

ELEVEN



We needed the silliest of excuses to have a good time. This time around, the fact that I had topped a surprise test on 'Defence', an operation of war, was touted as the reason for a celebration. That the result came on Saturday made it easier to party.

For once, the treat was on me.

'Look, I have no money to waste...' I tried to wriggle out, but my mates were not in the mood to oblige. For once, even Sandy and Zora joined forces with Porky and Maachh.

'Don't worry, dear chap,' assured Maachh. 'I have a nice plan whereby we can have fun without spending much money.'

'What exactly do you plan to do?' I probed. His plans never failed to worry me.

'We will have a gol gappa party.'

'Gol gappa?' Porky's face registered disappointment. Clearly, he was expecting an exotic meal.

'Yes; paani-puri also known as gol gappa.'

'But...'

'Let's be fair. It is the end of the month and Pessi's wallet is not too healthy.'

Satisfied at his modest demand, I nodded my head gratefully.

'All you have to do is to arrange for the paani. I will arrange the puris,' asserted Maachh.

'Certainly,' I agreed, surprised at his simple demand.

'Gentleman's promise,' insisted the Bong.

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'The paani in this case is beer, by the way,' Maachh dropped the bomb. Smiling

wickedly, he declared – ‘We are going to have a beer-puri party.’

To cut to the chase, I was ordered to procure half a dozen bottles of beer while Maachh returned with a bag full of puris from one of the local gol gappa wala.

Sunday evening saw us get together in my cabin, dunking the puris in beer. Half a dozen puris later, all of us were in high spirits. While Zora and Sandy had the good sense to stop at that number, Maachh and Porky continued the revelry.

‘Pessi, here is a challenge,’ Maachh slobbered as he stuffed yet another puri into his mouth. ‘If you can beat me by consuming more puri, I pay for the beer.’

The drain on my wallet had been substantial, and I was eager to recover the expenses on beer. By then, I was also feeling a tad reckless due to the alcohol. Cheered on by the rest of my pals, I accepted the challenge.

It wasn’t an easy wager. Stuffed to the gills, I gave up after ten puris. The Bong won hands down with a record of thirteen beer- filled puris, with Porky at his heels. All I could manage was the third position.

‘Let’s take a trip to town,’ suggested Porky. Luckily, there were no takers for his idea. We were too drunk to scale the walls and go to town.

The party wound up soon after.

Monday morning, like for everyone in the world, is the worst day of the week for the GCs. After the leisurely Sunday, the first day of the week drew groans and curses from all of us. Gluttony has its pitfalls, so say the wise. They also say that a foolish friend is worse than a clever enemy.

I was learning it the hard way. The beer-puris had not gone well with my innards. Three visits to the toilet before six in the morning did nothing to ease the discomfort in my belly. By seven, the cadets had left for their classes and the barracks were deserted, but I was doubled over with stomach cramps.

Deciding to report sick, I mounted the bicycle and began pedalling hurriedly towards the MI Room. Barely did I cover twenty yards when the bumpy road created a fresh wave of pressure on my intestines, forcing me to return to base.

Luck had deserted me that morning. A wily ustaad, on his prowl for errant

cadets, spotted the bike parked outside the toilet door. A fiendish smile graced the ustaad's face. He loved nothing better than laying his hands on a malingerer. As per the drill, he locked the bike and slipped the keys into his pocket.

Hearing the sound of someone tampering with the bike, I hollered from the toilet – 'Who is there? Meri bike ko haath mat lagana, don't you dare touch my bike...'

'Nahin to kya? Come out, I will show you who I am,' the Ustaad shouted.

My goose was cooked, I realized. Pulling up my trousers, I peeped out to ascertain that it was indeed the Ustaad. There was no escape.

'Oh, it is you.' The ustaad was surprised to see me. I was known for my exemplary record among the instructors.

'Theek hai, go quickly to your class,' he warned, handing over the bike keys. Relieved at being let off easily, I pedalled feverishly towards the classes. Unfortunately, the bumpy road took its toll again and by the time I reached the building, my belly was once again lodging furious complaints.

There was nothing else to do but run across the corridor and head for the toilet. Five minutes later, I stood at the door of the class, seeking the instructor's permission to enter. The class was about to end, and having finished the portion for the day, Major Murthy was doling out last minute instructions.

The Major had spotted me running past the classroom minutes ago. 'You are too early for the next class,' he commented sarcastically. 'By the way, where are you coming from?'

It was an embarrassing question. 'Sir, in my hurry, I missed the class room and went past.' I tried to ignore the broad smiles around the room.

'Don't you have a time table?' persisted the instructor.

'I do, sir.'

'Well, show it to me.' Major Murthy walked up to me.

Shuffling through the satchel desperately for the time table, I found myself

holding one of Maachh's prized porn magazines. Drunk on the beer-puris, we had been leafing through them the previous evening and a couple of them had found their way into my satchel.

'What is that?' The instructor was staring at the magazine in my hand. The cadets in the classroom were sniggering.

'My notebook, Sir,' I replied, trying to cover up the offending magazine that was quickly snatched from my hands.

'I don't think it is a notebook, unless you are in the habit of covering your notebooks with pictures of nude women.'

At that moment, the bell rang, marking the end of the class. Fingering the porn magazine, the instructor warned, 'First, you run past the class and make an entry at the end of the hour, and then you are found with offensive magazines instead of notebooks in your satchel. I will make sure that your Company Commander hears of this.'

Ignoring my rumbling stomach, I doubled up to CoCo's office, and praying fervently, I peeped inside. My eyes popped at the sight of CoCo flipping through the same magazine that had been confiscated by Major Murthy. There is truth in the saying – 'Boys will be boys, age notwithstanding'.

I waited a few breathless minutes till the man had drawn a long sigh and placed the magazines inside his drawer. Then, clearing my throat, I asked for permission to enter the room.

'GC Nikhil, I have a serious complaint against you,' began CoCo. 'It comes as a shock for me. You have an impeccable record and I don't understand what has come over you. I guess it is the company you keep...' He paused and stared at me.

There was nothing to do but hang my head in shame and hear him out. How does one explain that X-rated magazines are a part of growing up? Or that the GCs, like the other young men, have normal urges and instincts.

'Why were you late for the class? And why are you carrying porn magazines in your satchel?' CoCo asked.

While it was a known fact that most cadets had a cache of such magazines, no one dared to carry them to class.

‘I am sorry, Sir.’

‘I don’t understand...’

‘Sir, something I ate last night disagreed with me. I have to report sick, Sir.’

Perhaps the pitiable look on my face, or the probability of his office getting soiled, prompted CoCo to dismiss me without further delay.

‘Get lost. Go and report to the MI Room immediately,’ shouted CoCo.

‘Remember, one more complaint and I will not let you off the hook.’

The next class had already begun. Grateful at being let off with a warning, I scooted towards the MI Room without a second’s delay.

It was only later that it occurred to me that CoCo had not returned the magazine. I chuckled at the thought of Mrs. CoCo catching him red-handed with the X-rated glossy. He would certainly fare worse than I did.