

Just another story

Suhas

"Arranged marriages in India aren't broken." - he said, looking down at his cup of tea on the terrace of a balmy summer evening.

His black glasses, a few days old beard, and short hair gave him that aura of a learned guy.

"They're not?" - I asked him, half puzzled and half unconvinced.

He glanced up from his cup, the warm glow from the setting sun reflecting off his glasses. "No," he said slowly, pausing as if to collect his thoughts. "It's more a question of understanding and acceptance. The premise is not about romantic love but rather about a partnership, about growing together. Sometimes, it works; sometimes, it doesn't. But they're not inherently 'broken.'

"Wait, what?" I said, blinking at him. "So you're saying it's all about the agreement? The shared goals and compatibility?"

He leaned back, his gaze returning to the swirling tea in his cup. While he was lost deep in thought, I couldn't help but notice a neatly folded letter starting with the words "Dear Ira" half tucked in the front pouch of his backpack. A faint smile touched his lips, but his eyes were distant, lost in thought. Who is this Ira, who seems to be very dear to him? Was that even an actual name?

His neatly ironed white shirt was getting crumpled as he leaned against the coconut tree while he stood there talking to me. He had come to take a look at me - the potential bride for him after both of us had given the green light for the marriage talks to begin.

"Well," he started, the corners of his mouth lifting into a faint smile. "Isn't that what all good relationships are about?"

He seemed to be in no rush to leave, standing under the tree, sipping his tea, and pondering life's intricacies. His casual, almost scholarly demeanor made me question my preconceived notions about this arranged marriage scenario.

"But what about love?" I asked, unable to hide the skepticism from my voice. "Does love fit anywhere in this equation of yours? Or is it just about compatibility and shared goals?"

He chuckled - his eyes crinkling at the corners. "Love," he began, as he glanced up at the now darkening sky, "...can grow both with time and shared experiences. Sometimes, it may not be there initially, but that doesn't mean it never does. It can develop. And isn't marriage more fulfilling when built on mutual respect and understanding rather than just a momentary feeling?"

I wasn't convinced and had a feeling he had more to say. Perhaps some experiences? Maybe an ex-girlfriend?

I looked at him, my brows furrowing slightly as I tried to read between the lines. "You seem to speak from experience," I finally said, my curiosity piqued. "Is there... someone

else? An ex-girlfriend, perhaps?" I patted myself for not saying Ira's name out loud lest it caused some awkwardness on our first meeting.

He took off his glasses, rubbing the bridge of his nose for a moment. He seemed taken aback. After a pause, he nodded, "There was someone, yes. But that's a story for another day, perhaps when we know each other better. Right now, let's just say I've come to value companionship over initial sparks."

"But how can a person see a handsome guy with a good pay package on a matrimony site, think he's husband material, and just agree to be married to him for the rest of their lives?" - I was asking more questions than I've asked in my JEE coaching.

He laughed, the sound echoing in the quiet evening. "It's certainly not that simple," he agreed. "Trust me. I totally get your point of view. It's not just a pretty face or a good job. It's about getting to know someone, understanding their values, aspirations, and, of course, their quirks. That's why we have this period of courtship before marriage, isn't it? We're not just blindly saying 'yes' to this lifelong commitment. We're saying 'yes' to the opportunity to get to know each other and see if it's going to work out."

I had to admit. He made sense. He was making me think and question my own beliefs. But I still wasn't entirely sure if I was ready to take the leap.

He seemed to sense my unease and smiled kindly, his gaze softening. "It's okay to have doubts and questions," he said. "In fact, it's necessary. But remember, in any form of relationship - be it love or arranged marriage - there's always a risk. And there's always a chance it might not work out. But that's the beauty of it, isn't it? It's a leap of faith, a hope for a shared future."

I looked at him, and for the first time, I saw a flicker of uncertainty in his eyes. It made him seem more relatable.

"Take your time," he said, standing up from his spot under the coconut tree. "Think about it. And remember, I'm here if you want to talk or have more questions. Marriage is a big decision, after all."

With that, he started walking down the flight of stairs, leaving me with my thoughts and the faint aroma of his cardamom-infused tea. I had a lot to think about and consider, and of course, spam my girls' group with the story of meeting this guy and his quirky, bookish charm. But one thing was certain: this arranged marriage scenario was more complex and intriguing than I had initially thought.

"How was he so sure that I was the one he wanted to get married to? He spoke like the ball was in my court, and he was convinced of his decision," - I questioned Anvi, my classmate from college who I'd grown up with.

"Aren't guys like that? They fall in love first and then figure out the rest later!" she giggled.

"Well, that's quite a generalization," I responded with a light laugh, rolling my eyes at Anvi's jest. "But it did seem like he was quite certain about this. I wonder if it's the same for all guys or just him?"

Anvi shrugged her shoulders, her eyes gleaming with curiosity. "Maybe he's the kind who knows what he wants and goes for it? Or perhaps he's just really good at making decisions?"

"But what about love? How can he be so sure about something like that?" I questioned, my thoughts going back to our conversation. "I mean, it takes me hours to decide on a dress, let alone a life partner."

"Maybe love isn't a prerequisite for him? Perhaps he sees marriage more as a partnership or companionship and believes love can grow from that." Anvi suggested, taking a bite of her midnight Maggi - sitting at the same spot on the terrace he was at a few hours back.

I nodded, deep in thought. There was wisdom in his words, a refreshing perspective on the idea of marriage. But it also raised multiple questions. I was unsure if I was ready to change my perception of love and marriage so drastically.

"Or, maybe he's already started developing feelings for you, and he's more sure about it than you are," Anvi added with a teasing grin, her eyes twinkling mischievously. I threw a cushion at her playfully but couldn't help but blush at the thought.

"Only time will tell, I suppose." I sighed, taking a deep breath. I knew I had a lot to think about, a lot to decide. But for now, I decided to let things unfold naturally and see where this journey takes me.

I glanced at the screen, a small smile playing on my lips as I recognized the sender. "It's him," I confessed, showing Anvi the text. "He's asking about my plans for the weekend."

Anvi's eyes widened in excitement. "What are you going to reply?" she asked eagerly.

"I'm not sure," I admitted, chewing on my lower lip as I thought about my response. "I don't want to seem too eager, but I also don't want to appear uninterested."

"Why not just be honest?" Anvi suggested. "If you have plans, tell him. If you don't, maybe this is an opportunity to get to know him better."

I nodded, considering her words. Finally, I typed a reply. "No plans yet. How about you?" I hit send before I could second-guess myself.

I looked up at Anvi, shrugging nonchalantly. "Let's see what happens."

But deep down, I was curious to see where this would lead. Perhaps this arranged marriage scenario wasn't so bad after all. Maybe this courtship before marriage, an arranged-love marriage, if I could call it, could be the best?

Only time will tell.

Anvi and I sat on the terrace for a long time, discussing life, love, marriage, and, of course, the man who had suddenly become a significant character in my narrative. Anvi,

being the hopeless romantic she is, was already planning the wedding, her eyes shining with anticipation. On the other hand, I was still absorbing the enormity of the situation.

As they say, love was something Anvi and I have longed for since time immemorial. But finding the right guy admittedly has been a struggle. "Where are all the good guys, Shraddha?" - she would ask me. And those we've had a crush on have crushes on others, and neither of us has actually come around to ask them out. A few have proposed going on a date with us. Still, it has yet to go anywhere, so much for the talk with the potential groom about shared interests and compatibility. It says something about both of us.

A week later, I found myself sitting across from him in a quaint café, my fingers fiddling with my cup of coffee. This time, it wasn't an official meeting, and there was no coconut tree to lean against. Instead, it was just two people getting to know each other. Parents not around to eavesdrop on our conversations. A sigh of relief.

He looked different today. Gone were the day's old beard, replaced by a clean-shaven look. I must admit that I already preferred that stubble beard, but nonetheless, his aura of wisdom and calm demeanor remained the same.

We spoke about everything and anything. About our hobbies, our fears, and our dreams. There was no pretense, no hurry. It was comfortable and familiar, and I found myself starting to like him.

Over time, our conversations grew longer, and our meetings more frequent. We shared laughter, silence, and stories. We debated, we agreed, and we disagreed. And through all this, I began to understand what he meant about compatibility and shared goals. It wasn't just about love; it was about the joy of discovering each other, the satisfaction of shared silence, and the comfort of being in each other's presence.

My thoughts about love and marriage evolved, shaped by my interactions with him. Love was not just a sudden spark but a slow burn, a gradually building warmth. It was about compatibility and companionship. It was about understanding and accepting each other's flaws. It was about shared dreams and respect.

A few weeks into our regular meetups, Rajeev excused himself to visit the washroom while I sipped my cappuccino. The place was pretty deserted, and the cold air conditioner made me look around to see if he had brought his jacket along. In his bag, I couldn't help but notice the letter to Ira. Against my better judgment, I unfolded the paper and skimmed through it. The letter was eloquent and heartfelt, clearly written to a woman he had deep feelings for. My heart sank a little; was this why he had such mature opinions on love and compatibility? Was I just his second choice?

He sighed when he returned and saw the disturbed look on my face and the opened letter.

"Ah, you found it," he said softly. His voice was neither defensive nor accusatory. "It's only fair, you know. Ira was someone I was very attached to, someone I considered spending my life with - if she agreed, that is. But circumstances didn't favor us. She was

emotionally unavailable, and I asked her out at a not-so-good time. She's married to someone else."

He paused, locking eyes with me. "That letter was my way of putting my feelings into words, giving it a form, a closure. I did give it to her; it was more for me than for her. I was about to dispose of it. Didn't think it would come to light this way."

I looked at him, searching for any sign of insincerity. There was none. Or nothing that I could see right now. Maybe he had taken acting lessons, too? But the question still hung heavily between us—did he still have feelings for Ira? Despite all our talks and shared laughs, was I just a backup option for him?

"I need to think," I said, standing up. He nodded and stood up alongside me, looking somber but understanding.

Over the next few days, I pondered my feelings, my preconceptions about love, and the new shape it had taken during our time together. Anvi added in her own words. I couldn't go and tell my parents about this. It would just complicate matters for everyone. Could I accept a man who had loved before, who had contemplated a different life with someone else? And could he truly move on, cherishing our unique story, our newfound love?

It wasn't easy, but I realized that what we had was not a lesser form of love. It was real, mature, and full of potential. Our conversations, shared dreams, and the ease we felt around each other meant something.

When we met again, he started, "If you have any reservations—"

I cut him off. Yes, I still had my reservations. But, I had to talk first and tell him what I thought - "We all have pasts, and it would be naive to think otherwise. What matters is the present, the connection we have now. Let's focus on building our future, a new chapter. A better chapter."

He smiled; relief was palpable on his face. "I couldn't agree more."

And so, the letter to Ira became a critical juncture in our story—not as a threat to our relationship, but as a milestone of trust, acceptance, and a matured, deepened love. With this newfound understanding, we moved forward, confident in our choice and committed to our shared future.

The letter was eventually thrown away, not out of bitterness, but as a symbol of beginning anew. In its place, we wrote a new narrative, one that was uniquely our own.

As the weeks turned into months, it became clear that my feelings for him had deepened. It wasn't a passionate whirlwind but a gentle breeze, subtly making its presence felt. His eyes would light up when he saw me, his voice would soften when he spoke, and his touch would linger just a little longer than necessary.

'Arranged marriages in India aren't broken,' he had said during one of our early conversations. Now, I believed him. I had experienced the beauty of it firsthand. It wasn't

about finding the perfect partner but about discovering the perfect companionship. Love wasn't about falling at first sight but about growing in love each passing day.

Our journey began not with the exchange of rings or vows but with the exchange of understanding and acceptance. It wasn't a fairytale, but it was our story, and it was perfect in its own unique way.

A year after that turning point, I found myself sitting beside him on our terrace. He looked at me with love in his eyes and a cup of tea in his hand. 'You were right,' I told him, 'arranged marriages in India are beautiful.'

'Only if you find the right partner,' he replied, his eyes gleaming with happiness as he leaned in to plant a soft kiss on my forehead.

At that moment, I knew I had found the right partner. An arranged marriage hadn't been so bad after all; it was the best decision of my life.

Love, as I'd learned, wasn't always about grand gestures and sweeping declarations. Sometimes, it was about shared dreams, quiet understanding, and a simple cup of tea.