Short Story

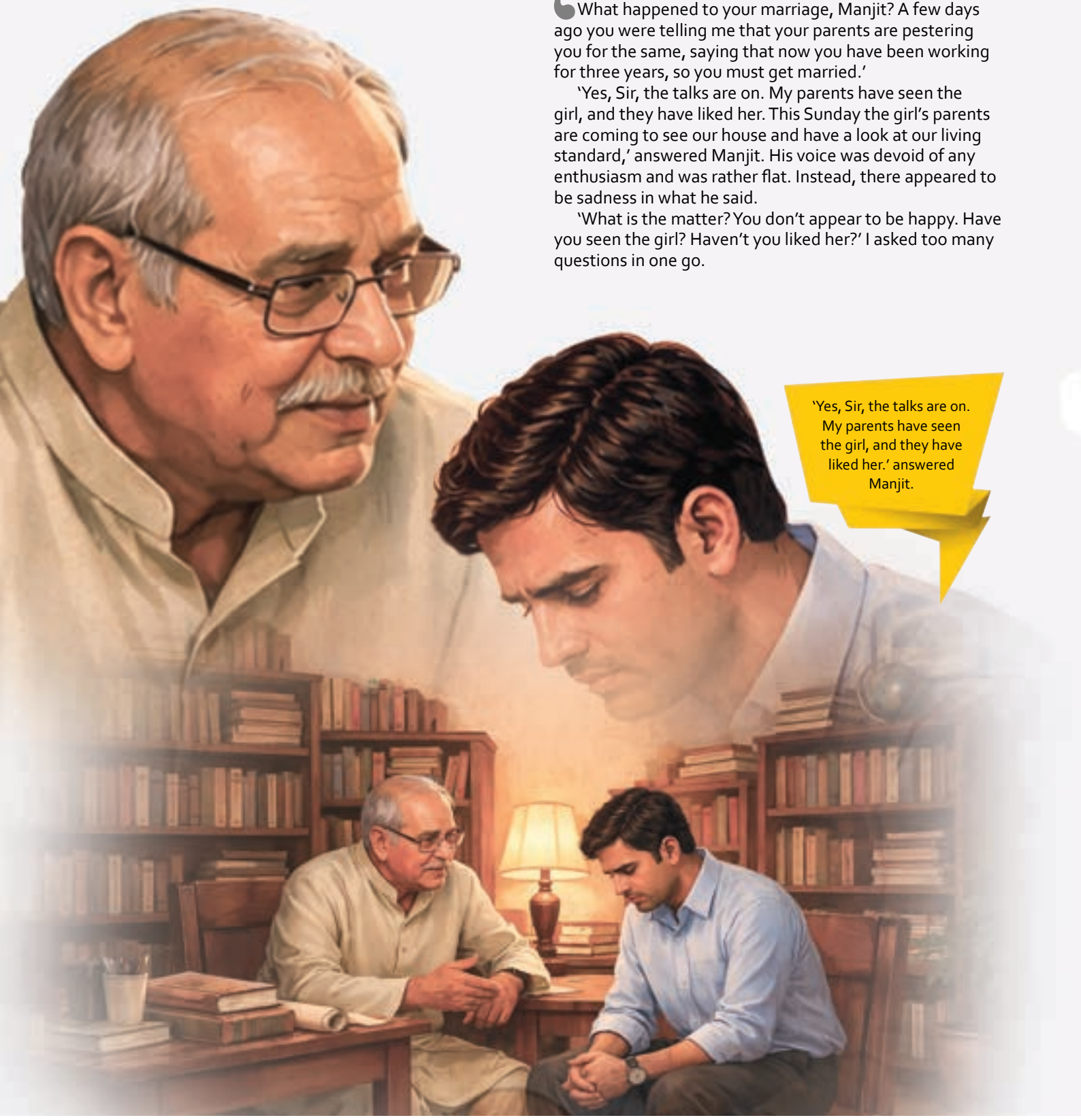
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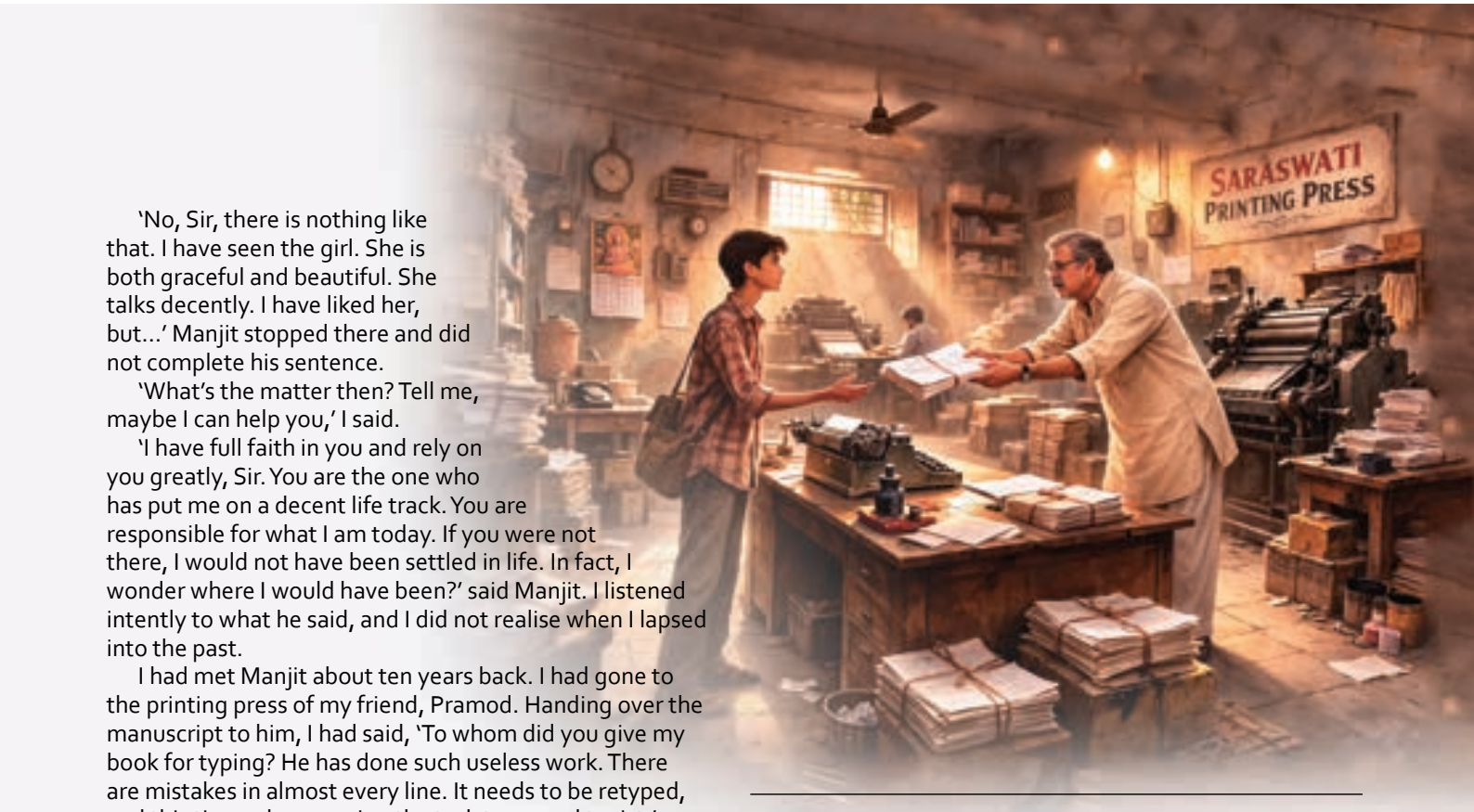
The extreme step they didn't take. ***By Wg Cdr DP Sabharwal***

'What happened to your marriage, Manjit? A few days ago you were telling me that your parents are pestering you for the same, saying that now you have been working for three years, so you must get married.'

'Yes, Sir, the talks are on. My parents have seen the girl, and they have liked her. This Sunday the girl's parents are coming to see our house and have a look at our living standard,' answered Manjit. His voice was devoid of any enthusiasm and was rather flat. Instead, there appeared to be sadness in what he said.

'What is the matter? You don't appear to be happy. Have you seen the girl? Haven't you liked her?' I asked too many questions in one go.





'No, Sir, there is nothing like that. I have seen the girl. She is both graceful and beautiful. She talks decently. I have liked her, but...' Manjit stopped there and did not complete his sentence.

'What's the matter then? Tell me, maybe I can help you,' I said.

'I have full faith in you and rely on you greatly, Sir. You are the one who has put me on a decent life track. You are responsible for what I am today. If you were not there, I would not have been settled in life. In fact, I wonder where I would have been?' said Manjit. I listened intently to what he said, and I did not realise when I lapsed into the past.

I had met Manjit about ten years back. I had gone to the printing press of my friend, Pramod. Handing over the manuscript to him, I had said, 'To whom did you give my book for typing? He has done such useless work. There are mistakes in almost every line. It needs to be retyped, and this time, please assign the task to a good typist.' On hearing my complaint, he called Manjit and told him, 'Understand the work from my friend, and do the needful.' Manjit was then just a young boy of seventeen or eighteen years of age.

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Manjit handed over the typed manuscript to me after about ten days. The typing was literally without any mistake. Wherever he could not understand my handwriting, he had left the space blank instead of typing something that was not correct. I was impressed with this style of his. On inquiring, he told me that after failing in Class XII twice, he had left his studies and, after doing a three-month typing course, had started working.

My book about aeroplanes did not consist of text alone but had many pictures and illustrations as well. Thus, I was required to sit with him and explain to him many things about the placement, alignment, and sizing of figures and illustrations by the side of the text. This required a lot of concentration, which was not possible in the printing press because, being a good worker, Manjit was often disturbed by others seeking his assistance. This used to waste a lot of my time, and the work that could be finished in two hours used to extend to almost double the time. Irritated and exasperated by this, I requested Pramod to allow Manjit to do my work at my house without any interruptions till the book setting was complete and it was ready for printing. Thus, Manjit started coming to my house for two hours, thrice a week.

I noticed that while typing the book, Manjit started developing some interest in it. Many times he would ask me questions as to what it meant, how it happened, and so on. Noticing the ever-increasing trend of his inquisitiveness, one day I said, 'Manjit, you are intelligent. Why don't you appear for Class XII exams? I am sure you would pass.' He agreed, and that very year, he cleared the examination from National Open University with good marks.

After a few months, Manjit started working on my new book on Personality Development, and soon seemed to be fully immersed in it. Now he used to type less and ask more questions. Looking at his interest that appeared to be getting bigger and bigger as the days passed, I said, 'Now you must register yourself for graduation.' He agreed instantly and registered in an evening college. Now he used to go to the press for three days, spend two evenings at my place, and go for classes for the remaining two days. On Sunday afternoons, he used to spend a couple of hours with me to clear his doubts.

In three years, he completed his studies. As soon as his result came and he became a graduate, he came to me with an advertisement that had appeared in a newspaper for typist-clerks in the High Court. Looking at it, I said, 'You must apply. I am sure you will qualify.'

'Yes, sir, I shall pass the typing test without any problem, but I am worried about the written exam that will be held before that. I am not confident about that.' Patting him on the back, I said, 'Don't worry. You will clear that also. Start preparing. I shall help you.'

Manjit worked hard and cleared the written examination. There was no problem in his typing test. He was shortlisted for the interview. When I asked him how he was feeling for the most difficult test in getting the job, his confident answer was, 'Sir, I know each and every part of your *Personality Development* book. I just can't fail in

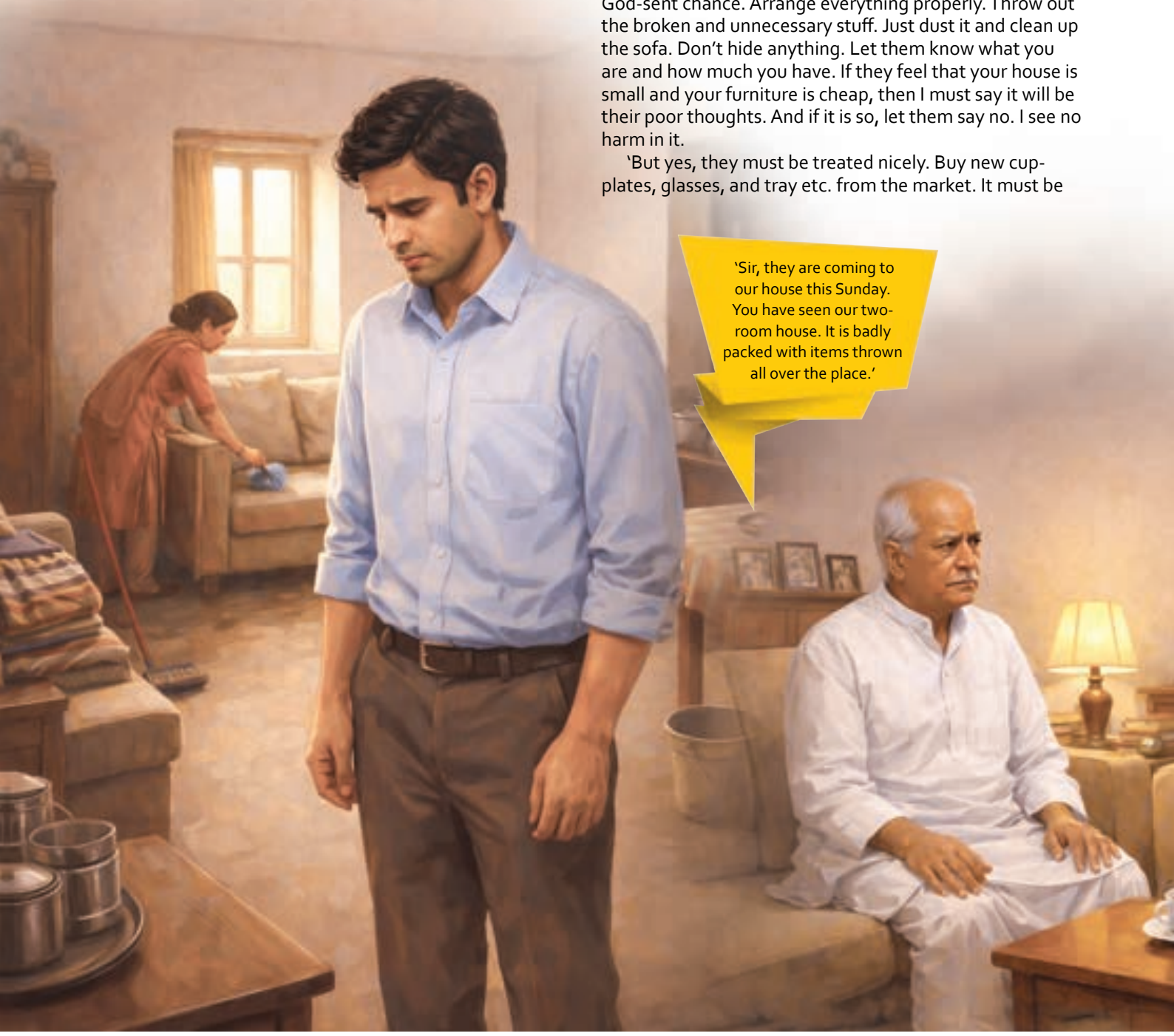
the interview.' His confidence was well-founded. He was selected, and shortly thereafter, he became a government employee. He worked diligently, and after about four years, he was promoted from lower-division clerk to upper-division clerk. He continued coming to my house on two evenings for typing manuscripts of my books. Today also he had come for the same when I started the conversation. I was pulled out of my thought process when I heard him saying, 'Sir, there is a problem.'

'Tell me, what is it?' When I asked, he answered, 'Sir, they are coming to our house this Sunday. You have seen our two-room house. It is badly packed with items thrown all over the place. There is not even a proper place to make them sit. And more than that, we don't even have crockery to offer them tea. I am afraid that seeing our house and our way of living, they might say no.' I could feel disappointment flowing out of his voice.

'Change your thinking, Manjit. Learn to be happy with what you have. In fact, feel proud of your possessions. There are many in this world who don't have even a small house as you have. And I am sure the girl's parents would appreciate it,' I said.

'Change your thinking, Manjit. Learn to be happy with what you have. In fact, feel proud of your possessions. There are many in this world who don't have even a small house as you have. And I am sure the girl's parents would appreciate it,' I said and added, 'As regards the clumsiness, well, you can set it right with a little effort. Consider it a God-sent chance. Arrange everything properly. Throw out the broken and unnecessary stuff. Just dust it and clean up the sofa. Don't hide anything. Let them know what you are and how much you have. If they feel that your house is small and your furniture is cheap, then I must say it will be their poor thoughts. And if it is so, let them say no. I see no harm in it.

'But yes, they must be treated nicely. Buy new cup-plates, glasses, and tray etc. from the market. It must be



decent but not necessarily costly. Buy a new tablecloth, and that's all. You don't have to worry after that,' I advised Manjit.

Next week when Manjit came, he was visibly happy as the girl's parents had given their consent. On my asking, he told me that the girl, Sandhya, is a senior-secondary teacher in a reputed public school of the city. When I asked when the engagement ceremony was, he said, 'It will be soon, sir, coming Sunday perhaps.'

After two days, I got a call from Manjit requesting an early meeting, saying it was an urgent matter. I asked him to come over the same evening. As he entered, I asked, 'What happened? Where is the box of sweets?' Then, looking at his sullen face, I asked, 'What happened? I hope everything is fine.'

'No, Sir,' he replied instantly. Seeing that I was waiting for him to continue, he added, 'My *mamaji* has not accepted this alliance because the girl is eight months elder to me.'

'But why has he objected? There is nothing wrong in it. I agree that in our society, it is normally the boy who is elder, but so what if the girl is elder! But how did your *mamaji* come to know about it?'

'You know the role my *mamaji* plays in our household. My mother does not do anything without his consent and approval. So one day he went to school to inquire about her. He heard many good things about her and was pleased, but when he came to know about her date of birth, he just said one sentence: "This marriage cannot take place."'

'Don't worry, Manjit. I shall come to your house shortly and will talk to your mother.' A few days later, I went to talk to his mother, who was in agreement with me but said, 'You know that after my husband's death, he was the one who supported us and looked after us. Though he is younger to me in age, I just cannot go against his wishes. You talk to him and convince him. I find this alliance best for my son.'



A few days later, Manjit brought his mamaji to our house. He was around 70 years of age. Living in a village, he was doing farming. I received him with respect, offered him tea and snacks, and then, addressing him with due regards, said, 'The times are changing. Earlier, the girls used to live a simple life at home. Nowadays, they get education and start doing jobs."

A few days later, Manjit brought his *mamaji* to our house. He was around 70 years of age. Living in a village, he was doing farming. I received him with respect, offered him tea and snacks, and then, addressing him with due regards, said, 'The times are changing. Earlier, the girls used to live a simple life at home. Nowadays, they get education and start doing jobs. Sandhya too is one of such girls. She was in college when her father was involved in a serious accident and lost his legs and his job. Thus, Sandhya had to pick up a job as a school teacher. She refused to marry early since she wanted to educate her brother. Now that he is employed, she has agreed for marriage. Now, please tell me, what is her fault? And moreover, I don't think any of our religious books ever mention that the boy has to be elder than the girl at the time of marriage?'

'What you say is right, but I am afraid of the people and the society. What will they say?'

'What people and which society are you talking about! Please tell me, did anyone come forward to help when Manjit's father died? The same way, no member of the society came forward for helping Sandhya and her family when her father got crippled and was bedridden. Then why should you bother about how they will feel? And the times have changed. No one has time to think about others. Moreover, even if people talk about it, so what? It does not matter. What matters is that now there shall be two salaries coming to the house every month, and that would really make the difference.'

'What you say holds water. I tend to agree with your viewpoint that her being elder to Manjit should not matter. But then there is another issue. A bigger issue. She earns more than Manjit. So, after marriage, if she starts boasting about it, don't you think it would disturb household peace?' he asked a pertinent question.

'You have a valid point, but why do you think that she would do so? She might not. But for discussion's sake, let us consider that she does so. But then it is a minor problem, and there is a simple solution to that,' I said.

I wished the family all the best before I departed. Manjit's wedding was completed without any further problems. One day, I invited them for dinner, and during talks, I asked in a casual manner, 'Manjit, there were so many hurdles in your marriage. What level of confidence did you have that the marriage would go through?'

'What is the simple solution? Manjit's salary cannot be increased to her level,' *Mamaji* asked in a surprised tone.

'Agreed, but then Sandhya's salary can be reduced, and there are two ways to do so. The first is to tell the school to pay her less, and I am sure the school would not have any serious objection to that. And the second, but more practical, solution would be that the portion of her salary that exceeds Manjit's should be given to her mother every month,' I said and, after a pause, asked in a muted voice, 'Which of the two options do you consider more appropriate?'

Mamaji kept on looking at me but did not say anything. I kept waiting for him to say something, but when he did not, I said, 'I know you looked after your sister after her husband died. I learnt from Manjit that you were sending some money every month. Now Manjit has got a similar chance to do something good. The excess part of the salary that Sandhya gets compared to Manjit can be passed on to her family. What do you say?'

For the first time, I saw a smile erupt on his face. In a laughing tone, he said, 'You seem to have an answer and easy solution to every problem. In fact, you can anticipate problems and find their solution. I agree with you completely. You turned this useless boy into a responsible person. Now you guide him to set up a good household.'

'Then should I conclude that you agree to this marriage?' When he said yes, I asked, 'But you have not expressed your opinion about the issue of Sandhya earning more than Manjit. What should be done about it?'

'I leave that issue to my sister, Manjit, and his would-be wife. Let them decide,' said *Mamaji*.

'You are absolutely right, *Mamaji*,' I said and asked Manjit to get his mother on the phone, as I wanted Mamaji to convey the good news to his sister. I wanted it this way because somewhere in my mind I had a doubt that on reaching home, he might make a turnabout. But nothing of that sort happened. Once he agreed, he stayed fast on his word and started making arrangements for the marriage. He decided not to go back to the village till the marriage was solemnised. The marriage date was fixed.

One day, just a few days before the marriage, Manjit came to me with another problem. He said, 'My brother and sister-in-law are creating a fuss. They are wanting a dowry and are saying that Sandhya should bring more than what my brother had received in his wedding, since she has been earning a decent salary for so many years!' Next day, I went to his house to talk to his brother. As soon as I started the topic of dowry, his brother, with folded hands, said, 'I did not realise that Manjit would do such a foolish act and, for a small family matter, would go to you and trouble you. I am extremely sorry for this act of his and beg your pardon.'



'No, it is nothing like that. Neither am I troubled, nor do you have to beg for apologies. I have known Manjit for almost a decade now. Your brother is not only an intelligent boy but possesses a noble soul as well. Now, when he is going to start his own house, why are you putting a spoke in the wheel? Why do you want a dowry? You have beds, sofas, chairs, cupboards, fans—well, almost everything in the house. Where will you keep the additional items? And moreover, she is worth much more than a mere dowry. With her monthly salary, you will be able to afford whatever else is needed in the house.'

Both of them understood what I said. Not only that, but they also felt apologetic. I wished the family all the best before I departed.

Manjit's wedding was completed without any further problems. One day, I invited them for dinner, and during talks, I asked in a casual manner, 'Manjit, there were so many hurdles in your marriage. What level of confidence did you have that the marriage would go through?'

'None at all, Sir. My level of confidence was rather low. There was literally no hope that it would happen, but your...' I did not allow him to complete the sentence and asked, 'If your *Mamaji* and *Bhai-Bhabhi* had remained adamant, then what would you have done?'

Manjit looked at Sandhya and gave a tiny smile that I could sense. I could instantly make out that there was something between them that I did not know. However, I kept quiet and waited for Manjit to say something. After a pause, he said, 'Sir, there is nothing to hide, and I will tell you the truth. We both used to meet and had decided that if they continued to oppose, we would come to you.' I kept quiet, waiting for Manjit to continue. He understood my silence and looked at me expectantly. I obliged and said, 'Don't be afraid, Manjit. Say whatever you have to say. I won't feel bad.'

'No, Sir, there is nothing of that sort. I can share the truth with you. Well, the fact is that we had decided that if the matter ever came to that stage and there were serious obstructions to our wedding, we would have gone for a court marriage.'

'I am really surprised that you had taken that decision. May I know on what basis did you decide that, and how would you have executed it alone?'

'Not alone, Sir. Obviously, we would have come to you for help.'

'But were you sure that I would have helped you?' I asked.

'I am sure you would have understood our intentions after understanding my proposal, which was that we would take a small house on rent and take my mother to stay with us. Am I right in my presumption, Sir?'

It was the first time Manjit had asked me a straightforward question. My answer was yes, but there was a question as well. 'But how could you presume that I would help you in a court marriage?'

'Sir, you have told me many times that if your heart believes that it is the right thing to do and it is not going to harm anyone, then don't think much about it. Just go ahead and implement it.'

I nodded my head in agreement. I was happy on two counts. First, Manjit and Sandhya did not have to resort to the extreme step of court marriage that would have created a lot of ill will in the family. And the second, but the more important, point was that Manjit had been listening to and grasping my words of advice doled out from time to time. We

CAMPUS RUMPUS

A STAIRCASE BETWEEN US

I will never forget that day in my life. I still remember my first year of college like a half-written love letter, full of feelings but no courage to sign my name. I saw her in the very first week. She was standing near the notice board, tying her hair. From that day, my routine changed. I started noticing small things—her smile. I liked her, but liking someone silently is easy; telling them is the hardest part. I wanted to talk to her many times. Every day, I planned a perfect conversation in my head. "Hi, which department?" or "Have you completed the assignment?"

But when I saw her in real life, my throat went dry, my legs froze, and my courage vanished. So instead, I watched her from a distance. I knew her timetable without her knowing my name. She often went to the library in the afternoon. I would pretend to look for books just to catch a glimpse of her. I told myself, "One day, I will talk."

One day, my friend noticed my silent madness. He laughed and said, "She is standing alone near the library corridor. If you don't go now, you never will." My heart started racing. This was the moment I had been waiting for—and also running from. I took a deep breath and started walking towards the library. With every step, my confidence increased a little. But fate had other plans. Just near the stairs, my foot slipped. For a second, time stopped. I lost balance and almost fell. My heart jumped out of my chest. I quickly looked up—she was there, but thankfully she was looking somewhere else. She hadn't seen me. Before she could turn her head, I ran away like a thief. I became scared to go anywhere near her. Every time I saw her, that memory came back—the stairs, the slip, the embarrassment. I avoided the library completely for weeks.

But my friends? They never forgot. They laughed. Every time they saw those steps, they reminded me of my great escape. Even today, I never told her how I felt. Maybe I lost my chance to take it. Some love stories begin with words. Mine began with silence.

–Siddharth