

SIX



Just two weeks old in the academy, Maachh's list of enemies was growing. The two DEs – Joe and Gary – had been allotted premium slots in his hate list. Joe, because he was better than most of us, and Gary because of his politically incorrect views about the army.

The only DE who managed to dig deep inroads into the Bong's heart was Noble Thamburaj from God's Own Country; a docile guy with a dimpled smile. A genial gent, the chap was as noble as his name. Generosity was natural to him. Be it sharing his shaving gel or his guitar, he was willing to lend everything to everyone. His room was like a tiny store, stocked up on things most needed by the cadets.

What vanquished Maachh was the generous supply of banana chips that came from Kerala in a steady supply. Thambi, as he was called, was the heir-in-waiting to a small chips shop started by his grandfather, and now owned by his father. The Thamburaj family fortunes grew as the crisp chips travelled all the way from Idukki to Dubai to grace the plates of the expats in the Gulf countries. Why he had decided to join the army was a complex question that baffled all of us at the academy.

It wasn't long before we became addicted to the chips. Come tea time, and we were to be found with big bowls of the delicious stuff before us. The number of addicts grew steadily, with Noble Thamburaj presiding over his brood.

'The only decent guy amongst the DEs is Thambi,' Maachh stamped his approval. 'The rest are not worth cultivating.'

'He should have been in business, what is he doing at the academy?' commented Sandy, who hated all things oily and 'coconut-ty'. The coconut oil used to fry the chips turned him off. 'Besides, why can't his father peddle good old potato chips fried in regular oil?'

'Just because you can't eat the banana chips doesn't mean that Thambi's father should switch his products to please you,' retorted the loyal Maachh. Won over by the crisps, the Bong was determined to defend Thambi.

One evening, Maachh walked into my room and began venting his spleen.

‘That guy on the other side of your room is a joker. He thinks he is Dharmendra, pumping steel right through the morning outside his room.’

‘What’s wrong with that?’ I asked. ‘He is not harming anyone. Besides, where should he work out, if not in front of his room?’

Frankly speaking, I had no intention of getting involved in this Maachh vs. Joe battle. With our lives careening crazily in the highest gear, it was important to keep all roadblocks at bay. The slightest bump could have us skidding uncontrollably. At the moment, Maachh was the biggest speed breaker and had to be avoided at any cost. His mad ideas could cost me a term.

‘What I mean is that he should exercise silently, without drawing attention to himself. Also, should he not wear a vest, and not snort like a bull? Come to think of it, the guy snorts all the more when he sees me.’

‘Just leave him alone,’ I gritted my teeth to get the message across. ‘I don’t see what his snorting or wearing a vest has got to do with you?’

‘That bloody DE thinks he is one up on the guys from NDA. You don’t understand; he is bent upon humiliating us.’

Maachh could be very exasperating at times, his logic as twisted as a cork screw.

Drawing a deep breath, I tried to reason. ‘Look, it’s time you grew up. This is the IMA, not NDA. And we are GCs, with the G standing for GENTLEMAN so behave like one,’ I counselled.

My response angered Maachh. He was not likely to give up. ‘Go ahead and support him.’ He jabbed a finger in the air and crossed his eyes comically. ‘You will never grow up either, dear Pessi.’

Pessi (short for pessimist), was a moniker I had earned at the NDA because of my cautious nature. Maachh and his group of reckless monkeys had coined that name for me.

That evening, we spotted an angry Maachh snorting as he marched up and down in the verandah, past our rooms, trying to imitate Joe while the Goan continued with his workout. Maachh’s puny efforts at needling Joe were nothing but hilarious and it failed to provide him with the desired result. The hefty cadet

knew that the Bong was trying to provoke him, but he was in no mood to oblige.

He finished his exercise and went back to his room without any sign of irritation. There is nothing more maddening than being snubbed, and an agitated Maachh was determined to further needle his foe. Stepping into Joe's room, he snorted loudly, twice, and drew back quickly. Even that had no effect on Joe.

'Please do not disturb me,' was all that the Goan said.

Knowing Maachh, I was certain that he would not give up.

It was the peak of summer and the nights were hot and unbearable. Not a leaf stirred on the trees around the barrack. Most of the cadets were forced to sleep with their windows open to catch any stray gust of breeze. With a day that began at the crack of dawn, and a hard regimen that drained us of words and vigour, we needed all the sleep we could get.

Our alarms were set for 5 am, and there was a virtual stampede in the morning as we rushed about our routine. Anyone who woke up even a couple of minutes late had to pay a heavy price for tardiness. A missed breakfast was their reward. It was worse for the jangoos (juniors) who got up an hour earlier and ran through their ablutions to make the bathrooms available to us. We started the day on the double.

It was almost midnight, and loud snores resounded as the cadets rested their weary bodies after a hard day. Even an earthquake couldn't have stirred us from our blissful sleep.

There was, however, one cadet who kept himself awake for he was on a mission of his own. Satisfied that everyone was fast asleep, Maachh slipped into Joe's room through the open window. For a few minutes, he stood watching Joe as he slept soundly. Then, smiling devilishly, the wily Fish picked up the table clock and advanced the time by three hours before slinking back to his room.

Maachh knew that a storm would break at 2 am, so he bolted his doors and windows from inside and went to sleep, happy at the thought that he had accomplished his mission. Joe was up at two instead of five in the morning. Rubbing sleep from his eyes, he dressed and emerged from his room for the morning parade without a clue about the time. When he walked out, he found everyone snoring away peacefully. Not a leaf stirred. Not a soul could be spotted

on the grounds.

Joe headed straight for Maachh's room and a storm struck the poor Fish. The entire barrack was awakened by the loud bangs that rained on my neighbour's doors. By the time I emerged from my room, a couple of GCs were trying to pull Joe away from Maachh's door. He was fretting and frothing at the mouth. He knew it was the irrepressible Bong who had played the mischief.

This was the only instance I saw him lose his shirt in the year-long training at the academy.

Thank god for the sturdy doors. Had Joe been able to break it down, it would have been the end of the Bong that night. This time it was not just Joe who wanted Maachh's pound of flesh, but the entire lot of cadets staying in the Meiktila barracks also wanted a tiny bit of his soul. Being woken up at an unearthly hour after an exhausting day was unpardonable. For once, wisdom dawned on the Bong. Sensing the public mood, Maachh refused to emerge from his room.