

**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.