

# JULY

It was late in the afternoon, and Prateek and Manoj were lounging on Manoj's terrace. Drinking their fourth bottle of Pepsi, they were surrounded by empty packets of chips, *bhujia*, *kurkure*, newspapers and several magazines.

"Have you ever thought about love?" Prateek asked Manoj, breaking the silence between them. "You know, like falling in love, or having a true relationship with someone?"

"Not really. It always ends badly, time-pass is best." Manoj told him.

"Not always. I'd love to fall in love someday, you know."

"That's right, you can drop yourself into it." Manoj joked sarcastically.

"Oh no, wait, you literally FALL in love."

Prateek thought about it. "You mean like bungee jumping?"

"Yeah, but love is bungee jumping with no strings attached," said Manoj and they both laughed.

"That's a good example of love, no strings attached, so you can't bounce back up. When you're in love, you can't go back to being the person you were before you fell in love," said Prateek.

"Well," replied Manoj, "to be honest, I really didn't think that far ahead. But yes, you're right. It really is a good example and I'm a genius."

Prateek Singh and Manoj Churuwala were childhood friends, both twenty-three years old and second year MA sociology students at Rukhmani Devi Patna College. Both lived in Patna, the state capital of Bihar, and had grown up there. Prateek was tall and thin, with fine features and straight dark hair. He belonged to a middle-class Hindu family who had fallen on hard times financially. He was an only child, a fact he had never liked. Manoj on the other hand, was bulkier, with curly hair and a dominant nose in an otherwise unremarkable face. Prateek was his only good friend from his school days and he preferred it that way, despite the difference in their financial status.

"We should be drinking beer, you know," Prateek broke the silence

again after the sodas were finished.

“Yeah, so that I’m finally kicked out,” Manoj retorted, making it clear that was not going to happen.

Prateek sighed and lay back on the ground. “Back to love. Do you know what Plato said about love?” he continued his train of thought.

“What?” Manoj asked.

“According to Plato, ‘love is a grave mental disease’.”

“Wow. Plato is awesome, ten out of ten for that definition. It’s a disease all right—a serious mental disease. Perfect.” Manoj raised his empty Pepsi bottle.

“And do you know what Aristotle said love is?” Prateek asked Manoj.

“What?”

“Well, according to him ‘love is composed of a single soul inhabiting two bodies’.”

“Oh no, he probably had the disease. Plato was definitely the greater philosopher.”

“Who cares who was greater? Which theory suits you is what matters.”

“I’d go with Plato—love is a grave mental disease.” Manoj decided.

“The two souls theory makes me feel better.”

“Well, that’s because you’re a girl!”

Prateek reached over and kicked his laughing friend.

After a brief silence, Manoj spoke up. “Have you thought about what it would be like if some girls actually fell from the sky right now? Hmmm, that would be one hell of a birthday gift,” he said. “I’d play the...”

“Just a second,” interrupted Prateek, bringing out his little vibrating cell phone from his pocket. “Oh no. I have to go.”

“Hey it’s my birthday, you’re not working today, remember?”

“I need to get you a gift, don’t I?”

“You don’t,” Manoj answered.

“Are you sure?” Prateek asked.

Manoj sat back on his sofa, “No.”

“You bastard,” laughed Prateek.

“Go on, get out,” Manoj waved goodbye.

“You know I can’t say no to Kishore sir.”

Kishore was Prateek’s part-time employer. He was the captain at the Talika Restaurant and managed a team of over fifty waiters. If there were

absentees from the staff he would ask Prateek to substitute, paying him a hundred rupees an hour. That made good pocket money for Prateek, who needed the extra money.

“See you in the evening,” Prateek shouted as he ran down the stairs.

\* \* \*

After finishing up at the restaurant, Prateek stopped at a cyber café on his way home. He got a cabin, typed ‘www.facebook.com’, and hit enter. He logged in and saw two friend requests, one message and twenty-five notifications, four of which had the same name, Gunjan Rath.

Gunjan Rath likes your comment ‘I love coffee it’s my love, life and my...’

Gunjan Rath likes your comment ‘You Nescafe haters shoot yourselves...’

Gunjan Rath, Gita Raj, Ram Kumar and five others have also commented on Nescafe’s status.

Gunjan Rath, Gita Raj, Ram Kumar and five others have also commented on Nescafe’s photo.

He clicked on the last link and a photo of a coffee mug with ‘Friends’ written on it opened up. He remembered the photo and his comment. A week had elapsed since he last logged onto Facebook and he had forgotten what he had posted.

He read Gunjan Rath’s comment. “I love coffee too, soooooooo much!” He smiled at her face peering out of her profile picture. She was stunning—fair with sharp features and a beautiful wide smile. He worked out that she was twenty-three years old and studying in college.

‘Can I take you out sometime Gunjan? Just coffee?’ he replied to her comment. Her profile said she lived in Hyderabad and regretfully he realized he would probably never meet her in person.

A minute later he received a reply. ‘Sure, when and where?’

She must be online at the same time. He typed quickly, ‘Right here, right now,’ adding a link to an image of a steaming cup of black coffee.

She replied instantly. ‘That is so sweet of you.☺’ She added a link there too with another cup saying, ‘This one’s for you.’

‘But I don’t like black coffee,’ Prateek informed her.

‘You offered it to me.’ Gunjan Rath replied.

‘Yes because I didn’t know which you preferred. This way, if you like milk in your coffee you can always add it in.’

‘Maybe I thought the same.☺’

Prateek was typing ‘Right,’ but before he could post it, the manager of the cyber café came up. “Your fifteen minutes are up sir. Should I increase your time?”

Prateek checked his watch; he was running late. He had to go home first and then go to Manoj’s party that night.

“No, I’m leaving now, I was just signing out,” he said and clicked to log out. He went to the counter to pay, started up his bike and rode off.

\* \* \*

Gunjan waited for a reply to her comment, but didn’t get a response. She heard the door open and quickly logged out.

“Gunjan!” Her mother called. “Gunjan! Have you gone deaf?”

“Mom!” said Gunjan rushing to the drawing room. “I was in the bathroom. What’s all this?”

“I went shopping. Take the groceries out and put them away,” her mother ordered. Gunjan picked up the bags and headed to the kitchen.

“Subah.” Gunjan heard her mother call out.

Gunjan suddenly stopped what she was doing, her eyes wide and mouth open, as if she had just seen a ghost. She walked quietly to the door, took the scooter keys hanging beside it, and tiptoed out.

“Subah!” her mother called again, louder this time. There was no reply.

“Gunjan?” But there was still no reply.

She walked out of her room. “Gunjan, where is Subah? Gunjan, Gunjan where are you?” She looked around and through the window, saw Gunjan starting up the scooter.

“Oh my God! Gunjan you fool, not again. You bloody idiot,” her mother yelled as Gunjan drove off to pick up her younger sister from school, two hours late.

\* \* \*

Gunjan’s mother, Taashi Rath, was a professor of economics at St.

Mary's College in Hyderabad. She was in her forties, with a slightly dark complexion, slim and very health conscious. Separated from her husband, she lived alone with her two daughters.

Subah, her younger daughter, was seven years old and was in the second grade. She was sitting on the school steps while the school *chowkidar* kept a watchful eye on her.

“What are you wearing, Di?” Subah asked as soon as her older sister rode up to her school.

“Forget it—just jump on,” ordered Gunjan, still in her pink and white cotton pajamas.

“Okay,” replied Subah in her innocent baby voice. She saw how worried her sister was. “You know, mom won’t do anything to you, she loves you too much, just like I love you Di!” she hugged her sister tightly from behind.

Gunjan felt little hands holding her and a head resting on her back. She realized how much Subah and her mother trusted her, and her eyes began to moisten at the thought of something happening to Subah.

“Sweetie, I love you too,” Gunjan said to Subah, touching the small hands clutching her waist.

The ride home took ten minutes. “Here we are, home sweet home!” Gunjan announced.

“Did you finish your lunch today?” she asked, but Subah was silent. Gunjan realized Subah’s grip was loosening, and she caught her arm tightly as they drove up the driveway.

Taashi came running as Gunjan got off the scooter, carrying Subah in her arms. The tired child had fallen asleep.

Taashi breathlessly asked her if anything had happened to Subah, panic in her voice.

“Nothing happened, Mom. She’s asleep,” replied Gunjan trying to avoid contact with the furious, teary eyes of her mother.

“Look how much she trusts you, she went to sleep knowing you will get her home safely...and look at you!” Taashi scolded. “Gunjan, this is not the first time, and you know it. You know I can’t go bring her from school because I’m...”

Gunjan interrupted, “Mom, I know...I’m sorry. It was a holiday today and I lost track of time.”

Taashi took Subah from Gunjan and carried her to her bed. She

checked the lunch-box, noted it was empty, and relaxed a little, knowing that at least Subah wasn't hungry.

Gunjan was at the door waiting for her mother to return. She wasn't generally like this; she was a pretty responsible person, always helping her mother cook, clean, and shop. This had only happened once before. She couldn't believe she had done it again.

Taashi came out after a few minutes and noticed Gunjan sitting on the stairs, wiping her tears.

"Listen, I'm your mother," she said, gripping Gunjan's left wrist. "You and Subah are all I have." Gunjan broke into fresh tears as she hugged Taashi. The two held each other for a moment in a tight embrace.

"Don't be angry with me, please?" Gunjan hung her head. "It will never happen again—I promise."

"It's okay, but you need to take better care. She's just a baby. You need to be more responsible."

"I will. I promise."

Her mother wiped her tears and the two went inside together, hand in hand.

"Listen I have a meeting to attend in an hour, okay? I'll be back by six. When Subah wakes up, make her some Maggi or something in case she's hungry." Taashi instructed Gunjan.

"Of course, I'll do that."

Taashi touched her daughter's chin, now a few inches higher than her own, and remarked, "You're such a pretty girl."

"Ha ha ha! I'm prettier!" declared Subah from her room, laughing in her baby voice. Taashi and Gunjan loved when Subah used that voice more than anything.

"Are you now, madam? Wait right there, I'm coming to get you!" Gunjan ran into the room with her mother right behind her. "Well, well, look who's hiding under the blanket. Gotcha!"

\* \* \*

It was six-thirty in the evening when Prateek reached home with a small packet of *jalebis* for his mother.

"Mamma!" he called out. There was no reply. He called her again.

"*Haan*, Babu, I'm a little busy now," his mother said in a muffled

voice. Prateek followed her voice to the kitchen and saw his mother cleaning the stove.

“Mamma, try these *jalebis*,” he said offering them to her. She continued to clean without looking up.

“Put them on the table,” she told him.

“You have a cold or something?” Prateek asked her, concerned.

“Yes,” she replied, feigning a smile at him. He noticed her eyes were red.

“Have you been crying?” he asked.

“No. Well, yes. I have a headache,” she lied. “Go change your clothes.”

“I know you’ve been crying. What happened, Mamma?” Prateek asked softly.

Ramila Singh approached her son and took the box of *jalebis* from his hand. After washing her hands, she opened the box and emptied the *jalebis* into a bowl.

“You and Dad fought again, right? Where is dad?” Prateek looked around the room, finally understanding what had happened.

“He’s out.” his mother said, and went in the bathroom to wash her face. Prateek was standing at the kitchen door when she came back out. She knew he was waiting for an answer.

“Babu, you’ve been seeing all this for a long time now. I shouldn’t argue with him.” Ramila’s voice sounded defeated and tired.

“You never argue Mamma, it’s always him—yelling at you like a madman. What’s wrong with him?”

“Don’t you speak like that, he’s your father.” Ramila was inside the kitchen again. She picked up a *jalebi* and offered it to Prateek.

“They’re fresh,” he said and took the one offered to him. “Promise me you won’t give dad any,” he warned.

“Of course not,” she said, but didn’t keep her promise and saved two for her husband. No matter what he did, Moti was her husband, and she knew it was her duty to look after her husband and the father of her child. She took some onions from the basket and began peeling them as Prateek turned to go to his room.

“I’ll call you for dinner,” Ramila said to Prateek’s back as he disappeared up the stairs.

“No Mamma, I’m going to Manoj’s birthday party tonight. I’ll eat

there.”

“And when will you be back?” Ramila called after her son.

\* \* \*

The party was fun, but Prateek couldn't get his mind off Gunjan and their aborted conversation. He borrowed Manoj's laptop and finding a quiet corner, logged onto Facebook. As his homepage opened, he noticed a friend request. It wasn't from Gunjan. Some girl called Bimla Devi had sent him the request with the message, 'Hey handsome, wanna be frnz? Love Ur pic :-).'

Prateek accepted her friend request but didn't reply. He clicked on the coffee mug link, looking for Gunjan to send her a friend request.

Fifteen hundred kilometres away, Gunjan was doing the same thing in her room.

Prateek noticed the friend request come through, accepted it and immediately messaged her, 'I was just about to send u a friend request!'

'Hmm, were u?' Gunjan replied, pleased he was online. 'Was the coffee I offered u bad?' she asked.

'No, nvr had a better 1. Wat made U say so?'

'U disappeared the other day. A 'have a nice day' note before u left wud hav shown sum respect.'

Prateek thought for a second, then typed, 'Orrrrrrrrr maybe I didn't wanna go but I had to, all of a sudden.'

'Hmmm...maybe, or maybe we cud stop discussing that and continue wid our coffee.'

'Our date u mean?'

'Just coffee remember? :P,' she replied, enjoying the chat.

Manoj and his friends were calling Prateek to join them, but he kept chatting with Gunjan. They chatted about Hyderabad and Patna, life, movies and music, books and hobbies, and every possible topic they could bring up.

Gunjan didn't care that it was past ten, or that she needed to wake up early the next morning. She just kept chatting with him, ignoring messages from all her other friends.

Finally, Manoj snatched the laptop away from Prateek and made him join the party. Afterwards, Prateek, helped with the cleanup, all the while

thinking about Gunjan and wondering what she would think of him. Twice in the same day he had disappeared in mid-conversation. Hopefully she wouldn't be upset with him.

\* \* \*

For the next two days, Prateek was busy and didn't get a chance to visit the internet café. Gunjan was on his mind though. She was unlike any other girl he knew. He was comfortable enough to share his feelings with her, something he could never do with a girl before. He wondered if she thought about him as well or if he was just another guy she had chatted with. He needed to find out.

Gunjan kept checking but didn't see Prateek online. She didn't want to admit it, but she actually missed him. She went through his photos, posts and friends list, trying to find out more about him. *I should have taken his number*, she thought to herself.

Two days later, Prateek messaged Gunjan, 'Hi.'

She was offline, but as soon as she received the SMS from Facebook, she logged in excitedly.

'Hey, how u been?'

'Gud. Missed me? ;)' Prateek asked.

'Kinda. Did u miss me?' she replied, hoping her professor wouldn't notice she was using her cell phone in his class.

'Nope. :P.' Prateek lied, as he checked out the photos Bimla Devi had tagged him in.

'Hmm if u didn't miss me, u wudn't have asked me if I missed u.' Gunjan pointed out. 'So where were u all these days,' she inquired.

'Work ☹,' replied Prateek.

'Busy bee!' Gunjan wrote.

Prateek had been busy but he had also been upset for the past couple days. His parents' fights had escalated and his mother was at the receiving end of his father's anger. It angered and depressed him, especially since his mother wouldn't let him protect her or get involved in any way. He wanted to talk to someone, get some advice, but he could never bring himself to mention his family problems to anyone, not even Manoj. But for some reason, he decided to talk to a stranger about it.

'So how r ur parents?' Prateek asked Gunjan.

She wondered why he asked about her parents, but answered anyway. 'Mom is fine and Dad is, well, not with us...mom and dad separated. I hav a cute lil sis too.' Gunjan typed back. Then added, 'Hw r ur parents?'

Prateek read her answer and was surprised. Here he was, trying to learn about other people's parents, only to find out that Gunjan's dad didn't live with her.

'My dad lives with us.' Prateek wrote to her.

His answer unsettled Gunjan. 'I asked u how ur parents were—I didn't ask u if ur dad lived with u,' she expressed her irritation.

'OMG. M sorry! I'm just going through some stress with my parents. I guess that's on my mind. Anyway, what's happening with you?' Prateek tried to change the subject.

'Wat abt ur parents? You wanna talk about it?' Gunjan felt they were birds of the same feather. She had always wondered if there were other families in worse situations than her own. It felt good to talk to someone who could understand what she was going through.

Prateek thought for a moment and then wrote, 'They fight so much, it irritates me.'

He typed again, 'My mom is very sweet and simple, but my dad...I don't know what's wrong wid him sumtym, he yells at her and then she cries. I luv my mom more than anyone in this world n I just want dad to stop hurting her.'

Gunjan read his message and felt sad for him. She typed back. 'My case is sumwat the same. My mom n dad cud never just be without yelling at each other, not even for a single day. So finally, dad got married 2 another woman n began 2 stay wid her. From then on, there was peace in our house. And mom is happy wid us 2 daughters.' She clicked 'send' while slowly letting her breath go, realizing she was holding it as she typed.

Prateek read her message and wanted to comfort her. 'Its good u gals have this unity among urselves. Do u sisters fight?' he asked.

'No. Subah is only seven yrs old. She is very loving.'

'Do u think she misses your dad?'

'No, actually she doesn't.'

'Hmmm it's nice of u to share all this with me.' Prateek said warmly.

'Well, u shared ur situation wid me and my parents are the same so I thought it wouldn't be sumthng shocking for u to hear. Most people don't

understand.'

'After sharing my worry with u I feel much better,' Prateek wrote.

'Yeah me too...' Gunjan smiled.

'Okay, I have to go now. Something's come up.' Prateek sent.

'U should just disappear lyk always. Y tell me! :-/' Gunjan replied.

'Angry? I luv it when a gal gets angry.' Prateek teased her.

'Y?'

'All the more fun making u smile again. Hey, can I hav ur number, if u don't mind?'

Gunjan happily typed it for him.

'That was easy. Lol, thanks. So what was it u wanted to ask me?'

'Will get it when you call : P.'

'My number? Ur kidding me!' Prateek was surprised.

'No. I really missed chatting wid U. Can u gimme a missed call right now. Will save ur number?'

'Sure n yeah I missed u too. Call u sometime soon. Tc beautiful :-\*' Prateek typed and sent it after removing the ':-\*'.  
Prateek typed and sent it after removing the ':-\*'.

'Yes u take care 2. Ciao. :-)' Gunjan typed back. She was smiling. It was the first time she could speak to someone about her family problems and not be pitied. At the end of class she packed her books and stationery, all the while thinking about their conversation.

