

TWENTY-NINE



It was Sunday morning. We had just returned from the much- awaited break and were sitting in the cafeteria, bragging about our success with the girls back home. Most of the exploits were imaginary but that didn't make a difference. The stories we told helped pass our time quite pleasantly so some of us retold stories we had read in books and others from movies we had watched.

‘What’s eating Zora?’ Sandy whispered to me.

Everyone was in high spirits after the break. Only Zora’s spirits seemed to sink to deeper depths with every passing hour. For the past couple of days, the guy was seen going around with a morose expression on his handsome face.

‘I have no idea,’ I whispered back. ‘He’s been preoccupied for the last few days.’

Our stories didn’t improve Zora’s mood. He wasn’t listening to any of them as he pushed the cold cutlet around on his plate. It was uncharacteristic of the guy to brood. He had quite a sunny temperament.

‘Something seems to be bothering you, buddy,’ Sandy probed. ‘Would you like to share your worries with us?’

‘It’s nothing!’ Zora wasn’t keen on unloading whatever ghost he was carrying. He jiggled his long legs up and down, which we knew was a warning sign. He wanted to be left alone. Yet, we hung around trying to cheer up the gloomy fellow.

‘There has to be something. It is not like you to mope around with a long face,’ commented Porky.

‘You are not the kind to sink into the depths of despair without substantial reason,’ I added my bit.

‘Look Zora,’ said Sandy. ‘Sharing your problems will lighten your burden and who knows, we might be able to solve the problem for you.’

The Rajput looked undecided.

‘Come on, tell us what is bothering you. Remember, sharing is caring and it

doesn't end at sharing food,' insisted Maachh.

After much persuasion, Zora agreed to break his silence. 'Yaar, I am disturbed. This time, when I went home for the break, my parents announced my engagement to a girl from Bikaner.'

'What!' we chorused. This was a totally unexpected piece of news. The Bong was the first one to recover.

'You lucky dog,' he shouted, jumping up and shaking Zora's hand. 'Congrats! That's good news, man. What I don't understand is the gloomy mood? You should be dancing and prancing around.'

'Yes, in your place, I would have been jumping around with happiness,' added Porky.

'Maybe he is missing her,' opined Maachh. 'It must be tough to get engaged and return to the rough routine of the academy.'

'Come on pal, it is just a few more months,' consoled Porky. 'After that we get our commission and attend your wedding.'

'We will get drunk and do the bhangra.' Maachh went on a tangent.

'You guys don't understand,' said Zora, exasperatedly. 'I don't want to be engaged to anyone. I am too young to be married, anyway. I tried talking to my parents but they wouldn't listen.'

'You Rajputs are known to get married in their cradles,' laughed Sandy. 'Considering that, you have at least attained the legal age for marriage.'

'Isn't it rather sudden?' asked Porky. 'I mean, when you went for the break you were clueless about the forthcoming engagement, weren't you?'

'True, I had no clue that such a thing was being planned.'

'You could have declined.'

'Are you mad? He couldn't have declined at the last minute,' Maachh joined the discussion.

‘The girl belongs to a conservative family from our ancestral village. Our families are very close. In fact, the relationship goes back a couple of generations. This alliance was decided when we were children,’ Zora looked more and more depressed as he narrated the story. ‘Like many other families in the village, our parents decided that we will be married when I attain the legal age. Now that the training is almost over, they insisted on getting the two of us engaged.’

‘They must be worried that you will fall in love with someone else,’ Porky smiled mischievously.

‘Tch tch,’ commiserated Maachh. ‘You are so young. Imagine being hitched already. That means you can’t gallivant around with young lasses after you become an officer. No dances and dinners with beautiful damsels. You must be feeling trapped.’

‘Don’t rub it in,’ Zora sighed. ‘I am very upset about the whole thing. Imagine! They wouldn’t allow me to see her face. They are that conservative.’

‘In this age and time? What a tragedy!’ said Porky. ‘I can’t imagine marrying a girl without at least meeting her a couple of times.’

‘They are a very traditional Rajput family. They don’t show their daughters before marriage. Although my mother and sister have seen the girl and declared her to be pretty, I want to meet her and decide for myself.’

‘Aren’t you being stupid?’ asked Sandy. ‘As per the latest statistics, not many girls want to marry army officers, and here you are getting a girl from a rich, business family from your community, and you don’t want to get married to her. I can’t understand it.’

‘Look, like all of you, I want to date a girl, take her dancing, enjoy candlelight dinners with her, and get to know her better before I get married and settle down in a family setup,’ said Zora, a dreamy look on his face. ‘Romance dies with marriage. There are just responsibilities and problems.’

It was obvious that the guy didn’t have a very rosy picture of marriage in his mind.

‘Arre yaar, you can do all this with your fiancé and then get married. I am sure

your families will not object,' suggested Sandy. 'I don't see any problem at all.'

'You don't understand, she belongs to a very conservative family. They will never allow her to go out with me. Just imagine, they don't allow me to see her before the engagement. Do you think they will let us date? Forget dancing, we won't be able to go out for dinner, either. You don't know the attitude of typical Rajput families.'

'We are in the twentieth century, dude,' reminded Sandy. 'All those ideas vanished with the last century.'

'Yes, we live in the twentieth century but in certain parts of the world, it is still the nineteenth century. Nothing has changed. At least not in our village.'

'So, have a fling with another girl and settle down with your Rajput bride,' suggested Porky. 'Have your cake and eat it too. Anyway, they are not insisting for a wedding for a few years so you are a free bird till then.'

'And what if they came to know about my fling? I will be marked as the black sheep of the community. Thereafter, there will be no Rajput bride for me.'

'So marry a girl who is not a Rajput. Big deal!'

'You don't get it, buddy.' Zora threw a pitying look at Porky. 'You don't get it at all.'

'I have an idea,' said Maachh who had been lost in thought for a while now.

'NO!!' shouted the entire gang.

No one, least of Zora, wanted to listen to his stupid idea.

'Listen buddies, I have Zora's welfare in mind and my plan is foolproof.' Maachh insisted. 'If we can make his fiancé and her family believe that he is a bad character, everything will fall in place. They wouldn't want their daughter to marry an alcoholic or characterless man.'

'Please keep your ideas to yourself. Don't interfere in my affairs,' Zora warned him. 'I would rather marry Renuka than have my reputation ruined.'

‘Nice name – Renuka,’ said Maachh, ignoring Zora’s outburst. ‘Is she as beautiful as her name?’

‘None of your business,’ Zora snapped at him.

‘Hey man, you are already possessive about her,’ smirked Maachh. ‘I knew it. The sparks are flying.’

‘She is his fiancée, don’t forget that,’ hooted Porky.

‘You will be lucky if you find a girl to marry you,’ Zora scowled at him.

The conversation took off on a tangent.

‘You mentioned that girls don’t want to marry army officer, is that true?’ Porky asked Sandy, his voice anxious. ‘You mean to say that we will not be able to find ourselves a wife.’

‘If you can hook a fauji’s daughter well and good, but if you can’t, then well, you can only pray.’

‘I don’t think that is true,’ said Porky. ‘If that were true, all army officers would have been bachelors.’

He had a point.

‘Well, you will have to settle for whoever agrees to tie the knot with you. The point is that you won’t have much of a choice,’ Sandy stuck to his argument.

‘But why don’t they want to marry an army guy?’ Maachh butted in, eager to enter the fray.

‘Firstly, the money the army gives its men is peanuts compared to what the private companies pay to their employees. No wonder, the peanuts get only monkeys like you into the army. Secondly, the profession is fraught with risks; no one knows how long an army guy is going to survive. You will agree that the parents don’t want their daughter widowed. Do you know – of the twenty friends from the academy, my brother is left with just twelve and he’s only 29? Eight of them are gone in just seven years of service. So work out the statistics and you will know what I mean.’

'Eight in seven years? That is almost an average of one per year. It must be a jinxed batch,' mused Porky, who could never accept the gloomy side of life.

'Thirdly, which woman wants to uproot her household and move every two years and spend half her married life in separated accommodation, waiting for her husband who may or may not come back? It is a tough life, buddy. Not just for the officers but for the wives, too. There are very few takers for it.'

'I don't agree,' said Maachh. 'Girls have a thing for the uniform and the brass buttons. They swoon at the sight of dashing young officers.'

'Yes, I have read that in a book,' Porky butted in.

'Girls swooning at a monkey like you? No way!' Zora's tongue was caustic. He was cut up with the Bong for the earlier remark.

'They swoon alright, but they don't marry,' insisted Sandy adamantly. 'They are smart. Dancing and prancing with a smart army officer is alright, but marriage with him is an absolute no-no.'

'I don't agree,' said Porky, unwilling to accept Sandy's take on the subject.

The argument continued, till Maachh put an end to it.

'I have an idea,' the Bong raised his hand. 'There is an easy way to test our value in the marriage market. All we have to do is to put an ad in the matrimonial column of a newspaper and see the kind of response we get.'

'Don't you dare!' threatened Zora. 'You will get all of us into trouble.'

'This joker will get us relegated,' remarked Sandy.

That evening, Maachh's brain was buzzing with ideas, but there were no takers for them. One by one, he elaborated on his plans but everyone scoffed at them.

'I just wanted to prove that we have immense potential in the marriage market,' he said lamely.

The mysterious smile on the Bong's face alarmed me. 'Look, keep away from the Pandora's Box.'

‘Who is Pandora and where is the box?’ asked Porky, a puzzled frown on his chubby face.

‘Shut up,’ scolded Zora, edgily. ‘Will the lot of you leave me alone for a while, please?’