

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.

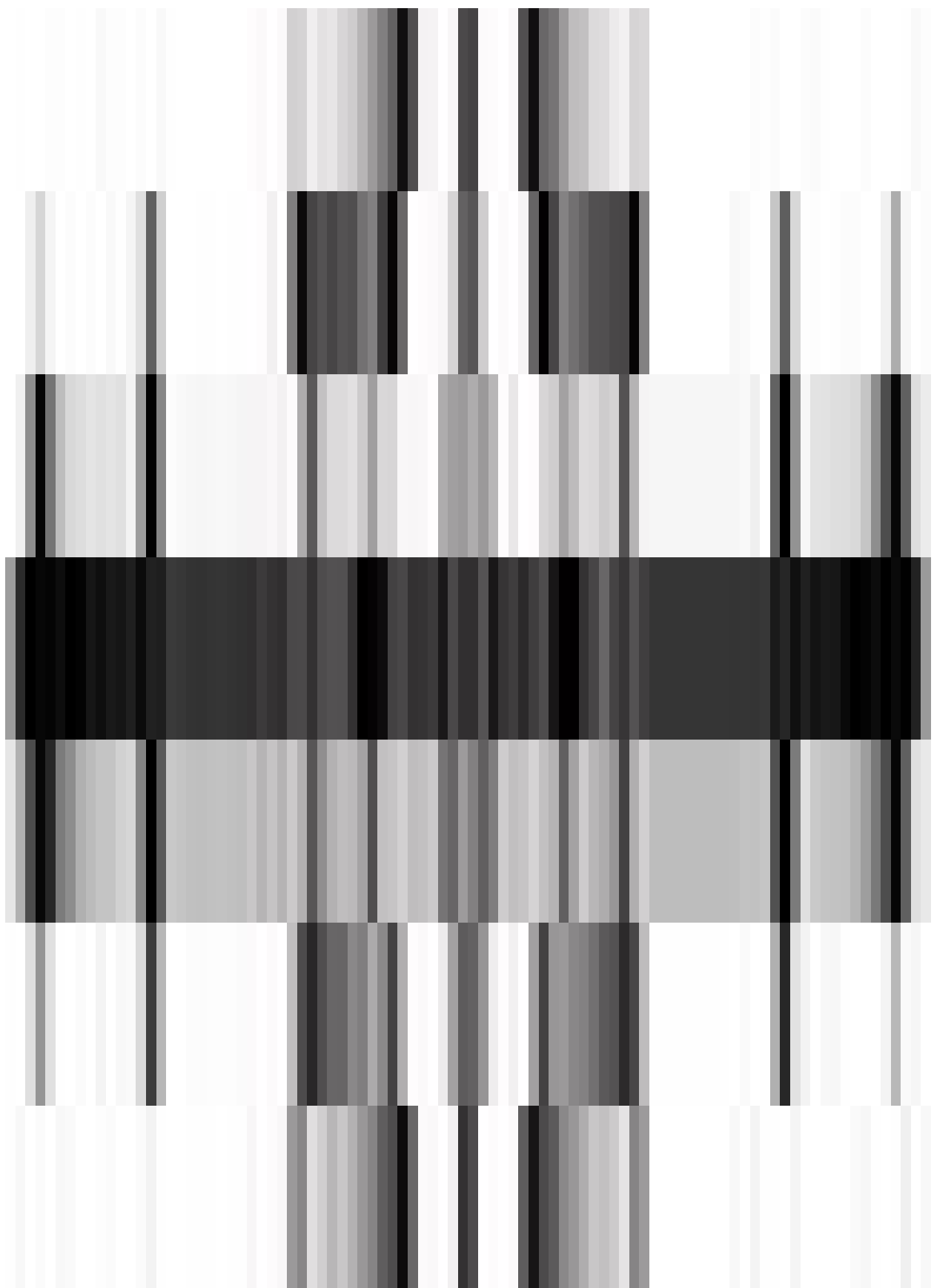
And that’s what all five of us did; arms linked, we walked around the campus. There was a full moon. The entire city was asleep but none of us wanted to hit

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.