

## Of Cake & Wine

-----Cmde G Prakash 1064/81

Sundays in our Sainik School were days of true fun.

After breakfast, cadets would throng the games store, clamouring for cricket sets, hockey sticks, volleyballs, basketballs and footballs. The vast grounds would in no time be full of games and fun.

Life after lunch was the same and so was life after tea. The last rays of the setting sun would finally find us back in our dormitories, exhausted yet looking for more fun.

But life before breakfast was slightly different. After early morning tea, there was the roll call. After this, all Christian students would bathe, adorn whites and troop off in neat files to the small church just outside the campus. The rest of us would be issued with cleaning and grass cutting material and we would be deployed for cleaning our dormitories and their surroundings, an activity that was euphemistically called Gardening.

The most coveted activity used to be grass cutting, with the help of a sword. The sword was a double-edged strip of pliant iron two inches thick, almost three-feet long, fitted out with a wooden handle. The grass in our school seemed to be of a special sadomasochistic strain. They enjoyed growing to great heights in just a week, and then getting chopping off.

And how we would get into action. We would imagine the grass to be our enemy, which it really was, and go swish, swish, hacking it by square yards in each stroke. At the end of it all, we would run back into the house for a bath, eager to rush for breakfast. On most days, water would have run out. We would scavenge water from unmentionable sources, fake a bath, change into whites and rush for breakfast, only to find the angels who had trooped off in whites in the morning savouring their breakfast in style. To top it all, they would

brag about the cake and wine they were served at the church.

This soon had us petitioning Mr Prem C Nair, our housemaster, for a chance to visit the church, quoting secularism, equal opportunities and all that. Prem C, the eternal gentleman, allowed us the privilege.

One fine Sunday morning, we troop off to the church in our best whites and behaviour. On arrival, we are shown the pews, into which we settle. This is better than a temple, since we can sit. Sombre music emanates from a choir on the right of the altar. Occasionally, the sexton goes quiver, quiver with a medieval contraption that spews thick frankincense smoke. Once the priest gets going, we periodically follow the other faithful to our knees, leaving the comfort of the pews.

Half an hour later, we see a queue forming in the centre of the church and we are told that it is the cake and wine line. When we join it hurriedly, we are told we are not eligible, since we have not confessed.

Who do we confess to? We ask.

Confessions for the day are over, we are told.

The next Sunday finds us back in the pews. We spot the confession line in a corner, partially hidden by the sombre choir. We join it.

My face finally reaches the grilled window with the priest on the other side. And I confess. I faithfully report some misdemeanours like not being regular at brushing my teeth and seeing bad dreams.

One cannot really experiment with truth anywhere near a boarding school.

I am told comforting words and I am overjoyed at having qualified for cake & wine.

Beaming, I join the cake & wine line. The slow progress is unbearable. Finally, I reach the head of the line. The sexton proffers an ornate tray with a silver plate and a silver goblet. The portions are not bad at all, I tell myself. The priest closes his eyes and prays to the lord. I too close my eyes in a fit of fervent prayer thanking the Lord for his largesse in anticipation.

I feel a hand close to my face and manage to open an eye partially. Before closing my eye again, I find a little white something, the size of an Avil tablet, dripping with a red syrupy substance on its way to my mouth. It tastes good. A sample, I guess. I hear a little prayer to the lord, followed by a shove from behind that ejects me from the line. I thank the Lord and leave.

Sweet memories of that little communion with the Lord, lingers.