

The Great Indian Love Story

Tumultuous—that is how I feel when I think of him. Warm and fuzzy, hot and cold, all at the same time. I think of his fair face, his hard, piercing eyes and dark hair, his gentle hands that could be rough with impatience, and his crooked smile that made me yearn. There were other things about him that also made me yearn, I think with a smile—his strong, magnificent body that made me go weak. The effect he has on me is wonderful, yet at times it is confusing and terrifying. I think of him when I wake up in the afternoon, and when I fall asleep at dawn. I waited for him to call so I could run to him and be cradled his arms again. I ached for him all the time because with him I feel special.

Prologue

I met Serena at a point when I was desperately lonely and bored with my life. I'm not going to lie—there were times when I had wished I didn't know her. Serena was trouble, and I knew it the minute I laid eyes on her. But I realize now that I needed her in my life. Serena's story helped me discover my own. Her experience jolted me out of my stupor and pushed me to take control of the langorous, hollow life that I had lived until then. For that I will always remain in her debt.

I finished my undergraduate degree in the spring of 2008 from the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, which wasn't exactly an amazing school, but it was decent. Lots of kids landed some pretty good jobs on graduation. Unfortunately for me,

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the economic meltdown hit and all of a sudden it seemed like the world was disintegrating—stock markets around the world were crashing, banking institutions were failing, people were being laid off by the thousands, and the US government was hastily trying to put together bail-out packages to help those most in need. Career Services at Amherst University told me point-blank that finding a job would be close to impossible given my unexceptional academic record. They asked me to very seriously consider my options back home in India. In my darkest dreams I had not imagined moving back to India, the country that I had left as a child, and where my parents still lived.

I spent hours on end at Career Services, browsing through thick binders and books, attending one counseling session after another and scouring the internet for jobs. As time went by, and Career Services stopped answering my phone calls, it began to sink in that moving back to India was the only viable option I had. I was an Indian citizen, with a below average GPA in an inconsequential major, with a sub-standard resumé and to top it all I lacked

the necessary social skills to impress interviewers. I was below-average on every score. Period.

I did try, I'll give myself that. I tried hard to get a damn job, probably harder than I had ever tried for anything in my life, because I really did not want to move back to India. The thought of going back, after spending my entire adult life in the US, to a country that had become alien to me was terrifying.

My life at university was by no means fabulous. Most people would have found it boring, but I derived a certain degree of happiness and enjoyment from it. So, my boyfriend Param was geeky and not very good in bed, and he was just another desi investment banker, and my so-called friends said I could do much better, but I did like him quite a bit, and I didn't want to leave him. Not to sound melodramatic or anything, but I was maybe even a little heartbroken. I was sad at the thought of leaving behind my American college life because for me there was peace in this existence. Most people on campus would just let me be, and that's all that I really wanted—to be left alone. I had a couple of friends and they were alright—the kind that provided mild entertainment when it was

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needed, there were a few bars and restaurants that I frequented, the classes weren't so bad either, in fact I actually enjoyed some of them. I would be exaggerating if I said I was brimming with happiness at Amherst, but I can whole-heartedly say that I was content, and it is only now that I realize what a special and amazing feeling that is.

I unceremoniously graduated without a job and spent the summer shuttling between my elder sister's home in Providence, Rhode Island, and Param's shoe-box apartment in Hell's Kitchen, Manhattan, because I didn't have the cash to pay rent. Neither my sister nor Param was particularly helpful in the job search. My sister the academic super nerd, a PhD student at Brown University, and her husband the distinguished doctor encouraged me to enter academia, the only thing they knew. Academia was also the only thing I knew I did not want to do. Param, my boyfriend, who led the dreary banker's life, coming home at 3 a.m., was barely holding on to his own job. I desperately looked for work to no avail. By August it came to a point where my bank balance was nearing zero, and when I had to borrow money from Param for a cup of coffee, it

became blatantly clear to me that it was time to go back to India.

My sister tried to make me feel better by telling me that my parents missed me and that they were growing old and needed me, but it didn't help. My parents bought me a one-way ticket to New Delhi and that was the end of my life as I knew it.

After spending eighteen hours on an Air India flight, the cabin of which reeked of body odour thinly camouflaged with cheap perfume, I found myself in New Delhi, in a lizard-infested guest room with no friends, no boyfriend, my savings exhausted on an unemployed summer. Alright, I'm exaggerating. Things weren't all that bad. The guest room had one resident lizard, my parents were moderately stingy and my father was a powerful government official, so life wasn't terrible by any standard. In a small way it was nice to wake up every morning to a hot breakfast and endless cups of chai, and not have to worry about food, laundry or bills.

I was almost twenty-two, which according to my parents was a suitable age to get married. I expected them to bombard me with bio-datas of eligible bachelors from good homes, listing their age,

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height, weight and annual salary. But surprisingly they were strangely calm about the whole marriage thing. They didn't even push me to find a job, or to apply to grad school, or, for that matter, to do anything constructive with my life. Of course, there were the occasional 'what-are-you-planning-to-do-with-your-life' conversations, when I was summoned by my father early in the morning, but the one thing I had done in college was to master the art of bullshitting, so these discussions weren't much of an ordeal.

I enjoyed spending time at home. We had a beautiful garden, a cute dog, and a cook whose food was tolerable. Patience had always been one of my virtues—I think it stemmed from lethargy—so I could deal with the slow pace of life in Delhi and the even slower internet connection.

I had a few friends in town, from my convent school years, whom I located on Facebook, but most of them were enjoying the trappings of matrimony which to me at this age was a ludicrous thought.

My life was now pretty lame and I didn't particularly mind because I figured this city had nothing more interesting to offer, so I continued

to wallow in my apathy till a job, boy or US visa pulled me out of it.

All in all, I think I was okay, most of the times my parents just left me to my own devices. Which was how I liked it. I wasn't happy—how could one be in this shithole?—but I wasn't sad either. The days passed me by, taking on a rhythm of sorts though I sometimes experienced a strange, inexplicable kind of despondency, a sense of nervous calm that often left me feeling lost. Now when I look back at that time, I realize that this was probably the lull before the crazy storm that was going to hit my life. I would have inadvertently continued on that pathetic path for a long while if I hadn't met Serena.

We met in the locker room of Soul, a trendy new health club and spa. My father, as a senior income tax officer, had been given complimentary membership in the hope that when collection time came around, Soul would be spared. My father being frugal made it a point to go daily, and since my mother had been complaining of my sedentary lifestyle and weight, I started accompanying him.

Soul was my first initiation into Delhi society, and I was quick to realize that it was more a hangout than a gym. Though everything was in place for a

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world-class gym—the equipment was state of the art, the trainers very professional—everyone always seemed to be chilling and hanging out, the small talk between sets and the laughter between reps lasted longer than the sets and reps themselves. The clientele of Soul consisted mainly of middle-aged men who arrived at the gym determined to work out, heading straight for the treadmills where they immediately broke into a fast run, arms flailing, heavy tummies heaving. The uncles, as I liked to call them, would lose steam soon after and then proceed to take rounds of the gym, shaking hands, slapping backs, exchanging stock tips and business gossip with all the other uncles. The aunties, the middle-aged women of the gym, were always dressed in their best. Designer work-out gear and diamonds were *de rigueur*. They wore the latest Serena Williams collection, paired with carefully chosen tennis bracelets, earrings and pendants, the jewels small enough to not get in the way, but big enough to be noticed.

The aunties spent far more time in the plush locker room. They preferred the steam baths and

saunas, which gave them a temporary rosy glow of health, to the gym, where lifting weights was tedious and the general understanding was that the residue from the sweat could not possibly be good for the skin.

It was a known fact around town that the latest and juiciest gossip was exchanged at the ladies' locker room in Soul. This, coupled with the fact that a few young politicians and senior beaucroacts were regular members (courtesy the complimentary memberships), provided priceless networking opportunities. There was a sudden surge of applications for membership, making the membership process at Soul selective, which then led to even more applications. The social climbers, as they were referred to in the sanctuary of the ladies' locker room, had made it a matter of pride to gain membership. Soul was like the hottest nightclub in town with a very tough door.

I spent a significant amount of time in the locker room myself, waiting for my father to finish his hour-long brisk walk on the treadmill, as I detested working out, and it was better to while away time here than anywhere else. In the ladies' locker room I gathered bits and pieces of information and

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began to understand the social dynamics at play. There was the usual gossip about cheating spouses and businessmen who pretended to be living it up while their companies were being run to the ground. But every once in a while a scandal would rock the glitterati at Soul. Like when the son of a famous politician died—for weeks the women in the locker room could not make up their minds whether it was an accident, murder or, horror of horrors, suicide! Or when the daughter of one of the regular members was charged with driving her brand-new Audi out of the showroom and into the thick of a hit-and-run case. I didn't contribute to these heated discussions but always paid close attention so I could go home and share the gory details with my mother. I had never imagined the Delhi of my childhood had changed so much.

On one such day I was sitting in front of a mirror in one of the plush terry bathrobes that they gave members, slowly and liberally applying the fragrant body lotion that was also complimentary, when she came and stood next to me, presumably in search of the highly popular lotion. I looked up at her and quickly looked away because she was completely naked except for a bright red panty adorned with a black bow.

Her overt friendliness was bordering on scary. 'Are you new here?' she asked me. Her words had a tinge of an American accent.

'Yeah, I am actually,' I replied, naturally looking up at her as I spoke, but then I had to avert my glance again given her nakedness, which she obviously had no qualms about.

'Oh, cool,' she said as she rubbed the lotion vigorously on her legs. 'New to Delhi as well? I haven't seen you around.'

'Um, yeah. I just moved here from the States.'

'Oh yeah?' I could sense the sudden interest. She blatantly looked me up and down, assessing me. Basic social etiquette prevented me from doing the same, but I observed her in the mirror out of the corner of my eye.

She was dark and her dull grey pallor was in stark contrast to her peroxide blonde hair which hung around her face in perfect, soft golden curls. She was chubby, with round buttocks and generous love handles that formed a soft roll around her tight red panty. She had nice large breasts, taut and firm. In a way the chubbiness suited her, making her look voluptuous rather than fat. She wasn't really attractive, but she wasn't hideous either.

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She extended her hand, 'Hi, I'm Serena, nice to meet you.' I limply shook her hand and smiled at her weakly, 'Hi, I'm Riya.' She smiled back, a nice, friendly smile that made her dull face glow. 'So how do you like it here in Delhi? You know I was in the States as well. New York. Manhattan, you know. I lived there for five years. I went to NYU, you know NYU, right? I'm sure you know New York University, everyone knows it. But don't worry, moving back is a shock at first and the adjustment will take time, but, you know, there are lots of good people here in Delhi . . . and lots of cute guys,' she said, winking at me.

She had a loud voice and spoke with a strange accent—a mix of a Punjabi and an American accent. She seemed like the kind of person who would say 'anyways.' 'You likin' it here? Have you made friends?' she asked, actually pausing for me to answer before continuing to rub the lotion into her arms.

'Kind of, I guess,' I replied tentatively. There was a moment of awkward silence and then I added, 'To be honest, I don't know many people here.'

She laughed. It was a hearty, loud, brassy laugh, a man's laugh. I didn't think I had said anything particularly funny, but it was nice hearing her laugh,

it broke the awkwardness of the situation.

'Oh, nice, that's just like me.... I lived there for five years, you know, in New York City... and wow did I love that city! I truly miss it, from the bottom of my heart! What a rocking city it is, na?' Now that she had finished applying lotion, the bottle half empty and her body glistening, she lit a cigarette, all the while looking at me, sizing me up. I could feel it, and I wriggled uncomfortably under her gaze. She took a long drag of her cigarette, blowing out a thin stream of smoke through her mouth and nostrils. It looked tempting, that cigarette of hers, it had been a while since I had smoked.

She said to me in a serious tone that made me look up at her, 'Well, sweetie, I was new here too, and now I'm not new anymore. Don't worry, babe, it's a tough city, but you have me now, and I know that we are going to be very good friends.'

As simply as that Serena Sharma became my first friend in Delhi and a fixture in my life. The loneliness of the city drew us together, an unlikely pair.

Serena and I got along well, she liked to talk, and I liked to listen. Truth be told, I didn't have very much to say. So far I had led a fairly

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uneventful life and couldn't recall any stories that might interest her. I was happy to be regaled and shocked by Serena's colourful experiences. She enjoyed talking, and could go on for hours if she had an audience.

I found myself hanging out a lot with Serena because time passed by quickly when I was with her. She was always entertaining and, also, I didn't really have any other friends. Our nights came to take on a routine. I would have dinner with my parents, and by the time they'd retired for the night, Serena would come pick me up in her old rickety as she liked to call the dilapidated car she drove. We would go to one of the twenty-four-hour coffee shops and drink beer and smoke cigarettes. Sometimes when she had a joint, we would smoke the hash in her car and then go eat. Those were the best nights. Serena would order rajma chawal, and I would get chocolate chip pancakes. Serena would start off on one of her stories in her brash voice, and I'd spend the rest of the night giggling.

Serena loved to party. I came to realize that her life revolved around parties. I am not exaggerating if I say that the larger part of Serena's time was spent preparing for, and in anticipation of, the

parties she would attend every weekend. She would strategically spend time at the right restaurants and health clubs and mingle with the right crowd, and inevitably some guy would invite her to a party. She always took me along because she couldn't go alone. I was only happy to have somewhere to go to.

Serena was truly addicted to the Delhi social scene. She would devour the page 3 columns in the newspapers with her morning breakfast. She prided herself on knowing the juiciest Delhi gossip and was a regular contributor to the stories at Soul. She would tell me about the glitziest weddings of the season, who had bought a private jet recently, who was wearing fake diamonds and who was carrying an imitation Louis Vuitton handbag. Even though I didn't personally know any of the people Serena spoke about, I derived cheap thrills from hearing about the tales of the rich and famous because they truly amazed me. I had never imagined that I of all people could be remotely close to anything in the slightest bit glamorous.

With Serena, I found myself seeing and experiencing Delhi in ways I hadn't believed possible. In all my years away I had thought of

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Delhi as I had left it, dusty and lethargic, where everything seemed to move in slow motion even to a child. In the Delhi of my childhood, entertainment was hanging out at the old-world Gymkhana club that always smelt of pesticides, chaat parties in dusty lawns, which inevitably gave me chronic tonsillitis, and the occasional treat of dining at a restaurant in a five-star hotel—the life my parents, well-respected members of the civilized beaurocratic society, still led.

Much had changed since I had moved away. There were new roads, skyscrapers and steel-and-glass malls everywhere. But they all seemed transient, like they would soon lose their shine and fall apart. Plastic hoardings advertised affordable health insurance, the smiling faces of politicians, familiar signs of Western fast food. For how long would it all remain polished? India's heat, dust and rain would wear away all the gloss, leaving everything rusted, corroded and full of gaping holes.

The people here seemed to love plastic. The poor carried their possessions in colourful, meticulously preserved plastic bags. For the rich, plastic designer sunglasses provided protection from the grime and poverty pervading their wealthy neighbourhoods.

Ira Trivedi

Shielding their eyes from the flimsy plastic bags littering the gutters, the privileged remained in the sterile world they had created for themselves.

Slowly, I, too, became immune to the disfigured beggar, the naked child, the starving puppy. It was just easier that way.

Serena

That night we had gone to my friend Kamaya's place. We usually booked a hotel room or went to his guesthouse, but on that occasion we couldn't wait and Kamaya had offered her small apartment in Lajpat Nagar. The grimy bedroom was infested with lizards and ants, and reeked of cheap perfume. We drank the White Mischief vodka that Kamaya had in her freezer and snorted the cocaine that he kept in a small vial in his pocket. I cut the lines with his platinum credit card while he rolled a thousand-rupee note into a pipe. He only snorted through thousand-rupee notes. I remember the night fondly, despite the lizards and the dirty bathroom and the grimy sheets.

We didn't make love. Making love was what Salman and I did, where the sex itself was secondary,

where every kiss, every caress, every action implied something profound—our bodies connecting on a deeper level. With Amar, it was different. I couldn't quite understand it, and I usually understood these things. I might not know much, but I am smart about things like sex. That is not to say it was just about sex with Amar, there was more to it. In a way I did love Amar, but it wasn't the kind of unwavering affection and passion that I had felt for Salman.

I will always remember the morning after. I woke up in Kamaya's bed, the sheets tangled around my naked body. It was still early, but Amar was dressed and ready to leave. Seeing I was awake, he brought his face close to mine as if to kiss me, but all he did was look deeply into my eyes, as if he was truly seeing me for the first time. He continued to stare at me, the expression on his face unfathomable. And then he kissed me on the cheek and said thank you, like he always did, before he walked out of the door.

After Amar left I wondered what he would tell his wife today. Maybe that's why he left early, so he wouldn't have to be interrogated when he

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got home. He became really nervous sometimes, especially after coke, and he would then start pacing back and forth. 'What do I tell her?' he would say to himself over and over again. He would grab his hair from the roots and pull hard. In the beginning, his behaviour used to scare me. I really thought I had done something wrong. I would try my best, even though I was frightened and nervous, to make him feel better. I would hug him and kiss him and hold him, but he would push me away.

I was smarter now. I understood him. I sometimes felt that there was no one in the world who understood him better than I did. Because I knew where he was coming from, I was able to forgive him. I realized that however hard he tried acting like a bad boy, he was soft inside. He was like an overgrown teenager who went through life acting on impulse, not realizing he was hurting people along the way. It was difficult to forgive a grown man like one forgives a child, but I could sense his restlessness and it helped me deal with him. I don't think his wife understood that about him. I could now deal with his anxiety attacks, just as long as I had a joint or a few drinks or even some Charlie to distract me.

I wanted to love Amar, I wanted to be there for him all the time, to help him with the loneliness and pain that I saw in his eyes. But how could I? I wasn't his wife, I wasn't even his girlfriend. What was I to him, I wondered sometimes.

It was the incredible sex and the excitement of an illicit affair that had initially drawn me to Amar. I had promised myself I wouldn't fall for this love bullshit again, not after what had happened with Salman. I was hurting and I needed a distraction. Amar was perfect—with him I didn't have to think, I could just let myself go and revel in the sensations of sex and cocaine. I knew I wasn't capable of falling in love like that again. But before I knew it, spending time with Amar had become more than just a source of pleasure. I reminded myself time and again that I had to stay strong and understand this for what it was—Amar was married, he had a wife and a new-born son, and he loved them. To him our relationship was only about sex . . . though he did tell me once that he loved me. At the time I believed him, but in moments of sanity doubts would surface. I would realize it could have been the alcohol and coke speaking that night.

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I knew the only reason I was thinking this way was because I hadn't seen him for more than a week. I had to meet Amar tonight. He had left for London the day after we had met at Kamaya's and I missed him the entire time he was gone. But he was supposed to return today and I knew he'd be at F Bar. A week away from the Delhi social scene was more than he could handle. I knew I had to be there too.

The only problem was my friend Vik was throwing a party tonight and I had promised I'd go. Maybe I could talk him and his friends into going to the club after his party. But I knew that Vik didn't like nightclubs very much, he preferred hanging out with his coke-head friends and the random firang girls he was always surrounded by. I didn't like Vik all that much because I felt like I *had* to snort coke when I was with him. He never took no for an answer. Don't get me wrong, I enjoyed the sweet sugar, but there were times it made me anxious and my heart would beat really fast. I hated that feeling. The last time it had happened, Vik had smiled and told me it was normal. He then gave me a pill which he said would calm me down, make me less jittery. I don't remember how I got

home afterwards. The pill knocked me out for over twenty-four hours. I had slept for so long that my mother, who usually never entered my room, had actually come in to ask if everything was okay.

But, I had promised Vik, and I have to admit his parties could sometimes be fun. And after that maybe Riya and I could go to F Bar and I'd get to meet my man.



I stared at my ghostly face in the mirror, all one uniform shade from the thick layer of foundation that I had applied. I reached for the blusher to add colour to my cheeks. Then the eye shadow—I prefer darker shades, dark blues and greys, sometimes even black. I feel they make my eyes look smokey and glamorous. I used mascara to lengthen my short eyelashes, and then the most important part of my make-up routine—kajal, which I applied liberally. Soon it would spread giving my eyes a sexy, messy look. I rubbed scented oil on my body, and then reached for the short black dress that lay, freshly ironed on the bed. The neckline of the dress revealed my generous cleavage and accentuated my

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breasts, making them look voluptuous. The short skirt displayed my legs to an advantage. I slipped my pedicured feet into golden stilettos, grabbed my car keys and quietly slipped out.

My mother and stepfather were still awake, but I didn't say bye. I didn't like my stepfather seeing me all dolled up like this. Not like he was a perv or anything, but he was only fourteen years older than me. I mean I had dated guys his age. As I passed my parents' room, I heard him cooing lovingly to Tanya. He loved that baby so much—it made me sad when I saw them together, father and daughter. It reminded me of Papa.

I took the elevator—an old-fashioned one with a rusty iron grill door—which creaked dangerously as it made its way down to the ground floor. The young guard stared at me, looking me up and down, his gaze lingering on my legs. I shot him my dirtiest look, our eyes meeting for a brief second before he looked away with a hint of a smile on his lecherous face.

Outside, the air felt thick and heavy with moisture. The monsoon was my favourite season. There was something beautiful and sad about the grey clouds which would wreak havoc for short

spells. I walked to my old rickety and tugged at the jammed door which opened with a creak. It was Papa's old car that I had inherited. It had caused a stir when he'd bought it—the Maruti Esteem was considered a luxury car back then. Everyone in Chandigarh had wondered how a police officer could afford such a car. He must be corrupt, they all said, but I knew the truth. Papa was an honest officer—he always had been—but he was a spendthrift, just like me.

I hit the accelerator to dispel these thoughts about Papa and the car let out a groan. I drove through the streets of Lutyen's Delhito pick up Riya. In this part of the city everything looked the same. The wide streets were lined with huge green trees, the buildings were low and flat, their whitewashed walls sparkling in the moonlight. I could catch glimpses of the spacious bungalows behind the bamboo gates painted green and over the low red brick walls. Street names were written in English, Hindi, Urdu and Punjabi on concrete arrow-shaped signsboards. There was something wonderful about this part of Delhi. For the people who were in the know, it reeked of money, influence and class. Those

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who weren't could never even imagine the kind of wealth and power that existed here.

I reached Riya's house and gave her a missed call like she'd asked me to. While I waited for her in the car I redid my make-up. I then reached for the nearly empty perfume bottle that lay in the glovebox and spritzed myself. I took out a cigarette from the case, struck a match and lit it. As I sucked on the filter, I felt the smoke travelling down my throat and filling my lungs. I slowly let it out through my mouth. The first drag was always the best. I can clearly remember my first cigarette. The way the smoke had stung the back of my throat was painful and it had brought tears to my eyes. Much had changed since then—I now smoked a pack a day. I laughed to myself, who could have ever imagined that my life would turn out this way.