

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.

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