

## 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 bhabhi 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 bhabhi, 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!