asleep.'

Everyone knew that Joe was the brains of our course and he was sure to have come up with the right solution, but the idea of stealing it from his room was not acceptable to us.

'NO,' we shouted in chorus, aware that such a foolish plan could jeopardize our reputation beyond redemption.

It was past midnight when Gary, the sixth member of our syndicate, walked in casually.

'Where the hell were you?' Maachh leapt around like a monkey with a singed tail. 'We have been slogging all night for the solution while you were enjoying yourself. Have you forgotten that you are also in our syndicate and have some responsibilities?'

The sturdy Sikh ignored the Bong's outburst much like a lion ignores a jumping primate. Smiling victoriously, he pulled out a tiny scrapbook from the nondescript bag he was carrying.

'Contrary to what this idiot thinks, I have been busy. What's more, I have done whatever needed to be done,' he flashed the scrapbook at us.

'Fucker, you were hoarding the PCK while we were breaking our head over the exercise,' cursed Maachh, who had done nothing but pester us with his idiotic ideas.

Relieved smiles broke out and we hugged each other, confident of victory. It was a cakewalk to replicate the solution. Close to midnight, convinced that our solution was the right one, we walked into the sand model room. Maachh smiled smugly at the other syndicate members and stuck his thumb up while handing over the solution to the instructor. The brilliance of his smile could have dimmed a floodlight.

Come morning, representatives of the other syndicates also submitted their solutions to the team of instructors and the suspense began.

A huge sand model sat in the centre of the Sand Model Hall depicting the exercise setting. Fighting anxiety attacks, we stared at the instructors. This was the moment when they would pick one of the solutions submitted by the syndicates. They would then zero in on the chosen syndicate and subject its members to merciless grilling.

My heart skipped a beat when the instructor picked up our solution and asked us to make a presentation. Although we had tutored Maachh painstakingly through the night, we weren't sure if he could stand up to the rapid-fire questions put forth by the team of instructors. Keeping our fingers crossed, we hoped that the instructors wouldn't pick on him to explain the solution. We would be doomed if that happened and if the silly chap had to deal with the queries.

Perhaps our fervent prayers saved the situation. The instructor picked out Sandy to explain the strategies. After this, they picked on me to reply to a complex set of queries. Sandy did a fantastic job and we were applauded for an excellent solution.

There was jubilation in our syndicate. Not a single GC believed that we had won due to our merit. They knew we had found a PCK to help us solve the problem. This was true, of course, but we were not telling anyone. Thanks to Gary finding the PCK, it had been a cakewalk for us.

As we filtered out of the hall, Joe walked up to Maachh and asked: 'Come on Bong, spill the beans. How did you do it? Where did you guys find the PCK?'

Maachh feigned innocence, scratched his head and asked, 'What is a PCK?'

The guy was a born artiste. We were happy he didn't go around boasting about the PCK. That didn't stop him from demanding that we celebrate the event, which we did on the very next day of liberty. We left it to him to plan the details of the celebration. As usual, he came up with a host of silly ideas, but for once we did not object to his plans.

FOURTEEN



The library was my favourite haunt. While most GCs preferred the comfort of their beds to taxing their brains during free time, I spent a significant number of hours poring through books on various subjects – especially military matters. My project at the NDA had introduced me to the joys of reading on military history. Reading the details of the Second World War proved to be stimulating. The sinking of the Bismarck, the German battleship, the Pearl Harbour attack by the Japanese, and the retaliation in the form of the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki drew my interest and held my attention.

While Maachh and Porky spent almost all of their pocket money on food, Zora on shaving products and Sandy on music records, I spent mine on books. Besides reading up on the wars, I was keen to meet and speak to the instructors and officers at IMA who had taken part in wars. Our drill ustad, Subedar Uttam Singh from the Armoured Corps, was one such person. He had been awarded the Sena Medal for his acts of bravery during the Battle of Basantar.

Often, during our free time, I would seek out the valiant ustad to speak to him about his exploits. The Subedar was just too happy to share his experience with an eager cadet. He narrated snippets about unit life and also gave me sane advice.

One afternoon, I cornered him during his visit to the Meiktila Company. It was the tea break and a few GCs were loitering aimlessly. But a war story never failed to garner interest. We gathered around the Ustad as he narrated how Second Lieutenant Arun Khetarpal of 17 Poona Horse fought the Pakistanis in the 1971 war and managed to kill a couple of them despite being mortally wounded. The young officer was awarded the Param Vir Chakra for his courage and the supreme sacrifice of life. The Subedar's passion, as he narrated the incident, touched a chord.

His vivid description of the battleground captured our imaginations – 'I still remember the day. It was 16 December 1971. We were at Jarpal, in the Shakargarh Sector. While crossing the Basantar River, Second Lieutenant Arun Khetarpal and his troop came under fire from the enemy. Our brave soldiers destroyed ten enemy tanks. Arun Khetarpal was responsible for destroying four of them single-handedly. In the retaliatory fire, his tank was shot and it burst into flames. He was asked to abandon his tank but he realized that the enemy, though

badly decimated, was continuing to advance into his sector of responsibility, and if he abandoned his tank at that point, the enemy would break through. Although severely wounded, he told his commander – “No Sir, I will not abandon my tank. My gun is still working and I will get these bastards.” He fought on gallantly and destroyed another enemy tank, which was barely 100 metres away from his position.’

We listened with rapt attention as the Subedar’s eyes moistened. Adrenaline rushed through our bodies.

‘Just then, his tank received a second shot and the fearless, young officer succumbed to his injuries. He was just twenty-one. It was his bravery that won the day for us.’

There was silence as we experienced a range of emotions. I felt a lump rising in my throat.

‘I salute the hero,’ Maachh finally broke the silence. He stood up and saluted solemnly, and Porky followed suit.

After dinner that night, we assembled in Porky’s room to carry the discussion forward. All charged up with patriotism, we were an animated lot.

‘We shouldn’t have released the POWs (Prisoners of War),’ opined Maachh.

‘We should not have returned the territory gained during the war,’ said Porky. ‘Imagine how many soldiers and officers had laid down their lives to capture that piece of land.’

Subedar Uttam Singh’s vivid description of the battle had had a great impact on all of us. Overnight, we discarded all our idols and coronated Arun Khetarpal as our new hero. A few of us bought books on the war to know more about Khetarpal, while others put up his pictures in their rooms. Such was the impact that even a guy like Maachh began borrowing books about the 1971 war. He ranted and raved about newspaper reports about ISI activities on the Indian soil and vowed to wipe out the infiltrators as soon as he was posted at the border.

By now, our interest on wars had peaked. From the 1971 war, the charged up cadets ventured to read about the Chinese aggression and the subsequent war in 1962. We discussed the events at great length, dissecting each move – political

as well as military.

‘It’s a shame that we lost the war,’ said Porky.

‘We lost the war because of inadequate equipment; not because we weren’t brave enough,’ Zora opined. ‘In 1962, we were ill-prepared for a war at high altitude. Can you imagine the troops fighting in high-altitude areas in December, and that too in canvas shoes? It was cruel of the politicians to send the soldiers to war without proper equipment. Many of them died because of the cold. They had no boots and no warm clothes. Yet, they fought till the very end.’

‘The decision makers should be sent to the mountains in canvas shoes and insufficient clothing,’ Maachh ventured on a mutinous path.

‘My brother’s unit found a couple of frozen bodies of Indian soldiers at Kumratsar, north of Tawang, in June last year,’ added Sandy.

We all knew that Mandy had been posted at Tawang before he came to Dehradun.

‘I can’t believe it,’ mumbled Porky. ‘It is tragic that the soldiers should have frozen to death.’

‘Yes, they were frozen stiff in their canvas shoes and cotton uniform.’

‘Had I been there in 1962, I would have given a bloody nose to the Chinese. I would have destroyed the entire squadron and received a Param Vir Chakra,’ Maachh boasted.

‘You, and Param Vir Chakra? I am sure that you would have taken to your heels and run in the opposite direction the moment the first bullet was fired,’ Sandy laughed.

‘Mind your tongue, you rascal,’ the Bong was in his element. Mention of cowardice always got him into a rage.

‘It is a fact,’ Sandy needled him. ‘Everyone knows that Bongs can spout literature and sing Rabindra Sangeet but they can’t fight wars. That is the reason we had to help the Mukti Bahinis. In fact, most of the 96,000 soldiers of Pakistan who surrendered to India after the 1971 war were Bengalis.’

‘Don’t you dare...’ the Bong warned.

‘I dare. I stand by my statement – Bongs are cowards.’

Maachh was a staunch Bengali. He could not bear any insult to his ilk. Sandy’s statement was too much for him to bear. He moved like lightening and landed a powerful punch to Sandy’s face before anyone could intervene. The first punch landed on Sandy’s aquiline nose and he began bleeding. Not satisfied, the Bong punched him again before being overpowered by Zora.

‘Let’s take him to the MI Room,’ said Porky, disturbed at the sight of Sandy’s bleeding nose.

‘Don’t be stupid!’ shouted Zora. ‘How will we explain the injury? Maachh will be in trouble if we report the matter.’

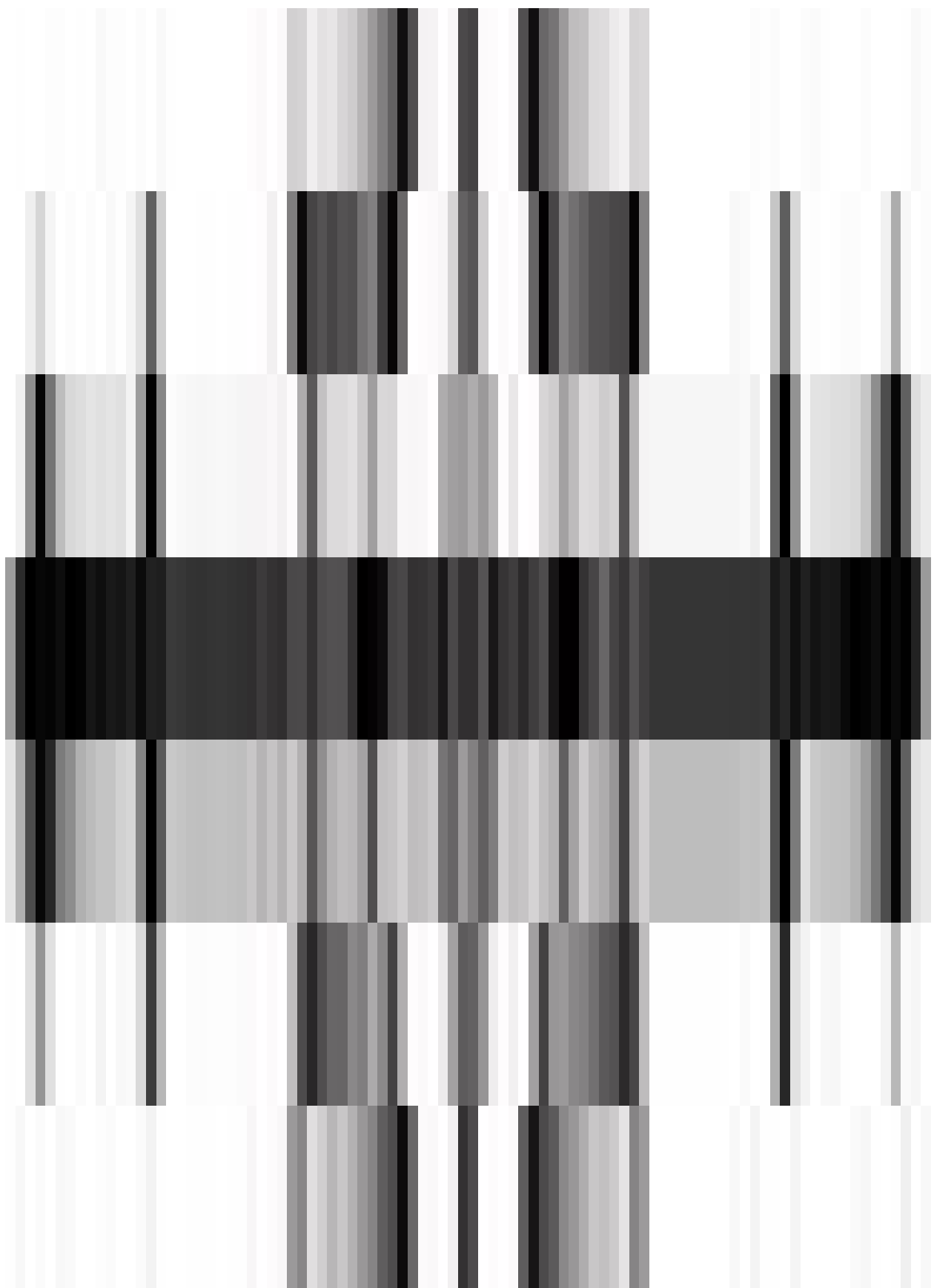
By that time, the Bong had come to his senses. Contrite, he quickly rushed to the bathroom and brought out a wet towel. Wiping Sandy’s face, he said. ‘Buddy, if you think I am going to apologise, forget it. The next time you insult a Bong, you will not get away with just a bloody nose. Bengalis are a class apart. Have you forgotten Subhash Chandra Bose or the thousands of teenaged freedom fighters who laid down their lives during the freedom struggle? Find time to read up on the history of India’s freedom struggle and you will know the truth.’

‘I stand corrected,’ winced Sandy as Maachh wiped away the blood, gently. ‘Bongs are a class apart, I admit. And you are a specimen.’

‘You would do good to remember that,’ warned the Bong. ‘Also remember not to needle me, ever. Don’t go by my physique. I am a born fighter and have the courage to take on guys twice my size.’

‘I will remember that,’ promised Maachh’s strapping opponent. Pleased with the promise, the Fish gave him a friendly thump on the back as Sandy grimaced.

FIFTEEN



One evening, Maachh burst into my room with exciting news even as Zora, Porky, and I were giving the final touches to our plan for a secret midnight bash for Sandy.

It was Sandy's birthday, and we were planning a party in Porky's cabin. The Bong put an end to everything with his announcement.

'Guys, drop all your plans for the time being. We don't have to plan a bash. We are invited to Sandy's birthday party,' he exclaimed breathlessly. 'His brother and Pinky bhabi are taking us to the Mughal Restaurant for a royal treat.'

He rubbed his hands gleefully, drooling at the thought of feasting at the restaurant. The place was quite expensive. With penury always knocking on our doors, we could not afford a meal at the restaurant. And now it seemed that lady luck had finally smiled at us.

Dressed in our street clothes and doused in a generous spray of the aftershave lotion (all of us shared the imported cologne gifted to Zora by his sister), the four of us (Porky, Maachh, Zora and I) presented ourselves for the celebratory dinner at the restaurant.

At the threshold of the restaurant, we paused and checked each other out. In an instant, we were transformed into true gentlemen cadets, observing all the social etiquettes and courtesy expected of us, even though all we wanted to do was to ogle the beautiful girls around us.

We had honed our peripheral vision to perfection for exactly such situations. For instance, we could be staring straight ahead but our eyeballs would have recorded all the details about the lovely damsels seated at the adjoining tables.

The four of us were flattered to note that eyeballs had swung towards us as we made our entry into the restaurant. To be honest, the four of us looked smart despite our katori haircuts.

On a table at the far end, we spotted Sandy's brother, Pinky bhabi, and a rather good-looking girl. We restrained our urge to stare at the girl. After the initial burst of greetings, our eyeballs locked in on the pretty lass. The four of us were waiting for an intro. We stared at our buddy, but Sandy seemed to harbour a bee

under his turban. The idiot chose to ignore the very first rule in the book of etiquettes by refusing to introduce us to the girl. He began chatting earnestly with her, paying no attention to our pleading looks.

When all the nudging failed to do the trick, we resorted to sharp kicks aimed at his knees. All this was done very discreetly, of course.

It was evident that the rascal had not forgotten nor forgiven Maachh for the black eye. This was his way of exacting revenge. 'Why take it out on us! We have done no wrong,' Porky mumbled. 'He can ignore Maachh but it is unfair of him to club us with him.'

Despite all the ice packs and home remedies, the black eye was clearly visible. Maachh's strong punch, powered by indignation, had caused noticeable damage to his handsome face. Scowling and silent, Sandy acted as if we didn't exist.

Nothing could escape Pinkky bhabi's keen eye. She noticed the patch of blue under Sandy's eye and the Band-Aid stuck under his nose. The slight swelling on his jaw didn't escape her eagle eyes either.

'Ohhhh! Sandy, you got into a fight?'

'No, I didn't get into a fight.' The chap tried to avoid the discussion by concentrating on the menu while Pinkky bhabi shot a meaningful look at her husband, who nodded his head.

'Out with the truth,' Mandy commanded in a hard voice. 'Tell me everything.'

'There's nothing to tell, Paaji. Believe me, there was no fight.'

'In that case, you must have run into a tree while sleepwalking. That gave you the bloody nose, I guess.'

Maachh avoided Sandy's eyes and squirmed uncomfortably in his seat. There would be serious repercussion if Mandy learnt of the truth.

'Who hit you dear? Your Paaji will fix the chap. How dare anyone hit you when your brother is an instructor? It is a shame. Just name the guy,' Bhabi coaxed.

By then, Maachh had begun looking for an escape route.

‘I told you. No one hit me. I slipped and fell in the bathroom,’ replied Sandy. The Bong, who had been holding his breath, let out a sigh of relief.

‘He is lying,’ his brother said. ‘You don’t get hurt like that unless you are drunk and fall flat on your face. Think of a better excuse, idiot.’

Mandy was sure that there had been a fight, in which Sandy had borne the brunt of someone’s punch. Having been through similar situations at the NDA and IMA, the elder brother was confident that he would not get the truth out of Sandy. He sighed and gave up. Pinkky bhabi, unfamiliar with the code of camaraderie between GCs, was concerned about the bruises on her brother-in-law’s face.

Throughout the proceedings, Sandy ignored us. He continued to avoid our kicks and jabs while our frustrations continued to mount. Finally, it was Pinkky bhabi who made the introductions while Sandy continued to scowl darkly.

With the flourish of a performer, Bhabi pointed toward the girl and announced. ‘This is my sister Kiki,’ she dimpled proudly. ‘She’s doing a course in art at Delhi University.’

She paused for a minute while the sister pouted most fetchingly. Thankfully, our collective gasp was drowned in the noise of crockery as the waiter emerged with the drinks of our choice.

‘... and these are Sandy’s friends. I am sorry I get all confused about your names. Sandy, why don’t you introduce them to Kiki?’ urged Bhabi.

In the meantime, my throbbing heart somersaulted expertly and landed somewhere in the vicinity of my throat.

Sandy had no alternative but to introduce his friends to the girl. He did it rather grudgingly. Maachh had to cough and clear his throat twice because Sandy skipped his name. When all the hints failed to work, the desperate Bong grasped her hand and blurted out – ‘And I am Manoj, Manoj Mitra.’

After which, he proceeded to shake her hand rather vigorously till Sandy delivered a forceful kick on his shin. Maachh finally released her hand and fixed a vacuous smile on his face. Having managed to seat himself near Kiki, the rascal proceeded to monopolize the conversation with silly comments. Our

thundering faces were no deterrent for the resolute rascal.

The girl was not fooled by Maachh's manoeuvres to grab her attention. After a brief and polite pause, the goddess deigned to favour us with her divine attention.

'So what are your hobbies?' she asked Porky, whose eyes were popping out of their sockets.

The guy stammered and blushed while she looked on encouragingly.

'I like collecting stamps,' he finally replied after gulping down a glass full of water.

This was the first time we were hearing about his stamp collection. Zora and Sandy sniggered loudly, embarrassing the poor chap who had just about managed to find his tongue. In the meantime, Maachh was brooding over his bowl of tomato soup. Having spiced it with an extra-generous sprinkling of pepper, he coughed and went red in the face. The ever-concerned Pinky bhabi quickly rushed to his aid. A series of loud back-thumping followed. Not one to miss an opportunity, Sandy did his share of walloping. We followed up the good work diligently. The poor Bong was surrounded by evil minds.

Finally, Kiki turned her attention to me. For some illogical reason, I was reduced to Porky's state of stammering. All I managed was a string of incoherent responses to her queries.

It didn't really matter what she spoke, our treacherous hearts were willing captives of her charm. Within half an hour, she had floored all four of us and claimed two victims. By now, Porky had regained his confidence and returned to his normal effusive self. He was concentrating on cornering Kiki's attention while Maachh tried to ambush him. The two buffoons vied with each other to make an impression on the girl.

Stopping short of performing acrobatics, the clowns did everything possible to wriggle their way into her heart. It was hilarious watching the duo as they struggled to control their drooling tongues. In a bid to appear sophisticated, they restrained their desire to tear into the delicious kebabs and butter chicken with their bare hands. For the moment, the heart was ruling over the stomach.

While they worked on impressing Kiki, Zora and I were stuffing ourselves on the scrumptious fare. The two of us were very clear about our priorities – feasting came first. I could see the two buffoons torn between the chick and the chicken. Watching us enjoy the food made it tougher for them to continue with the suave image they were trying to project. Maachh picked delicately at the morsels while Porky glared menacingly at us.

‘Gluttons! Leave something for us,’ he hissed under his breath. We ignored his threats and continued to polish off the stuff.

The kebabs were disappearing as fast as bank notes in times of inflation. Watching the depleting starters, the two of them dumped decorum in the nearest bin and attacked the platter with an enthusiasm that would have shamed a barbarian.

Unmindful of Kiki’s horrified looks, we continued to gorge. Decorum be damned!

That night, Maachh and Porky returned to the academy yodelling a romantic tune. The pensive gaze, feverish pallor, and rapid breathing – they exhibited all the signs of being in love.

First, I caught Maachh, sitting in the verandah, sighing about the moon.

‘Isn’t the moon lovely?’ said he.

‘Where is the moon? It is a cloudy night, you moron,’ I replied testily, my mind occupied by the more mundane aspects of life.

‘Sometimes you just have to imagine it is there.’

‘Forget the moon and catch up with your lessons. There is a test tomorrow.’

‘There will be time for tests all through life, but there won’t be a better time for romance,’ he murmured dreamily. ‘Do you think we will get another opportunity to dine with Kiki? She looked ethereal as she chewed on the kebab. The crumb on the corner of her lip made such an attractive sight that I almost got up and brushed it off her face. I was so enraptured by the sight that I forgot to eat the chicken lollipop.’

The tinge of disappointment in his voice didn't escape me.

'Buddy, forget the lollipops and think about the test.'

'How insensitive! I am in a romantic mood and you want me to think about blood and gore?'

Disgusted, I stomped off to prepare for the test. I had barely settled down at my desk when Porky trooped into my room. Clad in his pyjamas and with a pining look pinned upon his rotund face, the chap sat down on my bed and took off on a romantic flight of fancy.

'Did you notice Kiki's smile? It radiates from the left corner of her mouth and ends up at the corner of her right eye, lighting up the whole face,' he stated dreamily.

'You have an excellent alternative profession in case you don't make it in the army. You could become a private detective. Such powers of observation can bring great success to a fellow in that profession.'

He threw me a blistering look and replied: 'You are being nasty because you are untouched by the magic in her eyes.'

'And I am happy to be untouched and unscathed, you clown. Go and prepare for tomorrow's test or join Maachh on the verandah steps to exchange notes about Kiki's beauty,' I snapped. 'If any of you two jokers disturb me again, you are going to parade a broken nose before the night is out.'

'You are abnormal,' said the deranged chap, beating a hasty retreat to a safer domain.

They didn't mention Kiki to me again, but that didn't stop them from weaving romantic yarns about the girl. The two of them bribed and begged Sandy for her contact details, but the guy was too smart to oblige them.

'Why should Sandy give you Kiki's details?' I reasoned with Maachh. 'I think the guy is in love with her.'

'Are you in love with Kiki?' The Bong cornered Sandy the next day.

‘Don’t be stupid,’ retorted the burly Sikh. ‘I am not interested in her.’

‘Don’t tell lies. According to Pessi, you are not parting with her number because you are in love with her.’

‘Bullshit! For the final time, I am not interested in her. Do you get that, moron?’

‘Then why...’

‘Before you repeat yourself, let me tell you, I am in love with another girl. I won’t give you Kiki’s details because I don’t want you to harass her. She is not interested in you, why don’t you understand that?’

‘You are in love?’

‘Why? Is it such an unbelievable thing? Can’t I fall in love or do you and Porky own a patent on the emotion?’

‘Who is it? Someone we know?’ Maachh couldn’t keep the excitement out of his voice nor could he keep a secret.

A couple of minutes later, he rushed into my cabin – ‘Hey man, Sandy is in love and he’s not interested in Kiki,’ he revealed ecstatically.

‘That should be good news for you.’

‘Why won’t the guy reveal the name of his lady love?’

‘He doesn’t want you to steal her away, that’s why?’ the sarcasm in my voice didn’t escape him.

‘You are ridiculing me,’ Maachh fumed. ‘I will never steal a friend’s love. But I am curious to know about Sandy’s love.’

Porky was equally curious when told about Sandy’s romance. The two of them continued to pester the Sikh till they finally managed to get the details.

‘The bloody joker has fallen for a girl he met on the train,’ Maachh burst in excitedly into my cabin that evening. He was dying to share the secret. ‘It happened while he was on his way to the IMA. The girl was on the upper berth

and Sandy offered to swap the lower berth with her. She lives in Delhi and is studying law. Her name is Neelam. Sandy carries her picture in the wallet but he's not showing it to me.'

'So what do you propose to do about the matter?'

'I am going to sneak into his room one day and have a look at her picture.'

'Hmmm,' I busied myself with my books.

'Do you realise what it means?' The stubborn guy wouldn't let go of the matter. 'It means that Sandy's heart had been seized and stamped, and the ownership had been declared by Neelam. Pinky bhabhi's match has failed to work.'

Maachh suddenly seemed elated. 'It also means that Sandy will refuse to marry Kiki and the field is open for me.'

He rushed out to share the news with Porky.

Some chaps never learn!

SIXTEEN



Romance is contagious. All this talk of love and girls found many takers in the barracks. Maybe it had something to do with the season. Most cadets had a crush on some girl and now they began reviving their interests. I found myself working up my resolve to ring up the girl I ached for.

One Sunday morning, I finally walked to the phone booth, steeling myself against all odds. Nandini and I had been friends ever since I learnt to walk. Our fathers were colleagues and our mothers belonged to the same gossip group. After years of being neighbours, we were driven apart by the exigency of her father's career, which took them to another region of the country.

When I returned from the NDA after my training, I found that the family had relocated. I had been looking forward to taking our relationship to the next level and it broke my heart when I found that they had moved. It took immense persuasion and a hefty bribe to make my sister part with Nandini's phone number.

None of this was known to my gang, of course. Even a whiff about my love life would have resulted in merciless ragging. Perhaps it was Maachh's mooning that sparked off my dormant emotions. It spurred me to make the long delayed call to Nandini.

Back then, all calls had to be made in the STD booth on the campus. The first come, first serve system (FCFS) didn't work here. Rather it was seniority that worked. As I stood in the queue snaking up to the phone booth, I rehearsed my words. All through the evening, I had gone through every possible opening sentence but none of them seemed satisfactory. Finally, I decided to approach her in a straightforward manner. Damn it, we were childhood friends. Wouldn't she know that my feelings had changed from friendship to love in the past few years? Wasn't that a logical progression?

An uncomplicated approach – 'I am Nikhil. Remember me?' – would be the best opening line, I decided. No frills and no risks. Either she would gush at hearing from an old friend or cold-shoulder me. If she snubbed me, all I had to do was to end the call on a friendly note.

My heart was beating erratically as I entered the booth. Despite all the rehearsals, panic struck as I dialled her number. I put the phone back on its

cradle and wiped my sweaty hands on the seat of my trousers and waited for my heartbeat to normalize. The thumping on the booth door by impatient cadets galvanised me into action. I dialled the number once again and waited. Tension gripped me like a vicious anaconda. My mouth went dry as the tinny sound of ringing echoed in my ears.

‘Hello,’ her voice had the same dulcet notes I remembered. ‘Hello,’ she repeated but my tongue rolled into a ball. The muscles in my shoulders had bunched up in tight, painful coils.

‘Prank call,’ I heard her telling someone as she hung up.

The thumping continued outside... ‘Hurry up or get out,’ hollered a waiting cadet.

I dialled again and held the receiver stiffly in my perspiring hand. ‘Hellooooo,’ her voice sounded annoyed. Was I disturbing her?

A tremulous ‘hello’ was all I could manage.

‘Who is it?’ she asked.

‘Nik... Nik... Nikhil,’ I stammered. Drawing a deep breath I continued hurriedly before she could hang up on me, ‘Can you recall the name? I am Nikhil, your neighbour.’ My voice sounded strange – teetering towards a treble, it flickered like a candle on a stormy night.

A few seconds passed. I could hear her brain ticking. In the meantime, I shook my neck to release the bunched-up muscles around my shoulders and slackened my grip on the receiver. The mirror before me showed a nervous and sweaty chap on the verge of collapsing.

‘You are Dutta uncle’s son?’ Some sign of recognition, at last! The breath I had been holding for a while whooshed out loudly.

‘Right! We were neighbours.’ My enthusiasm carried the conversation forward.

‘Where are you and how come you are calling me?’

‘I am at the Indian Military Academy, training to be an officer,’ my confidence

was growing by the minute. ‘Last month, when I went home for the break, I learnt that you had relocated. Fortunately my sister had your home number. She gave it to me.’

She drew a deep breath and I waited for her to squeal excitedly. In my dreams it had always been that way.

‘Oh, I didn’t know you were in the IMA.’ Her voice was cool, calm, and composed. ‘How is everyone at home? It’s nice to hear from you after such a long time.’

Just nice! She didn’t gush or squeal. I was disappointed.

Outside the booth, Kaka, the big bully from Naushera Company, began raining blows on the flimsy door. For added effect, he threatened me with his fists.

‘I have wanted to speak to you for a long time but I didn’t have your phone number,’ I gushed.

‘Now that you have the number, you must keep in touch,’ she suggested.

The thumping on the booth door was getting louder and I could barely hear her voice. If I didn’t get out in another minute, I knew that Kaka would storm in and throw me out of the booth.

‘Look, I have to go now. I will call you again,’ I said, my heart singing with pleasure. ‘Tomorrow...’ my voice tapered off uncertainly.

‘I’ll wait for your call,’ she promised.

She said she would wait for my call. She was interested. I could have kissed the instrument in ecstasy if the bully was not loitering outside. Instead, I emerged from the booth and allowed myself a whoop of joy, oblivious of the curious looks I was receiving.

My grin extended from ear to ear. The world looked a much better place, the leaves greener and the sky more blue. Whistling a tune, I sauntered into the cafeteria to allow my brain and body to recover from the after-effects of the gushing adrenaline. It was time to mull over the conversation. Ordering a soft drink, I relaxed, my thoughts centred on Nandini.

With love having touched my heart, I succumbed to the luxury of daydreaming. I wandered through fantasy land. It was a voyage like no other. I inspected the surroundings through rose-tinted glasses, seeing things that didn't exist. A full-blown moon, twinkling stars, ruby red roses, and shimmering butterflies occupied my mind instead of the shabby furniture and noisy cadets who sat in the cafe. Nandini filled my mind – her thick and wavy hair tumbling to her hips, the arched brows bridging the ocean in her eyes. I could see her rosebud mouth unfurling in a smile while her thick eyelashes drooped sexily over her almond-shaped eyes.

‘Is this seat taken,’ a voice disturbed my thoughts. Looking up I saw Shamsheer, aka Mooli, towering over me. A lovely damsel with magnetic eyes stood with him. Although my thoughts were occupied by Nandini, I couldn't help noticing her eyes that flickered around the hall. Sometimes grey, sometimes green, and sometimes blue, they defied colour coding. I am a guy who doesn't like uncertainties of any kind. For me black is black and white is white; grey zones don't sit easy on me. Her eyes left me cold. She was a stunner. There was no doubt about it. Her voluptuous figure was the kind that would make Maachh drool. With a peaches-and-cream complexion and a profile like Mumtaz Mahal, she looked as though she had stepped out of a Mughal miniature.

What was Mooli doing with such a beautiful girl? He was not the kind that girls looked at, let alone befriended. It was a Sunday morning and the cafe was brimming with energetic cadets engaged in cheerful debates and banter. Wednesdays, Saturdays, and Sundays brought many pretty women to the academy. The cafeterias brimmed with people and colour. I gestured for Mooli to make himself comfortable.

‘Hey, everything alright with you, I hope. You look like you have been visited by Lady Macbeth.’

Damn Mooli, I cursed under my breath. He had been reading the Bard again. Ever since he had joined the academy, the Jat, realising he needed to brush up his English, had been reading all kinds of books, including massive volumes of Shakespeare's works. The guy was on a self-improvement trip. It didn't stop there. The clown's need to test the newfound knowledge was a pain for all his course mates, especially when he began mouthing Shakespeare. Depending on what he had been reading the previous night, some days it was the dialogues of Shylock from Merchant of Venice and on others it was Puck from A Midsummer

Night's Dream. Today it was Macbeth. Clearly, he was trying to impress the girl by quoting the Bard.

‘Shut up, Shamsheer,’ I rebuked, not willing to listen to his nonsense.

‘Alright, alright! No need to get testy. What are you doing here all alone?’ Mooli drawled. ‘Where are your pals?’

He was trying out a new accent, I noticed. There was a hint of an American twang. It was a sure sign that the buffoon had been watching too many American movies when he wasn't reading Shakespeare.

‘I abandoned them this morning since I was waiting for you,’ I snapped.

My sarcasm was lost on the thick-headed baboon. He preened and grinned in a lopsided manner, another sign he had been watching an American movie.

The girl beamed, her eyes glittering like jewels. I blinked to ward off their brilliance and glared at Mooli.

‘Oh, this is Nilofer. She is studying commerce. Stays in the hostel....’

Where and how did Mooli come across the girl? She was a rare specimen; very different from the beauties that frequented our academy.

Once the introductions were over, the two of them turned their back on me and began whispering sweet nothings to each other. Their eyes locked, they ignored me. I strolled out of the cafeteria intending to share the news with my pals.

Back at the barrack, I narrated the details of my run in with Mooli and Nilofer to my gang of four, carefully keeping Nandini a secret. They were overjoyed to hear the news.

‘No wonder, he has been slinking away on Sundays, spruced and smelling of expensive aftershave,’ said Porky.

‘The scoundrel!’ exclaimed Maachh, ‘How did he manage to find the girl?’

‘You will have to ask him.’

‘I intend on doing so.’

Maachh and Porky sauntered towards the cafeteria. Sandy and Zora joined them soon after. Mooli was in for trouble.

Grinning to myself, I retired to my cabin. For the moment I needed to return to my thoughts of Nandini.

As expected, the four fellows pounced upon Mooli as soon as he swaggered back to the barracks after a couple of hours. Attracted by the noise, I joined the melee. It was going to be fun watching the Jat being interrogated.

‘So, who is this Mumtaz Mahal, sorry Nilofer?’ Maachh was the first one to question Mooli.

‘The girl with colourful eyes,’ Porky clarified.

‘How did you get to meet such a beauty?’ enquired Sandy.

‘And we took you to be a serious and ambitious guy, focussed on bagging the Sword of Honour,’ Zora’s voice was sarcastic.

Mooli, aware that the gang wouldn’t let go of him till they had extracted every bit of information, decided to confess.

‘Okay guys, here’s the story,’ he began, clearing his throat ceremoniously. ‘About three weeks ago I was at the English Book Depot to buy a copy of Macbeth. While browsing through the books I noticed this beautiful girl who was trying to reach for a book on the upper shelf.’

‘... and she couldn’t reach it,’ supplied Maachh.

‘I did what any Gentleman Cadet was likely to do. I took it out for her.’

‘Obviously.’ The gang of four shook their head seriously. ‘We would have done the same.’ They smirked.

‘She smiled and thanked me. Just as I moved to the other end of the book shelf, she pulled out another book from a big stack and the entire pile collapsed,’ Mooli looked dreamy.

‘Oh, no.’

Clearing his throat, the Jat continued: ‘Once again, I rose to the occasion.’

‘Naturally!’

The chaps were mocking him but Mooli was not bothered.

‘She looked embarrassed at the mess she had created. Feeling sorry for her, I rushed to her aid. Thereafter, I helped her put the books back on the shelves.’

‘None of the salesmen were around, I guess,’ interjected Sandy, mockingly. ‘They have a strange habit of disappearing at a crucial time.’

‘Like in the movies,’ Maachh butted in.

‘How romantic!’ exclaimed Zora.

‘Will you guys let me speak?’ Mooli was irritated by the interruptions.

‘No more disruptions, guys! Let him speak,’ ordered Sandy, winking at the others. ‘Let the love story continue.’

They let out a collective sigh and Mooli continued: ‘Well, she looked at me with her blue eyes. On second thought, they are grey.’ He paused thoughtfully. ‘I think they are green; anyway whatever colour her eyes are, I felt the world stopped spinning around me. It seemed like I had been hit between my sternums.’

‘Sternum?’ Porky interrupted.

Sandy and Zora exchanged amused glances.

‘She thanked me and moved to the next shelf. Not wanting any more accidents, I followed her and we spoke about books. I asked her if she had read Shakespeare’s Macbeth. She hadn’t. I told her what it was about and that I was looking for a copy.’

‘Did she buy a book?’ Porky was curious. ‘Or did she upset some more book shelves?’

Throwing a disdainful look at him, Mooli warned: 'Don't interrupt. To reply to your query she bought a book on Kashmir.'

'Kashmir?'

'The girl was very helpful. She scoured the entire shop till she found a copy of Macbeth and handed it to me.' He took out his handkerchief and wiped the perspiration from his brows. 'By the way Niloo is from Kashmir,' he added.

'Niloo, ahem,' Zora coughed meaningfully. The infection spread and everyone began coughing. When the coughs subsided, Mooli continued dreamily: 'Well, we walked into the book shop's cafe. It is one of those coffee-cum-book shops, where you sit and browse while enjoying a cup of coffee,' he explained as though we had never entered the place.

'Carry on buddy,' encouraged Porky.

'Well, we were sitting at different tables and browsing through the books. I ordered a cup of coffee for myself. As an afterthought I ordered a cup of coffee for her...'

'Being a gentleman and a cadet,' added Sandy. His eyes twinkled mischievously.

'Yes, being a gentleman and a cadet,' Mooli nodded seriously. 'Well, she walked up to me to thank me and sat down at my table. When two people are sharing a table, conversation is bound to happen. One thing led to another. She asked my name and I asked hers. She already knew I was from IMA.'

'With your haircut, it doesn't require a Poirot to work things out,' said Sandy.

'What is Poirot?' asked Porky.

'It is not "what" but "who" is Poirot,' remarked Sandy.

'Ok, who is Poirot? Is he from the academy?'

'Shut up!' Maachh was getting impatient.

'She told me she's studying at a local college and her parents are in Kashmir. We discovered a lot of common interests.'

‘You mean she also reads Shakespeare to improve her knowledge,’ asked Maachh.

This time Mooli caught on. He glared at the Bong.

Turning to the others, he said: ‘Actually she did most of the talking.’

‘Naturally, you being dumbstruck by her grey, green, and blue eyes, you only nodded your head, I guess,’ Zora teased.

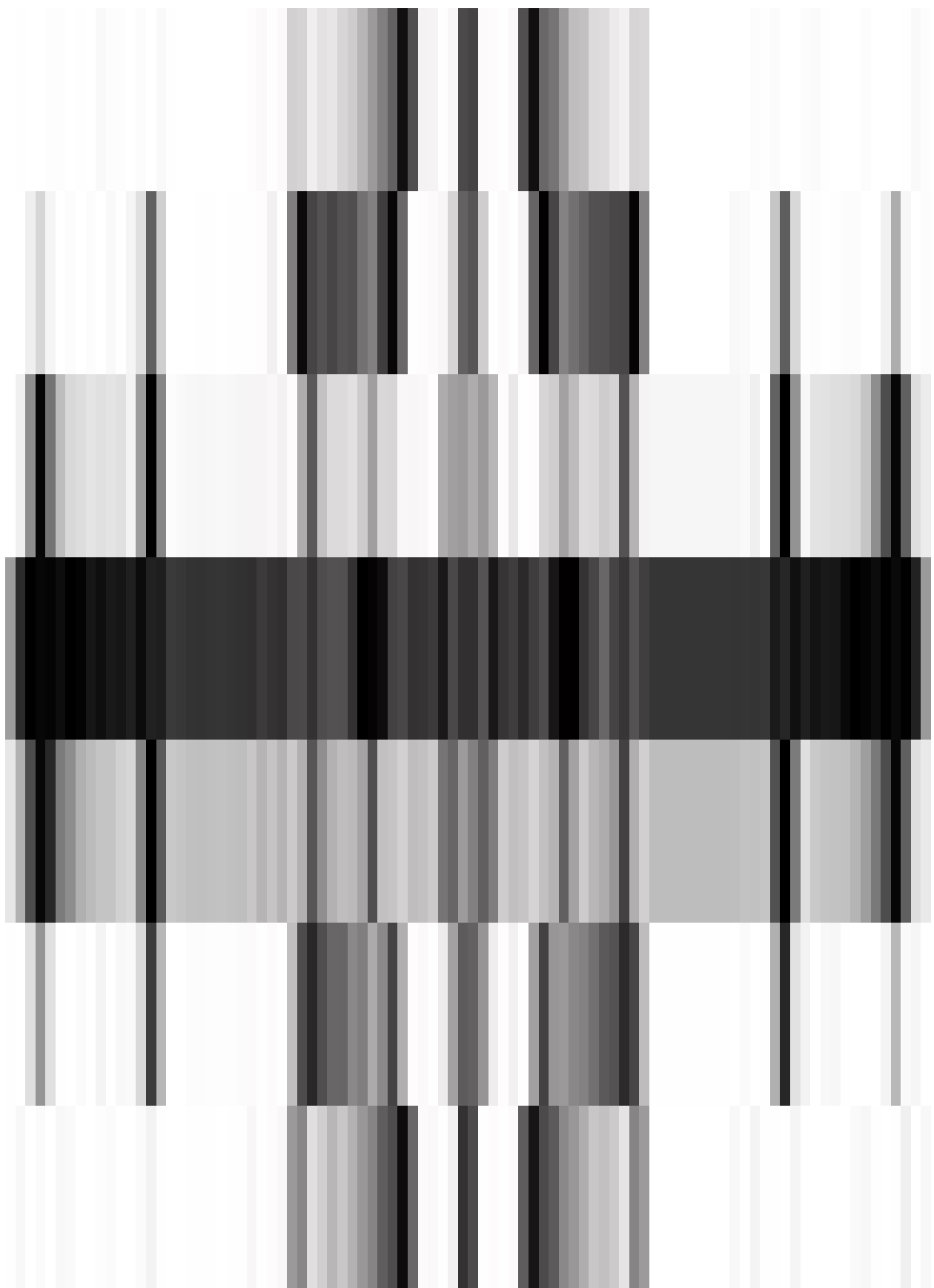
Mooli ignored the barb and said: ‘Well one thing led to another. She suggested that we meet again and so we met the next Sunday for coffee. The following Sunday we had dinner together. In fact, we have been meeting regularly for the past three Sundays. Niloo wanted to visit the academy, so I brought her here today.’

‘So, how far has the affair gone?’ as usual Maachh was brimming with curiosity. ‘I mean, smooching stage or...’ he glanced around meaningfully and winked, ‘... or proceeded even further?’

‘Don’t ask idiotic questions,’ scolded Mooli. ‘You wanted to know how I had met her and I told you everything. Now, if you will excuse me. I have to run a few errands.’

He sauntered off, whistling tunelessly. We were flummoxed. No one had imagined him to have a romantic cell in his heart.

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.

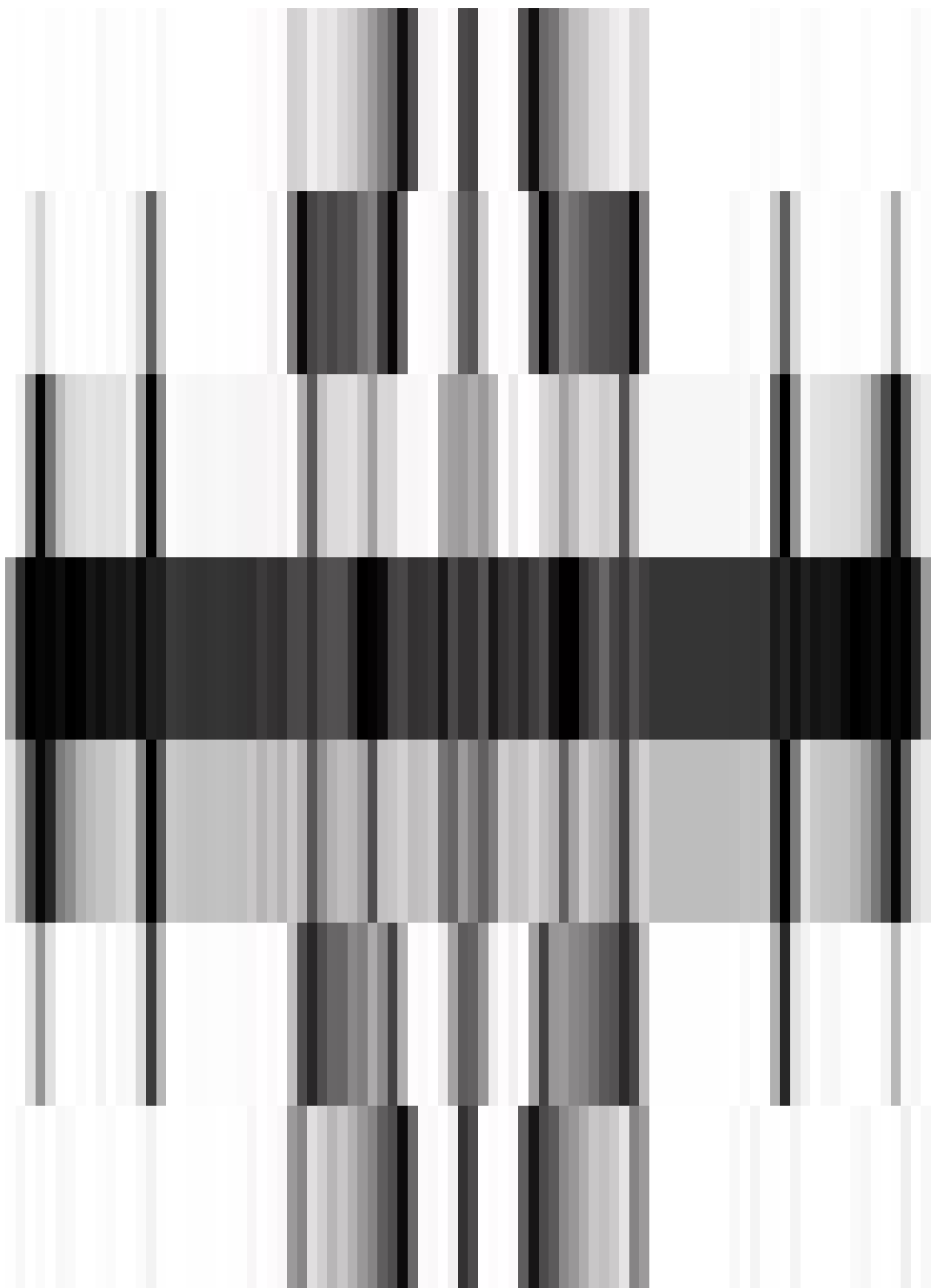
‘Not from me,’ Zora threw up his hands. ‘You won’t get a penny from me.’

‘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.

EIGHTEEN



And so, with a well-planned budget and Maachh on a tight leash, the five of us set out on our journey.

‘We could hike for some distance, and then take a lift from one of the trucks. It would save us some money,’ suggested Maachh.

We promptly agreed and began marching towards the highway.

I brought out my mouth organ and began playing music. And so, singing and laughing, we made our way to the outskirts of Dehradun with several photo stops along the way. Along with the money, Sandy had borrowed a camera from Pinky bhabi and he put it to good use, taking photographs of the group as well as the interesting sights.

Once we reached the highway, we flagged a truck and took a lift to Mussoorie.

The journey from Dehradun up to the end of Mall Road in a truck cost us nothing when the genial driver learnt that we were GCs from the IMA. We were almost halfway to our destination when the truck driver halted for a cup of tea. Seated as we were on sacks that seemed to contain rocks and stones, we needed the cuppa as much as he did. The packet of banana chips, gifted by Noble, was empty within seconds.

Even as we sipped our steaming brew, a bus arrived and its passengers spilled into the dhaba. A big group of young girls alighted, chattering like magpies. Maachh might have been on a tight leash, but his eyes weren’t. They almost popped out of their sockets at the sight of the pretty ladies.

‘I think they are from the convent at Dehradun,’ he whispered. ‘Let’s go and say hello to them.’

‘Do you think they are going to Mussoorie?’ Porky asked, his eyes widening with excitement.

‘Where else would they be going, idiot? This road leads to Mussoorie.’

The two of them started to rise from their seats, but one look from Sandy and they sat down again.

‘You are not going anywhere,’ said Zora. ‘I’ll tie you up if I have to.’

Had not his words restrained the two chaps, they would have landed us in fresh trouble.

‘The nuns look like dragons,’ said Porky, eyeing the nuns who were accompanying the girls. ‘It will be wiser not to strike up a conversation with them.’

‘You are right, it’s not worth the trouble,’ Maachh tried to sound uninterested.

Memories of the tragic telephonic encounter with the warden of the girls’ hostel reared its ugly head and sanity prevailed.

Thankfully, the driver beckoned and we clambered into the back of the truck with as much dignity as we could muster, whilst the girls stared and laughed at us.

‘Idiots!’ was all Maachh could mutter as he found them clutching their bellies with laughter at the sight of him propped on a sack. To be fair to the girls, he presented a comic sight.

‘Let’s find a hotel first,’ suggested the ever-practical Zora as soon as we reached Mussoorie. ‘Then, we can dump our backpacks and go gallivanting.’

His suggestion found favour with all of us except Maachh, who was of the opinion that tanking up on food was necessary before we began our search for hotel rooms.

‘I am hungry,’ he revolted. ‘I can’t walk another step.’

‘All in good time,’ consoled Sandy, producing an apple from the voluminous pocket of his trousers. ‘In the meantime, here’s an apple to keep you going.’

Maachh was not the only one whose innards were raising flags of discontent. In a bid to maximise our vacation, we had started very early in the morning and the hurried breakfast had long been digested. Valiantly, we soldiered on without protesting.

The hill station was shrugging off its winter lassitude. Not yet invaded by

tourists, the place was shrouded in stillness. The aura of quiet elegance had not vanished, yet. A few honeymooners, some families, and groups of college students strolled down the Mall Road.

We wandered around town for about an hour, inspecting hotel rooms and checking the tariffs. Either the rooms were dirty and inadequate or the rates were too high for our wallets.

In the end, exhausted after endless haggling, we signed into Hotel Mountain View where Zora had managed a good off-season discount. We got two rooms with an extra bed in the larger one. It was a reasonably good hotel located in a peaceful area. Our rooms were clean and spacious and the view from the windows took our breath away. We stepped into the large balcony and took in the scenery. The snow covered peaks were clearly visible through the tall deodar trees. The refreshing, cool breeze was an added advantage.

‘It will be a treat to sit in the balcony and enjoy a peg of whisky along with chicken tikkas,’ opined Maachh, who was obsessed with food.

The mention of food stoked our hunger and a few minutes later, we embarked in search of an affordable eatery. The Bong stood and sniffed like a hound as we crossed each restaurant.

‘I can smell tandoori chicken,’ he remarked, his nose twitching excitedly. ‘Let’s go in here, I am famished. We don’t have to waste time in consulting the menu; I will have chicken tikkas for starters, biryani for main course, and kulfi for dessert. I am sure they have these dishes on their menu.’

‘A meal here will cost us more than three meals elsewhere,’ said Sandy, steering the Bong away from the restaurant. ‘You will have to skip dinner as well as breakfast if you eat there.’

‘Heartless goon,’ muttered the sullen Maachh. ‘Won’t let a chap eat.’

‘Patience, dear fellow,’ consoled Sandy. ‘A friend of mine who was here a couple of months ago mentioned a nice and affordable Tibetan eatery. You can eat to your heart’s content once we reach there.’

Ten minutes later, we were seated at the modest Tibetan restaurant adorned with framed photographs of a smiling Dalai Lama. The fresh mountain air had

whipped up our appetite and our bellies were rumbling with hunger. Maachh's clamour for mutton biryani was quickly set aside as Sandy took charge of our spending. Instead, we enjoyed steaming bowls of nourishing soup, thukpa, and momos.

Once his body was fuelled, Maachh's attention turned to girls again.

'I say, let's go to the Company Garden. I have heard it is a very beautiful and romantic place. There are sure to be some nice girls loitering around the garden and who knows what may happen.'

'Yes, let's go to the garden,' Porky piped up, excitedly. It was obvious that the two jokers were bent upon creating mischief.

'Only if you promise not to get us beaten up,' joked Zora.

The Company Garden turned out to be a damp squib. Expectations of colourful blooms dancing in the breeze and birds warbling a happy song vanished as we went around. Perhaps we had come during the wrong season, I couldn't help but feel disappointed. With only drooping flowers and neglect around us, we settled down on a bench to enjoy the cool breeze and pose for pictures.

'There are not many girls around here,' complained Porky. 'You said it was a romantic place and there were sure to be many girls.'

'Not many girls venture out in sunlight,' Maachh told him. 'They are worried about their complexion, you see.'

'In that case, we should have come here after sunset.'

'You won't find them roaming around after sunset, you silly fellow,' rebuked the Bong.

Disappointment was writ large on the faces of the two jokers, although Maachh was trying to put up a brave front. 'Learn to enjoy the beauties of nature,' he advised.

'Let us move to where the action is,' said Zora. 'I suggest we walk down the Mall Road. We can hang around there till sunset and then have our dinner.'

‘It’s been an exhausting day. Let’s take it easy today. Tomorrow we can venture out sightseeing,’ I suggested.

‘A cup of coffee would be nice,’ said Porky, after we had walked from one end of the Mall Road to the other. ‘I want to rest my feet.’

For once, everyone agreed. We had walked a lot and everyone felt the need to rest for a while. The sun was about to set and the temperatures were dropping.

We entered a café and occupied a corner table. ‘A cup of coffee costs as much as our meal at the Tibetan joint,’ whistled Zora, scanning the menu.

The waiter was hovering around for our order. We looked undecided. Splurging on coffee at the cafe was a luxury we could not afford.

‘Give us some time,’ Zora told the waiter. ‘Let’s walk out of this place,’ he whispered as soon as the liveried guy was out of earshot. ‘We can find a cheaper place.’

We were reluctant to go searching for cheaper cup of coffee and were scanning the menu for affordable fare.

‘Don’t look now, but Peacock is here,’ whispered Sandy. ‘He is sitting at the other corner with a serious-looking female.’

‘Where?’ Despite his warning, we swivelled on our seats. There he was, smiling and whispering sweet nothings into the ears of a woman. The two were lost to the world while their coffee lay forgotten.

‘So, that is your secret, Captain Vikram Sharma,’ muttered Maachh, rubbing his hands gleefully.

‘Why, that is Renu Chopra,’ exclaimed Zora. ‘She is from Jaipur. Her father is a Brigadier and a family friend.’

Excited at the sight, he continued: ‘She is a doctor and is working at a Dehradun hospital. Can’t believe she is romancing the Peacock, she’s is a studious and no-nonsense girl.’

‘Tell us about her,’ requested Porky.

‘Arre, there is not much to tell. A serious girl, Renu never looked beyond her books. I can hardly believe my eyes. Wonder what the Paltu sees in her.’

‘He looks totally smitten.’

‘Well, his mother will be terribly disappointed with his lady love. She is neither a showstopper nor a docile doormat.’

‘Vikram Sharma, you will have a tough time convincing your mother,’ smirked Sandy. ‘Wait till I tell Pinkky bhabi about this.’

‘I don’t blame him,’ I said. ‘He will be an old man if he allows his mother to look for a bride for him. He has done a wise thing by finding someone.’

‘True. No wonder, they have come all the way to romance in Mussoorie.’

‘Let’s follow them,’ said Maachh, all keyed up. At that moment, the waiter made his appearance yet again.

‘Arre, we told you to give us some time to decide,’ Porky scolded him. ‘Now get us some water first.’

Shooing away the waiter, we concentrated on the young couple once again. This was fodder for the grapevine. We gossiped like old women.

‘Bacchhoo, now we know your secret,’ Maachh grinned. ‘All I have to do is to mention the magic words “Mussoorie” and “Renu” whenever I get caught by him.’

‘... and he will let us go,’ tittered Porky. ‘What a discovery!’

It was not possible to sit much longer at the cafe without placing an order. The waiter, after placing glasses of water, had begun hovering around us. Not even stern looks from Porky could drive away the persistent fellow, who resorted to returning Porky’s looks with equal firmness. The Peacock, in the meantime, had placed his arms carelessly around Renu’s shoulders and things were warming up. We were reluctant to leave the cafe, involved as we were in noting the happenings at our instructor’s table.

‘Let’s order three cups of tea and split them. Tea is cheaper than the coffee,’

decided Zora.

The waiter threw us a disgusted look as we placed our order. 'The cost of tea is worth watching this romance. Do you think he is going to kiss her?' Maachh was getting thrilled with the idea.

'This is India, not Hollywood. Couples don't go around kissing each other in public. Put a brake on your imagination,' rebuked Zora.

'I am sure they are staying in a hotel, we must follow them.'

'What will you gain by following them?'

'We will know the name of the hotel.'

'So? How does that help you?'

'Besides, they may be driving back to Dehradun. It is not too late to do that.'

At that very moment, the two of them got up to leave. The waiter had not yet brought in our tea, and we decided to give him the slip. One by one, we sauntered out of the cafe. Once we had walked out, we sped along the road and entered a souvenir shop on the opposite side.

As expected, the waiter raced out within three minutes and stood there, his eyes scanning the road. We had a good laugh at the sight of his bewildered face. His customers had vanished without a trace.

'That was a very wicked thing to do,' I sighed. 'It was absolutely disgraceful and an absolutely un-gentlemanly deed.'

'Go and pay him for the tea, if you are feeling so bad for the waiter.'

'Poor guy, he will have some explaining to do.'

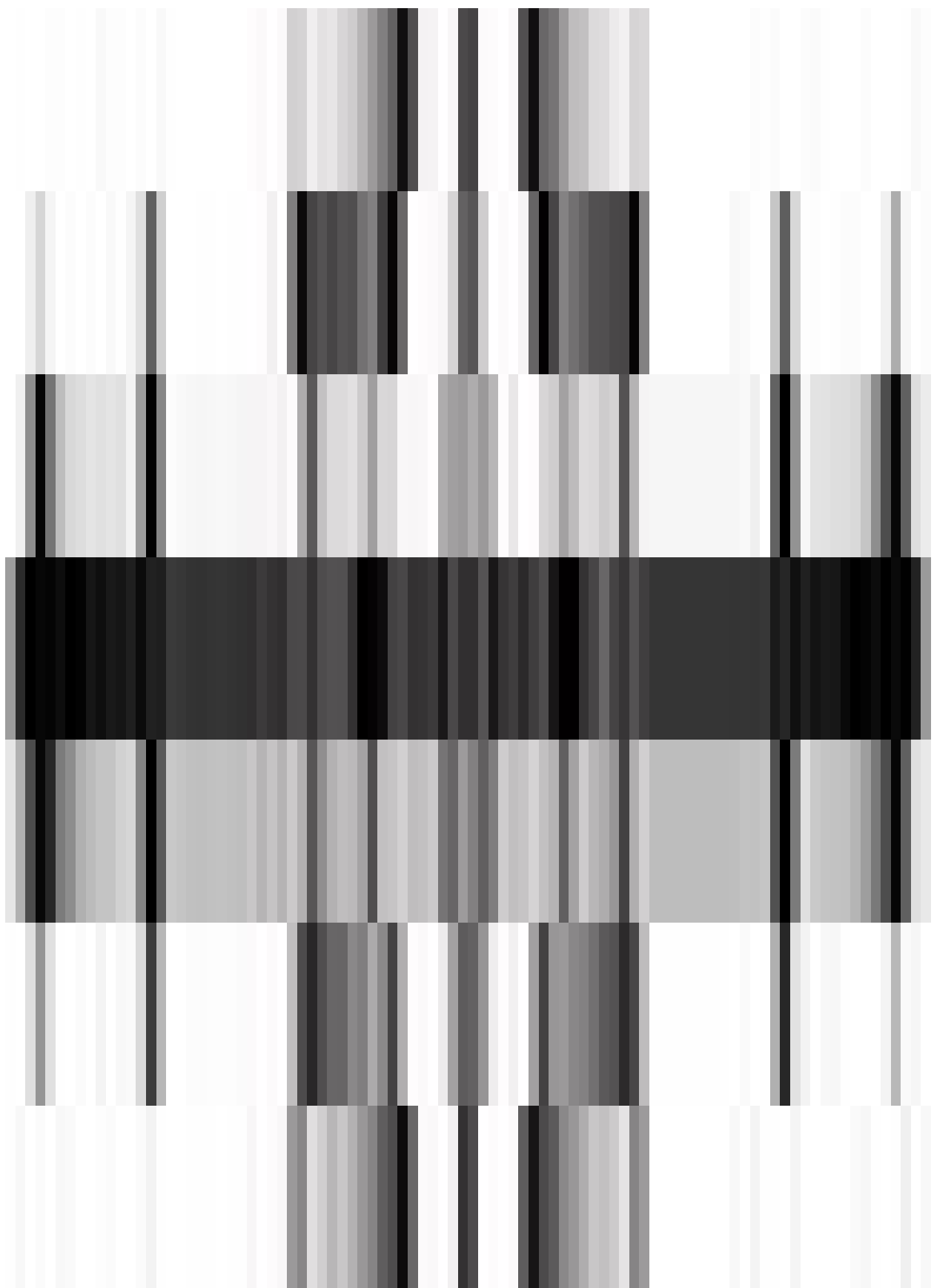
'I don't think so. They will heat up the tea and serve it to some other customer.'

Stepping out of the shop when the coast was clear, we were rewarded by the sight of Peacock's shining Premier Padmini disappearing round the bend of the road that led to Dehradun. With Renu by his side, the instructor was speeding

away happily.

‘Like I told you, they are not staying in Mussoorie,’ said Sandy, his eyes twinkling as he imagined Pinky bhabhi’s reactions when he told her about Peacock and his romance.

NINETEEN



Dinner was chhole bhature at a lively dhaba at the end of a narrow lane, where a stout Sikh sang as he prepared the bhature. Out of tune, out of beat, he warbled unmindful of the dirty looks thrown his way.

‘What luck! There is live music to go with the food,’ commented Porky.

‘Tomorrow, we will dine in style,’ promised Sandy.

‘I don’t believe you,’ said Maachh, visions of mutton biryani and chicken legs haunting his mind. ‘I will go out on my own and eat whatever I want. I am sure I will not get a good meal if I go with you.’

His one-track mind was set on biryani.

‘Count me in,’ Porky said. ‘Don’t forget to call me when you go.’

The next day was hectic as we went to see the Kempty Falls, which was not as gorgeous as the brochures promised.

‘This trip will remain in my mind forever,’ remarked Zora as Sandy took pictures of the group.

‘Did you know that the Maharaja of Kapurthala has a bungalow here?’ Zora asked.

‘How do you know? Did he invite you to his bungalow?’ Maachh asked nastily.

He was in a foul mood ever since biryani had eluded him.

‘It is not necessary to be invited to a bungalow to know of its existence,’ Zora replied, smoothly. ‘By the way, my grandfather was often invited to his house by the current Maharaja’s father.’

‘Let’s go to Benog Hill,’ interrupted Sandy. ‘My pal had been raving about the view from the hill.’

‘Where is Benog Hill?’ asked Porky.

‘It is about eight kilometres from Library Chowk. We could take a cab.’

‘What a waste of money!’ grumbled Maachh.

‘It wouldn’t cost much,’ I consoled. ‘Besides, we must see all that the hill station has to offer. We are not likely to return to Mussoorie soon.’

The matter decided, we walked up to Library Chowk and took a cab from there. Climbing the hill, we paused for breath. The ancient Jwalaji Temple was a sight to behold, and stretched at our feet was a carpet of colourful wildflowers. It was a far better sight than the Company Garden. We sat on the grass and communed with nature.

The sun was calling it a day and we decided to catch the sunset. Although it was chilly, the sight of the orange orb doing its disappearing act behind the hills was enchanting. Awed by the beauty, we forgot all about the biting wind that was assaulting us from all sides.

The trek back to town was a silent one. Perhaps it was the spiritual experience at the temple that had a sobering effect on us. It was late when we finally walked into our rooms after dinner. The chilly mountain air was crisp and clear, a light breeze swept through the eucalyptus leaves, and a full moon added to the charm.

‘Let’s play a game of bridge,’ said Sandy, bringing out the cards.

‘Where is the bottle of rum you had brought along?’ asked Maachh.

‘I am saving it for a special occasion,’ teased Sandy.

‘At this rate, I don’t think we will ever see the bottle coming out of your bag.’

‘Chicken, chicken, my kingdom for some chicken...’ mouthed the Bong.

‘It’s always about chicks or chicken. Isn’t it?’ Zora pulled his leg.

Since only four could play the game, Maachh wandered out into the balcony. There he busied himself with dreams of whisky and chicken.

‘You will catch a cold, come inside,’ shouted Porky.

‘Don’t worry about me. I have the stars and the moon to keep me company.’

A couple of minutes later, he walked into the room and pulled out the white bedsheet from the foot of the four-poster bed. Wrapping it up around himself with only his eyes visible, he vanished again.

Suddenly, our ears were assaulted by loud shrieks from the adjoining room.

‘Someone is getting murdered,’ remarked Porky rushing towards the door. We joined him as he ran into a pair of middle aged Anglo-Indian ladies. Clad in their night clothes, they clung to each other outside the door of their room, screaming their lungs out.

‘G... gh... ghost,’ stammered one of them after Zora reached their side. ‘Th... the... there is a ghost in our balcony.’

By now, several heads were emerging from the half-open doors around us. Some of them had joined us in the corridor. Terrified faces peeped through a few windows.

‘Call the manager,’ suggested someone.

‘Call the police,’ said another. ‘It must be a thief.’

The women were high, we noticed. So did the others.

‘A drink too many,’ scoffed one of the men in the crowd. ‘I can smell alcohol.’

It was true. The women were not quite stable on their feet and they reeked of alcohol. As soon as word got around, people began disappearing into their rooms.

‘They must have imagined it. Drinks can speed up the imagination,’ remarked a lady who had rushed out in her nightgown. ‘They will be laughing at all this fuss when they wake up in the morning.’

‘Mind your words. We are not drunk,’ protested the stouter of the two screamers. ‘Both of us couldn’t be mistaken.’

‘We are from the IMA,’ said Sandy in his most authoritative tone. ‘Can we have a look at the balcony?’

‘We will drive away the ghost, if there is any,’ seconded Porky, gallantly.

The four of us, followed by the women, walked into the room and stepped towards the balcony. There was nobody.

‘Are you sure you saw someone here?’ asked Zora, looking doubtfully at the ladies.

‘But I am sure there was a ghost.’ The two of them were still clinging to each other for moral support.

‘Well, it has disappeared now. I suggest you both go to sleep. We are in the adjoining room. Give us a call in case the ghost decides to return,’ saying this, I latched the door that led to the balcony.

‘Selina, the bottle has disappeared,’ one of them pointed a shaking finger at the table. ‘The ghost has taken it.’

‘... and the food has gone too,’ said the other. The two of them turned to us – ‘You don’t believe us, do you? Well, where did the whisky bottle and the food go, if there was no ghost?’

Nonplussed, we stared at the two glasses with remnants of whisky in them, sitting alongside an empty plate. There was no bottle.

At that moment, the receptionist on night duty arrived along with a couple of waiters.

‘What happened, madam?’ he asked.

‘There are ghosts in this room.’ One of the ladies complained. ‘You must give us another room.’

‘I am sorry but it is not possible to give you another room as all of them have guests. I have been here for the past ten years and no ghosts have been reported. I assure you, there are no ghosts in this hotel.’

‘Are you trying to tell us that we are lying?’

‘No, I am not saying that,’ the receptionist replied. ‘It could be a trick of light.

Sometimes, the branches of the trees move in the wind and the mind plays tricks.'

'No tricks here. We saw the ghost.'

'One of us could be mistaken but not both of us,' retorted the stouter one. 'Melina, do you recall the ghost we encountered when we went to Shimla in 1969?'

'We seem to attract ghosts wherever we go,' sighed the sister.

'This one loves whisky and chicken,' tittered Selina.

By now, all of us were convinced that the two ladies were drunk.

'Well, I will post a guard outside your door,' promised the receptionist, winking at us. 'Just shout and he will rush in if the ghost reappears. Relax now and go to sleep.'

A sudden suspicion preyed on my mind as we entered our room. Something about the whisky and chicken combination gave rise to doubt. As indicated by my intuition, seated in the balcony was Maachh munching happily on a chicken leg. A half-empty bottle of premium whisky stood by his side. A satisfied sigh escaped the rogue as he threw away the bone and picked up another leg.

'Bloody scoundrel!' Zora jumped on him. 'So, you are the thieving ghost.'

'You are a disgrace,' spat Sandy. 'I never imagined I would see the day when one of my pals would stoop to steal whisky and food from old ladies.'

'This is un-officer like behaviour,' I joined them in berating the guy. 'I am ashamed of you.'

'Were you so desperate for daaru and chicken that you had to scare the women and steal from them?' For once, Porky sided with us.

'Those who don't approve of my behaviour can go to sleep and those who don't mind a bit of mischief can join me for the feast,' Maachh invited.

'I don't want to join you in eating stolen chicken,' I snarled.

‘Stop preaching and come here,’ said the unrepentant Bong, picking up another piece of chicken from the plate. ‘What is done is done. Your points are noted for future compliance. In the meantime, there is enough to go around.’

Tempted, we stared at the bottle. A few minutes of hesitation later, his shameful conduct was forgotten and we grabbed the bottle and took a swig each.

‘You guys are hypocrites. After all the abuses you heaped on me, none of you refused to enjoy the drinks and snacks.’

‘I can get drinks and chicken from the two ladies without stealing,’ claimed Zora.

‘Ha! Lofty words,’ scoffed the Bong.

‘You want a bet?’ challenged Zora.

‘Bet.’

‘A hundred rupees.’

‘Alright, a hundred rupees.’

‘Tomorrow evening, we will all be sitting with the two women, enjoying drinks and dinner,’ promised the Rajput. ‘... and this joker will pay me a hundred rupees for losing the bet.’

‘Buddy, make no mistakes, you will be paying me a hundred rupees,’ Maachh chuckled as he went to his room accompanied by Porky.

The next morning, before we left the hotel for sightseeing, Zora knocked on our neighbour’s door.

‘Good morning,’ he greeted them suavely.

Selina was surprised to see the young man standing at the door. ‘Come in son,’ she smiled. ‘You are up early.’

‘I am sorry to disturb you but I wanted to check if everything was alright. I hope you slept peacefully and the ghost didn’t make an appearance after we left.’

‘Thank you for your concern,’ she replied. ‘No, the ghost didn’t return and we slept peacefully. Why don’t you sit down?’

‘We are leaving for a bit of sightseeing. I thought I will find out if there is anything we can do for you.’

Impressed by his courtesy and concern, Melina replied: ‘No dear, we don’t need anything. Will you have some tea or coffee? We were just ordering our breakfast.’

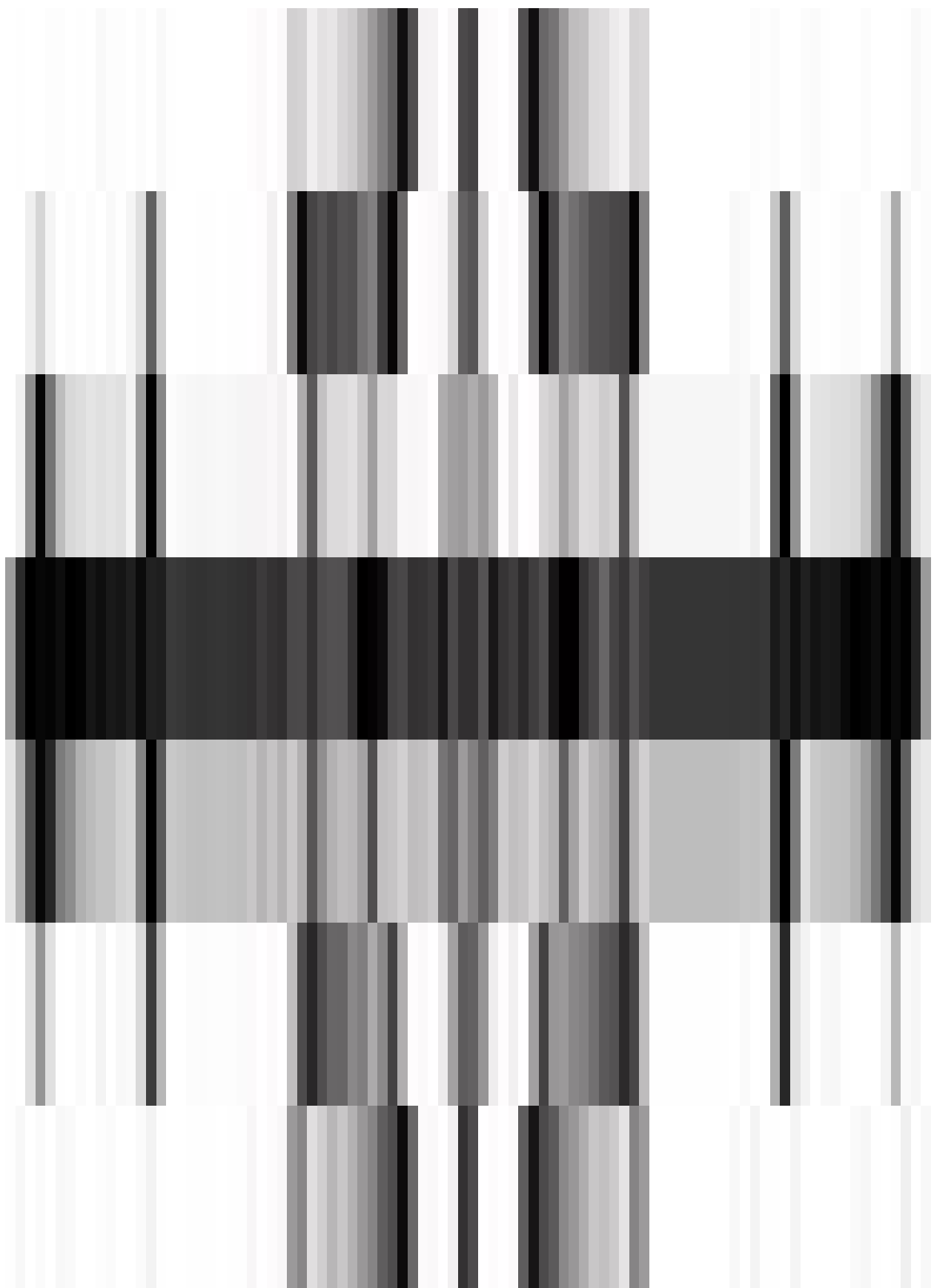
‘Thank you, I don’t mind a cup of coffee.’

Twenty minutes later, the four of us peeped into the neighbouring room, and found Zora entertaining the ladies with tales of punishments and parades as he sipped his coffee. The half-empty plates of sandwiches and cupcakes that lay before him confirmed that his breakfast had been quite satisfying.

‘Scoundrel!’ Maachh spat contemptuously, drooling at the sight of the remaining cakes. ‘Feasting alone without comrades is not acceptable. He is breaking the basic rule of camaraderie.’

‘Watch out, buddy, you may have to shell out a hundred bucks tonight,’ laughed Sandy. ‘Zora is out to charm the ladies.’

TWENTY



Half an hour later Zora joined us, his face creased with a contented smile.

‘So how was the breakfast?’ Porky rubbed it in.

‘Do you think it was right of you to enjoy coffee and cakes without us?’ asked the Bong, who was peeved at being left out of the treat.

‘Look buddy, I had gone to say hello to the ladies and they invited me for breakfast. It would have been impolite to refuse and improper to tell them that you all should also be invited.’

‘Hmmmph.’ The contempt on Maachh’s face showed he was unconvinced. ‘Just remember, such things are not easily forgotten.’

‘I promise to get everyone invited for dinner tonight,’ pledged Zora. His promise brought a smile on the Bong’s face.

Truce called, we made our way to Landour. An ardent fan of Ruskin Bond, I wanted to visit Landour Bazaar which figures in many of his stories. As I walked around, tales from Rusty’s life came alive and I sighed with pleasure.

From there we trekked uphill to Lal Tibba and were rewarded with a magnificent view of the Garhwal peaks. The snow had not melted and the sight of the resplendent white peaks as they reflected sunlight took my breath away.

Standing there, I inhaled the crisp air. The view was worth a million dollars.

Maachh was lying on a bed of pine needles dreaming of chicks and chicken, Porky lay by his side, his eyes closed in serene thoughts. Leaning against a tree, Sandy and I stared at the beauty around us while Zora loitered around. It was the most peaceful hour we had spent for a very long time. With its foggy mountains, winding paths, and beautiful bungalows, Mussoorie was a tranquil paradise so unlike the bustling towns one encounters everywhere. The pace of life around us was leisurely and calm.

We dawdled for a while and then embarked on an uphill climb to the Sisters’ Bazaar. The walk, popularly known as the ‘Chakkar’, dotted with quaint cottages was set amidst pine, deodar, and oak forests. The sun was setting as we made our

way back to Mall Road after exploring St Paul's Church and Char Dukaan.

'You better hand me a hundred bucks,' the Bong told Zora. 'As per our bet, you were to get us invited for dinner. It has not happened, so I win.'

'The sun has not yet set. Dinner is a long way off. How about some momos? I'll pay for them.'

Zora's suggestion found favour with us and we ambled towards a stall that was selling piping hot momos.

'Please pack six momos,' ordered the Rajput after we had finished.

'Good idea,' Maachh rubbed his hands gleefully. 'We can have them enroute.'

'These are not for you.'

'So, you are planning to hog them yourself?'

'No, they are for bait.'

'I don't understand...'

'You won't,' Zora smiled. 'Have patience and things will become clear.'

'Where are we having dinner?' asked Porky. 'The momos were just starters, I need my dinner. I hope you didn't count the momos as dinner.'

'The problem with you is your impatience. If you wait for an hour, I assure you of a feast. Just trust me.'

Faithfully, we followed the leader who was carrying the momos.

Once at the hotel, Zora turned to us and instructed: 'Now, you go back to the room. I will call for you after half an hour.'

He knocked on the neighbouring door.

As instructed, we waited to be called with considerable patience. Half an hour passed, but no dice.

‘He is taking us for a ride. I am sure he is enjoying dinner with them,’ Maachh paused his pacing and wagged his finger.

‘Yes, we will die of hunger while he is feasting,’ seconded Porky. ‘Let’s not wait any longer.’

‘Let’s knock on their door,’ proposed Maachh. ‘They will be forced to invite us.’

‘We will do nothing of the sort,’ Sandy’s voice was firm. ‘We will wait for Zora’s call.’

‘You have a lot of faith in him. I don’t.’

‘It is almost an hour now,’ wailed Porky. ‘He is not going to call us.’

‘It is only 40 minutes,’ I scolded. ‘Your watch is galloping like a race horse.’

I had barely uttered the words when Zora entered the room.

‘Let’s go,’ he commanded, and we rushed.

We were greeted by the sisters who smiled winningly at us. After introducing us, Zora gave a brief description about each of his pals.

‘There is no food here,’ whispered Porky.

‘Shut up,’ retorted Sandy and smiled at Selina who was saying: ‘We never imagined there were ghosts in this hotel. Our father, Stephen Brown, owned two bungalows. The one at Dehradun is called Mayfair, and Bluebells is located in a lovely, isolated area in Landour, not too far away from Mussoorie. As children, we spent our summers at Landour and winters at Dehradun. Melina and I were educated in Mussoorie and now we teach at the girls’ convent school in Dehradun.’

At the mention of the girls’ convent school, Maachh’s ears perked up. It was the same school where the two jokers had escaped to when chased by the bees.

‘You teach at the convent school?’ he asked. ‘How nice!’

‘What happened to your bungalow at Landour?’ asked Zora, trying to steer the

conversation away from the girls' school.

‘Our brother, James inherited Bluebells and we inherited Mayfair. After his death the bungalow was sold off by his children, who have migrated to the USA. They rarely come to India and there was no point in holding on to the property.’

‘Oh, that’s sad.’

‘It is rather sad. We had been enjoying our vacations at Bluebells but now we are reduced to this.’

‘I am sure, the ghosts will not bother you again,’ promised Zora. ‘How long are you likely to be here?’

‘We will be leaving in two days. We come here to relax and relive our past. Melina and I take an occasional stroll on the Mall Road or at the Company Garden.’

For the next one hour, the Brown sisters entertained us with interesting stories from their childhood and lamented the many changes the hill station had experienced. They spoke fondly of the Anglo-Indian community in the area. When Selina learnt of my admiration for Ruskin Bond, she promised to introduce me to him, some day.

Porky was upset that there was no mention of food. ‘What is the best place for roasted chicken?’ he asked, trying to bring up the topic. ‘You must be aware of all the good restaurants in town.’

‘I think Earl’s Court is a good place for continental food,’ replied Melina.

‘Then, we must go there for dinner.’

‘Are you thinking of going out for dinner?’ asked Selina.

‘Yes, it is dinner time and I am hungry,’ said the idiot. ‘We have had a hectic day.’

Zora’s warning looks had no effect on him.

‘The bracing breeze in the hills make me very hungry,’ he continued.

‘Well, we were thinking of inviting the five of you for dinner but if you are going out...’

‘Oh no, we would be delighted to give you company,’ Maachh replied promptly.

‘We don’t want to impose on you,’ Sandy spoke like a gentleman. ‘We have already taken a lot of your time.’

‘It is no imposition,’ protested the sisters. ‘After the concern and help offered by you, I think we owe you a dinner. Besides, we enjoy the company of youngsters. Your friend, Zora, has been entertaining us with interesting anecdotes about IMA.’

‘Thank you,’ said Zora. ‘I am flattered.’

‘I know you have a very hectic training but we would like you to come to our bungalow in Dehradun whenever you have the time,’ invited Selina. ‘You can join us for the Easter and Christmas celebrations. Melina is a very good cook and I am told that my skills in baking are considerable.’

‘We will manage to make time for a visit,’ promised Maachh, delighted at the thought of enjoying a good festive spread. ‘It will be nice to spend some time at Mayfair. I am sure it is a beautiful bungalow.’

‘Yes, it is one of those colonial structures that the British excelled in making. We have a huge orchard with dozens of mango and lychee trees. In fact, you should come during the lychee season. The flavour and taste of lychee plucked off the trees is absolutely impossible to find in the ones sold in the market.’

Now this had a sobering effect on Maachh and Porky, who winced at the memory of the bee stings.

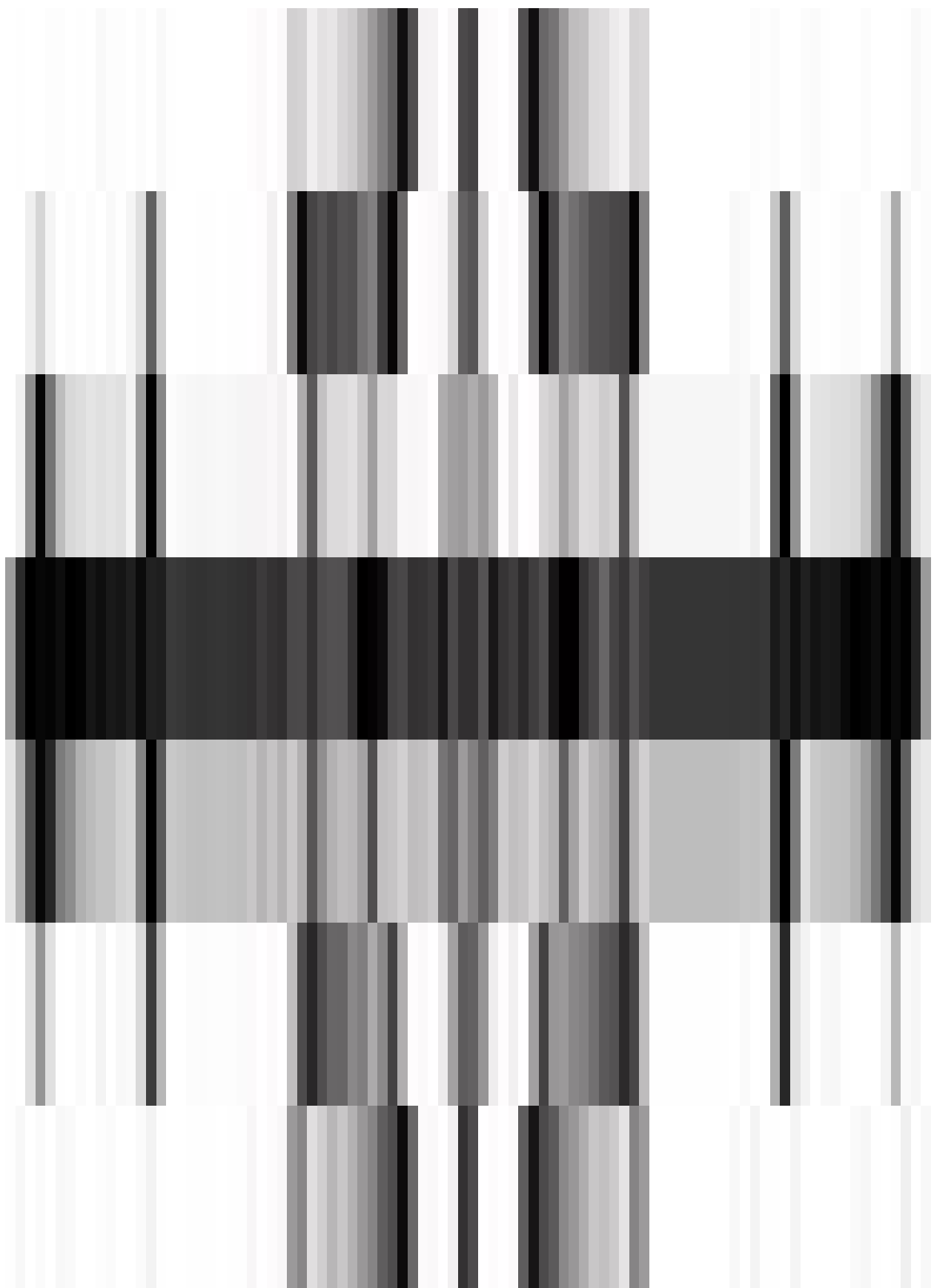
Restless at the delay in ordering dinner, Porky shifted uncomfortably on his seat and relayed silent missives to Zora. Half an hour later, the sisters brought out a fresh bottle of whisky and ordered a lavish meal after consulting Maachh, who seemed to leave no stone unturned. Chicken tikkas, malai prawn, mutton biryani, and ice cream – he ordered everything he could think of.

It was almost midnight when we sauntered back to our room, our bellies bulging with food.

‘The Mussoorie trip has been a great success,’ Maachh commented before sinking into deep sleep aided by several pegs of premium whisky.

The next morning, we departed with great reluctance but not before the two jokers had enjoyed a cup of coffee and cakes with the sisters and extracted an invitation for the Easter celebrations at Mayfair.

TWENTY-ONE



Soon, the fun times were over. The days of leisure spent in Mussoorie became a distant memory as our training at the IMA became more taxing. The days melted into nights before we could even register the passing of hours. Despite the strict routine, every day threw up a new challenge, a new experience. No two days were the same.

Our exhausted bodies craved sleep, but slumber was a luxury that was hard to lay hold of. By now, many of us began wishing we had not opted for the army. In fact, I often wondered what made me choose to tread the path of a soldier; not a single person in my family had ever thought of the army as a career. In fact, a lot of cadets debated the attractions of the profession, given the hardships one had to endure. Even Maachh and Porky, the carefree ones, were forced to slog.

Exercise camps were held almost every month. Most of us liked the idea of getting away from the campus, but the complex exercises were not our idea of a leisurely getaway. Physically draining and mentally demanding, the camps took a toll on our already fatigued bodies. Pushing our somnolent brains to the brink was not an easy task.

We struggled to find our way out of dense jungles and arid deserts. Not just that, the task of constructing makeshift bridges over rushing streams of water was not something we enjoyed, just as we didn't love the idea of wriggling and crawling through impenetrable undergrowth, or for that matter, climbing and sliding down mountain cliffs – all this with impossible deadlines. These tasks designed to test human endurance failed to whip up enthusiasm in the exhausted cadets.

Pitching tents within five minutes was no longer considered an achievement, but a routine affair. What had once been a thrilling experience was now a pain. Living in tents by the side of a freezing river during the winter with the bare essentials didn't hold exciting possibilities for anyone.

At times like this, most cadets improvised and cheated. We soon discovered that the only place that offered brief respite from the ordeal was the Military Hospital. Although we would all like to have spent a couple of days relaxing on a comfortable hospital bed, and tended by pretty nursing officers, none of us was granted the luxury. The only guy who got lucky was Sharman Kulkarni, aka Sherry.

In the past few months, the guy had acquired a reputation as a good horseman. After winning a few laurels at showjumping and tent-pegging, he was considered the ace of our course.

It was a sunny morning when Sherry led his beautiful white stallion, Bahadur, out onto the polo ground. With a prestigious horse show coming up, it was essential to practice for the event. The guy was set upon breaking his own records and raising the bar.

‘When you are good at something, you better be the best,’ was his slogan.

What he didn’t know was that even horses experience mood swings and don’t necessarily oblige riders at such times. Bahadur, though a prized stallion, was a moody animal too. And that morning, the horse just wanted to be left alone.

It balked at Sherry’s command to jump over the barrier, which was considerably higher than anything it had ever vaulted over. Twice, the horse refused to oblige and came to a grinding halt as it approached the obstacle. The rider patted and encouraged it, but the horse refused to oblige.

We all knew that Sherry had an unreasonable and stubborn streak. We also knew that Bahadur was a perfect match to any rider’s obstinacy. On the third attempt, a resolute Sherry raced all the way prepared to take his mount through the barrier. Bystanders later declared that it took just a split second for the accident to happen. Instead of the horse going over the fence, it was our pal who flew over the barrier while the horse remained rooted to the spot. Bahadur tossed his rider and displayed a total lack of regret for the act.

The poor chap lay in agony for a while. He tried to stand up but his feet collapsed under him. Sherry was rushed to the hospital where the doctor declared that the flying feat had taken a toll on his shin. The chap’s broken bone was put in a cast, and he was admitted to the Military Hospital. The fellow was heartbroken. All his hopes of bagging a cup at the horse show came to a tragic end.

The next day, when we visited him to express our camaraderie, Sherry lay facing the wall, his face wreathed in sorrow.

‘Come on, cheer up, buddy,’ Zora patted him on the shoulder. ‘It happens to the best of us.’

‘Damn Bahadur!’ the guy replied dejectedly. ‘I lost a golden opportunity, thanks to that animal.’

‘Well, every horse has its blue days,’ Maachh shook his head philosophically.

‘Look at the positive side,’ consoled Porky. ‘You won’t have to endure early morning runs in freezing temperatures, nor suffer those unending classes on Mountain Warfare, Commando Tactics, Counter-Insurgency, Jungle Warfare et al. I would love to loll on this bed demanding attention from the beautiful nurses.’

That bit about beautiful nurses cheered up the patient noticeably.

‘There is a beautiful nurse here on night duty.’ Sherry’s face grew animated as he described the encounter. ‘I was in pain and couldn’t sleep, so I called out to the nurse and this vision suddenly appeared by my bed. Her smile lit up this dull room. I forgot all about my pain and stared at her. “Is there anything you need?” she asked. I mumbled that I was in pain. A minute later, she was back with some medicine but I didn’t want to sleep.’

‘Why?’ Maachh asked, his eyes brimming with mischief. ‘Were the mosquitoes bothering you?’

‘You rascal, only an idiot would want to sleep when such a lovely nurse is present around the corner. I hobbled over to her twice. Once to ask for water, which she reminded me was right there by my bed side. The next time I went to ask for something to eat. I told her I was hungry. She searched for a while and returned with a packet of biscuits.’

‘You scoundrel!’ exclaimed Porky.

There was a dreamy look on Sherry’s face as he recalled his experience.

‘I wish I could be admitted to the hospital for a few days,’ sighed Maachh. ‘I need a respite from the training and a healing touch from the lovely nurse.’

The Bong didn’t know that he was destined to have his wish granted, very soon.

Just a couple of weeks after Sherry’s accident, Maachh came down with jaundice. His love for street food got him into trouble. The Bong was thrilled to

be admitted to the hospital.

‘No more training, no PT, and no parade!’ he sang. ‘No ustaads breathing down my neck, no instructors to worry about; I will have complete rest with beautiful nurses for company. And who knows what may happen?’

He was clearly over-optimistic, nevertheless we envied him.

‘The only problem is that I have been barred from eating anything but boiled veggies,’ he complained when we paid him a visit.

Now we had two chaps to visit. First we checked on Sherry, who seemed to be in high spirits and reluctant to get well, although the doctor had pronounced him fit to return to his routine at the IMA.

‘I am not going to let them discharge me from the hospital,’ he said. ‘I will pretend to be sick for some more time.’

‘Try breaking some more bones,’ advised Zora. ‘Nothing else will work.’

Next we walked into Maachh’s room. There we found the Bong lying with furrows of sorrow etched on his face.

‘What happened? Why the morose look?’ enquired Sandy.

‘Don’t even ask,’ replied the chap, testily.

‘What’s wrong? Just the other day you were dying to get admitted to the hospital,’ said Porky. ‘What went wrong?’

‘Arre yaar, I am not allowed to eat anything other than boiled beans and carrots. I can bear with that, but it is the absence of the pretty nurse that upsets me.’

‘Isn’t she here?’

‘Sherry is lucky; that nurse is on duty in his ward,’ he sighed.

‘There must be other nurses,’ Porky consoled.

‘Wait till you see the nurse on duty.’

Just then, we heard a booming voice behind us. A hefty matron darkened the doorway.

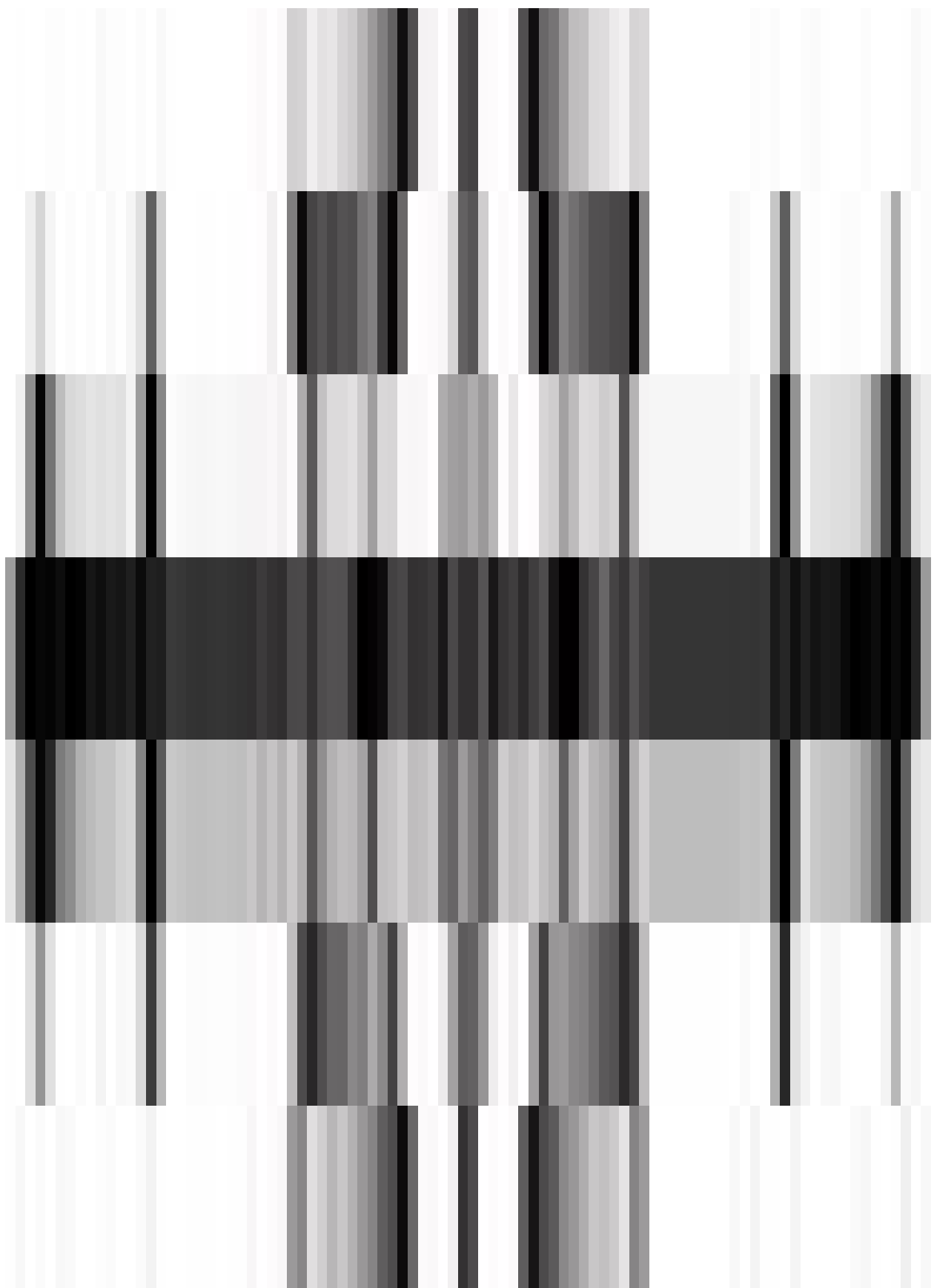
‘What’s going on?’ Her rasping voice shook the walls. ‘Visiting hours are over. What are you doing here, GCs? Out, this very moment, the entire lot of you!’

We scrambled with our tails between our legs. The reason for Maachh’s misery was evident. He was stuck with a battleaxe instead of the Florence Nightingale he had imagined.

Suddenly, all those pining to get admitted to the hospital no longer wanted to be there... and those who were there, wanted to get out at the earliest.

Sherry being the only exception.

TWENTY-TWO



It was a Sunday afternoon, and we had made plans of visiting our ailing pal before we went to town to catch a show at the cinema.

When Maachh heard the plan, he declared that he was going to join us.

‘There is no way I will be chained to this bed with the awful nurse watching over me.’

The previous evening, he had taken an out-pass and gone to the barrack to get some essentials.

‘More than getting the essentials, it was the need to get out of this prison that made me ask for an out pass,’ he clarified. ‘I feel stifled here.’

‘Forget it, buddy,’ Sandy chuckled. ‘You went out last evening. It is not likely they will give you another out pass so soon.’

‘I know I won’t get an out pass, but that doesn’t mean I can’t leave without it.’

‘You wouldn’t dare.’

‘You bet!’ Maachh challenged.

The guy was up to mischief once again. The Bong couldn’t resist a challenge.

‘You can’t go out to town without your mufti clothes,’ declared Porky.

‘Then you bring them for me,’ snapped Maachh. ‘I will get dressed and we will sneak out.’

‘What if the hatchet-faced nurse finds you missing?’

‘I did a bit of investigation and found out she’s not on duty tonight,’ chuckled Maachh.

That evening, an hour before our rendezvous at the movie hall, Porky delivered the mufti to Maachh.

It didn’t take much effort for the joker to escape undetected from the hospital.

We were not surprised to see Porky and Maachh, their arms linked, whistling as they walked towards the movie hall at the appointed hour.

‘Congrats! You made it,’ greeted Zora.

‘Was there any doubt about it?’ Maachh replied in a supercilious tone.

‘The challenge lies in getting back to your bed, undetected. Also, there will be a price to pay if they discover you missing.’

‘Don’t worry, I am carrying the old out pass as a safety measure. As for discovering my absence, they would assume I am somewhere on the campus.’

The guy was cool as a cucumber.

We were in high spirits after enjoying the film, and Maachh was on a supreme high. He indulged in a hearty meal at a fancy restaurant, despite the dietary restrictions imposed on him.

‘It’s been the most unpleasant experience, living on boiled veggies. I was dying to enjoy chicken curry and naan,’ he said, burping after the huge meal.

‘The after-effects of the chicken curry on your jaundice will be evident very soon,’ warned Sandy.

Happy after the outing, the Bong donned the regulation striped pajamas and flip flops behind a bush near the gate of the hospital. Thereafter, waving us off, he made his way towards his ward. As he walked down the driveway, he prayed that he would not come across any of the nurses till he had reached the ward.

That was not to be. The unlucky chap spotted the headlights of an approaching car. He considered jumping into a bush, but it was too late. He stood like a rabbit pinned in the headlights of the car, and was clearly visible to the driver. The car screeched to a halt just short of hitting him and an officer stepped out. To his misfortune, Maachh realised it was none other than CoCo. Fate had handed him a lemon, but the joker decided to make himself some lemonade.

‘Why are you loitering?’ CoCo barked angrily.

‘Sir, I had taken an out pass and am going back to my room,’ mumbled Maachh

tragically.

‘Show me your pass,’ demanded the instructor. CoCo was unrelenting when it came to discipline and rules.

With trembling hands, Maachh pulled out the old pass. He held his breath as CoCo peered at it in the dark, praying that the dim light would make it impossible for the officer to decipher the date on it.

‘Hmmm,’ grunted CoCo. ‘Run back to your ward, on the double,’ he ordered handing the pass back to the clown. Minutes later, he had driven off, leaving the Bong sighing with relief.

Only later did he learn that CoCo had gone to the hospital for treatment for an eye ailment. His eyes were red and bleary with conjunctivitis so he had not been able to read the details on the out pass.

Back in his room, Maachh faced an irate nurse. The battleaxe was back on duty, much to his dismay.

‘Where were you?’ she demanded, her hands on her more- than-ample hips.

The guy cowered like a truant child, while his brain thought of a suitable reply.

‘I was feeling homesick so I went out for a small stroll. Fresh air makes me feel better,’ replied the Bong in a lost-child voice.

When the occasion demanded, the Bong could put up a good performance. Wearing an expression of unhappiness, he stood before her. The woman’s matronly concerns surfaced.

‘Did you have your dinner?’ she asked.

Images of the boiled carrots and beans danced around his brain and Maachh winced. ‘Yes,’ he lied.

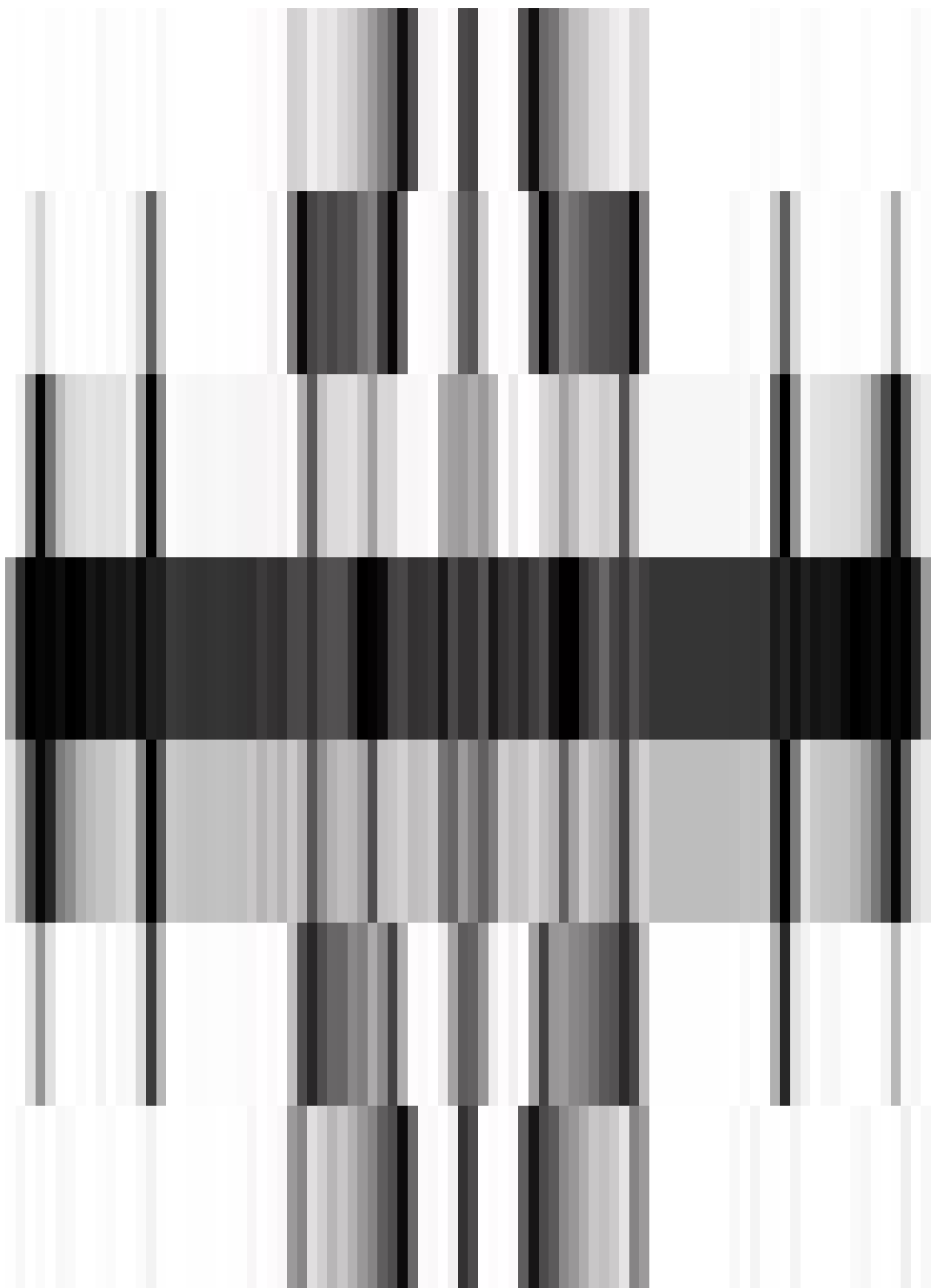
‘Tell you what,’ she threw him a million watt smile. ‘I will demand some sugarcane juice for you. It is good for your jaundice.’

Tenderness oozed from every pore of the sturdy nurse’s body. Maachh was taken

aback. The affectionate look on her face dealt him a hundred kilowatt jolt. Bubbles burst and stars twinkled. Everything was alright with the world as Maachh nodded his head.

It had been a miraculous day. First, he had managed to hoodwink the flu-eyed CoCo, and now the dragoness was mothering him. Maachh couldn't believe this turn of fortune.

TWENTY-THREE



We were almost at the end of our first term. The exhausting regimen could not rob us of joie de vivre. We were young and optimistic, and with the end of term fast approaching, life was beautiful!

Although a few of the cadets had turned serious, some like Maachh and Porky continued to wage their war against authority. One word which could not be mentioned in the academy was 'relegation'. It made even the stoutest heart tremble like a dry leaf on a stormy day. Even Maachh and Porky were tinged with sobriety when the fearful word was whispered.

Although there were hundreds of cadets in a single course, the ones who shared the same Company were closest to each other, and those that resided in the same barracks were nothing less than a family. But proximity can have its own problems; knowing the peculiarity of each cadet was just one of them.

There was not a cadet in the course who did not know about Sammy – Samir Samant – and his idiosyncrasies. That he had been exhibiting clear signs of madness all through the lovely months of October and November had not escaped anyone's notice. For some inexplicable reason, most cadets went nutty during these months. Maybe it had something to do with the holiday season and the pining of heart. Anyway, oddball Sammy showed severe signs of a delusional tendency.

The chap was famous at the academy for his theatrical skills. Any show put up by the cadets starred him in the prime role. The showers of compliments from instructors and cadets for his excellent performances on stage had gone straight to his head, and Sammy began to think he was cut out to be a film star.

'I am in the wrong profession,' he complained to anyone who was foolish enough to listen to him. 'I belong in Bollywood. Had it not been for my father, I would never have joined the academy.'

No one encouraged his ideas, but that didn't stop him from dreaming. 'One of these days, I am going to run away to Mumbai and join Bollywood.'

Sammy was not the only one who blamed his father for the choice of a wrong profession. Maachh topped the list of those who wished to be elsewhere.

And if there was a bigger loony than Maachh, it was this chap. His fertile imagination leap-frogged much beyond the realities of his life.

Although he was one of the most handsome guys on campus, he was definitely not star material. Generous application of neem paste and malai had not altered his swarthy complexion – a fact that frustrated him to no end.

‘All this running around in the sun has tanned me beyond repair,’ Sammy rued.

Nothing we said could convince him that acting was not the vocation for him. No sir, it was not his swarthy complexion that we thought would turn to be a downer, nor the lack of six pack abs. The reason we thought he wouldn’t ever become a star was because he would never be able to carry out bare-bodied stunts and springy dance moves like Dharmendra. This was a major drawback in Bollywood, everyone admitted, where prancing and singing with effervescent actresses was what set the cash registers ringing. The poor sod had a blanket-like covering of thick hair on his back. Now, this could be counted both as a blessing as well as a curse. The blanket of hair came in handy during the winter outdoor marches, when the temperatures plummeted. The thick, woolly blanket provided him with much-desired warmth, much to the envy of other cadets. But for a guy hoping to land a break in movies, it was a curse.

Sammy’s supporters, though few in number, opined that the shaving brush and blade could be put to good use in getting rid of the problem. The fact remained that it was a stumbling block in his journey to stardom. For the present though, the convenient spread of hair had earned him a fitting moniker – Blanket.

The right side of his brain was crammed with dossiers about the forthcoming movies or the latest gossip circulating in Bollywood circles, while the left side dealt with the day-to-day requirements of the academy. If only he could cram his lessons as well as he could memorize the dialogues from the latest movie, he would surely have bagged the Sword of Honour at the academy.

It was a Sunday morning. We spotted the guy toggled up in his best attire, reeking of liberally-applied aftershave. His hair sleek and gelled, the blanket on his back brushed clean. Armed with an out pass, the wannabe movie star hummed happily as he made his way out of the barrack.

‘Don’t try any tricks tonight,’ we warned him. ‘The Peacock is on the prowl. There are rumours of surprise checks.’

‘Rumours are rumours, not to be believed. Besides, I am on a rendezvous that is worth all the risks,’ he replied lightly, and disappeared after winking at us mysteriously.

There must be a movie shooting somewhere in the city, we deduced.

Come afternoon and there was no trace of Sammy. Evening brought no news of him either. Blanket’s friends surmised that he had finally made the promised escape to the big, bad world of movies. It had long been expected that someday our pal would finally find the courage to pull the absconding act, which just went on to prove that ambitious fathers should not push recalcitrant sons towards honourable goals. The number of sons who desired to don other caps than the beret was growing by the day. Amongst them was Maachh, who we expected to abscond any day.

I had barely hit the sack when there was urgent knocking at my door. I found Porky standing outside in his crumpled nightclothes, his face creased with anxiety.

‘Buddy, there is a problem,’ he whispered. ‘Maachh has not yet returned to his room.’

‘But the two of you went out together,’ I said.

‘We went out together in the afternoon, hung around the mall and went for dinner at the new Chinese restaurant that has come up near Ghanta Ghar. Although the food is good, the prices are rather steep. I don’t think I will go there again. You know how difficult it is to make ends meet...’

‘Come to the point, idiot! We are not here to discuss restaurants and their effect on your purse. Where did Maachh go?’

It couldn’t happen, I was thinking. Two guys absconding on the same day would be too much for the academy to swallow.

‘Don’t get impatient. I am coming to that. We had some fish and rice at the restaurant, followed by...’

‘There you go again, I didn’t ask for the menu! What happened to him?’

It was difficult enough carrying sane conversation with the guy on normal days, but when he got worried, it became almost impossible.

‘That is what I am telling you. I had some gol gappas at a food stall before dinner but it didn’t agree with my stomach. By the time I finished dinner, my stomach had bloated to twice its size, and had begun growling menacingly. It was a discomfiting affair, I tell you. The gas...’

‘Nothing new in that,’ I commented sarcastically.

‘Let me finish,’ he rebuked scathingly. ‘I returned to the academy, went straight to the MI Room, got myself some medicine, and went to sleep. I got up a few minutes ago and went to check on Maachh. Guess what, the bloke hasn’t got back. He is absconding.’

‘Did he say where he was going?’

‘Who?’

‘Maachh, you idiot!’ I almost screamed.

‘I was in too much discomfort, tummy bloated and all that, so I couldn’t wait to hear his plan in detail, but I remember him telling me that he would hang around for a while and get back later.’

We were back to square one.

‘Do you think he has run away?’ I whispered.

‘Oh no!’ Blood drained from the fellow’s face. Porky couldn’t imagine life without Maachh in the academy. If the Fish escaped, Porky would have to escape too.

‘Don’t worry,’ alarmed at the sudden pallor on his face, I reassured him. ‘Go to bed. He will return when he is tired of haunting the lonely streets of the city.’

Porky went back to his room shaking his head in misery. Sighing with relief, I went back to my bed.

Ten minutes later, he was back, knocking on my door.

‘What is it now?’

‘I just remembered. Maachh was following a girl. He has been following her for the past two Sundays, says he has fallen in love with her.’

‘That must be it,’ I laughed. ‘He has run away with the girl.’

‘He couldn’t have run away,’ insisted Porky.

‘And why do you think so?’

‘Because his favourite aftershave is still here. He won’t leave without that,’ Porky said, hopefully.

‘How little you know of love, my pal. A guy in love can leave everything behind. Especially a guy like Maachh who thinks it is okay to stalk girls.’

‘So you think he has legged it?’

I couldn’t resist the temptation to tease Porky.

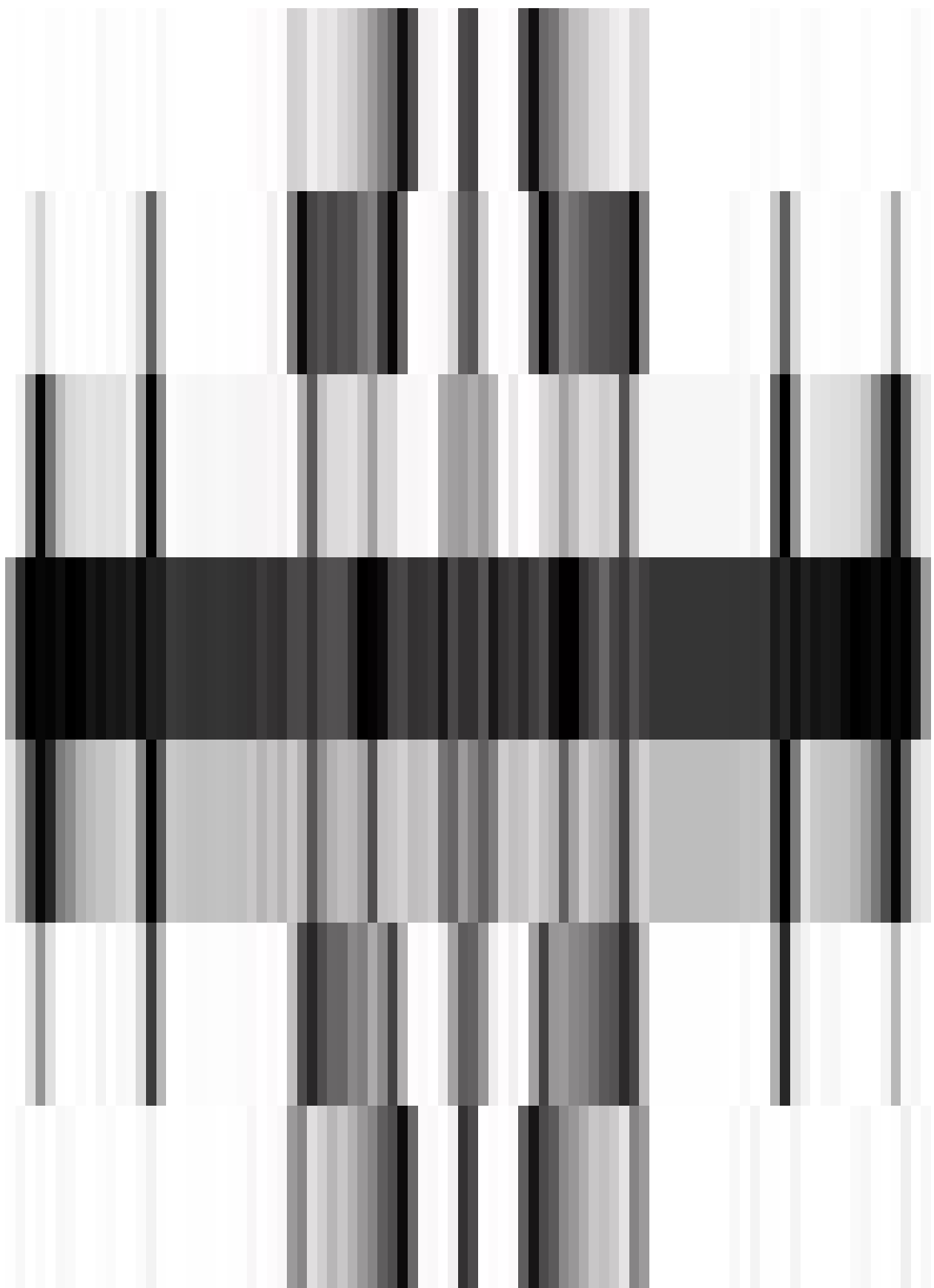
‘Yes buddy. I think he’s gone. He’s done the flucht as the Germans say, or scampo if you prefer Italian.’

As Porky walked back to his room, his drooping shoulders gave away his despair. Feeling a bit guilty about upsetting the guy, I went to bed. Sleep, however, remained far from me as disturbing thoughts ran through my mind. Counting sheep, I burrowed myself deeper into the bed and had just begun giving flight to my imagination when what seemed like thunder woke me up. It was turning out to be a night of distressing events.

Someone was hammering my door down. Peeping cautiously from the window, I noticed Porky. He was flapping his arms uncontrollably, rather like windmills gone haywire.

‘The Peacock has got them,’ he wailed.

TWENTY-FOUR



As rumoured, the Peacock was on the prowl. Creeping in the dark, he scouted the premises, peering behind each bush and tree, inspecting each shadow. Premonition told him that tonight was a night of windfall. The dark, moonless night was thick with possibilities. He marched back and forth, listening for movement. An owl hooted overhead, startling him, and then there was silence. Absolute, deathly silence! Not even the sound of wind or the faint rustle of dry leaves disturbed the stillness. His sixth sense had let him down. At the end of a long and futile hour, he finally decided to give up the watch.

Just as he reached the corner, he heard the tell-tale crunch of dry leaves. Walking silently was an art that many cadets had successfully mastered. With practice, they had perfected the art of stealth. But things are bound to go wrong at some point.

Peacock sensed that something was amiss. Rubbing his hands gleefully, ears cocked, he waited till he saw a figure jump down with a thud on his side of the wall. The intruder must have stubbed his toe on a stone. A curse followed the cry, which rang through the silence but was stifled promptly.

Chuckling over the sudden bounty, Peacock stepped towards the prowler. Barely had he gripped the trespasser by the collar when another body landed with a loud thud a hundred metres away. All of a sudden, the forested area was buzzing with action as cadets jumped into his waiting arms.

The timing was just right. It was the season when Confidential Reports were being penned and signed, and expectations of ambitious officers were on the rise. This was the time to stand up and be noticed or remain a loser.

Capturing the two renegades as they made an illegal entry through the forested parts of the campus was plain good luck for the Platoon Commander.

Sprinting out of my room with Porky at my heels, I caught sight of Peacock grinning evilly while the captured fugitives shuffled their feet sheepishly by his side. Hands locked behind his back, the Peacock performed a quick circumambulation around the two. Helplessly, we watched from the shadows. Soon after, we heard him inform the unfortunate Maachh and Blanket about their fate.

‘Be ready to be marched up to the Commandant, tomorrow morning.’

No amount of pleading from the duo could melt the frozen heart of the ambitious Peacock.

Everyone in the academy knew the result of being marched to the Commandant. The forbidden word bobbed in our minds. The unfortunate chaps would be relegated.

The next morning, we wore the expression of pall bearers while the two guys on death row went to meet their fate. Relegation in the academy is a very formal affair, carried out with military precision. It is customary for a bugle to be sounded when a GC is relegated by the Commandant and all ears were cocked up at 11.00 AM, which was the hour set for the condemned to appear for the verdict. Unable to concentrate on the lessons, we waited for the bad news.

The sound of the bugle hit our waiting ears loud and clear, but it sounded only once. Surprised, we exchanged puzzled glances. There were two cases and the bugle had sounded only once, which meant that only one of the two cadets had been relegated. Which one of them had been relegated was a question worth a million crisp rupees. With pals of both the chaps rooting for them, tension hung heavy in the air. The suspense was unbearable!

Come lunchtime, we rushed to the barracks. There we found Maachh lolling in his bed with a grin that could have won him a crown at a beauty pageant.

‘He has not been relegated.’ Porky ran excitedly around the room. He hugged his pal and matched his grin.

Poor Blanket had bought it, we were told. There was jubilation at our end of the barracks but the other end was wrapped in gloom with Blanket’s pals consoling him. Porky began the celebratory dance. He jumped and hopped on his feet in a pantomime of a war dance.

Prancing around the veranda, Maachh shook hands with everyone. He was the uncrowned hero of the day. We felt sad for Blanket, but knowing him, we expected him to bounce back to his normal self soon. He wouldn’t pass out with us, but it was just a matter of six months before he did the passing out.

That evening, celebrating the event over platefuls of mutton chops and

hamburgers washed downed with colas, Maachh narrated the story of his misadventure with a liberal sprinkling of salt and pepper to his wide-eyed audience.

‘After I said goodbye to Porky, I had no intention of calling it a day,’ he began. ‘As he has already told you guys, I spotted the pretty girl who has been haunting my dreams for the past couple of weeks. She was with her friends.’

We waited impatiently while he sipped his cola and let out a loud belch.

‘They bought tickets for a movie and entered the hall. I also rushed and bought a ticket and followed them inside. As luck would have it, I found myself sitting just two seats away from her. From my vantage position I could watch her profile and hear snatches of their conversation, too. What luck, I tell you!’

‘Which movie?’ asked Porky as he munched on his seventh cutlet. He was most relieved to have his pal back. His day had passed in agony. The guy had almost had a nervous breakdown while waiting for the verdict.

‘I don’t know.’

‘You mean you sat through almost three hours and don’t know the name of the movie.’ Porky was unconvinced.

‘That is what love is about... the eyes see nothing but the person you love, the ears hear...’ we stopped Maachh before he could launch into his dissertation on love.

‘Well there is not much to tell, actually,’ he sighed. ‘I watched her as she laughed and cried with the heroine. I caught her expression of sorrow as the hero was thrown out by the heroine’s father. I tell you, her expressions were better than those of the movie stars.’

‘Proceed with the story, the details of your stalking can wait,’ I interjected.

‘Well, the movie finished at around midnight and I made my way back to the academy. Imagine my surprise when I literally jumped into Peacock’s arms.’

‘Much ado about nothing,’ I concluded. ‘You didn’t even speak to her nor introduce yourself to her and you risked getting relegated.’

‘What did you tell the Commandant?’ Porky raised the question troubling all our minds.

‘I told him the truth,’ Maachh grinned evilly.

‘Told him the truth and he didn’t relegate you?’ Sandy asked.

‘Partial truth, if I may say so. I told him that I was returning to the academy when there was an accident. By accident, I meant my running into the girls, but he was not to know that.’

‘Then...’

‘I said a boy got hit by a motorcyclist and I was the only bystander so I hired an autorickshaw and took the boy to the hospital. Once there, I got him checked into the emergency and called his parents. Only when they arrived did I leave the hospital.’

‘He believed you?’

‘All this is not a lie actually. There was an accident and a boy did get hit by a motorcyclist as I was crossing the road. Some people carried the boy to the Doon Hospital. If the Commandant checks back with the hospital, he will find that there indeed was a boy who was hit by a motorcyclist. My grey cells have never let me down,’ he boasted tapping his forehead.

Once again, the Fish needed to be steered on course. Before he could start on his favorite topic about the benefits of a fishy diet on the brain cells, we turned his attention back to the narration.

‘What did the old man say?’

‘Well, he had no option but to thump me on the back for my selfless deed. I told him that it was useless trying to help the accident victims lying on the road in their last throes of life. “Sir,” I said, “I will never again help anyone if I am relegated for my good deed. In fact, hereafter, no cadet in the academy will ever take an accident victim to the hospital.”’

‘That was a terrific angle! I guess the Old Chap must have been stumped by your logic,’ Porky’s voice sounded reverential.

‘Of course he was,’ agreed Maachh. ‘Noble gestures can’t be punished, they need to be rewarded.’

‘And did he reward your lies?’ I asked sarcastically

‘He shook hands with me and patted me on my back. Coming from him that is reward enough, I guess.’

For his bravery, Maachh was anointed the undisputed champion of the evening. But only after I made him promise to never stalk girls again.

Just as the bonhomie was reaching the critical point, and we were cheering each other with the cola glasses, we spied Blanket entering the café with his pals. He seemed in a celebratory mood, too. The guy was totally unrepentant.

Eager to hear his story, we extended our invitation to his group. Plates of cutlets and glasses brimming with cola were passed around as the hero warmed up to his tale.

‘My story is very different from that of Maachh,’ Sammy began. ‘I came to know from reliable sources that Zeenat Aman was shooting at Sahastradhara on Sunday morning. From the same sources, I learned that the day’s shots would require her to sing and dance under the waterfall. This was to be followed by a scene of altercation as the villain and his henchmen arrived at the spot. Now, you all know that she is my favorite star and nothing... NOTHING... could have prevented me from reaching Sahastradhara. I hiked for a distance and then took a lift in a truck and managed to reach on time.’

We all nodded in agreement. Not just Blanket, but quite a few gentlemen cadets would have given their lives to be there, relegation be damned. The loss of a term is nothing compared to the priceless opportunity of watching Zeenat Aman live and in the flesh.

‘So, there I was, one amongst the thousands of spectators jostling for elbow space. Zeenie was under the waterfall in a white sari. All of a sudden, I found myself in the spotlight. My towering height and crew cut had attracted the attention of the director. He singled me out of the crowd and asked if I was willing to stand before the camera. You can imagine my delight. I almost fainted with joy.’

‘You lucky dog!’ Porky thumped him on his back. ‘How I wish I had been there.’

‘Your being there wouldn’t have helped, Porky,’ said Sandy. ‘The director was looking for a handsome guy and not a toad.’

We waited for Sammy to continue, our breath arrested by the suspense of his story.

‘I was willing to do anything in order to get close to Zeenat. The director inspected me from head to toe, ordered the assistant to hand me some clothes and within moments I was geared in the garb of the villain’s henchman. Things just got better after that. The director instructed me to whistle at the drenched Zeenat and pass some silly remarks.’

‘Did you do that?’ asked Maachh, plainly jealous of Blanket’s good fortune.

‘No, I couldn’t,’ Sammy’s voice sounded regretful. ‘One look at her and I found myself shivering from top to toe as though a sudden attack of malaria had seized my body. I strode up towards Zeenat with trembling innards, but the cat got my tongue the minute I stood before her. I froze. I just couldn’t speak. The director hollered and the crowd hooted but my tongue remained frozen. Not a word emerged from my parched throat. I tried and tried but all that came out of my paralyzed throat were some strange sounds. Zeenat giggled, and the director fumed as he shouted “Cut”. A couple of attempts later, he threw me back into the crowd.’

There was regret in his tone. The guy had come within an inch of making a fleeting appearance on screen with his favorite star, and lost it all because of his disobedient vocal cords. We tut-tutted sympathetically. It was a shame really.

‘Don’t worry. At least you got the opportunity to be with Zeenie baby and stand in front of her for a couple of minutes. That is what matters pal,’ consoled Sandy. ‘And what story did you tell the big man?’

‘I told him as much of the truth as possible, without getting into details. Perhaps that made him madder and he relegated me for a term.’

‘A term lost is a term gained,’ spouted Maachh philosophically. ‘I wouldn’t mind it if I were in your shoes except that my father would die of a heart attack. He is

just waiting for me to wear my stars.'

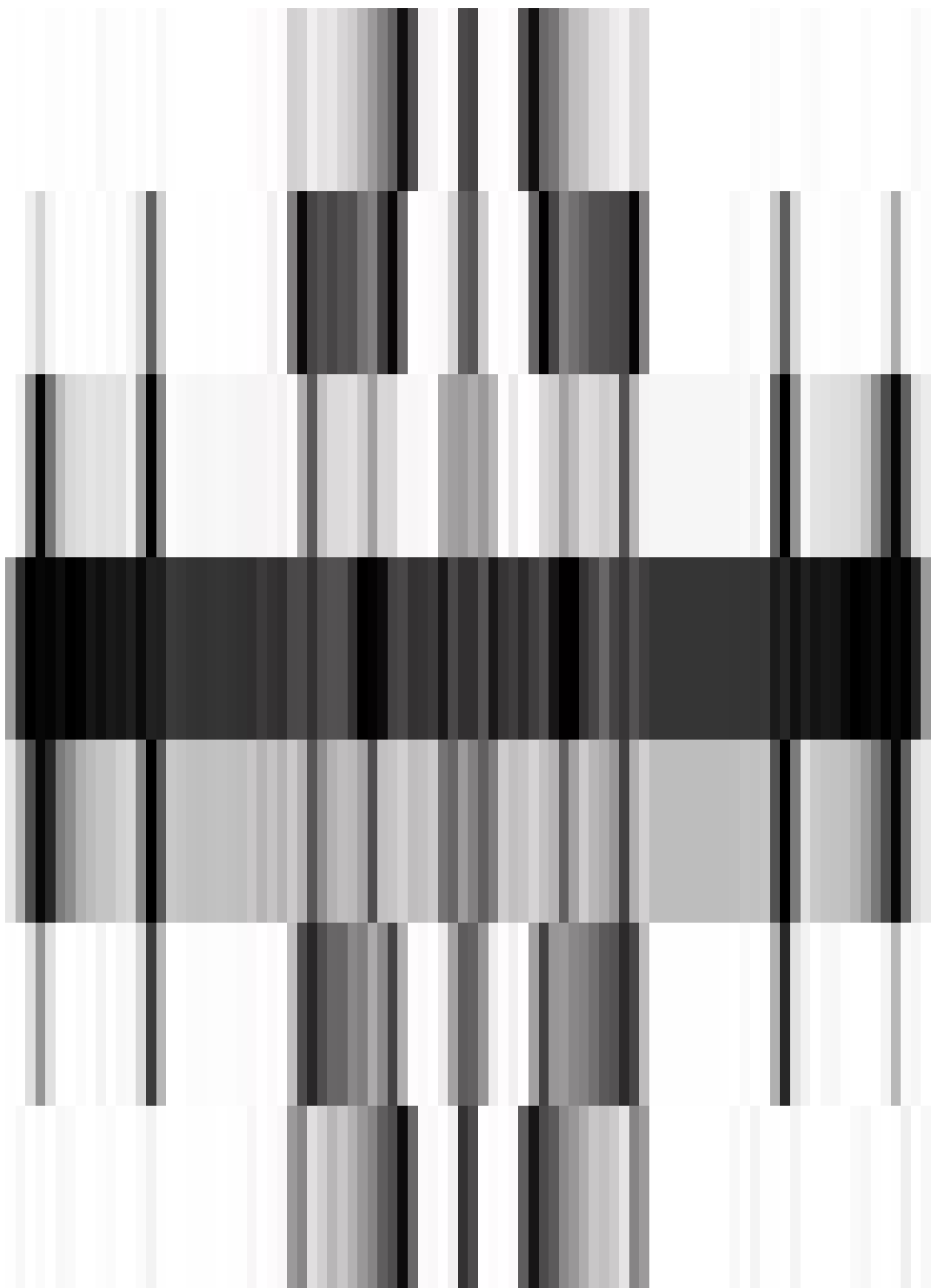
'Look at it this way,' I consoled. 'We will wear the rank of a brigadier only after slogging on different war fronts for twenty-five long years, while you have already become a brigadier.'

The logic here being that a cadet relegated for a term is automatically crowned a 'brigadier' by his coursemates.

'By God! I had never thought of that. You are right. It has not been a total loss.' The thought cheered the Blanket. 'On that note, let us all have another round of soft drinks.'

From that day, no one addressed him as Blanket any more. He was respectfully addressed as Brigadier Sammy. Before him, many cadets had earned the rank of brigadiers in the academy, but none had the distinction of being relegated for having taken part in a shooting with Zeenat Aman.

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 alics 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.

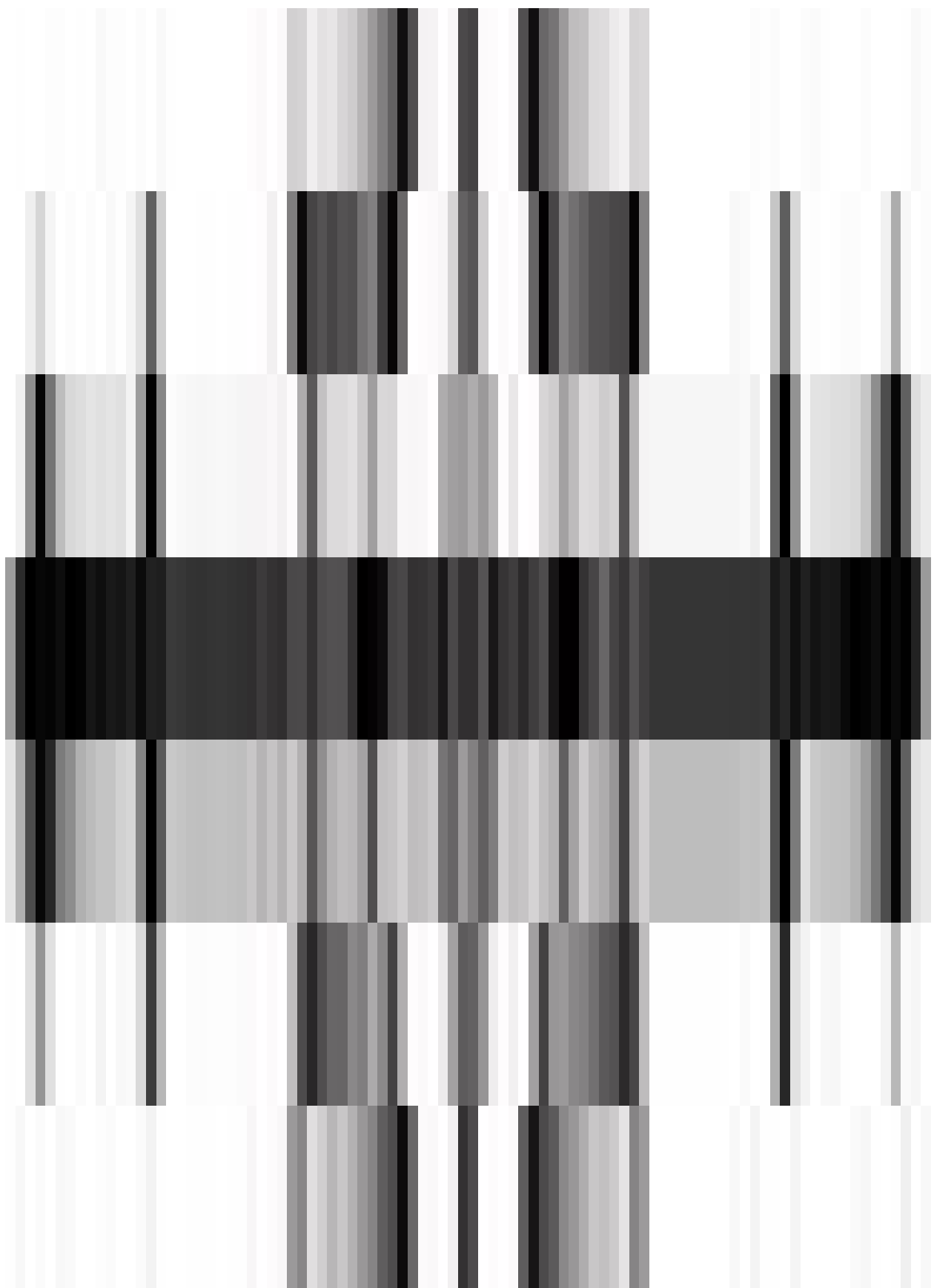
'Love can make a fool choke on his thoughts,' I commented, and the guy threw me a dirty look.

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.'

‘Yes, a guy needs his pals at such times,’ agreed Zora.

‘I think he had a fight with the girl with colourful eyes,’ suggested Porky.

‘Maybe, she has ditched him for a smarter guy,’ laughed Maachh.

The four of us approached the distraught joker, who was mumbling to himself as he paced up and down the corridor.

‘Hi handsome,’ Maachh greeted him cheerfully.

‘Leave me alone,’ was the response he received to the genial greeting.

‘Okay. I was just checking if everything is alright.’

‘Keep away, I am warning you. I won’t be responsible for my actions.’

The Jat was not on the best of terms with Maachh at any time, and his foul mood didn’t make things better.

‘Ahhh, I knew something was wrong. Can I help?’ offered the Bong.

‘Just leave me alone.’

‘Look buddy, I know something is bugging you. It would help if you shared your misery. I may be able to help you,’ Maachh persisted.

The Jat stopped in his tracks and stared doubtfully at the Bong. ‘You really want to help?’

‘Of course, I do.’

After a moment of hesitation, Mooli shook his head – ‘No, I don’t think anyone can help me.’ And he began trudging up the corridor once more.

We hung back.

‘I think there is something fishy here,’ Zora whispered. ‘First this beautiful Kashmiri girl dangles a bait before dumb Mooli, and then her mysterious brother appears out of the blue. And now they insist on a pass to the POP.’

‘I smell fish, too,’ said Sandy in a hushed voice. ‘Me thinks the matter calls for an investigation. The joker will kill us with the stench of his mustard oiled scalp unless we can solve his dilemma.’

A few metres from us, Maachh continued pacing with Mooli, trying to get the chap to confess about his troubles. ‘I guess it is that girl. Am I right?’

Mooli halted and stared at the Bong. ‘How did you know?’

‘My dear chap, it doesn’t take rocket science to know when a man is plagued by a woman. In any case, Bongs have a few grey cells more than an average guy so we catch on pretty fast,’ said Maachh who never let go of an opportunity to boast. ‘Speaking of grey cells, did you hear that joke about...’

‘No jokes,’ Mooli held up his hand warningly and looked daggers at Maachh. ‘I am extremely upset and you think it is a time for jokes!’

‘No offence meant. I was just trying to lighten your mood.’

‘I don’t need jokes, I need a solution to my problem.’

‘That will be possible only if you shared your problem with us.’

‘Well...’ Mooli dithered. ‘Okay, let me confess. You are right, it is to do with Niloo and her brother.’

‘Ah, I thought so. Tell papa Mitra your problems and it will be solved.’

‘Well, they want passes for the POP and you know how it is, the tight security and since they are from Kashmir and all...’

Maachh nodded with understanding. ‘Yes, we all know that the Kashmir factor is a big issue ever since 1966, when that blasted Maqbool Bhat launched JKNLF and the Pakistani Intelligence found its feet in the state.’

The Jat nodded his head, surprised at Bong’s knowledge about the matter. ‘That’s true.’

‘Did you know the guy was the mastermind behind the hijacking of Ganga, the Indian Airlines plane on its way to Lahore? Those guys let out the passengers

and crew before burning it in Lahore. That was on 1 February 1971, if I remember correctly.'

By now the Bong was all charged up. He had found an enthralled listener in Mooli, who was always keen to update his data bank. For the moment, the guy had forgotten all his troubles.

'...And all this happened under the directions of Maqbool Bhat, under instructions issued by the ISI, Pakistan's intelligence agency. That was just the beginning of problems in the Kashmir Valley. The Pakistani agency went on an overdrive and enlisted the support of JKNLF for anti-national activities. Dozens of young men were recruited and sent across the border for militant activities.'

'What happened to Maqbool?' asked a wide-eyed Mooli.

'He was arrested as soon as he stepped onto Indian soil. As far as I know, he is being tried for the murder of a CID officer in Srinagar.'

'I am impressed,' Sandy thumped Maachh's back. 'How did you collect all this information?'

The Bong's chest puffed up by several centimetres as he boasted. 'Well, I have been reading a lot about the Bangladesh Liberation War of 1971 and the insurgency in the Valley.'

'You are absolutely right. The Indian intelligence agencies have reported an increase in insurgency in the state of J&K,' Zora added his two bits. 'It is due to this report that the military authorities have taken steps to secure their premium defence institutions which are under threat from the militants.'

The Jat remembered his problems as soon as he heard about the security angle. 'That is exactly my dilemma.'

'True, you can't expect a couple of passes for a young girl and boy belonging to J&K, without proper verification,' said Sandy, steering the conversation to the topic of passes. 'By the way, how much do you know about that Kashmiri girl and her brother?'

'Have you gone to her college?' Maachh asked, and Mooli began to look uncomfortable.

‘I hope you know what is happening in Kashmir,’ added Porky, who was unwilling to be ignored. ‘Many young men from Kashmir are involved in suspicious activities. Under the circumstances, it will be extremely unwise to invite them for our POP. In any case, what do you know about Zafar?’

‘Did you check out their credentials?’

‘No. Neelu and I always meet at the City Centre.’ Clearly, Mooli was beginning to get very worried. The possibilities that there could be anything fishy had not struck him till that moment.

‘How do you know she studies in a college? Where does she live?’ asked Porky.

‘Have you met any of her friends?’

‘Did you go to her college?’

Our rapid-fire questioning took the wind out of the Jat. Not given to expending his energies in brainwork, he had never mulled over these points. He was at a complete loss as he realised that he knew almost nothing about her.

‘It did not strike me to check on her,’ Mooli admitted. He looked crestfallen.

‘We have to do something about the matter,’ Maachh decided, taking matters into his own clumsy hands. ‘Do you have any objections?’ he asked Mooli who was still trying to come to terms with the queries and the suspicions. Realising that there was a lot more to it than met the eyes, he nodded his consent to Maachh’s idea.

‘We can take them to a lonely place and beat them up. Once they have been softened up we can interrogate the two,’ Porky had been reading too many spy stories. ‘I think they are terrorists,’ he added for greater impact.

Mooli balked at the idea of his lady love being beaten up. ‘No!’ He put a brake on Porky’s imagination. ‘There will be no violence. I agree that I might have faulted in checking up her credentials, but that doesn’t prove that she is a militant.’ The Jat ended aggressively. ‘I will allow no thrashing of Zafar, either. They are my friends.’

‘Now, now,’ Sandy calmed the two. ‘We can’t resort to violence based on

assumptions. For all you know, they may be absolutely innocent. We need to know a little more about them before we reach any conclusions. '

There was logic in his statement to which everyone agreed.

As expected, Maachh and Porky rose to the occasion by volunteering their services.

'We will follow her on the coming Sunday,' offered Maachh. 'When she goes back after meeting Mooli, we will trail her to see where she lives.'

'I already know where she lives,' Mooli interrupted. 'She stays in the girls' hostel of her college.'

'That is what she told you,' Zora was trying to retain his patience with the thick-headed oaf. 'But no one knows for sure that she stays there. It has to be verified.'

'Absolutely! We must find out where the two of them stay and what brings them to the city.' Porky declared enthusiastically.

'Also, we must investigate the chap's activities. I am quite suspicious about that Zafar fellow.' Zora looked pointedly at Mooli. 'Did you ask him what is his subject for PhD?'

Mooli was looking more and more deflated as our statements began to sink into his brain.

In the end, for want of a better strategy, Maachh's plan was agreed upon.

TWENTY-SEVEN



Excitement mounted as Sunday drew closer. We were playing a dangerous game. The thought of it both excited and worried us. There would be hell to pay if word went around and the instructors learned of our misadventure. Also, if the mission failed, there would be dire consequences.

Mooli looked increasingly pathetic as hours passed. He went around with a dejected expression on his face. He had never imagined that his romance would take a dangerous turn or end in such a manner. Although he was not fully convinced of Niloo's alleged evil designs, the seeds of doubt had been successfully planted.

Predictably, Maachh and Porky were the most excited of the lot. Their chests puffed with self-importance, they went over their plan repeatedly till they were satisfied.

'This is like a secret mission. I feel as though I am a part of an important espionage assignment,' Maachh declared as they prepared to leave for the adventure.

'We may have to undertake dangerous missions when we are commissioned. This episode will prepare us for future assignments,' said Porky.

'Dear pal, we are the chosen ones,' the Bong thumped his back encouragingly. 'I am confident that no one else will be able to do justice to this mission.'

Although amused at the statement, I held my tongue.

'You are absolutely right,' endorsed Zora. 'None of us are brilliant enough to carry out the task.'

'I have thought of a name,' said Porky. 'After all each mission has to have a code name. What about "Mission Blue Eyes"?''

'Very apt,' Maachh approved. 'We can refer to it as "MBE".'

'Member of British Empire,' I chuckled.

'What?'

‘Oh nothing, I like the acronym.’

‘Acro... acro-what?’ Porky looked puzzled.

‘Never mind, you were saying... ?’

‘Should I use a false moustache?’ Porky asked. ‘It looks great on me. I once used it for a play in the NDA. Besides, Niloo and Zafar will not be able to recognize me if I wore a moustache.’

‘It doesn’t matter what you wear, because Niloo doesn’t know you,’ Maachh deflated his balloon. He had been trying, for the past twenty-four hours, to be patient with his over-enthusiastic pal.

‘You’ll need a change of dress, though,’ Zora said. ‘Everyone in Dehradun can recognize a GC by his mufti. It is like screaming your identity from the rooftop.’

‘From the rooftop?’ asked Porky. ‘We are not allowed to go to the rooftop, anyway.’

‘You thickhead, it is just a metaphor.’

‘What is a metaphor?’

‘Never mind! Anyway, coming back to the subject of your clothes...’

‘Do you think I have not already thought of it? Why do you think I eat so much fish? There are more grey cells in my cranium than anyone else,’ Maachh tapped his head. ‘We will carry spare clothes in a bag. The moment we leave the academy, we will halt somewhere and change into civvies. For good measure, we’ll carry caps to hide our trademark katori cut.’

On the appointed day, Mooli informed us that he was meeting the girl at the Payal Theatre, where they planned to watch a movie. Following which they would go to a pizza joint for dinner. The guy looked absolutely deflated at the idea of the two jokers following the girl.

‘Don’t terrify her,’ he requested. ‘She is not a bad girl.’

‘We will soon know about that,’ retorted Sandy.

Zafar was not expected to join the two lovebirds that evening. His whereabouts remained as mysterious as ever.

As planned, Maachh and Porky followed Mooli to the city that Sunday. The guy met Nilofer, who was waiting outside the movie hall. She had already bought two tickets. From the corner of his eyes, the Jat watched Maachh and Porky rushing toward the ticket counter to buy tickets for themselves. The movie was not doing well and the hall was almost empty. It was for that precise reason that Nilofer had opted to watch the movie. She wanted to work her charm on the Jat.

Minutes after Mooli had settled down with Nilofer, the jokers occupied the seats directly behind them.

The lover boy, who was acutely aware of their presence, was a bundle of nerves. Watched by Maachh and Porky, the anxious Jat maintained a stiff posture even when the girl snuggled up to him. Nilofer, oblivious, remained her usual chatty self. She giggled and commented on whatever was happening on the big screen. It was a light, romantic movie, and she seemed to enjoy every bit of it.

When the movie ended, Mooli and the girl made their way to a food joint, trailed by the two bumbling sleuths. For the poor Jat, it was an ordeal to get through the meal. He felt as though a thousand arrows had pierced his throat. He swallowed, sputtered, sighed, and gulped all through the meal. His discomfort did not escape Niloo's attention.

‘What is the problem?’ she asked. ‘You are rather preoccupied today. Haven’t you been able to manage passes to the POP?’

The Jat squirmed in his seat with an unhappy smile on his face – ‘I have a nasty headache and there is a test tomorrow. I would like to return early to my room to prepare for it, if you don’t mind.’

‘You look ill. I think you should see a doc,’ she suggested. ‘Maybe the food didn’t agree with you.’

‘Yes, you are right. I am feeling quite unwell,’ the Jat mumbled. His anxiety was strumming up all his nerves in a discordant opera. ‘I think I’ll get back to the academy and report to the MI Room. I need some medicine.’

He was impatient to make an escape.

‘You haven’t said anything about the passes,’ the girl reminded him.

‘Oh, I will manage it, don’t worry about that. You will get it a day before the POP.’

It wouldn’t hurt to lie a bit, thought Mooli.

‘You are such a darling,’ she pouted. ‘I knew you would not fail us. Zafar will be delighted to hear that the passes have been arranged. Well, I guess, you should go back and rest a bit,’ she suggested, ‘I want you to be happy and smiling when we meet again.’

Maachh and Porky who had been lurking in the background, rushed out just in time to see Mooli waving goodbye to his girlfriend.

The Jat nodded his head imperceptibly and the duo nodded back. Porky gave him a thumbs-up signal to indicate they were ready to follow the girl.

The girl hailed an autorickshaw and drove off, with Maachh and Porky following in hot pursuit. Clad in jeans, T-shirts, and caps, the two felt like heroes.

‘Follow them!’ Porky ordered the auto driver, who, having caught the whiff of an adventure, was only too happy to oblige.

Rather like a chase scene straight out of a Bollywood thriller, the two rickshaws raced through the roads of Dehradun.

Fifteen minutes later, reaching an unpretentious residential colony, Nilofer’s autorickshaw drew to a halt. She paid the driver and moved towards the gate without a backward glance. Not in her wildest dreams had she imagined that she was being followed.

Maachh and Porky got off at the end of the lane and waited till Nilofer had entered the gate. As soon as she disappeared from view, they walked up to the security guard and asked for Miss Nilofer Khan’s apartment.

The stout Gorkha looked blankly at them and shook his head while drawing on his bidi. He was reluctant to part with any information.

‘I am not supposed to entertain questions about the residents from strangers.’

‘Look we just need to know her apartment number,’ explained Maachh, patiently.

‘Why?’

‘Because she is my sister’s classmate and I want to invite her for a party at our house.’

‘Then ask your sister for her apartment number.’ The guy refused to bite the bait.

‘She has lost the address. We are not asking for state secret. We just want the apartment number of Miss Nilofer Khan.’

After a long drag at his bidi, the Gorkha finally spoke.

‘There is no one by that name in these apartments,’ he informed.

‘Maybe you didn’t notice. The woman who just entered that building is Nilofer Khan,’ Maachh informed the watchman. ‘She is a student at the girls’ college.’

‘Are you telling me or asking me?’ The fellow replied belligerently. ‘Am I the watchman or are you the Gorkha here? That woman is Mrs. Gul Mohammad, and she is not a student but a housewife.’

‘Her husband stays here, too?’

‘Where else would he stay? Do you think husbands and wives stay in different buildings?’ The Gorkha had begun to enjoy his authority over the two seemingly stupid visitors.

Maachh and Porky exchanged a meaningful glance over the watchman’s head.

‘How long have they been staying here?’

‘Where does he work? Do they have any friends in the building?’ Porky began raining questions on the Gorkha while handing him a fifty rupee note. The sight of money loosened the watchman’s tongue.

‘I don’t know much about them. They have been staying here for the past four months. No one knows much about them as they keep to themselves. Once in a

while, a few young fellows come to visit them. But why are you asking so many questions?’

The watchman was beginning to get suspicious. Feeling he had parted with enough information to justify the fifty rupees, he turned aggressive once again. He wanted to extract some more money from the two. Maachh, with his meagre resources, couldn’t afford to keep up with the Gorkha’s greed, so he decided to change his tactic. He signalled Porky to shut up.

‘I think there is a mistake. We are looking for Nilofer Khan and not for Mrs. Gul Mohammad,’ Maachh tried to placate the irritated Gorkha. ‘I think you are right. She does not stay here. Thank you for your help.’

By now the watchman had also realized that he was not going to get any more money out of the duo, so he hustled them towards the exit, saying – ‘Chalo, chalo, get going before someone sees you hanging around here.’

There was nothing to do but to withdraw.

‘No issue, brother,’ Maachh oozed charm. ‘We don’t want to get you in trouble. We will leave now.’

As they walked towards the road looking for an autorickshaw, the Bong mulled over the information they had extracted from the watchman.

‘One thing is for sure. There is something fishy about the girl. We will have to come back tomorrow and speak to a few residents, discreetly.’

‘We should steal into her apartment and search it,’ suggested Porky, enthused with the idea of playing a detective.

‘I don’t know whether we can do that. Let’s ask the others.’

The two returned to the academy, where our entire gang was waiting impatiently to hear about their adventure. Porky burst in excitedly, and began dramatizing the chase.

‘She hailed a rick and got in. Then the two of us got into another. Her rick was going very fast and ours was just behind. She turned and threw a suspicious look...’

‘Calm down, pal,’ ordered Zora. ‘Maybe Maachh can give us the real picture.’

Maachh presented a saner version of the story. Poor Mooli looked more and more deflated as he heard about Niloo’s real identity. It was evident that the simple Jat had been taken for a ride by Zafar and Nilofer, who were trying to gain an entry into the academy during the POP. The entire picture became clear as we debated the matter. It was agreed that it was a serious matter. It called for professional handling.

‘I think we should share the information with the authorities,’ suggested Zora.

‘We can tackle them ourselves,’ Porky spoke with usual bravado. ‘All we need is a little time. I still think we should rough them up.’

‘Don’t be stupid,’ chided Zora. ‘We are dealing with dangerous people. They are most likely connected with some terrorist group and we can’t tackle them ourselves.’

There was sanity in his words.

‘You have done your part and done it very well, indeed.’ Sandy praised the duo. ‘Let’s have the matter handled by the experts.’

‘I am in no doubt that Mooli will get into trouble if we tell the authorities about the girl,’ said a worried Maachh.

‘That is right, Mooli’s career is at stake,’ agreed Porky.

Mooli looked more and more miserable as the discussion continued. In the end, when everyone had finished expressing their opinion, he drew a deep breath and said: ‘I think we should share the information with Paltu. I have not done any wrong; he is bound to realize that. In any case, the security of the academy is more important than my career. At the most, I will be relegated for a term or two, but I won’t be able to forgive myself if those people gain entry into the academy with an objective of causing terror.’

Everyone agreed with him. The chap was honest and upright. It was not his fault that he fell into the trap. It could happen to anyone. Perhaps, the reason he had been baited by the girl was because he was a naive fellow and easy to entice. They wouldn’t have tried the trick on Zora, Sandy, or even on Maachh for that

matter. Nilofer had chosen well.

The next morning, Mooli sought an appointment with Paltu and made a clean breast of the entire affair. Taking note of the seriousness of the matter, Paltu reported the matter to the higher-ups without wasting any time. With that, the wheels of action were set in motion.

By ten in the morning, the GCs grouped around the notice board where a warning had been pasted against the GCs befriending strangers, especially women. Most of the cadets were confused since they had no knowledge of the goings-on. The matter became a hot topic for the rest of the day, with each cadet wondering who had crossed the line.

Verification of all the visitor's passes began in earnest. Mooli was denied an out pass till further action, not that he was willing to move out of the academy. Terrified at the thought of coming across Nilofer and Zafar, the Jat refused to leave the campus. Events were unfolding at a fast pace; too brisk for him to comprehend. He had managed to open the Pandora's Box and the worms had crawled out. The worried Mooli barely slept that night.

His eyes red and swollen, Mooli was summoned to Batty's office the next morning. The poor sod broke down in front of the officer.

'Sir, reprimand me, relegate me, punish me in whichever way you like. I deserve it for the trouble I have brought to the academy,' he cried. 'When I befriended her, I had no idea that she was connected with an anti-national group.'

To his credit, instead of scolding the remorseful chap, the officer handed him a glass of water and patted him on the back.

'I am sure, you had no bad intentions when you befriended that girl,' Batty told the distressed cadet. 'In fact, whatever has happened is for the good. Had you not come across the girl, we would not have learnt the identity of her associates. At least now we know the group that is targeting the academy. The intelligence agencies will take over now.'

Batty proceeded on a longish lecture about dealings with the fairer sex.

'The world is a difficult place, son,' he advised. 'Things are not always as simple as they seem, and since you will be an officer in the Indian army, such things

will happen. Enemies may use honey traps to seduce you. They may try to make you compromise on your values. It always pays to be cautious. We appreciate your sincerity. You have put the academy's interests above your personal ones and that is definitely commendable.' Batty tried to ease the chap's anxiety. 'Don't you worry, son! Just go back to your barracks and leave the matter to us. We will take care of it.'

Mooli saluted smartly and got up to go.

'Just one thing,' said Batty. 'We want you to get in touch with the girl on the telephone and promise to deliver the passes later in the week.' He instructed. 'Don't say anything that will rouse her suspicions. Just behave in your usual manner. We will give you the details about the venue, date, and time for the meeting. Also request her brother to be present.'

'Whatever you say, Sir.'

'Now, relax and don't worry about anything.'

That was easier said than done. The Jat confided: 'I don't know if I can speak with her on the phone after learning all about her intentions. I am not good at acting.'

'It is easy, yaar,' joked the Bong. 'All you have to do is to think of her mesmerizing eyes.'

'It is not a matter of joke.'

'I am trying to help you.'

'I don't need your help, thank you.'

Mooli walked off in a huff.

'Poor chap, he is really troubled,' said Zora. 'You shouldn't have irritated him.'

We tried to mollify the Jat. He needed our help and support.

Hours later, Batty called Mooli to his office and provided him with details about the venue and time. We rallied around him as he entered the booth to make the

call. Batty too accompanied us to the phone booth.

It was a difficult feat, but Mooli achieved a semblance of normalcy while speaking to Nilofer. With a trembling voice, which she probably mistook as a sign of his passion, he gave her the details of their rendezvous.

‘I have something important for you,’ said Mooli, trying to control his emotions. ‘I hope you will bring Zafar with you.’

‘Don’t worry, he will be there,’ she trilled. ‘So, you finally managed the passes.’

‘Hmm,’ was all the Jat managed to mutter. Lying didn’t come easy to him.

The girl, happy that the entry passes had been obtained, sent a loud kiss over the instrument, which further traumatized the guy.

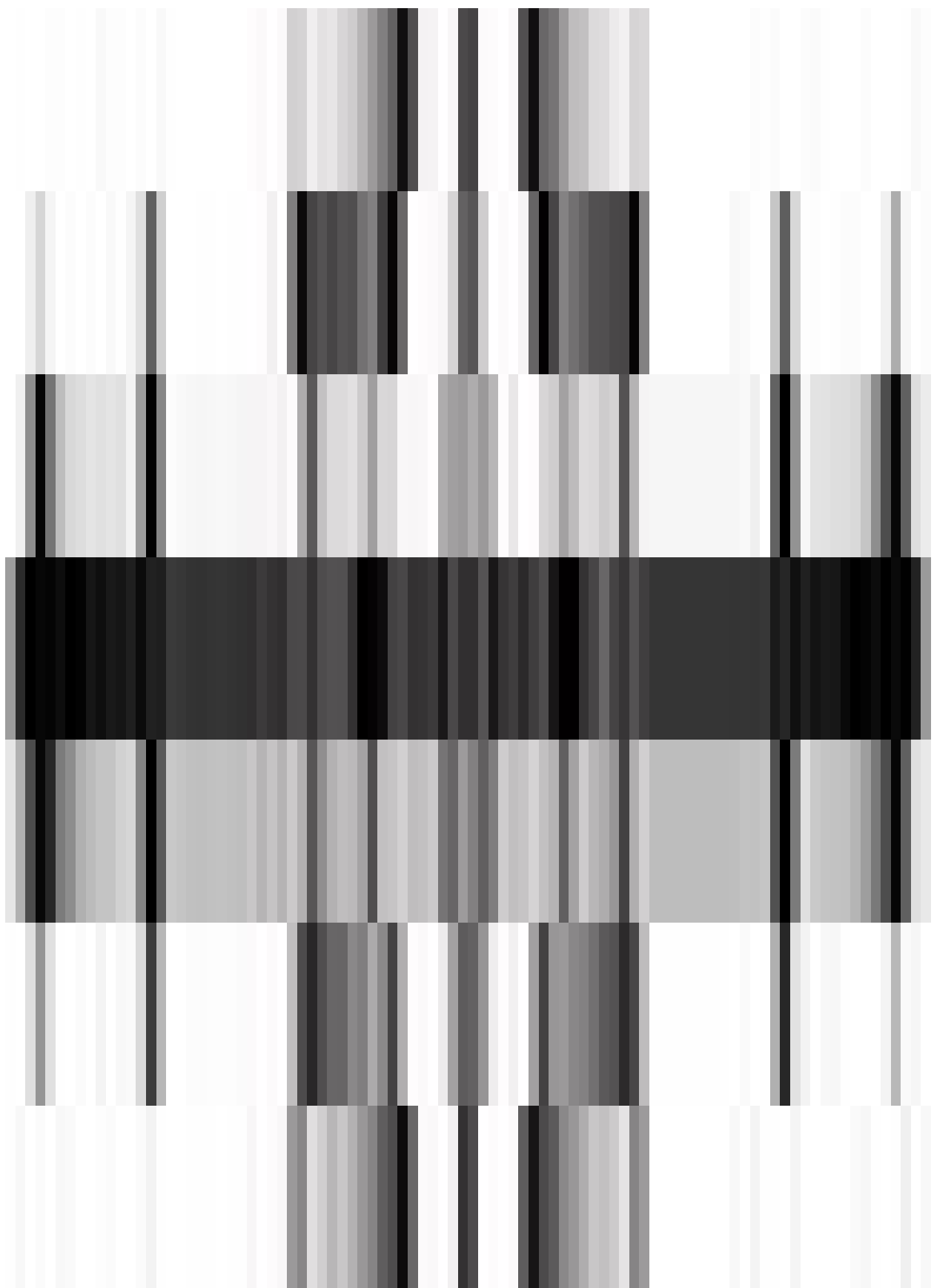
The trap laid, officials waited for the finale.

Three days later, we learnt that a joint operation had been carried out by the RAW and the army intelligence. In a couple of surprise raids, they nabbed four suspected militants. The sleuths, who had been lying in wait, had a windfall when the group gathered for a meeting at the apartment where Nilofer was living with Zafar, who was her husband. Their names were neither Zafar nor Nilofer. Maps, cassette tapes, explosives, and other incriminating evidence recovered from the apartment verified what all of us had suspected – the militants were targeting the academy on the day of the POP.

Only the six of us were privy to the entire episode. The rest of the world and the other GCs learnt the details from the newspapers, which printed concise reports.

Four ISI agents have been arrested from an apartment in Dehradun. During the search, police discovered objectionable material and tapes with inflammatory speeches. Several documents and photographs with details about military establishments in the area were also seized by the authorities. It is presumed that they were targeting the IMA during the POP. The matter is under investigation.

TWENTY-EIGHT



We were now in the second term and it was time for the camp. As camps go, one would expect them to be enjoyable experiences, but NDA had taught us that harbouring such expectations was foolish. This particular camp was a big pain for the overworked GCs. Apart from all other routine parades and exercises, it involved a strenuous scaling of the hills in Mussoorie while carrying all kinds of equipment and accessories that the sadistic instructors could think of.

Although we were accustomed to early rising, the day began a trifle too early for our comfort. Dawn had yet to break when we clambered into one of the two dozen trucks, which in all fairness, should have been retired a decade ago. Sighing, we settled down for a bumpy ride. The convoy left the main road and wound its way through mountainous terrain, with the loose parts of our vehicle making a racket.

The journey to the campsite was long and bone-rattling. Our bodies bounced as though we were on a trampoline. Loaded with an early breakfast, our bellies were not suited for the torturous drive. We had started singing songs and cracking jokes, but the enthusiasm petered off as the journey progressed. Silence descended, broken only by an occasional grunt or a curse. Soon, we lost track of time and distance.

Most army drivers give a damn to the conditions of the road and the vehicle; their goal is to reach the destination, come what may. We tried hard to keep ourselves upright. The smarter cadets were already spread-eagled on the floorboard. Porky sat holding his aching belly. The dozen sandwiches, half a dozen boiled eggs, a few bananas, and two large mugs of tea were churning inside his cavernous abdomen, waving a banner of dissent. The guy believed in loading up his tank at every available opportunity, for who knew when the next meal would come.

The road eased a little and we began nodding off, swaying in rhythm with the movement of the vehicle. The GCs who had managed to make themselves comfortable on the floorboard were snoring as though they lay on thick mattresses. The ex-NDA cadets had mastered the art of catching their forty winks under all conditions; hospitable and inhospitable.

The truck lurched over a huge boulder and came to a grinding halt. Stretching

and yawning lazily, we stood up and surveyed the scene. We were many kilometres away from the city. The mountains and the verdant valleys brought out the poet in me. I would have given anything to live in the wilderness forever, but my poem was cut short as somebody pushed me from behind and I jumped out of the vehicle.

The ustaads had all arrived. Herding us like sheep, they pushed us towards the trucks laden with the stores. For the next forty minutes, we worked like coolies as we unloaded the heavy stuff and placed them in the designated areas.

We pitched our 180-pounder tents on the slopes of a hill located not far from a village. These tents housed eight cadets each, and the seven chosen to be housed in my tent were – Maachh, Porky, Zora, Sandy, Makkhi, Mooli, and a DE called Ratty. The cramped space was soon littered with our sleeping bags and paltry belongings.

The sun was dipping rapidly, almost as though it was late for a rendezvous. The sky was splashed with vivid colour. Tired and dusty, all we wanted to do was hit the sack. The thought of bed accelerated our pace and we worked harder. The sooner we finished the tasks, the more time we would have for rest. It was late evening by the time we managed to bring a semblance of order to our surroundings. Tents pitched, beds unrolled, we put up our feet.

‘All I need is a bath and some food,’ I said.

‘And then some sleep...’ added Makkhi.

‘A lot of food and sound sleep; the perfect recipe for happiness,’ Porky mumbled.

The wish list was lengthening.

‘And some nice music...’ said Ratty, the DE. ‘And I will be in seventh heaven,’

‘Don’t even mention that,’ shouted Maachh.

The mention of seventh heaven never fails to invoke painful memories in the ex-NDA cadets. To them, the two simple words signified a journey through hell and back, maybe twice over. (Seventh heaven is a favourite punishment meted out by seniors in the NDA, where one had to hang from the sharp edged seventh

horizontal wire of the mesh that covered the ventilator).

‘Sorry, I shouldn’t have mentioned seventh heaven,’ Ratty apologized. It was not his fault, really. Since he was a Direct Entry, he had no idea about our agonizing association with those words.

‘It is so peaceful here,’ remarked Porky, who had dug deep into his sleeping bag and was preparing for a blissful snooze. With his belly still burdened with the food he had tucked in, he could afford to wait for another hour for the next one.

As if on cue, the ustaad entered the tent and Sandy, who was lolling in his bed just near the entrance, was sent off to get water. Last spotted, the guy was clambering onto a water tanker with a scowl on his face.

It was getting dark and we were famished. As soon as the water tanker arrived, huge canvas tubs were filled with water. The sight of clear water in the tubs drew us like bears to a honeycomb. Soon, we were splashing water all over our bodies to wash away the muck and grime. Refreshed after the bath, we enjoyed dozens of puris for our dinner.

Shortly after, we hit the sack. We had barely slipped into a dreamless slumber when Paltu arrived, unannounced.

‘What have we here?’ he said, his voice saccharine. ‘My, my, sleeping beauties, and eight of them at that!’

The very next moment, his yell had crossed 110 decibels – ‘And who do you think is going to dig the snake pits, you lumps of lard. Get the shovels and prepare the pits. NOW! ON THE DOUBLE!’

In a trice, we jumped out of our beds and began digging. It was a mandatory requirement which we had disregarded, hoping no one would notice. Since our tent was located at the very edge of the camp, far away from the others, we didn’t think it would be inspected at night. To be fair, we intended to complete the task in the morning but Paltu’s visit had jeopardised our plans.

It is incredible how quickly a guy will finish a task when he wants to catch up on his sleep. We finished digging in ten minutes flat, and were back in our hastily made beds. Minutes later, a discordant orchestra of snores resounded through the silent night.

I had barely gone to sleep when I felt the few drops of rain land on me. Shouting that the tent was leaking, I sprang up to discover that the drops were coming from Mooli's dripping underwear. The idiot had strung a rope across the tent and hung his wet underwear on it, and the water from it was dripping right over my bed. I cursed the chap and threw the offensive bit of clothing on his bed. The guy seemed immune to all disturbances, and continued to snore without any sign of discomfort.

The next morning, we were up at the crack of dawn to improve the layout of our tent. We straightened our beds, lined up our boxes, strung up strings, and neatened the interiors. Satisfied with our handiwork, we turned our attention outside the tent. Laying out the pathway, cleaning up the surroundings, and setting things in order in the camp took away an hour, after which we rushed for an early breakfast.

It was going to be a hectic day with an outdoor theory class followed by a practical exercise. A dummy village had been set up a few kilometres away for the purpose.

We were assigned the task of cordoning off and searching the dummy village to flush out the militants who were hiding in it. The GCs were to be divided into two groups. While the cadets in one group, along with ustaads, would playact as militants who occupy the village and defend it, the other would act as the search party responsible for attacking and capturing them.

After the theory class, the ustaads arrived and asked for volunteers for both the groups. Sensing that the GCs who volunteered to attack the mock village would have to march a long distance in the dark, accompanied by the ustaads, not many hands went up to volunteer. The volunteers for the group that was to occupy the mock village were many. These guys had the easy job of waiting in the dummy huts after they were transported to the village in trucks. Not keen on being singled out for the attack party, many GCs slunk to the back rows, trying to make themselves invisible. The ustaads were familiar with the tricks used by the cadets.

'Gentleman Cadets, all those standing in the back line will be in the attack party,' ordered the Ustaad.

'Koi volunteer?' asked another ustaad.

A few of us took the honourable way out of the situation by opting for the attacking team. After slight hesitation, Porky and Zora also volunteered for the attacking team. Split in smaller groups, we were to march through mountainous terrain to reach the point of rendezvous. Maachh and Sandy lingered and managed to get themselves selected for occupying defensive positions in the mock village. Once the teams had been finalised, the defending party was transported to the village in a truck.

‘Bloody malingerers,’ muttered Zora as Maachh and Sandy waved from the truck.

‘That’s not fair,’ Porky rose to the defence of his pal. ‘Someone has to volunteer for the defending party.’

Our platoon of thirty-six GCs marched silently through rocks and brambles with heavy equipment slung on our shoulders. Only those who have marched through rough terrain, dressed in battle dress and weighed down with backpacks, will know what an ordeal it can be.

With the sun beating down ferociously, a long march is anything but enjoyable. Our tongues hanging out like dogs in the desert, we marched in the heat. The moment a break was announced, we headed for the nearest patch of shade, removed our backpacks, and lay down for a couple of minutes. Some of us even managed to catch a nap and could be heard snoring.

Climbing the hill was bad enough, but carrying the deceptively- named Light Machine Guns (LMG) was a real pain in the ass. Quite literally! The GCs, however, are an inventive lot. We had our own ways and means to wriggle out of such situations. In this case it was the GPS.

For some people today, the acronym stands for Global Positioning System, but in our time, it translated into Gujjar Positioning System. Aware of the hardships the cadets had to undergo, some enterprising Gujjars (shepherds) loitered around the hills during the camping season. Their services came at a steep price – guiding us through the hills cost 100 bucks, carrying the LMG was 100 bucks, and for every other extra pack, it was 50 bucks.

Even the hardest of us didn’t mind scratching the bottom of our scanty resources to lighten the burden. The Gujjars were smart chaps. They knew the exact location where we had to report. Without their help, it was near impossible to

find the route. We could be roaming endlessly around the forests. They knew each and every shortcut through the forest. They also knew where the instructors were waiting for us. Once we neared the location where the instructors were waiting, money and equipment would change hands. The Gujjars would pocket their fee, hand over our equipment and disappear. At this juncture we made full use of our acting skills as we panted up the hill with our back packs and pretended to be extremely exhausted.

Using our Gujjars, we marched towards the dummy village. Dusk was setting in by the time we reached the fringes of the village. We decided to wait for a while before launching the attack, since we were sure that the GCs in the half a dozen huts of the mock village would soon fall asleep. Tired and sweating after the arduous march, we crept in the shadows, waiting.

An hour later, with the ustaads breathing down our neck, we decided to launch the final assault. The ustaads warned us to be careful since the terrorists in the mock village would be ready and waiting for us. They would have a well-planned strategy for a counter-attack, he told us.

Stealth and surprise are important, the ustad whispered. Take them by surprise, don't allow anyone to get away, we were instructed. Victory will be yours!

With Maachh around, the terrorists were not likely to have a plan, we were confident. He was sure to goof up things with his impractical ways.

It was absolutely dark when we began moving towards the village. Cautiously and stealthily, we crept closer to the huts in small groups, intent on startling the fellows. I burst into one of the huts standing in the shadows and was greeted by loud snores. Groping in the dark, I stumbled against one body and then another. Maachh and his gang were fast asleep.

I wasn't surprised. What I did not know was that the ustad had followed me into the hut. I located and kicked the Bong, who turned on his side.

'Wake up you idiot and fight,' I whispered in the dark.

The crazy guy muttered sleepily: 'Pessi, don't trouble me. Go to sleep.'

I went around, kicking all the sleeping GCs, trying to wake them up. In the meantime, the furious ustad shook Maachh.

The stupid fellow, mistaking the ustaad for me, mumbled sleepily: ‘Shhhh... Don’t disturb. Just lie down and sleep.’

What followed was straight out of the Sad Sack comics. It was not something Maachh was likely to forget, ever. The irate ustaad shone his torch into the Bong’s face and yelled at him. Rubbing sleep out of his eyes, Maachh stood meekly awaiting his doom.

One by one, the ustaad roused the sleeping cadets and ordered them to line up.

As a punishment, the group was ordered to march back to the camp while the attacking party got a ride back to the camp. We had the last laugh as we watched them toiling up the hill with their equipment and backpacks.

Cursing their luck, Maachh and his gang marched through the brambles and rocks for the rest of the night.

The only saving grace was that the ustaad didn’t report their un-officer like conduct to CoCo.

This was the very first exercise and Maachh was losing out on his OLQ (Officer-Like Quality). OLQ holds an important part in the making of an officer, and the repentant guy was now determined to make up for lost ground. He decided to impress CoCo with his OLQ during the next exercise, which was supposed to be a mock-up attack in the mountains.

We had never seen him work so hard. Diligently, he mugged up the orders for the attack and practiced them repeatedly. We encouraged the Bong and helped him work out a fool-proof strategy.

At the last minute, when it was time to volunteer as a leader, he developed cold feet and lurked in the background. All our efforts to tutor him came to a naught.

‘You have let us down at the last minute,’ Zora scolded. ‘Why didn’t you volunteer to lead the attack?’

‘I can’t do it,’ he replied. ‘I am not confident about the strategy.’

‘You have lost the opportunity to prove yourself. It was your only chance and you screwed it up.’

‘Fate knocks twice,’ Maachh justified. ‘The first time it knocks and the alert ones hear the knock. The next time it knocks for the lethargic. There is no third time, of course. Don’t worry, I won’t miss the knock next time.’

True to his words, opportunity knocked on his door a couple of days later. This time he didn’t ignore the knock. This time, bent upon proving himself, the brave Bong volunteered to lead the attack.

CoCo thumped his shoulders encouragingly, delighted at the transformation in the slacker.

It was a night attack and the group, led by the reformed Fish, set out to attack the opponents. Shouting the commands he had practiced carefully, Maachh led his brave men into the fray.

‘Don’t let a single enemy slip out,’ shouted Maachh. ‘Get the entire lot of them.’

Motivated by their enthusiastic leader, the cadets unleashed their fury on the enemy.

Expecting laurels, Maachh and his men marched back to the camp. Instead of rewards, they found themselves facing a frothing and fuming CoCo.

‘You are a terrible failure,’ CoCo ranted. ‘You don’t possess a single drop of OLQ.’

Maachh was aghast. As far as he knew, he had done a fantastic job and returned victorious.

The instructor continued to scold. ‘You bloody idiot, have you lost all sense of direction? You marched in the wrong direction and led an attack on your own troops entrenched in the bordering area. You were supposed to attack the enemy, not your own team. Thanks to your blunder the entire exercise was a total flop.’

There was no redemption for Maachh. The guy had managed to ruin the entire exercise.

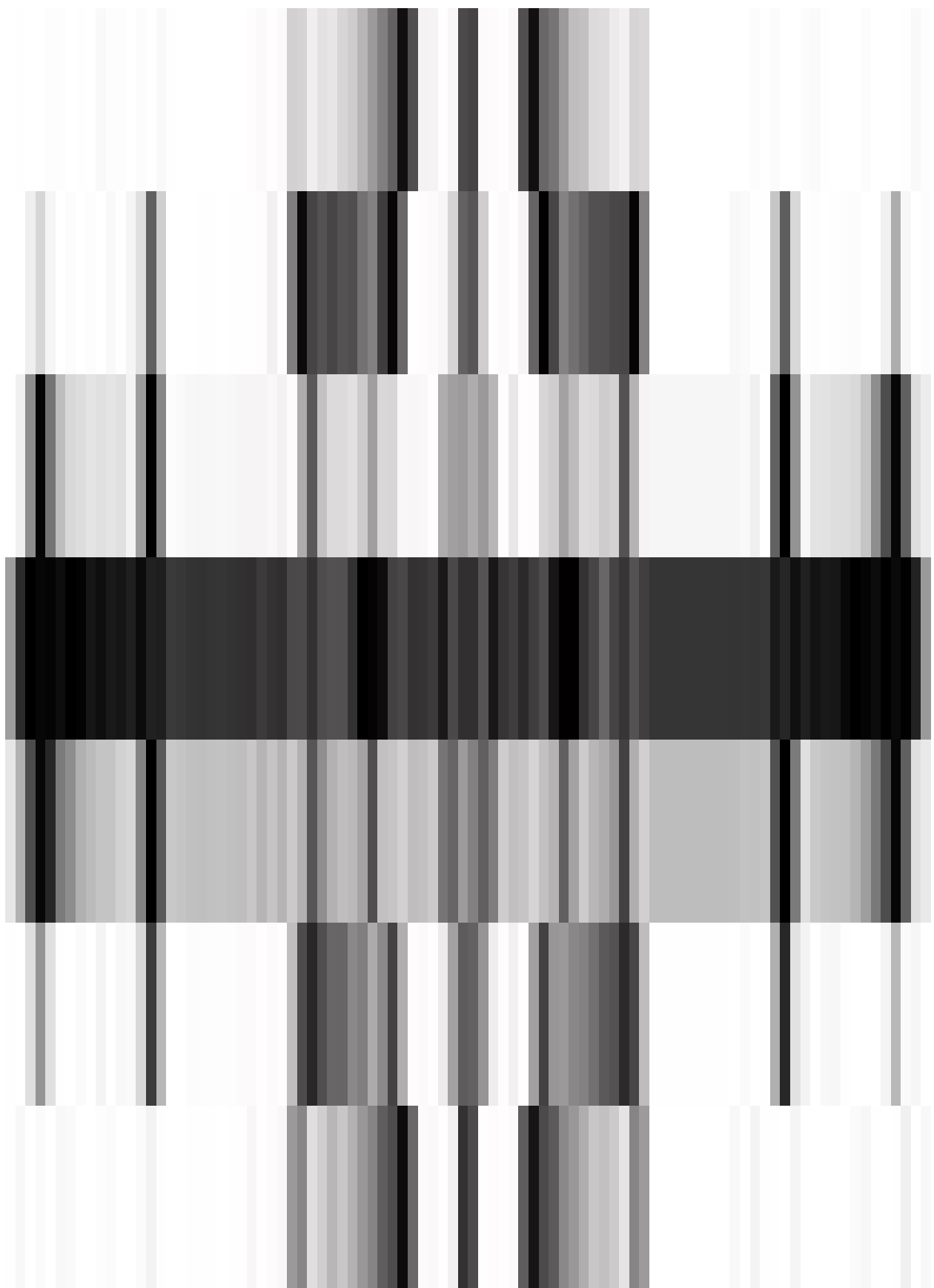
‘How was I to know that a part of our troops were lying in wait close by? I thought they were the enemies,’ he ranted in the privacy of our tent. ‘Why does it happen to me? No matter what I do, things always manage to go wrong.’

That day Maachh resolved never to volunteer to lead an attack.

‘It is better to forget about leadership and lurk in the background. At least no one blames you if things go wrong.’

For once, we had to agree that the buffoon shouldn’t be allowed to make crucial decisions.

TWENTY-NINE



It was Sunday morning. We had just returned from the much-awaited break and were sitting in the cafeteria, bragging about our success with the girls back home. Most of the exploits were imaginary but that didn't make a difference. The stories we told helped pass our time quite pleasantly so some of us retold stories we had read in books and others from movies we had watched.

‘What’s eating Zora?’ Sandy whispered to me.

Everyone was in high spirits after the break. Only Zora’s spirits seemed to sink to deeper depths with every passing hour. For the past couple of days, the guy was seen going around with a morose expression on his handsome face.

‘I have no idea,’ I whispered back. ‘He’s been preoccupied for the last few days.’

Our stories didn’t improve Zora’s mood. He wasn’t listening to any of them as he pushed the cold cutlet around on his plate. It was uncharacteristic of the guy to brood. He had quite a sunny temperament.

‘Something seems to be bothering you, buddy,’ Sandy probed. ‘Would you like to share your worries with us?’

‘It’s nothing!’ Zora wasn’t keen on unloading whatever ghost he was carrying. He jiggled his long legs up and down, which we knew was a warning sign. He wanted to be left alone. Yet, we hung around trying to cheer up the gloomy fellow.

‘There has to be something. It is not like you to mope around with a long face,’ commented Porky.

‘You are not the kind to sink into the depths of despair without substantial reason,’ I added my bit.

‘Look Zora,’ said Sandy. ‘Sharing your problems will lighten your burden and who knows, we might be able to solve the problem for you.’

The Rajput looked undecided.

‘Come on, tell us what is bothering you. Remember, sharing is caring and it

doesn't end at sharing food,' insisted Maachh.

After much persuasion, Zora agreed to break his silence. 'Yaar, I am disturbed. This time, when I went home for the break, my parents announced my engagement to a girl from Bikaner.'

'What!' we chorused. This was a totally unexpected piece of news. The Bong was the first one to recover.

'You lucky dog,' he shouted, jumping up and shaking Zora's hand. 'Congrats! That's good news, man. What I don't understand is the gloomy mood? You should be dancing and prancing around.'

'Yes, in your place, I would have been jumping around with happiness,' added Porky.

'Maybe he is missing her,' opined Maachh. 'It must be tough to get engaged and return to the rough routine of the academy.'

'Come on pal, it is just a few more months,' consoled Porky. 'After that we get our commission and attend your wedding.'

'We will get drunk and do the bhangra.' Maachh went on a tangent.

'You guys don't understand,' said Zora, exasperatedly. 'I don't want to be engaged to anyone. I am too young to be married, anyway. I tried talking to my parents but they wouldn't listen.'

'You Rajputs are known to get married in their cradles,' laughed Sandy. 'Considering that, you have at least attained the legal age for marriage.'

'Isn't it rather sudden?' asked Porky. 'I mean, when you went for the break you were clueless about the forthcoming engagement, weren't you?'

'True, I had no clue that such a thing was being planned.'

'You could have declined.'

'Are you mad? He couldn't have declined at the last minute,' Maachh joined the discussion.

‘The girl belongs to a conservative family from our ancestral village. Our families are very close. In fact, the relationship goes back a couple of generations. This alliance was decided when we were children,’ Zora looked more and more depressed as he narrated the story. ‘Like many other families in the village, our parents decided that we will be married when I attain the legal age. Now that the training is almost over, they insisted on getting the two of us engaged.’

‘They must be worried that you will fall in love with someone else,’ Porky smiled mischievously.

‘Tch tch,’ commiserated Maachh. ‘You are so young. Imagine being hitched already. That means you can’t gallivant around with young lasses after you become an officer. No dances and dinners with beautiful damsels. You must be feeling trapped.’

‘Don’t rub it in,’ Zora sighed. ‘I am very upset about the whole thing. Imagine! They wouldn’t allow me to see her face. They are that conservative.’

‘In this age and time? What a tragedy!’ said Porky. ‘I can’t imagine marrying a girl without at least meeting her a couple of times.’

‘They are a very traditional Rajput family. They don’t show their daughters before marriage. Although my mother and sister have seen the girl and declared her to be pretty, I want to meet her and decide for myself.’

‘Aren’t you being stupid?’ asked Sandy. ‘As per the latest statistics, not many girls want to marry army officers, and here you are getting a girl from a rich, business family from your community, and you don’t want to get married to her. I can’t understand it.’

‘Look, like all of you, I want to date a girl, take her dancing, enjoy candlelight dinners with her, and get to know her better before I get married and settle down in a family setup,’ said Zora, a dreamy look on his face. ‘Romance dies with marriage. There are just responsibilities and problems.’

It was obvious that the guy didn’t have a very rosy picture of marriage in his mind.

‘Arre yaar, you can do all this with your fiancé and then get married. I am sure

your families will not object,' suggested Sandy. 'I don't see any problem at all.'

'You don't understand, she belongs to a very conservative family. They will never allow her to go out with me. Just imagine, they don't allow me to see her before the engagement. Do you think they will let us date? Forget dancing, we won't be able to go out for dinner, either. You don't know the attitude of typical Rajput families.'

'We are in the twentieth century, dude,' reminded Sandy. 'All those ideas vanished with the last century.'

'Yes, we live in the twentieth century but in certain parts of the world, it is still the nineteenth century. Nothing has changed. At least not in our village.'

'So, have a fling with another girl and settle down with your Rajput bride,' suggested Porky. 'Have your cake and eat it too. Anyway, they are not insisting for a wedding for a few years so you are a free bird till then.'

'And what if they came to know about my fling? I will be marked as the black sheep of the community. Thereafter, there will be no Rajput bride for me.'

'So marry a girl who is not a Rajput. Big deal!'

'You don't get it, buddy.' Zora threw a pitying look at Porky. 'You don't get it at all.'

'I have an idea,' said Maachh who had been lost in thought for a while now.

'NO!!' shouted the entire gang.

No one, least of Zora, wanted to listen to his stupid idea.

'Listen buddies, I have Zora's welfare in mind and my plan is foolproof.' Maachh insisted. 'If we can make his fiancé and her family believe that he is a bad character, everything will fall in place. They wouldn't want their daughter to marry an alcoholic or characterless man.'

'Please keep your ideas to yourself. Don't interfere in my affairs,' Zora warned him. 'I would rather marry Renuka than have my reputation ruined.'

‘Nice name – Renuka,’ said Maachh, ignoring Zora’s outburst. ‘Is she as beautiful as her name?’

‘None of your business,’ Zora snapped at him.

‘Hey man, you are already possessive about her,’ smirked Maachh. ‘I knew it. The sparks are flying.’

‘She is his fiancée, don’t forget that,’ hooted Porky.

‘You will be lucky if you find a girl to marry you,’ Zora scowled at him.

The conversation took off on a tangent.

‘You mentioned that girls don’t want to marry army officer, is that true?’ Porky asked Sandy, his voice anxious. ‘You mean to say that we will not be able to find ourselves a wife.’

‘If you can hook a fauji’s daughter well and good, but if you can’t, then well, you can only pray.’

‘I don’t think that is true,’ said Porky. ‘If that were true, all army officers would have been bachelors.’

He had a point.

‘Well, you will have to settle for whoever agrees to tie the knot with you. The point is that you won’t have much of a choice,’ Sandy stuck to his argument.

‘But why don’t they want to marry an army guy?’ Maachh butted in, eager to enter the fray.

‘Firstly, the money the army gives its men is peanuts compared to what the private companies pay to their employees. No wonder, the peanuts get only monkeys like you into the army. Secondly, the profession is fraught with risks; no one knows how long an army guy is going to survive. You will agree that the parents don’t want their daughter widowed. Do you know – of the twenty friends from the academy, my brother is left with just twelve and he’s only 29? Eight of them are gone in just seven years of service. So work out the statistics and you will know what I mean.’

'Eight in seven years? That is almost an average of one per year. It must be a jinxed batch,' mused Porky, who could never accept the gloomy side of life.

'Thirdly, which woman wants to uproot her household and move every two years and spend half her married life in separated accommodation, waiting for her husband who may or may not come back? It is a tough life, buddy. Not just for the officers but for the wives, too. There are very few takers for it.'

'I don't agree,' said Maachh. 'Girls have a thing for the uniform and the brass buttons. They swoon at the sight of dashing young officers.'

'Yes, I have read that in a book,' Porky butted in.

'Girls swooning at a monkey like you? No way!' Zora's tongue was caustic. He was cut up with the Bong for the earlier remark.

'They swoon alright, but they don't marry,' insisted Sandy adamantly. 'They are smart. Dancing and prancing with a smart army officer is alright, but marriage with him is an absolute no-no.'

'I don't agree,' said Porky, unwilling to accept Sandy's take on the subject.

The argument continued, till Maachh put an end to it.

'I have an idea,' the Bong raised his hand. 'There is an easy way to test our value in the marriage market. All we have to do is to put an ad in the matrimonial column of a newspaper and see the kind of response we get.'

'Don't you dare!' threatened Zora. 'You will get all of us into trouble.'

'This joker will get us relegated,' remarked Sandy.

That evening, Maachh's brain was buzzing with ideas, but there were no takers for them. One by one, he elaborated on his plans but everyone scoffed at them.

'I just wanted to prove that we have immense potential in the marriage market,' he said lamely.

The mysterious smile on the Bong's face alarmed me. 'Look, keep away from the Pandora's Box.'

‘Who is Pandora and where is the box?’ asked Porky, a puzzled frown on his chubby face.

‘Shut up,’ scolded Zora, edgily. ‘Will the lot of you leave me alone for a while, please?’

THIRTY



The next week, Maachh remained mysteriously preoccupied. Flashing secretive smiles from time to time, he would disappear for hours without any explanation.

What we didn't know was that the idiot had undertaken two projects without telling anyone. The day after our discussion about Zora's engagement, he decided to help the Rajput wriggle out of his engagement. Our warning to lay off the matter had had no effect on him.

Although Maachh had suggested that the best way to emerge from the mess was to tarnish Zora's reputation, no one had taken kindly to the idea. That did nothing to deter the fellow from carrying out his plan.

One evening, while everyone was busy having a bash in Porky's room, Maachh disappeared for a while. It was a Saturday and we were in a celebratory mood. The previous Sunday, we had smuggled in a few bottles of beer and secreted them in Porky's box. We bought sausages, hamburgers, samosas, and sandwiches from the cafeteria to go with the beer. Sandy brought out a bottle of rum that he had managed to smuggle into his room. We were in high spirits with liquor and jokes aplenty. No one noticed Maachh sneaking away from the party.

Stealthily, he made his way to Zora's room and began searching for clues. Among the papers on his desk, the Bong came across an envelope. Excited, the Bong opened it and found the photograph of Zora's fiancée. Renuka's parents had sent the photo to Zora's parents and they had forwarded it to their son. The joker examined the picture. Staring at him was the pleasant face of a stout girl dressed in a traditional Rajput lehenga, choli and dupatta. The long-lashed eyes, the hesitant smile and the demure look on the girl's face touched the Bong's heart.

She is beautiful, he thought, studying the picture. Zora is a fool! Imagine not wanting to marry a girl as pretty as her. Sighing, he put the picture back into the envelope and replaced it amongst Zora's papers.

It was while he was putting back the picture that he noticed her address written in neat handwriting on the reverse side of the envelope. Pleased with the discovery, Maachh jotted down Renuka's address on a piece of paper and made his way back to the party.

Thereafter, he began fooling around in high spirits.

‘The fellow is up to some mischief,’ I remember thinking. I knew him like the back of my hand.

That night, the Bong wrote a letter to Renuka. Carefully, he listed out the reasons why she should not think of getting married to Zora. ‘He is an alcoholic and has many girlfriends at Dehradun,’ he wrote. ‘Under the circumstances, as a well wisher, I think you should call off the wedding.’

Although he knew the girl would be devastated upon learning that her fiancé was a scoundrel, the Bong felt obliged to help his friend. He considered it his duty to protect his buddy from an unwanted alliance.

He chose his words carefully and painted a grim picture of the boy’s character. Although it was a fairly longish letter, the gist was that Zora was given to drinking heavily, getting into debts and fisticuffs. He was also a womanizer. He signed it as a well-wisher. Satisfied that the letter was sure to break the girl’s heart as well as the engagement, the Bong went to bed.

A fortnight passed. Maachh’s restlessness grew as there seemed to be no reaction to his letter. Renuka and her family seemed to have ignored it completely.

It was a Sunday morning and we were preparing to go out on the town. Armed with the liberty pass, bathed and dressed, we were about to leave the academy when we spotted Zora leading his parents to the cafeteria.

The guy looked surprised at the sudden appearance of his parents. His father looked furious as they marched towards the cafe.

Only Maachh seemed delighted at the sight. He rubbed his hands gleefully and exclaimed – ‘At last! I had given up all hopes of seeing my plan succeed.’

His words made no sense to us.

‘What the hell are you babbling about?’ asked Sandy. ‘Do you know those people?’

‘I was expecting fireworks but I didn’t imagine they would land up here.’

‘Is it one of your funny ideas?’ Sandy stared suspiciously at the Bong.

‘To tell you the truth, I have been waiting for this,’ confessed Maachh proudly as we walked towards the cafe to discover the developments. We were baffled by his words.

‘Out with it or I’ll punch your brains out.’

‘When I suggested that we post an anonymous letter to Renuka’s parents, none of you agreed, so I wrote a letter on my own and posted it. I was sure of the outcome. I can guarantee that Zora is no longer engaged to the girl.’

‘You idiot,’ I exclaimed, ‘when will you learn to keep your hands off other people’s affairs? Zora doesn’t need your help to deal with the issue.’

Our criticism made Maachh looked more and more crestfallen as we neared the cafe. His face crumpled pathetically and he said: ‘I was just trying to help.’

We spotted them as soon as we entered the cafe. Zora’s father was frothing at the mouth while his mother was hissing at her son. Clearly, they were giving him a piece of their mind. Zora looked shocked. He had no idea why his parents had suddenly arrived at the academy nor did he know the reason for their anger. Their words were making no sense to him.

‘Since when have you taken to drinking?’ demanded his mother. ‘A drunkard and a womanizer; I must have sinned in my previous birth to be saddled with such a son.’

She began sobbing softly into her handkerchief.

‘It’s entirely your fault. You’ve given him too much liberty,’ his father scolded her. ‘I always told you to be strict with him but you wouldn’t listen. You are to blame for everything.’

Sitting at the adjacent table, we heard them ticking off our pal. Poor Zora, he didn’t know what hit him. As far as he knew, he had done no wrong, yet his mother was talking about drinking and womanizing. They were not ready to listen to any argument or explanation.

We glared at Maachh who had begun wriggling uncomfortably in his seat.

‘Go up to them and confess,’ hissed Sandy. ‘It is all your fault and you will have to set things right.’

‘You had no right to land Zora in trouble,’ I rebuked.

For once, even Porky did not take Maachh’s side.

‘Yes, Maachh, I think you should tell them the truth,’ he implored. ‘You have made his parents very unhappy.’

After squirming for a while, Maachh stood up: ‘Maybe, it was a mistake to have written that letter. I had not imagined it would create such a mess. I will apologise to them.’

To his credit, Maachh was a warm-hearted guy who wanted to do the right thing for his pal. Touched by Zora’s distress, he had made an earnest effort to solve the problem. His intentions had been honourable; all of us appreciated that.

We cheered as the Bong gathered up courage and walked towards Zora’s table. By now, Zora had guessed the identity of the mischief maker. He glowered at Maachh.

‘Good morning, Ma’am,’ the Bong began, bowing suavely.

We had to hand it to him. When the occasion demanded, the guy could behave like a perfect gentleman.

‘Good morning, Sir,’ he addressed Zora’s father. ‘I am Manoj Mitra, Zora’s course mate. I’m terribly sorry to barge into your discussion, but I couldn’t help overhearing the conversation between you and Zora. The misunderstandings must be cleared immediately.’

He drew a deep breath and paused.

‘Mind your own business,’ hissed Zora, but Maachh was determined to set things right.

‘I can vouch for your son’s excellent character and all our course mates will do the same. It is my fault that things have come to this stage.’

Zora's parents looked surprised.

'I don't understand...' began the father.

'Let me explain, sir,' said Maachh. 'When we returned after the break, Zora was very upset. He told us about his engagement and his reluctance to marry so early in life.'

He paused for breath. Zora's parents looked shocked.

'I couldn't bear to see him going around with a long face, so I decided to do something about it. The letter was a part of my plan to help him out of this.'

Expressions of anger, disbelief, and exasperation crossed their faces as Maachh continued speaking.

'I am sorry,' ended Maachh. 'It was foolish of me to have done what I did. I had no intentions of harming anyone or creating misunderstandings in the family. In fact, I didn't imagine that the letter would disturb you so much. It is my fault and I am willing to accept any punishment for it.'

His words, spoken from the heart, touched Zora's parents.

Zora's father was the first one to react. He patted the Bong on his shoulders and said: 'Son, I may have done the same thing for a friend. We should have spoken to Zora before rushing here.'

They accepted the fact that their trip was totally unnecessary.

'We should have had more faith in our son,' agreed Zora's mother.

'Am I forgiven?' Maachh pushed his luck.

'Of course, you are!' smiled Zora's mother, patting his hand. 'We are happy that our son has such loyal friends.'

She then turned to her son and rebuked him: 'If you were so desperate to get out of the alliance, you should have confided in us.'

'I did,' Zora protested. 'But you were not willing to listen. I don't want to get

married so early in life. Give me time to sort out my life. I have hopes and dreams that I need to see through before I settle down.'

'Don't worry, we'll find a way out of this,' assured his dad.

'Thank you, Sir,' Maachh seemed relieved with the outcome of the encounter.

'...And son,' Zora's father addressed Maachh, 'the next time you decide to shoot off such letters, maybe you should consult your friends. There must be some sane chaps in your gang.'

The Bong nodded his head sheepishly. He was happy to get away with a minor reprimand, and happier that Zora would soon be free.

After his parents left, the Rajput confronted Maachh.

'Idiot, when will you learn to stop meddling in my affairs? Anyway, I am off the hook and that is what matters, I guess. I should be thanking you for getting me out.'

'Thanks to the buffoon, your problems are solved,' granted Sandy.

'Actually, Renuka is quite a good-looking girl, you could have married her,' the Bong addressed Zora. 'In fact, I am feeling bad for her.'

'How do you know she is good-looking?'

'I saw her picture,' confessed Maachh.

'You scoundrel. You had the cheek to go through my belongings?'

'Sorry pal, I had to pry into your papers and found the envelope with her picture in it. I still maintain that she is a very pretty girl.'

'You have my permission to try your luck with her,' laughed the Rajput.

'Maybe I will...' Maachh beamed cheerfully. 'Some day, I will write her a letter and apologize for everything.'

THIRTY-ONE



Although the Bong's indiscreet letter to Zora's fiancée had resulted in a happy ending, he seemed restless and continued to behave in an odd manner. His frequent visits to the pigeonholes in the mess, where our letters were kept, made us curious.

'Have you written some more letters?' Zora asked the Bong, one evening. 'You seem to be waiting for another catastrophe.'

'What's cooking? Come on, spill the beans!' insisted Sandy.

'All in good time,' he smiled, mysteriously.

Two days later, he burst into my room with a bundle of letters. Among those letters were a few pictures of girls, close-up mugshots as well as full-figure ones.

'Where did you find these?' I asked, sure that he had raided someone's post box.

'They are for me,' he declared pompously as he arranged them on my table.

Soon, Sandy, Porky and Zora arrived and joined us in examining the booty.

One look at the photographs and Porky whistled excitedly. 'Where the hell did you find these?'

In reply to his query, the Bong took out a letter from the heap and read it aloud: 'Smart, slim, exceptionally beautiful, very gori, homely, English graduate girl, 22/157/58, father executive in public sector...'

'These sound like matrimonial advertisements,' said Zora.

'I can understand 36/24/36 but what's 22/157/58?' Porky was baffled.

'You are impossible! You don't understand the basics. These denote the age, height, and weight of the girl,' the Bong chided him.

'You idiot, where did you get these from?' asked Zora, picking up the picture of a young girl.

'I put an ad in the matrimonial column,' Maachh finally confessed.

‘WHAT?’ we were aghast. The guy’s madness knew no limits.

‘Remember the discussion we had about girls not wanting to marry army officers? Sandy was insisting that no one wanted to marry faujis, so I decided to put an ad and see for myself whether there are any responses to it. The proof of the pudding is in the eating, after all.’

‘Who is eating the pudding?’ Porky’s ears perked up at the mention of pudding.

Everyone ignored him.

‘You spent money to test Sandy’s opinion?’

‘It helps to know one’s market value,’ claimed the crazy chap. ‘I was worried that I would die a bachelor. At least now I know I won’t. Do you know how many letters have come in response to my ad?’

‘First, tell us what you wrote in the ad?’ asked Sandy.

‘Just the facts – handsome, smart, intelligent, army officer, 25/170/60, belonging to a respectable Bengali family looking for a slim, beautiful, and convent educated girl. To be honest, I picked up the words from some ads. Almost everyone wants a smart, slim, beautiful, gori, and convent educated bride. So I also asked for those attributes.’

‘A bundle of lies,’ scoffed Sandy. ‘All fictitious stuff...’

‘What lies?’ protested Maachh. ‘Am I not smart, intelligent, and handsome? Don’t I belong to a good Bengali family? What is fictitious about that?’

‘You are not yet an army officer and you are not 25,’ said Sandy. ‘In fact, you are not even intelligent.’

‘How dare you call me unintelligent?’ Maachh was getting belligerent. ‘Can you come up with such ideas? Are you capable of carrying out such plans? Now, you tell me, who is intelligent and who is not.’

‘You call these idiotic ideas intelligent? Let me tell you something; even a moron wouldn’t think of doing such stupid things.’

‘It requires guts to do them,’ the Bong retaliated. ‘Not many have the courage to give shape to their ideas.’

‘Courage? I think one has to be mentally challenged to behave this irresponsibly.’

Zora intervened before the two got into fisticuffs.

‘Alright! You are intelligent but you come up with the most ridiculous ideas, there is no doubt about that,’ he tried to smoothen Maachh’s ruffled feathers.

The chap was truly irrepressible. It was good to have the crazy guy with us; he guaranteed a few laughs, at least. We couldn’t have survived the tough life at the academy without these hilarious episodes. The guy provided enough fodder to amuse us for a lifetime.

For the next three hours, we pored over the responses and enjoyed the side-splitting comments mouthed by the Bong.

‘It is worth every rupee spent on the ad,’ declared Maachh. ‘The ad has opened up innumerable possibilities for me.’

‘What do you mean?’ threatened Zora. ‘If you are thinking of corresponding with these people, forget it. It is not ethical. It is bad enough that you have placed a fictitious ad and are enjoying the responses to it.’

‘It is not fictitious,’ insisted Maachh. ‘It is futuristic. I will be 25 and an officer some day. I am handsome, intelligent, and smart, aren’t I?’

‘OK, it is not fictitious but futuristic,’ pacified Sandy. ‘Promise me that you won’t take the matter further. Just drop it. We have had our fun. This is not a joke; it is the matter of a girl’s life and her dreams.’

‘It amounts to cheating people,’ I added.

Everyone agreed that it was a mean idea, but Maachh continued to defend himself.

After a prolonged debate, the guy promised that he wouldn’t take things further. But he put a rider to that decision.

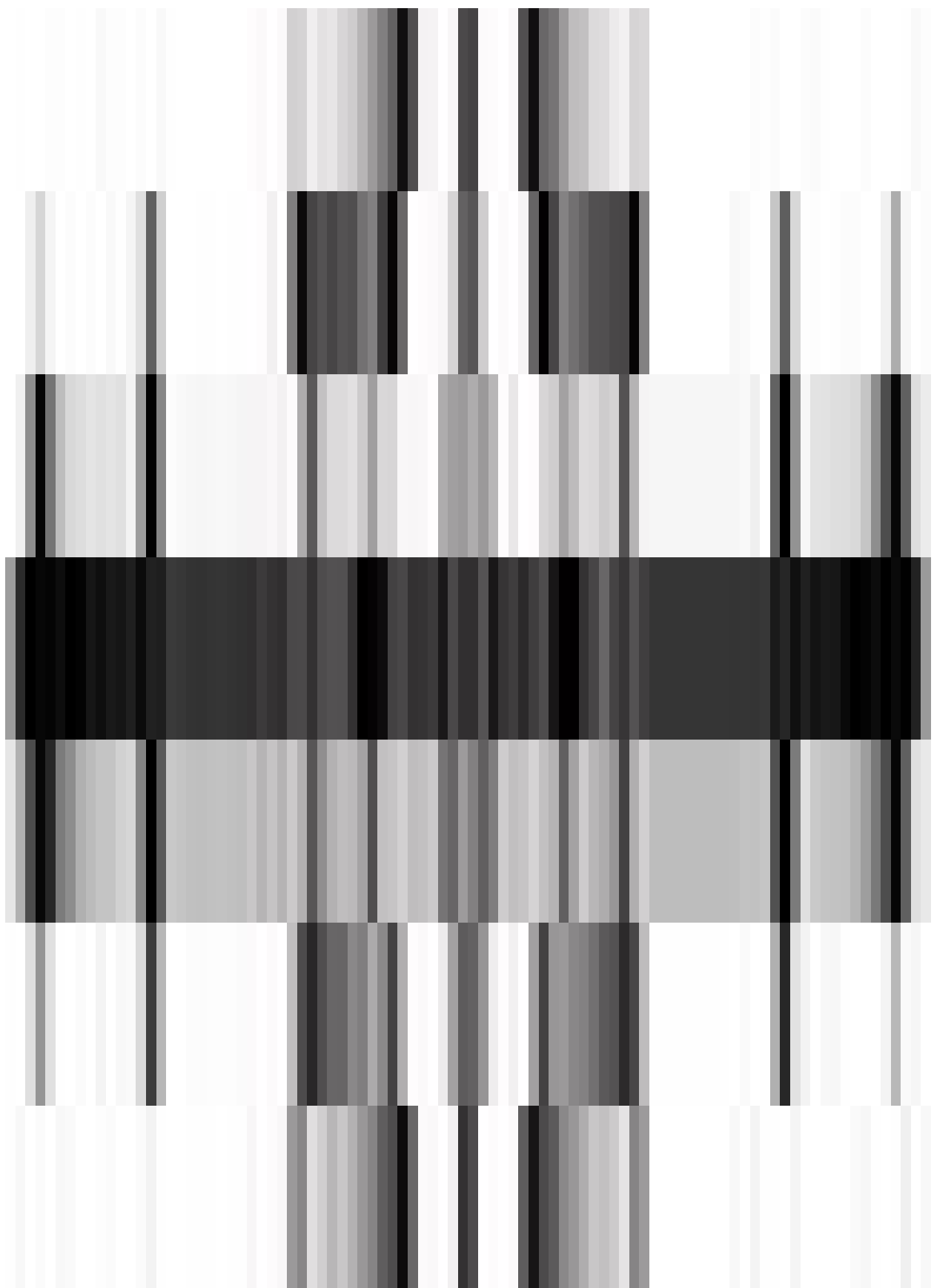
‘I will note down the phone numbers of the girls I like, and when I want to get married, I will contact them. No one can stop me from doing that. After all, I have spent quite a lot of money and I deserve some benefit from the ad.’

‘By then, these girls would have been married and had children, too,’ laughed Sandy.

‘We will see.’ The Bong had the last word.

Relieved that he had agreed to drop the matter for the time being, we indulged his little fancy.

THIRTY-TWO



It was a season of surprises, adventure and heartbreaks. The first surprise of the season was the news of Kiki's engagement to an NRI.

As usual, Maachh and Porky were the ones to break the news at the academy and a few hearts along with it. The duo met Pinkky bhabi at a popular hole-in-the-wall gol gappa joint in town. Their eyes watering with the pungent stuff, they were busy popping the fiery balls of deliciousness when she arrived. The three of them exchanged pleasantries while Pinkky bhabi ordered some gol gappas.

'Let me give you a treat,' offered the lady of generous proportions. Undeniably, her generosity matched the girth. 'Bhaiyya, give them whatever they want,' she instructed the vendor as she popped a crunchy ball in her mouth and sighed with pleasure.

The two jokers, elated at her offer, got busy loading themselves with all that the shop had to offer. It was a while before conversation began.

'Thank you, Bhabi, for feeding two hungry guys,' said the Bong, dramatic to the hilt.

'I have good news to share with you two,' she said.

'Sir has been promoted!' guessed Porky.

'You have bought a house.'

'You have bought a new car.'

The lady was amused at the flight of their imagination.

'There is to be an addition to the family,' Maachh hazarded.

'Yes, there is to be an addition to the family,' she laughed.

'I knew it,' exclaimed the Fish excitedly. 'Congratulations! We will all become chachas?'

Pink with embarrassment, Pinkky bhabi was quick to dismiss his idea. 'No, no, it

is an addition to the family but not in the way you imagine. Kiki is engaged to be married,' the lady trilled happily, unaware of the devastating effect her words had on the two cadets. 'I am so happy. Akshay is an architect with great career prospects. Imagine living in New Zealand! It is such a lovely place. I envy Kiki. She is very lucky.'

She gushed enthusiastically as the two swallowed their disappointment along with the gol gappas. Maachh swallowed a dahi wada the wrong way and burst into a series of coughs. Spluttering and gasping, they stared at her.

'When and how did this happen?' Maachh spoke after his coughing bout had subsided.

Popping a whole gol gappa gracefully into her cavernous mouth, Pinkky bhabi slurped a whole cupful of water before replying: 'Arre, no one can predict how and when cupid will strike. They met at cousin Nimmo's wedding at Patiala. None of us could imagine that Puppy – arre Akshay,' she clarified, 'would pop the question by the end of the fourth day. He declared that he had fallen in love at the first sight. I am not surprised. Kiki is a smart and beautiful girl. Anyone can fall in love with her.'

Maachh nodded enthusiastically although his heart had splintered all over his gol gappas. Not that Pinkky bhabi noticed anything amiss as she continued – 'She will be much better off marrying Puppy. Look at me; moving from place to place every few years. I had been trying to get her married to an army officer, but I am happy I was not successful. This is a much better proposal.'

Porky couldn't resist taking a dig – 'Kiki couldn't have fallen in love with Puppy in just six days.'

'Arre, love-shove is nothing. All that matters is that a girl finds a guy who can give her a comfortable life. These days if you have money, you can have everything.' She ended emphatically. *'Love can also happen.'*

The two of them nodded dutifully though they didn't agree with her views. They were disappointed by the fact that both Pinkky bhabi and Kiki preferred money over love. Materialism knew no bounds, they sighed.

'Besides, she will get the opportunity of getting away from this filthy and corrupt country. If I were intelligent, I would also have hooked an NRI,' she

sighed. 'Not that I am unhappy with my Mandy,' she added quickly, lest they get the wrong idea.

Maachh's jaws set in a hard line at the mention of filth and corruption. A patriot to the core, he sprang to the defense of his nation.

'I beg to differ,' he began, clearing his throat. Porky recognized it as the preface to a lecture on patriotism and he was right.

'It's not all roses in other countries. They also have their problems,' Maachh declared with vehemence. 'I don't think it is right to desert one's country or to condemn it as filthy and corrupt.'

'Arre bhai, who is deserting the country? I am married to an army officer, am I not?' Pinky bhabi was indignant. 'We are patriots, no doubt about that but fact is fact. Not speaking about the truth does not change it.'

Maachh was not appeased by her words. Mustering as much dignity as a session of hogging gol gappas would allow, he bid good day to the lady and walked away.

Pinky bhabi stopped in the act of popping yet another gol gappa into her mouth and stared at his retreating back. 'Kya hua ise?' she wondered perplexed at the sudden turn of events.

'He has these attacks,' explained Porky, chuckling. 'Thank you for the treat. Please convey our good wishes to Kiki.'

As they walked away, he thumped Maachh and tittered: 'You should have seen her face! Her eyes were as large as the gol gappas in her hand.'

On the way back to the academy, the two broken-hearted braves dissected the tragic event and consoled themselves with various excuses.

'With a name like Puppy, that guy can be no better than a mongrel,' opined Maachh. 'Imagine Kiki preferring the chap over us. Her taste in men is appalling.'

'Maybe we are better off without the likes of Goldie, Lovely, Puppy, Kiki, and Happy in our life,' agreed Porky. 'All show and sham, no substance. Give me a

nice and humble girl any day.'

'Yeah, one who will fit in with the kith and the kin. Someone who will gladden the cockles of the mater's heart, take charge of the family fortunes, and be pals with the bro and sis.'

'That is what matters at the end of the day, when the looks have gone and the fires doused... better to be with someone who will not criticize the country and run off with an NRI in search of greener pastures. '

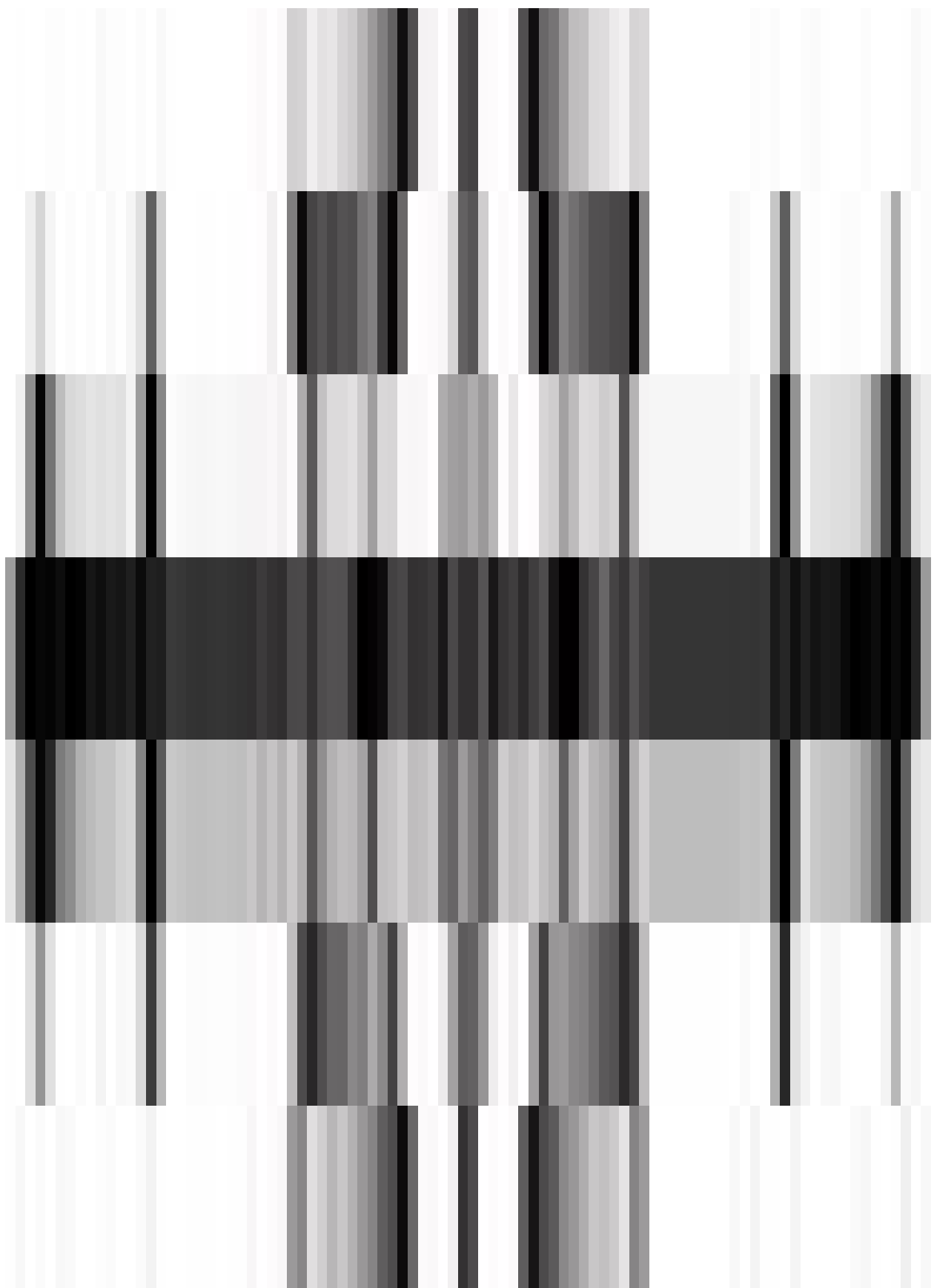
'Right you are mate,' the Bong grew philosophical. 'All that glitters is...'

'... not gold,' Porky ended the phrase. For once, he was not lost for words.

The news of Kiki's engagement spread fast through the academy as soon as the gallivanting gadflies returned with the news. They added as much masala to the gossip as they could. The sound of splintering hearts filled the corridors of our barracks as the news made its rounds.

Barely had the splinters been swept off the corridors when we were told to prepare ourselves for the toughest of exercises.

THIRTY-THREE



This was the last and most important camp of our training. It played a major role in our grading. Known as the 'Mother of All Pains', this exercise was the last hurdle to be crossed before the POP. It involved crossing the nearby forests, on foot. From time immemorial, GCs had been taking shortcuts to avoid trekking through the jungle, but the ustaads were no novices. They knew each and every trick up our sleeves.

The obstacle course was rough and the number of hurdles to be crossed were many. Numerous stories circulated in the academy about the hazards of the exercise. Maachh knew them all.

'During the last exercise, a guy was attacked by a leopard,' he told us. 'Not just that, I have heard that cadets have also encountered herds of wild elephants.'

'Stop gossiping like an old woman,' scolded Sandy, who was already stressed about the exercise.

Although no one was willing to admit it, we were fearful about the possibilities and wanted to silence the Bong.

'Whether you believe it or not, it is entirely up to you guys. As you all know, I am from Sainik School and many of my seniors have been through this training. They warned me about the dangers, and I am just conveying what they told me.' Clearly, Maachh was hurt that we refused to believe him.

His seniors had also tutored him on the ways and means to avoid hardships in the academy, and he followed their instructions to the 'T'.

It was pitch dark when we were let off from the south of the Shivalik ranges, and were instructed to cross over to the north before reporting back to the academy. For those with short stature, it was a tough call. Height mattered a lot since it programmed the length of a person's stride. Being a six-footer, I had a distinct advantage, and was generally way ahead of the others.

Unfortunately, I had been included in Maachh's group. It was double trouble since Porky was also in our team. With the two of them around, it was impossible to have an uneventful journey. Sandy and I crossed our fingers and prayed.

We had hardly moved a couple of kilometres when Maachh came to a sudden halt. He opened his rucksack and pulled out a lungi, kurta, and a wig.

‘I am dressing up as a Sardar and taking a lift in one of the trucks bound for Dehradun. At least I can grab a good night’s sleep that way,’ he announced.

We were sceptical about his plan. ‘What about the rifle? How do you propose to carry it?’ asked Sandy.

Throwing us a disdainful look, Maachh tapped his cranium and began dismantling the weapon. He then proceeded to stuff it in his rucksack. When the Bong was finished with his disguise, we had to admit that he really looked the part.

There was nothing for us to do but to wish him well. He waved cheerfully and vanished under the cover of darkness. Even if the plan seemed foolish, we couldn’t help but admire his courage. It took a lot of guts to execute a stupid plan like that. Dressing up as a sardar or a sadhu to avoid the struggle was a perennial favourite among the cadets, one that had been tried through the ages. It amused the ustaads who had handled enough of the IMA sardars and sadhus to last them a lifetime.

Since the journey was long and arduous, we tried to travel as light as possible. With an abundance of rivulets in the mountains, it seemed pointless to carry the heavy water bottles so we dumped them. The next to be thrown were the food packets.

‘It is better to carry dinner in your belly rather than on your back,’ declared Porky, tucking into the contents of his food packet. His swollen belly revealed that he had enjoyed a hearty meal unlike the rest of us, who had consumed a light meal so that we could walk fast.

With Maachh’s departure, our group of five had reduced to four. Porky, as usual, was a big pain. His bloated belly made him slow and lethargic. He called for frequent breaks as the weight in his belly was heavier than the one on his back. We had hardly walked an hour or so when we heard a shuffle in the bushes up ahead. Expecting wild animals to emerge, we crouched and waited – our hearts thumping with fear.

A minute later, much to our surprise, a dishevelled Maachh emerged from the

bushes. His lungi had several holes where the material had been caught in the bramble and his turban had unravelled enroute. He looked like a clown who had escaped from the circus. The chap had lost his way in the forest and was going around in circles.

It was a bit too late for him to march back to the road so he joined our group again. We moved in a single file along a beaten track. Thambi, who was good at map reading, was leading the way and the group was confident that he would take us on the right path.

Two hours later, we reached a rivulet. The climb so far had been steep and slow. Winded by the effort, we wanted to rest for a while. The sight of the gurgling stream and its welcoming banks tempted us to take a break. We unlaced our shoes and dipped our feet in the cool stream. I was at the point of drowsing, when a series of trumpets shattered the quiet of the forest. The trampling sounds alerted us that an elephant herd was somewhere close by.

We had been told that they wouldn't bother us if we didn't needle them. Yet, the very thought of facing the wild creatures was daunting. We abandoned all thoughts of rest and quickly scrambled to our feet again.

After about twenty minutes of walking, Thambi discovered that there were just four of us marching in a single file. Someone was missing from the group. The march came to an abrupt halt.

A quick check told us that Porky was missing. It was impossible for him to have strayed or lost his way since he had been just behind us. One by one, we called out his name, but there was no response. Worried, we debated on the course of action.

Trying to hunt for Porky meant that someone had to go back to look for him. No one wanted to go back. It involved almost twenty minutes of walking back and forth, and we were already fatigued. But the chap couldn't be left in the jungle. Besides, we couldn't report back at the academy without him.

Sandy and I decided to walk back and look for the joker. It took us barely five minutes to locate the idiot. His snores, loud and clear, could be heard from a distance in the stillness of the night. It was a wonder that the wild animals didn't make a meal of him.

We cursed and abused the chap till we had exhausted our vocabulary. A lot of time had been wasted in searching for him, and the temperature had begun to dip. We would have to move faster if we were to reach the academy before we froze to death. Pushing him before us, we made our way back to the others.

‘No more stops, we have to move fast. We have already lost valuable time hunting for Porky,’ declared Thambi.

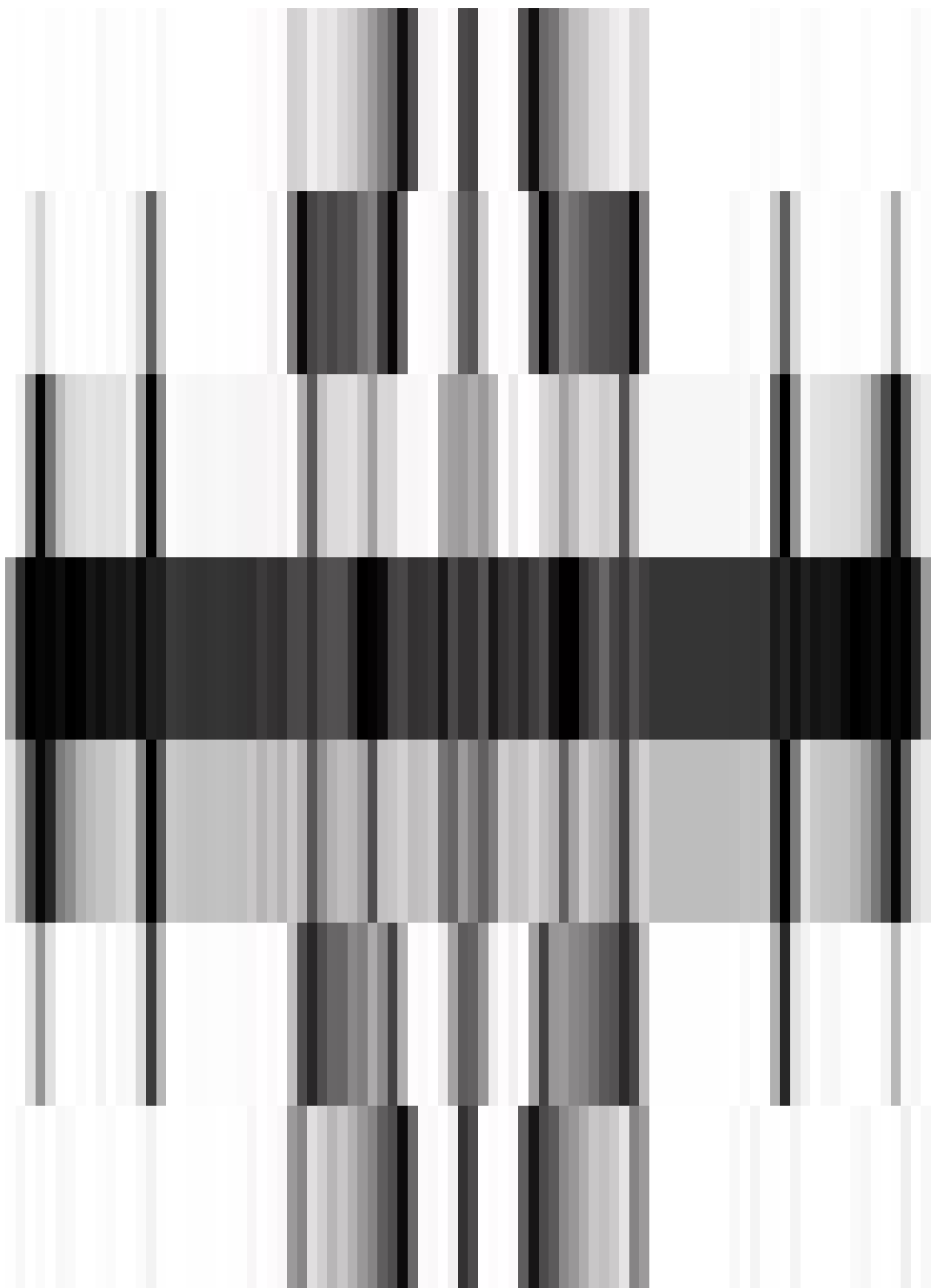
We quickened our pace to boost our body temperatures. A few minutes later, we ran into another group that was resting near a glade. Fighting the temptation to halt for a break, we forced ourselves to move on.

The sacrifice paid off when we finally reached the academy. Ours was the third group to complete the exercise.

As we made our way to the barrack, we spotted two of our course mates – Speedy and Archie – running around the ground, their rifles held high above their heads. They had been caught sleeping in the local night bus by the ustaad. The two would have succeeded in getting past the ustaad had it not been for a minor slip-up. Speedy, disguised as a sardar, had fallen asleep in the bus and his turban had slipped. The telltale haircut was a clear giveaway. The duo was unceremoniously hauled back to the academy and punished.

It was not a good night to be a fake sardar.

THIRTY-FOUR



It was a bright morning but our mood was far from sunny. Anxiety gripped us as we walked towards the auditorium for one of our most stressful tests.

‘All good things come to an end,’ muttered Zora.

‘So do all bad things,’ endorsed Maachh. ‘The good thing is that we will soon be officers.’

The mention of the word ‘officer’ made Porky straighten up and look dignified. ‘I am impatient for the day when I will no longer be a GC. I will be happy to get out of here.’

‘Let me assure you that we will miss the academy, once we pass out,’ said Sandy. ‘I have no doubts about that.’

‘I will surely miss our midnight parties and pranks,’ I agreed. ‘Despite the strict regimen, it was good fun.’

The thought of being separated from each other, probably never to meet again, sobered the two clowns. ‘You are right, buddy,’ Maachh sighed. ‘It was good fun, in parts.’

Like all trainings, ours was nearing its end.

‘Whatever happens today will seal our fates forever, career- wise I mean,’ said Sandy.

He was absolutely right. The allotment of arms would decide what we would do for the rest of our lives in the army. A week ago, we had submitted our choices in writing, but no one knew what destiny held for us. We had to list our top three options; mine were paratroopers, engineers, and infantry. For Maachh it was Army Supply Corps (ASC), ASC, and ASC, since he thought he could revolutionise the supplies of the armed forces. He had also confessed that his choice had been based on the belief that the ASC guys got the best cuts of mutton.

It was ditto for Porky since he thought that the supply guys could have all the food choices they wanted. The two idiots didn’t care that it was considered bad

form for an ex-NDA guy to opt for these services. We were considered the elite and were supposed to opt for the fighting arms. Services like the ASC and the Ordnance were supposed to be options for those cadets who were in the higher age group and didn't want the glory of fighting an enemy. The technical GCs opted for services like Signals, Electronics and Mechanical Engineers (EME), and Engineers.

As expected, Sandy and Zora had opted for the Guards service. The Guards were considered an elite force and generally took on cadets who were tall.

'Why don't you opt for it, too?' he asked me. 'You are over six feet and will surely get in.'

'Guards are the cream of the crop,' added Zora.

But my heart was set on the Parachute Regiment. Besides, I wanted to be a commando, so I had opted for the Paras. Only those who considered themselves in good shape opted for the paratroopers. I was an athlete and in fine shape. The same held true for Joe, who had also opted for Paras.

Most cadets would draw either artillery or infantry since there were maximum vacancies in those two arms. Vacancies in Armoured, ASC, Ordnance, and the technical services were limited and those who got selected had to be either high up in the merit list, or have a godfather to pull the right strings.

The cadets who ranked high in the merit list had the advantage of opting for whatever arm they wanted. For the rest, it was a lottery.

It was a Saturday, and a whole new world awaited us. With the allotment of our regiments and units, we would be taking the first step into our careers. As we settled down, we realised that everyone was sweating with anxiety except for our two pals.

Maachh and Porky were carefree about the allotment of arms.

'It doesn't matter, really,' declared Maachh philosophically. 'We are the first in our families to join the defence forces. No one at home will know the difference. All they want is an officer at home. It really doesn't matter to anyone whether I get ASC or Artillery. I am fine with whatever comes my way.'

‘Same with me,’ agreed Porky. ‘How does it matter which arm you are allotted? Ultimately we will all be serving the nation.’

‘Jassi is sure to draw the Armoured Corp. His father is a commanding officer and has several strings to pull,’ said Sandy.

‘And Speedy’s father is a general and everyone knows the magic wand a general can wave. The guy has opted for Engineers and will surely get it,’ added Zora.

‘The lucky bastards’, I mumbled mulling over my chances of drawing the favoured service.

It was a hot morning and our anxiety made us sweat profusely. Dripping with perspiration, I waited for Lady Luck to smile at me. The allotment really mattered to me since I had to prove myself to my father, who had initially been against my joining the forces.

Our excitement grew in proportion to the passing minutes. Just as the din rose to a crescendo, Colonel Joshi, who had been detailed to announce the regiments, made his entry. He swaggered in importantly since he knew that he held our dreams in his hands.

As expected, the toppers in the order of merit were allotted their choice of arms. Ronny, an exemplary performer who had opted for Paratroopers, was allotted his choice. There goes one vacancy. My heart took a dip – each time a GC was allotted Paras, my chances grew dimmer.

Each announcement was greeted with strong emotions. There were groans of disappointment or whoops of elation depending on whether the cadet had been allotted his choice.

My ears perked up as Gary’s name was announced. I was next. The chap was seated by my side and twitching excitedly in his seat. He had been allotted the arms he wanted. I held my breath and waited – it was my turn next. My heart skidded to a halt as my name was called out. With a sinking spirit I heard the announcement that followed – I had been allotted Artillery.

I had company; both Maachh and Makkhi drew Artillery. Unlike me, they were quite happy with their allotment. Porky pirouetted and leapt like a talented ballerina. He had been allotted ASC.

‘It really doesn’t matter, Pessi,’ Sandy consoled me. ‘You will make an exemplary officer wherever you go. Besides, you can always opt for Para after a while.’

He had been allotted the Armoured Corp while Zora drew Rajputana Rifles. Both of them were ecstatic. Armoured had been Sandy’s second choice and Rajputana was Zora’s second.

‘Let’s celebrate,’ suggested Porky. ‘The allotment of arms is over! Even if some of us have not got what they wanted, at least the stress is over.’

‘Not that we were stressed,’ added Maachh.

Porky’s suggestion of a celebration drew enthusiastic approval from everyone. I was the only one brooding over my allotment. Not for long, though. It was impossible to remain gloomy when everyone around me was celebrating their happiness.

Bottles were uncorked, ditties were sung, and laughter rang through the corridors that night. For once, the instructors kept away. We were allowed to indulge in merrymaking. With just a few days left for the Passing out Parade (POP), we had earned some respite.

THIRTY-FIVE



I can't imagine that we will be commissioned in just a couple of days,' Porky smiled into the glass of beer he was nursing in his hands. Of late, he had been thinking of nothing else.

'Just think! We will be saluted by the troops.' Maachh added. He looked dreamily into the distance.

We had gathered in Sandy's room for a post-dinner bash, but for some reason, our host didn't appear very enthusiastic about our company that evening. The reason was not hard to imagine. He was reading a racy thriller and wanted to finish it before the following morning, when it had to be returned to the owner.

'Look, why don't you guys go to Porky's room?' he suggested. 'I have just about thirty pages to finish. After that, I will join you.'

'Confess brother, you don't want to share the whisky with us,' sneered Maachh. 'You are hoarding it for yourself.'

We knew that the guy had managed to smuggle out a premium brand of whisky from his brother's bar. It had been kept aside to celebrate our last day at the academy.

'You are right! That's one of the reasons,' retorted Sandy, a nasty gleam in his eyes. 'Why do you expect me to play to host each time? Go find someone else to fleece.'

'Come on, Sandy,' I cajoled. 'It's just a matter of few days. After that we may not meet each other for a long time.'

'Yeah! I can bet you are going to miss us,' added Maachh, toying with Sandy's tuner. '... I don't want you to feel guilty about not sharing your bottle with us on the last few nights of our training.'

'Get lost,' Sandy smacked Maachh's hand. 'Don't fiddle with my tuner.'

'Well, have it your way,' the Bong persisted. 'It's a matter of a few days, now.'

'... and then you will be Second Lieutenant Manoj Mitra and no one will refuse

you a drink,' Porky, the loyal friend, piped up.

'True. We are almost at the finish line,' commented Maachh. Ignoring Sandy's dirty looks, he settled down on the easy chair. 'I am just waiting for the day when we will become officers.'

Porky's eyes lit up with excitement. 'I can't wait for it to happen. I have often dreamt of the day when I will be known as Lieutenant Pradip Purakayastha!'

The two rascals thumped each other's back and continued to amble along the lanes of their dreamworld.

'No more ustaads bullying us, no more instructors to fear, no more restrictions and punishments, no more difficult course-mates to put up with. It will be an end to all our miseries,' continued the Bong as he reclined on the chair, hands clasped behind his head. His face creased into a blissful smile as he stared dreamily at the fan, which was rotating lazily overhead.

'Sandy, please pour me a stiff whisky jaar', he requested, as if his life's ambition had been fulfilled.

Sandy put down the book he was reading. 'Pipe dreams! Sheer fantasy and fable! The two of you don't know anything about the army.'

'We know it better than you.'

'In that case, let me give you a rude shock,' smirked our host. 'You jokers forget that you will be at the bottom of the ladder once again when you land up in the unit. You will be just like a first termmer in the academy.'

The shocked look on Porky's face was enough to send us into peals of laughter.

'That isn't true,' he protested. 'You are trying to pull a fast one on us.'

'Have you forgotten our days at the NDA?' laughed Zora. 'We started off as mice, and by the time we reached our sixth term, we became men. It is a cycle. Here in IMA we began as mice and now we are men. Don't forget, once we join our units we will be mice again. It is the law of nature.'

'Who knows, you might turn into the ultimate man, by becoming an Army

Chief, one day,' I added my two-cents.

'Ha ha! Just imagine Maachh in his torn pajamas and slippers as the Army Chief. Look at his drooping moustache and puny physique. Does he look like the right candidate for the job? I will resign if he ever becomes the Chief. God save the Indian Army!' joked Zora.

Maachh did not respond. He was deep in thought. The mice and men logic had got him thinking. He had never imagined that he would have to face ragging after he was commissioned.

'What happens in the unit, do they rag you? What do they make you do?' Porky too seemed worried about the impending torture.

'Ragging in the unit! I have never heard of it. Is it true?' Maachh sat up and asked. This was getting interesting. He had not thought of life after IMA. It was like a new chapter of his life – rosy and glorious. He had not imagined it otherwise.

Suddenly everyone realised that they knew nothing about the unit life. We assumed that we would be in positions of power and importance once we were commissioned.

'Tell us more,' I insisted. 'You have a brother in the army so you must know the details.'

'Of course, I do and so does Zora. Am I right, brother?' he asked Zora, who was now lolling on the bed with a smug look on his face.

'Absolutely right, these idiots know nothing of what the future holds for them.'

'In a unit, there are some rules you must follow,' Sandy spoke with authority.

Maachh, whose eyes were half-closed, opened them wide as he pondered over the statement. 'And what are these rules?' he asked.

'Firstly, never part with your identity card. That is the first thing they will target. Young officers of the unit will pose as batman or dhobi and vanish with your I-card, and that will lead you into a lot of trouble.'

‘How do you know that?’ Porky asked, doubtfully. He suspected that Sandy and Zora were pulling a prank on them. ‘I have not heard of anything like that.’

‘Well, I am telling you, am I not? I know all this because I stayed with my brother during my midterm break at NDA. He was posted at Jhansi as a young officer and almost all the bachelors of the unit had a story to share. They had all suffered ragging. Not one of them was spared. None of us will be spared, I can assure you. It is a tradition, with each unit having its own method of ragging.’

He had our full attention by now. Even the most cynical among us believed his words.

‘That’s true,’ added Zora. ‘My brother has similar stories to tell.’

‘We went to meet our cousin in the neighbouring Artillery Unit,’ continued Sandy. ‘He had just joined the unit. The poor chap had a haircut much worse than the one we had at NDA. Not just that, he was made to carry a rammer and a lantern wherever he went.’

‘What is a rammer?’ Porky asked.

‘It’s a long, wooden pole with which a shell is pushed into the barrel of the artillery gun before it is fired.’

‘Why carry the lantern? Was there no electricity?’

‘There is electricity but they make you carry one just like Florence Nightingale. It is to be a part of your accessory whether you are in civvies or uniform. You have to take it with you whenever you leave your room.’

‘For how long does one have to carry these two things?’

‘You have to carry them till you are interviewed by the Commanding Officer (CO).’

‘Well, that’s alright. Carrying a rammer and a lantern for a few hours is no big deal,’ scoffed Maachh, slipping back into his easy chair. ‘After the months of ragging at NDA, mild ragging of that kind shouldn’t be a problem.’

‘Hello! It is not a matter of few hours.’

‘Why? You said that the two things have to be carried till we are interviewed by the CO.’

‘That’s true but the catch is that the CO is in no hurry to grant you an interview. It could take up to a month for the interview to happen.’

‘Oh!’

‘Wait, that’s not all,’ Zora butted into the conversation. ‘In many cases, you may be put up with the jawans in the barracks, instead of the Officers’ Mess. You literally live with them, use their toilets, eat in their langar (mess), play games with them, and follow their routine. My brother had to do all this.’

‘How can they make you live with the jawans? It is not fair. We have trained for four years to be officers,’ Porky protested indignantly.

‘Translated into days, it means 1,460 days,’ Maachh did some quick calculations on his calculator, which he carried in his pocket for just such eventualities. ‘... And that would be roughly around 35,000 hours.’ He punched some more buttons while Porky tried to absorb the information being doled out by the Bong. ‘Even if I were to discount the over 21 lakh minutes, it is a large chunk of our life. Imagine the hours of slogging! It is no sneezing matter and if we have to live with jawans in the unit, it’s just not fair.’

‘Fair or not fair, they will make you do all that. In any case, ragging is never fair.’

‘Maybe it happens in the artillery, but not in the ASC. I will be in the ASC.’

‘Don’t be stupid. It happens in all the services. Maybe in the ASC, they may give you just fodder and leftovers to eat for a few weeks.’ Sandy quickly dispelled the poor chap’s assumptions.

‘Instead of the best cuts of meat you are dreaming about,’ Zora punctured Porky’s balloon.

The clown looked shattered. He couldn’t imagine being deprived of the meat or surviving on fodder.

‘I will complain to the CO.’ The determined angle of his chin made me chuckle.

Here was a guy who would do anything for meat.

‘All this has the CO’s blessings, as they say,’ laughed Zora. ‘In a way it is good, I must admit. It makes you learn things pretty fast. Besides, it lasts for a month, at max.’

‘All the lard on your waist, gathered by gorging on academy food, will disappear in no time.’

‘What is one month compared to four years?’ the Bong declared, philosophically. ‘It hardly matters. Tell me, how long does it take to be a man again, instead of a mouse?’

‘You have to graduate. You can’t become a man overnight. It is a long journey from being a mouse to becoming a man. You become a cat and then a dog and so on. I think the promising ones can become men pretty fast. Look at my brother, he has put in just five years of service, and he is a mature man already, hai na?’

We nodded our heads silently. Mandy was an authoritative figure, no doubt there.

‘Not everyone can become an instructor at the IMA,’ Porky sighed. ‘He is a lucky guy.’

‘One doesn’t become an instructor at IMA by luck or fluke. You have to deserve the post.’

‘What about the rest of us? When do we stop getting ragged?’

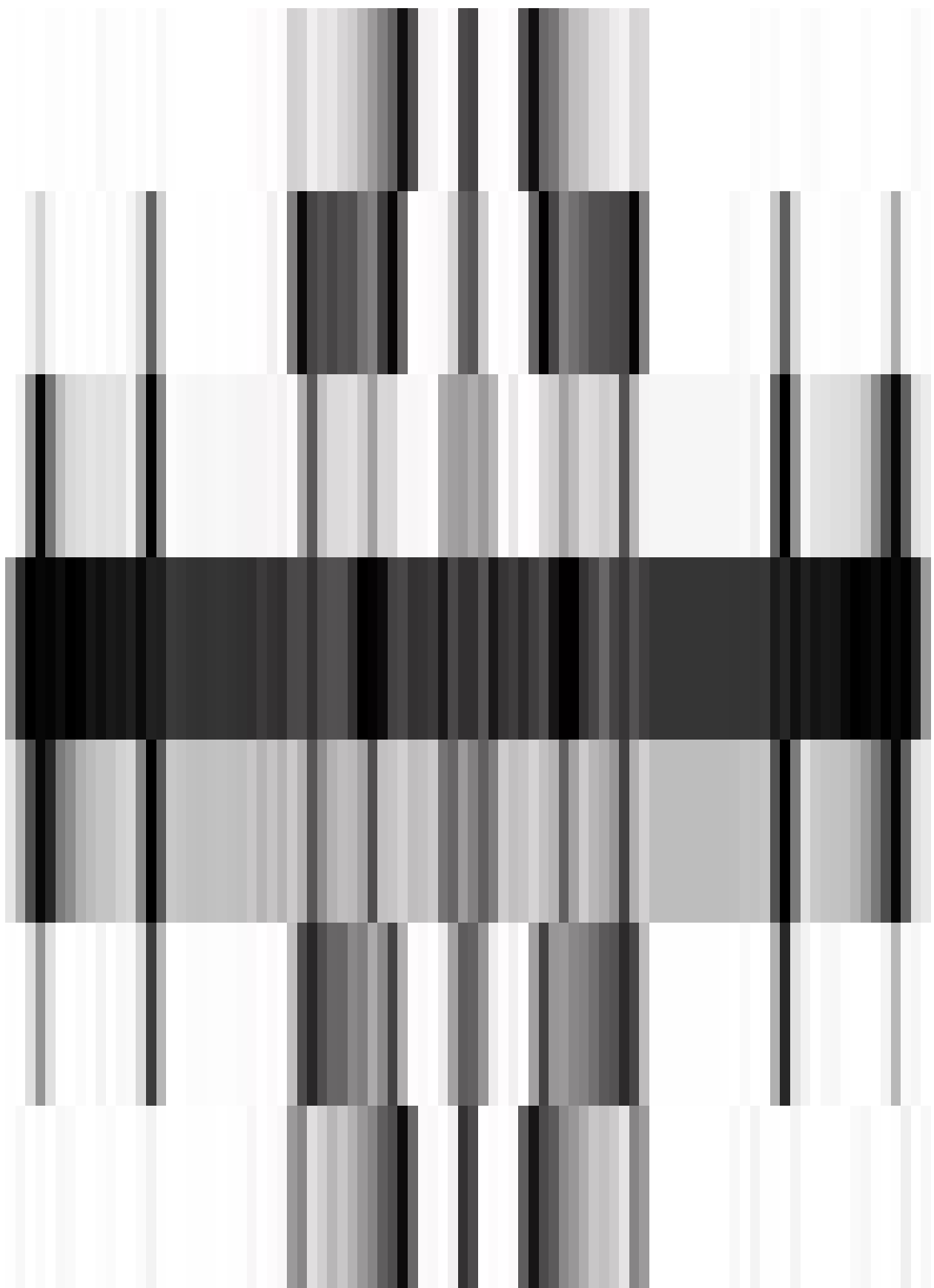
‘Whenever the next set of youngsters join the unit, the focus shifts and you are spared from the ragging. In fact, you become the tormenter.’

Maachh relaxed. It’s not that bad after all. One month of ragging – that’s nothing, he consoled himself. He could bear it. Once more, he reclined on the chair, hands clasped behind his head. His eyes strayed toward the fan, and he was lost to the world. His face creased into a blissful smile.

It was past midnight when we left for our rooms. Sandy picked up the book and started reading again. He did not want to disturb Maachh, who had fallen asleep on his chair, and let him be. The guy slept with the smile of an Army Chief on

his face, and Sandy did not have the heart to wipe it off.

THIRTY-SIX



The countdown to D-Day had begun. The air crackled with energy as the POP rehearsals began in earnest. It was a show that mattered to each of us and everyone was putting their best foot forward.

With just a couple of days left for the big day, there were fervent preparations for the Passing out Parade (POP). It was a matter of honour to participate in the parade, especially for the cadets whose parents were attending the POP. My parents would not be attending the parade. Two days before the POP, my mother had been hospitalised with severe abdominal pain, which was diagnosed as appendicitis and required immediate surgery. Father refused to budge from her side and so they had to cancel their ticket. I wished Nandini could be there to watch me march, but that was not to be. I had no one to impress.

Since it was impossible for everyone to be included in the parade, those who were not good in the drill were dropped from it.

Makkhi was going around with a long face. He hadn't been selected to participate in the parade. 'It will be a disgrace when my parents find their son missing from the parade. The only reason they are coming all the way to Dehradun is so they can watch me marching,' he confided glumly.

Since my parents were not attending the POP, it didn't matter whether I participated or not. I had a plan up my sleeves, one that pleased Makkhi no end. When he heard of it, his flagging spirits soared.

With just three days to go before the POP, no one was willing to hit the sack. Chatting away into the night, the cadets were a boisterous lot. No one knew if we would meet again. For once, neither the ustaads nor the instructors stopped us from breaking a few rules.

It was the last night before the POP. Loud music and laughter spilled out from the barracks. Groups of GCs strolled around the campus, arms linked, singing at the top of their lungs. Everyone wanted to squeeze out the maximum fun from the few remaining hours.

We gathered in Porky's room for one last bash. Alcohol flowed freely along with bawdy jokes. We were trying not to get too drunk for the parade the next morning. No one had forgotten the case of Inder Singh, alias Inky, who was

relegated in the previous term for missing the parade. The poor sod had one too many the night before the POP, and got knocked out. Inky was caught snoring in his room while the parade was on.

‘Have a drink,’ Maachh offered. He was hopping around with a glass of Triple X Rum, the regulation drink in the army. We eyed him warily. The guy looked soaked to the gills and we didn’t want to encourage him.

I took a sip and passed the glass to Sandy, who took a tentative mouthful and passed it back to the Bong.

‘Don’t be a sissy, yaar,’ shouted Maachh who had imbibed quite a bit of the rum. He then proceeded to force some of the liquor down Porky’s throat, who was staring cross-eyed at the fan whirring above his head.

‘At this rate, he is bound to be flat by the time we finish,’ I whispered to Sandy. ‘We must take care of him.’

‘You better take care of yourself,’ shouted the Fish who had heard snatches of our conversation. ‘I can take care of myself.’

He got up from the bed, where he had fallen in a stupor, and took a few steps before he wobbled and fell flat on his face. It was clear that the Bong was in no state to take part in the POP the next morning.

‘We’ll have to do something. We can’t allow the bugger to get relegated,’ Sandy looked worried.

None of us wanted a course-mate to be relegated. Zora took the lead.

‘Let’s give him the get-well treatment,’ he suggested. ‘That’s the only way we can ensure he wakes up on time for the parade.’

The three of us carried him to his room and rolled up our sleeves. Maachh was taken to the bathroom and made to sit on the floor by the side of the commode with his head bent over it. Then, Sandy administered what is popularly known as the get-well treatment.

Taking Maachh’s toothbrush Sandy shoved it down his throat. Out came the contents of his belly along with a cloud of odour. The Bong was still groggy. He

flipped over and lay on the floor like a beached whale.

‘Shit man...’ swore Porky. ‘He is too far gone for the treatment to work.’

Sandy had not yet finished. He took a jug of water and poured it down the Fish’s throat. In went the toothbrush again. A few strokes down his throat and there was another gush of muck and stink. The stench spread around the room. Screwing up my face, I poured another jug of cold water on Maachh’s head.

Shaking himself like a wet cat, he threw me a baleful look and muttered: ‘Wassh that nesheshary?’

‘Of course it was. One more word from you and I’ll push your face into the commode and pull the flush,’ I scolded.

‘One more drink?’ Sandy’s voice dripped sarcasm. ‘I have another bottle, just in case you want some more.’

‘Don’t rub it in, buddy,’ Maachh was in a saner mood after the treatment. ‘I had one too many but I don’t think that dousing me in cold water was required.’

‘Listen to the joker! He thinks we should not have poured cold water over his head. We should have allowed him to get relegated,’ Zora muttered scornfully.

‘I am sorry, guys,’ the Bong apologized. ‘Thank you. I am feeling better already.’

He washed his face and gargled vigorously.

Five minutes later bathed and dressed, he emerged from his room, none the worse for the experience.

‘No offence meant, buddy. You can pour another jug of water on me.’ His face lit up with a broad smile, he winked at me.

‘You are a disgrace,’ was all I could say.

‘Let’s go for a walk. This might be our last night together,’ Porky suggested.

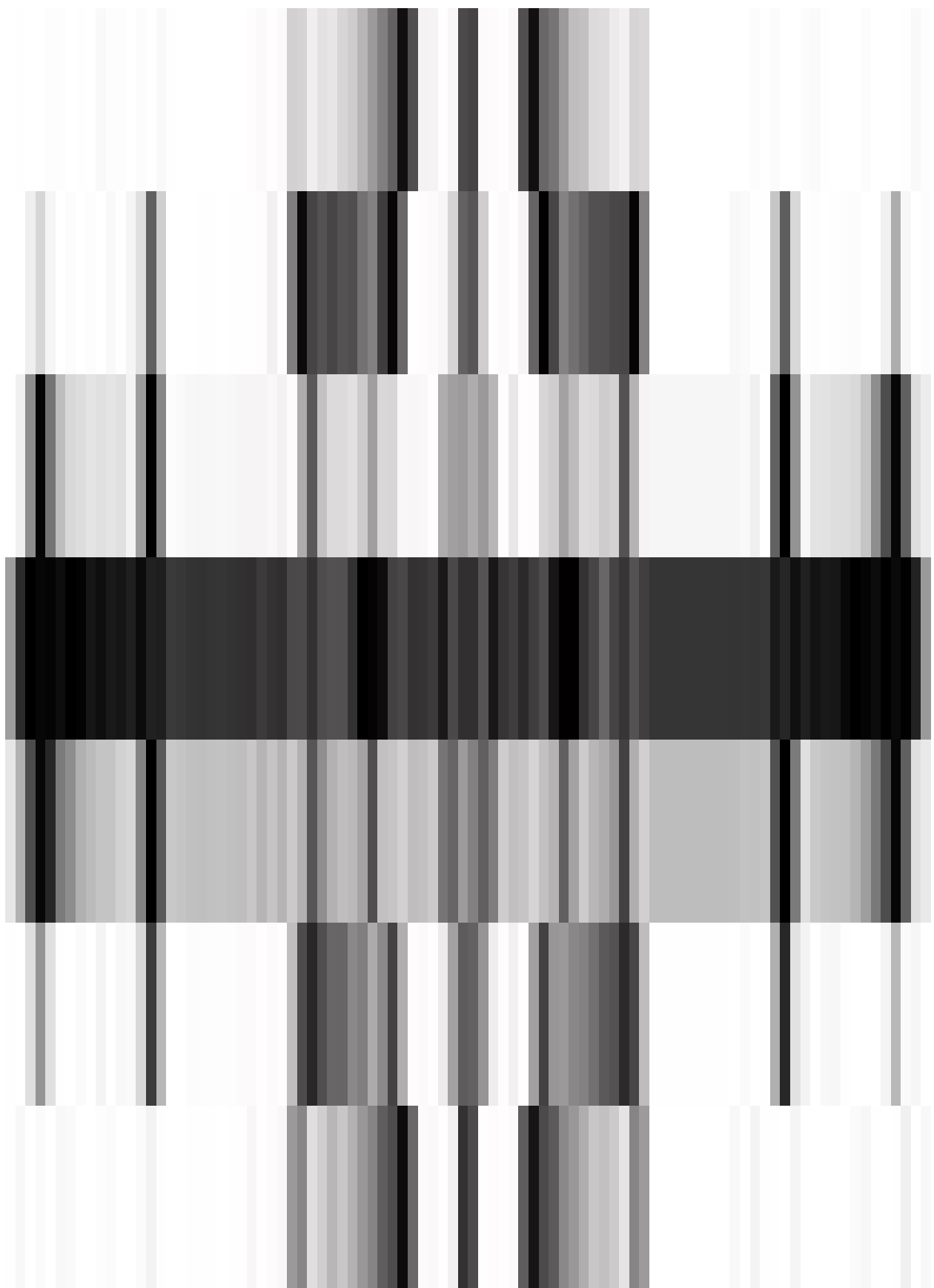
And that’s what all five of us did; arms linked, we walked around the campus. There was a full moon. The entire city was asleep but none of us wanted to hit

the sack. We laughed, sang, danced, and shared anecdotes.

The memorable night ended on a sombre note as we realized it was the last time we would be creating such a ruckus. Soon we would go our own ways; parted from each other.

Tomorrow we would be officers.

THIRTY-SEVEN



When we woke up at the crack of dawn the next day, my stomach was a pit of butterflies. Today would be the culmination of our training. This was the day we had been waiting for. We had endured endless hours of torture for the stars on our shoulders.

I jumped out of bed, ready to embrace the day and all the good things that would come with it. Tugged smartly, I looked around my room sorrowfully. The desk where I had spent innumerable hours, slogging over lessons, the bed I had spent many a night in dreaming of a golden career, the room where we had celebrated success and mourned failures. It held countless memories – good and bad. In a short while, I would leave it forever. Another young man would occupy it after I left the academy, dreaming the same dreams.

The parade was scheduled to begin at 9.00 AM, right after the Army Chief arrived. I had struck a deal with Makkhi. As per the plan, I was going to report sick at the last moment so the ustaad would have no choice but to include Makkhi in the final parade.

Minutes before the GCs gathered for collection of weapons, I feigned a severe cramp in my stomach and begged to be excused. The ustaad, taken back at the last minute emergency, looked around for a substitute. Makkhi, who was ready and waiting, dressed in his spotless uniform, stepped forward to volunteer as replacement. After throwing a cursory look at him, the ustaad nodded his head and he stepped into the line of GCs making their way to the armoury to collect their rifles for the parade.

I stepped back, a satisfied look on my face. The plan had worked.

It was the same parade ground, the same cadets, the same ustaads, the same rifles, but the day was special. Today, no one faltered, no one missed a move. Not a single cadet was out of step as they marched out with their weapons. There was an expression of determination on each face – a determination to perform to the best of ability.

As the GCs marched onto the ground to the beating of the drums, there was a roar of appreciation and applause from the crowd. The GCs marched smartly and stood facing the proud parents in the pavilion, their posture perfect and their heads held high.

It was a great moment for Makkhi as he took position, his eyes hunting for his parents among the crowd of spectators. Seated amongst the other guests, his parents watched him with pride. His mother wiped away the tears that streamed down her cheeks at the sight of her son, marching smartly. Cameras flashed and the moment was captured for posterity and I knew I had done the right thing by switching places with him.

Seated amongst the spectators, I witnessed the parade. Even from that distance, I could identify all my course-mates. Makkhi looked diminutive at five feet six with Joe, Dawson, Sandy and Ranbir towering above him, but his bearing was perfect. He would make a fine officer, I thought. With all these officers in the army, the safety and honour of our country was indeed in safe hands. My heart swelled with pride as I blinked back a stray tear threatening to spill over.

First came the Deputy Commandant of the academy followed by the Commandant, imposing in their regalia. Minutes later the Chief of Army Staff was driven up to the ground. An awed silence covered the ground as the spectators watched the ceremony.

The Chief went around the parade ground in an open jeep inspecting the cadets, after which the parade began. The sound of hundreds of marching heels hit the ground like an avalanche. The drum rolled, the band struck up, and a high-pitched voice issued a command. The synchronized swing of arms and the sound of thudding feet reverberated. There were tears in many eyes as they watched the young cadets marching spectacularly. There is something inexplicably inspiring about a march-past that stirs up patriotic juices in the audience. At that moment, I can vouch, each person in the audience felt proud to be a part of India.

After the parade, the Chief gave away the Sword of Honour to the best all-round cadet. As expected, GC Tarun Chatterjee was the man of the moment. Despite all our prayers, Joe had to be content with the Silver Medal.

After the Chief's inspiring address, we were ready to take on any kind of challenge. Had he asked us to march to the border and take on the enemy, we would have done that without hesitation.

It was now time to move towards the Antim Pag (final step) in a slow march. This was a significant moment for all the cadets; the grand finale to their arduous training.

Solemnly, the cadets took the 'final step', and stepped through the portals into the hallowed bosom of Chetwode Hall.

With the faces of the country's war heroes adorning its walls, Chetwode Hall wore a solemn look. Each year, hundreds of cadets passed through this hall, carrying dreams in their hearts and ambitions in their pockets. Passing out of the academy, they went forth to their units to face the challenges of their job. Some of us would lay down our lives in supreme sacrifice for the nation, others would go on to face the extreme risks and hardships the job involved. One thing was for sure; no one would shy away from the immense responsibility laid on their shoulders.

There was a tremor in my heart as I thought of the future. Our days of irresponsible frolicking were over. Soon, we would be officers on whose shoulders would rest the defence of the nation.

The most spectacular event after the oath ceremony was the unveiling of the brass stars we wore on our shoulders. It was a moment of achievement and pride for the cadets as well as the parents.

'Twinkle, twinkle little stars,' I sang under my breath as I watched the parents milling around their sons, removing the shoulder flaps to reveal the stars. Happy families posed for pictures which would be treasured in albums. Mothers hugged their sons. In return, the cadets touched the feet of their fathers and were blessed with good luck.

A large number of press reporters and photographers floated around the grounds capturing the highlights. The tall cadets with stately bearing and impressive moustaches were in high demand because they made for a good picture. Joe, Sandy, and Randy with their stature, rippling muscles, and twirling moustaches were the targets of the press chaps as though the country's fate rested in their fists. Aware that their pictures would adorn the front pages of newspapers, the chaps posed cheerfully for the cameramen. With the unveiling of the stars on their uniforms, the cadets turned into officers.

Dejected and deflated, I stood watching the others with envy. There was no one to remove my shoulder flaps or to rejoice in my success. No one blessed or kissed me affectionately; no one hugged me nor looked at me. I felt like an orphan.

‘Why the hell are you standing alone?’ shouted Sandy dragging me toward his mother. ‘His parents are not here,’ he explained.

‘Come here, beta,’ her face lit up with affection. Mothers have an uncanny ability to read between the lines. Even though I was braving a smile, she could see the sadness behind it. ‘Allow me the privilege of removing your shoulder flaps.’

Touched, I felt my eyes moisten once again. She removed my shoulder flaps and revealed the twinkling stars. Next moment, she kissed my forehead and murmured. ‘May you bring glory to the nation.’

This time, the tears couldn’t be dammed.

The universe, moved by my plight, proved that one is never alone. There is always someone to hold your hand. At crucial moments when you feel lonely and abandoned, support will come from unexpected quarters. There is always light at the end of the tunnel.

Turning, I spotted the drill ustad who had, for one long year, been my mentor. I was one of his favourite cadets. He was waiting to congratulate me. The equation had reversed. I was now an officer.

He saluted me and I returned the salute smartly.

‘Sir, you have been a very good instructor, I shall never forget you.’ I clasped his hands warmly.

‘And you, sir, have been my best student. I am proud of you.’

That was all I needed to perk me up. I forgot all about the absence of my parents. I forgot about my miseries. The love and affection of Sandy’s mother and the ustad washed away the gloom, and I joined the others in rejoicing the event.

Jubilant cadets tossed their caps amidst shouts and cheering, and soon there were hundreds of caps up in the air. The photographs of cap-tossing would cover the front pages in the next day’s newspapers.

Maachh and Porky vied with each other for a higher throw while Sandy smiled at their antics. A photographer hovering in the vicinity shot pictures of the two

jokers as they pranced around.

Groups of cadets spread on the ground sang songs, danced and cheered each other, their parents beaming in the background.

I noticed Benny kneeling to kiss the ground. There had been no one to remove his shoulder flaps nor bless him. He had no one; he was an orphan. At that moment, I realised I was more fortunate than most.

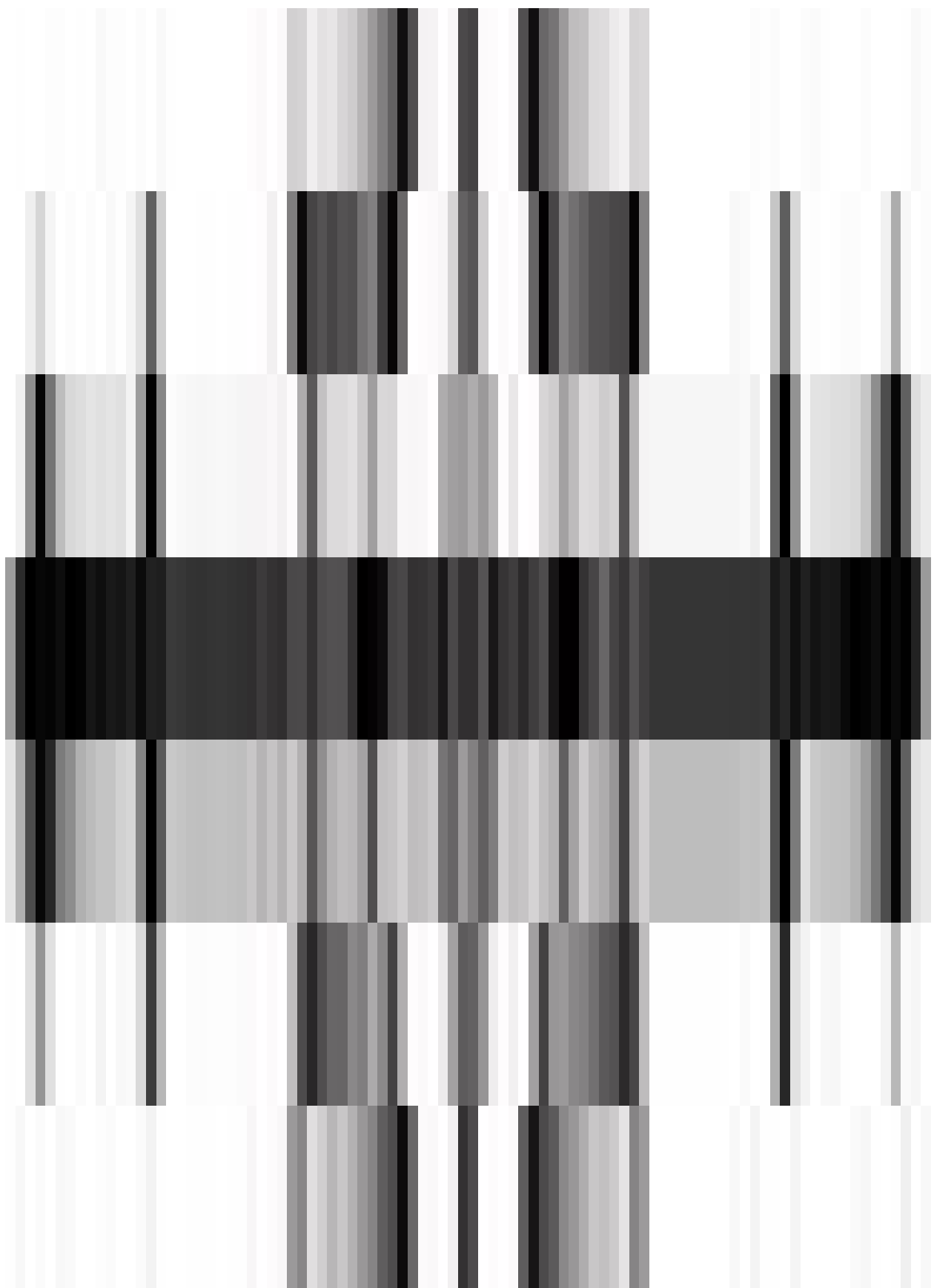
The act was noticed by a photographer from the press.

‘Could you do that again?’ the guy requested Benny. ‘I want to shoot a picture of you kissing the ground.’

It would have made an award-winning photograph; a uniformed cadet with a tearful face kissing Mother Earth, but Benny refused to oblige. He glared at the chap and walked away. His emotions were clearly not for sale. But those who were a witness to Benny’s act will never forget the scene.

Touched, I wiped a tear surreptitiously as I made my way back to my room one last time.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS



This book would not have seen the light of the day without the help of many people who shared their experiences with me. It would have been impossible for me to pen this book without the help of my husband, Ajoy. An alumnus of both NDA and IMA, he provided me with insight into cadet life and training at both the academies.

Although it is not possible to name each and every person who helped me carry the story forward, I am indebted to each of them for opening up their hearts to me.

The journey between the manuscript phase to the final print is a long one. It requires a patient and competent editorial team to take a book to the finishing line. I have been fortunate to find Rayman Gill-Rai who, with her suggestions and support helped me complete that journey. I am indebted to the editorial team at Roli Books, Neelam Narula and Dishina Uttamchandani, who worked relentlessly with me to breathe life into the book. My deepest gratitude to Sneha Pamneja, who designed the attractive book cover and to the entire marketing team who helped in taking the finished product to the bookshelves.

Praise for *BOOTS BELTS BERETS: Pranks, parades and love at the NDA*

‘This is a charming coming-of-age tale in a unique setting.’

Business World

‘An enthralling narrative of ordinary young men transcending their innate DNA and occasional episodes of human pettiness to emerge progressively into erudite, physically toughened, morally upright young leaders...’

Hindustan Times

‘Tanushree Podder manages to bring out the youthfulness and adventure of life in the NDA. She also does a splendid job in displaying the humaneness of the cadets... The book is a must read for all.’

Deccan Herald



The Indian Military Academy – a crucible of sorts where young boys are transformed into officers of merit through discipline, hard work, and a rigorous regime. A place where life is all about battalions and companies, and where the tactics of warfare are taught.

However, in Tanushree Podder’s no-holds-barred look into Academy life – pranks and girls are as important to life as are morning drills and sand model exercises. A fitting, but entirely independent, sequel to *Boots Belts Berets*, her celebrated book about life at the National Defence Academy;

On the Double follows the continuing adventures of Pessi, Maachh, Porky, Sandy, and Zora as they navigate the obstacle course that is the IMA. Their love of fun breathes life into their time together, and their friendship and dare-devilry guarantees sleepless nights for their Company Commander. A charming tale of friendship and coming-of-age, where young boys with lofty dreams stand at the cusp of change, ready to take on their future as sentinels of the nation.