

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.