DILVILPYAARVYAAR

Personal essays.
All about love.
Rising Flame is a National Award winning nonprofit organisation based in India, working for recognition, protection, and promotion of human rights of People with Disabilities, particularly women and youth with disabilities. Rising Flame’s vision is to build an inclusive world in which diverse bodies, minds, and voices thrive with dignity; live free of discrimination, abuse, and violence; and enjoy equal opportunities and access. Since our establishment in 2017, we aim to enable persons with disabilities standing at multiple intersections to have a voice, have a space, be heard and lead from the front. As a self-led organisation, we are committed to upholding disability justice values and feminist principles. (Website: www.risingflame.org).

Dil Vil Pyaar Vyar is a Rising Flame campaign around valentine's done in 2020 and 2021. It is a series of essays on love, intimacy, relationships and disability in collaboration with mainstream spaces. Personal stories about dating, crushes, rejection, heartbreak, expectations from partners or of partners and building own worlds of romance and pleasures. Dil Vil Pyaar Vyaar is an effort to amplify voices of disabled women; narratives on love that seldom are seen in mainstream discussions on romance.

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Dating with disability in the times of COVID!

Nidhi Goyal

New routines away from the city

It was a monsoon night and I wanted to sit down with a steaming cup of coffee and pen down my thoughts. But damn, the coffee powder would take six days to deliver from Amazon! That is how the world we lived in was during the lockdown and semi lock-down stages of COVID-19.

With huge risks to vulnerable populations, like my ageing parents with health conditions and of-course me as a blind woman, we moved away from the city as soon as the country went into danger. This was even before the lockdown was officially announced in the country. We were extremely fortunate to move into a community living center, 120 km from my home in Mumbai.
'We had our speaking days and non speaking days but I feel that COVID was indeed the testing time that brought us closer and made us more sensitive to our imperfections, differences, and desires.'
This combination of the crisis situation and my location meant that we were safe and away from the city. But it also meant that I did not receive all the services that had begun for the city folks. But also, instead of thinking of the limitations, I pushed my chair back and said, Okay, Okay what were my options - tea? juices? Ice cream?

I walked around touching different boxes in my kitchen and settled on the electric kettle. Hot water would have to do now. And this is what life was, for a young woman on a Friday night, sitting alone with a cup of hot water for company.

But half smiling, half annoyed, I was not sure who was to blame- COVID 19? Or my ‘early to bed’ boyfriend?

**Promises and uncertainty**

After eight years of friendship and a period of hesitation and figuring out, we had finally started dating in January 2020. The interesting thing was that none of the hesitations were stemming from our disabilities. Our thoughts, beliefs and working styles were the reason for our moments of pause and uncertainty.

And finally, 2020 was going to be magical for us. My man had asked me out over the phone when I flew from his city and landed into mine. Seriously over the phone! A thing that I don’t let him forget. He had followed it up with a please, a stronger please and a very very strong please requesting me to move in with him.
The private dining area of the fancy Gurgaon restaurant was full of whispered promises – promises of togetherness. Neither of us knew then, how much these promises would be tested in the months to come.

Months of innovation, months of frustration and months of struggling to support each other remotely was too much. It was of course too much for everyone, but particularly difficult for a couple like us.

Hmm lets see, because we both are extremely calendar driven; I for one hate long distance, he was living without a flatmate after years, I am a foodie and I had no access to my comfort junk food / restaurants! And oh yes, perhaps because I live with blindness and he lives with low vision.

A month passed and he would not ask for a video call and I had begun to feel annoyed. Being used to being showered with compliments or the typical boyfriend visual flattery, I was feeling starved. And somewhere the insecure part of me was creeping up on the confident young woman that I am.

‘I love your smile’

Very hesitantly I asked him, don’t you want to see me? The helplessness in his voice cut me. ‘Of course, I want to see you baby but I don’t want you to feel like it would be difficult for you and don’t want to inconvenience you. You are going through so much otherwise, that I didn’t want to ask for you to find a good wi-fi spot and make that extra effort of adjusting the camera’.

Holy crap! The resistance, the silence was not because I was not attractive, or because he did not miss me, but because of some misplaced noble reason of saving energy and effort.
Grinning like crazy, I made my first video call after 40 days of lockdown and, ‘Hey gorgeous, I love your smile,’ were the words that welcomed me and parched my soul.

But as someone who was very tactile even before she became blind, I struggled a lot with losing that privilege. Yes, we were in different cities even before, but with my crazy work schedule and him working out of the city which I visited at least twice a month for work, made it very convenient!

So this long distance relationship was not so long distanced for us. But now the digital world was the only link, and quite frankly on bad days I would think this link was very tenuous literally and metaphorically. Literally because my cellular network was no good where I had moved to and Wi-Fi was not yet installed.

The only temporary or sometimes available piece was the five-year old phone with not great batteries or mic or other things which housed an additional working sim for me. Literally because unlike for others, the entire digital world was not open for us both as screen reader and magnifier users.

The inaccessibility's of apps, websites, and digital content meant that options albeit there, were also limiting at times, which meant that we could not just pick a favourite film to watch, but would have the additional layer to check if and which film of ours had audio description.

This meant that when we wanted to send little things to each other, we were restricted to the e-commerce sites that were accessible, which some would say are many but sometimes the cynic in me said yes but always fewer than non-disabled folks.
**Life is not Bollywood!**

Metaphorically, the link was delicate because we had just figured a way of being with each other, of ways that worked for us as a couple. And wham, bam! the world had changed. We no longer knew what worked for us as individuals, let alone what worked for us as a couple.

What would something as basic, but as important as spending time, would mean for us digitally? What would our time expectations from each other be when he was living all alone at home with no additional help or human interactions, and I was suddenly living in a closed community with not my usual work infrastructure and many demands on my time.

The big question was how would we manage our stresses and frustrations being ambitious young professionals? With the corporate lay-offs, will he be sacked? Would there be significant pay cuts? As the head of the organisation, other questions assailed me - would my team be able to perform? Were they safe? What were the urgent responses we had to think of and provide to the community my organisation worked for?

Even realists like me sometimes wish relationships were more like Bollywood where little effort gave huge rewards; where happily ever after was a give in ; of course where you start understanding every breath the partner takes. Sigh, life is not Bollywood and relationships are hard, you need to invest in them.

**Creating intimacy digitally**

But what happens when you have very little time, strength and energy to invest in them, what happens when external factors make it harder- like dating with a disability during COVID? What happens when the pride of being independent and of having reached there in life after many struggles just vanishes because of the new normal in the crisis?
As a partner, I can tell you now that I felt deprived not only because we didn’t meet. But I felt deprived because there was no way for me to see his swollen cheeks when he wanted to throw a tantrum and get his way, there was no way for me digitally to see his head bob up and down in enthusiasm when he planned something.

And there was no way for me to sense his gaze saying he finds me sexy, which his breathing and touch would tell me otherwise.

And I shared this sadness with him at some point when it all became too much, and I noticed since then he started describing all his actions and sometimes his reactions for me as well. ‘I am also folding my clothes while talking to you’ and ‘this is that shirt I wore and you really liked last time’, became just some of the descriptions that were peppered for me to fill the visual silences in our intimacy; and all without me asking for it.

Long distance felt longer

Think, innovate, try, repeat the process became our mantra. Watching films together? Damn the viewing party feature on that app which was not accessible. Playing games together on an accessible gaming website? But he is not interested in cards. Reading a book? Hmm, I like fiction and he likes non-fiction.

We never gave up finding newer things to do. Honestly with all our constraints and difficulties we also tried to follow each idea through, but it was not always successful. We are not saints, so we did shove the blame of incompletion on each other. But we knew one thing for sure, that both of us wanted to spend time with each other, and we were trying really really hard.

Distance in the times of COVID is harder, but long distance in the time of COVID with a partner who lacks the skills to indulge in romance and intimacy over the phone ... hits the top of the difficulty scale!
How could we completely understand each other when we were ourselves coming to terms with our altered situations and ways of living. The initial months were difficult, uncertain, and left us trying very hard and often feeling misunderstood.

So work pressures kept mounting and work had to be done. It would be great to have a virtual office space, wouldn’t it? What better than to share that space with him…. 7 a.m. he was at his desk and I was on the makeshift desk – the foldable bed table.

More laughs, gifts and dates to come

Occasionally the sharp inhalation or the frustrated sigh or the noisy stretch made the hours together really come alive for me. I got to work with someone else around which really enhances my productivity, and him having the possibility to look at me intermittently through a few hours every day was perhaps the key for both of us. We felt closer, we felt supported and honestly, we both also felt a little smug and smart for having come up with this idea.

We had our bad days and good days. We had our speaking days and non speaking days but I feel that COVID was indeed the testing time that brought us closer and made us more sensitive to our imperfections, differences, and desires.

Looking back, I can laugh and smile and feel awe at the same time. The first gift that he sent me during the lockdown and semi lockdown was a chargeable fan since electricity was uncertain during the summer and then during the monsoons, and he wanted me to sleep through the nights.

Let me tell you that this thoughtfulness carved yet another special spot in my heart for him, perhaps more than even all his consequent gifts did. People always imagine that I am the creative one, but thinking out of the box, innovating, and researching are his thing- perhaps a gift of his Ivy league education.
My first lock down date was a stand-up comedy show which he bought tickets for and we watched it together at a distance. The show was on zoom and I was sitting with two different earphones in my ears - one to hear the performance on zoom, and one to hear him over a phone call. Our synchronised laughs calmed us down and brought us close in unique ways- and left a hope for many more dates to come!

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*Dil Vil Pyaar Vyaar, a Rising Flame campaign, was originally published on Love Matters in 2020 and 2021*
I have lived with chronic pain from Fibromyalgia for more than five years now. Chronic pain that is ever present and often disabling. It has been an active member of my life these past few years and I navigate it the best I can. It has of course been part of most of the years I have been in a relationship with S.

So when I talk publicly about my pain and mention this ambiguous partner, S, I am asked: ‘Oh what does he do? Oh he knows about your illness? Oh he is still with you?’

I am forced to smile and say yes. These questions are the most common questions I have heard but unfortunately they are not the only ones! I have been asked this so often that I think a part of me has internalised it.
‘All around us we see relationships of a certain kind. Date nights that are regular, outdoors....And so many other couples things. Many of these didn’t fit us and my disability made much of this harder’. It is not easy to defy the ‘norm’ that society not just accepts, but rewards.’
A year ago, S and I went on a small trip with his friends. This was our first trip with anyone other than each other. I was nervous. I rarely go on vacations with people I am not close with because of the erratic and unpredictable nature of my illness and disability.

I need breaks often, I suddenly deteriorate into pain and I come across as anti-social because of my early bedtime. Moreover, very few people knew about how bad my condition sometimes gets. S, of course, knew my condition very well.

This was a vacation I had taken with his friends after a lot of hesitation. It is difficult to associate my general peppiness with an invisible, relentless pain. But the reality is the co-existence. My way of dealing with it was not mentioning it to everyone and just taking the breaks I needed. In our pre-vacation conversation, he promised me that I could be myself and sleep whenever I wanted. I nodded and made the plans.

All part of our relationship

On our trip, I arrived late in the evening and we headed off to our stop for the night. Knowing my need to sleep immediately after travel, we just crashed. The next day onwards, we were to spend much of our time at the beach with his friends. Though we had been together for many years, I hadn’t met a lot of his friends.

I was nervous especially because I didn’t want anyone to feel pity for me; a oh-so common reaction to my illness and disability. My books, my medicines, all my safety nets were by my side as we headed into this vacation. He, as he is accustomed to do, checked on me every few hours and whispered that I could nap whenever I felt like it. It was reassuring.

Over the years of being with me, he had learned to notice the small signs of fatigue and pain. One of those evenings by the beach, after roaming around in the sun, a migraine creeped up on me. I sat with everyone for as long as I could before heading off to bed. It was early, like 6 pm early. This I have learned is not something people my age relate to - going to bed at 6 pm. But, S just said okay, gave me a peck on my cheek and went out for dinner with his friends.
Sleeping early, not mixing alcohol with my meds, eating only when I can, eating tonnes of sugar when I am sad and chugging lime sodas to relieve headaches were all part of our relationship. One we had built with care and of course, numerous arguments.

**Not easy to defy the ‘norm’**

All around us we see relationships of a certain kind. Date nights that are regular, outdoors. Trips together. Sex periodically. And so many other couples things. Many of these didn’t fit us and my disability made much of this harder. It is not easy to defy the ‘norm’ that society not just accepts but rewards.

Over the years of being together, we have had to carefully build a love language of Volini, hot packs, yummy home cooked dinners, walks in parks and asking the difficult questions like: Have you taken your meds?

Illness has taken me by surprise and definitely has taken my relationship by surprise. It has been hard for it to not be part of the relationship. When it is so much a part of me, can I truly keep it away from him?

Somedays, we don’t mention it at all and go out in the evening for dinner, a drink (neither of us are much drinkers) and return home to turn in early. Other days, one of us cooks comfort food the other loves and we eat with our own TV shows with headsets in bed. Quiet presence. Fingers touching. Hot packs for company.

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How Does a Person With Disabilities Dream of ‘The One’?

By nature, I am a person who likes to talk and be with people. When it comes to working or talking with opposite gender, I stutter and make a fool of myself before them. Part of it is because I have studied in girls’ schools and colleges all my life. Even in my workplace, I mainly work with female colleagues. This makes me nervous whenever I talk to guys.

The other part, I attribute is to my fantasies because of the movies I have watched and the novels I have read. Being a person with blindness from birth, the comments and criticisms people make and the way the author describes their imagination in the novels becomes my reality.
“As a person with blindness, the way the author describes their imagination in the novels becomes my reality.”
I began to see the world through these outlets. I visualise everything based on other people’s opinion. It is after all human tendency to exaggerate everything - be it positive or negative while talking about it. I absorb every comment, detail and criticism hungrily since it describes to me what’s happening around me. This has made me second guess myself at every turn in my life. Like other humans, I too wished to never be criticised by anyone.

One of the influences, as I had mentioned before, was novels. All these novels described women in the same manner. One with curves in all the right places. I know I am a little pudgy in the middle. This has always added to my insecurity at social gatherings. These novels have also influenced what I imagine men to be like and behave like. Macho, cracking funny jokes. I wish I too had a little naughtiness inside me.

**Am I Worthy of Being Loved and Cherished?**

It is painful to admit that when I meet someone new, unless and until he describes himself; how old he is or until I hear from him or others who describe his attire, I am unable to build a full picture of him.

It’s not easy to understand a person only through words that he speaks. My fear of a man becoming my caregiver rather than treating me as a partner has made me additionally weary of approaching men.

Being a blind person, I need a lot of assistance while going to a new place whether its restaurant or a resort. I always wonder how will my partner feel while taking me. Won’t he feel shy? Won’t people stare at both of us? How would a man handle it?

These thoughts plague me as I try to think of relationships and dating as a blind woman. It can be difficult for others when you need help all the time. Sometimes, I feel like a third wheel even when I am just out with my friends.
I always end up in the background whenever the conversation develops. It is also why I avoid parties or other crowded places. When the DJ shouts, ‘Come on! It’s time to dance!’ Everybody cheers, takes hold of each others hands and move to the dance floor. And I find myself sitting alone and mulling over my thoughts about belonging and my inabilities or shortcomings.

I have encountered guys who talk to me out of curiosity or who feel inspired when they see my ease of use of technology. They are good natured men. I try to be witty, even charming, but somewhere everything goes awry and I am back to square one. I never really understood why and I was never able to be a part of my peer group who enjoy casual friendships and romance.

Where Does Self Love Even Begin

It’s rare that I want to dress up nicely and go out. I wonder if anybody around is appreciating how I look. Because of my medical condition, my eyeball keeps rolling around, I am told and I can’t look anybody straight, much less looking deep into someone’s eyes. This is how I am told connections are made, right? One look and forever in love. So I believe there’s simply no way for them to connect with me.

It’s true I have never looked at the possibility of going out with guys who have the same disability as me. Again, this is because of my fantasies from when I was young, I have the dream of riding with my partner on the back of his Harley Davidson. He should fill the visual silences during movies or sports and in a conversational manner making me feel it is interactive. He would be sensitive to what I could do by myself and where I would need his assistance. He would be able to value my abilities and ask for help without any apprehension.

Yet, I also believed that all my expectations, wishes, dreams reflected me giving myself second-class treatment.

I believe that when I meet a person who accepts me as well as criticises me with humour, and who instils confidence in me about my
worth, I would lose all my inhibitions, self-inflicted doubts and find peace and love. I would belong. When I reflect on it deeply, I feel I am not being rational. But I don’t think love and reasoning always go hand in hand.

The author is a Rising Flame I Can Lead fellow.

Dil Vil Pyaar Vyaar, a Rising Flame campaign, was originally published on The Quint in 2020
I thought he loved me but...

Vinayana Khurana

One among many

I remember that day vividly. I was wearing my favourite purple dress and was strolling in the park in my locality on my wheelchair. I was listening to my favourite songs on my earphones when some guys walked past me and turned around with sympathetic faces, glancing at my wheelchair. I thought I should make the first move and try to strike up a conversation with them.

I asked the guys what they did and they started talking to me. Meanwhile I saw that one of the guys, who was wearing a white shirt, was watching me with a concerned look. He introduced himself as Aditya and told me that he was a musician.
Vinayana met Aditya. She was a poet and he – a musician. It seemed like a match made in heaven until she heard Aditya’s conversation with his friend.
He seemed really interested in me so to take the conversation forward, I told him that I also wrote poems. That is how we started interacting with each other. Aditya wanted to add music to my poems. I was happy and excited.

**Walks to remember**

We started walking together in the evenings. During one of our walks, we also exchanged numbers. Every day, Aditya would message me and we would meet up. I was beginning to develop a soft corner for Aditya. We used to talk about poems and music. I loved his company and wanted to hang out with him more often.

We started spending a lot of time together. We were either walking or continuously texting each other. I was really happy that I had found such an awesome friend.

Soon, I developed feelings for him. Aditya became a great support in my life as I used to tell him about my ups and downs. He used to guide me through it all. He always said that whenever I would need him he would always be there.
Heart in a poem

With every meeting, I was getting to know him better – like how much he loved to drive his car and how he loved his family very much. I loved how he would look at me with that special smile whenever I talked to him. There were lots of cute little things I was getting to know about him and my feelings grew stronger as the days went by. I knew that I was falling for Aditya and yes, I wanted to tell him.

I decided that I would write a poem and tell Aditya how I felt about him. I spent days and nights writing out the most beautiful poem. I really hoped that my words could convey what I really felt for him in my heart.

I wrapped the poem in an envelope and went on my wheelchair to meet Aditya as usual in the park. I was very happy to see him outside. I thought that this is the golden opportunity for me to tell him about my feelings.

A random girl

As I approached closer, I heard him talking to a friend. I heard his friend asking him about me. His answer left me surprised, shocked and heartbroken. He told him I was just a random girl and he talks to me because of sympathy.

I was heartbroken... but I had the dignity to drive my wheelchair past Aditya and never look back.
This is a small excerpt of the poem that I wrote for him:

‘We connected on a different level,
He understood my poetry,
I understood his love for music,
We talked like two strangers becoming friends,
But,
Sometimes, somethings are better incomplete,
Sometimes, if something lasts forever,
It would ruin its own perfection.’

Vinayana, 25, is a Delhi University postgraduate and loves to write poetry.

Dil Vil Pyaar Vyaar, a Rising Flame campaign, was originally published on Love Matters in 2020 and 2021.
He felt he was doing me a huge favour!

Srishti Pandey

That friend request

I was in tenth standard and had just returned home from school when I received a message on Facebook. I would rarely receive texts from someone except my close friends. So I was excited when I saw the notification on my phone. It was a senior from school asking if I was in a relationship. I replied with a ‘no’.

His reply left me stunned. It read, ‘Oh! But you’re too cute to be on a wheelchair! And you know what? Don’t worry! I am willing to date you.’ I didn’t know what to say so I left the chat instantly.
I don't want a caretaker disguised as a boyfriend. What I want from the person I choose is respect and love. I want romantic dates, flowers, movies, holding hands, hugs and kisses. Why is it so hard for people to understand that I want the same things they want? The same ability to fall in love and be loved.
I am willing to date you. I kept repeating the words to myself all day long. It was almost funny how easily and without a second thought he assumed that I am single because no one wanted to date me! He had also assumed that I'll remain single if he didn’t ask me out. He felt he was doing me a huge favour!

**My chances at love**

I called my friend that evening and to my surprise, she said something even more bizarre! She said that I should think about dating him as he's the first guy ever to ask me out. According to my friend, I didn't have a lot of ‘chances’ at love like my non-disabled friends.

I was shaken because it came from a close friend. Though I was hurt, I couldn’t share my pain with her. For some reason, I have always been bad at confronting people and I thought that even if I did confront her, she wouldn’t understand my point of view.

However, it wasn't the first time someone gave me advice like this. I’ve been told by people that either I am not made for love at all or that I should fall in love only with a specific type of guy.

Not a single family function goes by without random aunties and uncles telling my parents that it’s gonna be a task to find me a decent man. To everyone, I couldn’t find men who would like me for me - just men who were ‘willing to date me’.

Perhaps my friend that evening asked me to date that guy because he perfectly ‘fit in’ the category of guys she thought suitable for me. Guys who will be ‘willing to take care of me. Guys who will be ‘willing to make an effort without any expectations’. Guys who will be ‘willing to help me out' with literally 'all my work'.

All these statements come from the place where my value as a human, as a woman, as a person looking for love, is reduced to my disability. As if I am not capable of any of these tasks or in actuality, I am incapable of contributing at all in a relationship.
For most of my life, I was made to believe that relationships would never work out for me. And so I would freak out or become awkward around men who would ask me out. I would take advice from here, there, everywhere and mess it all up. Because I didn't expect that someone even half decent would want to date me! Let alone fall in love with me.

My expectations were repeatedly lowered by everyone around me.

**What does an ideal date look like?**

When my friends would discuss the kind of date they'd want to go on, they'd start describing an 'ideal date' for me as well - without even asking what I wanted! Their description of my dates would be of a man who'd be extremely caring and sweet of course - totally willing to go out with me. When we went out, he'd push my wheelchair (without even asking me if I need help, of course) and basically do everything for me; from ordering food to picking me up and dropping me `safely'. Available to me at all times.

But I didn't want any of that.

I didn't want a caretaker! I longed for romantic dates; just like they did. I'd dream of flowers, movies, holding hands, hugs and kisses! But my friends would censor and invalidate my ideas of a date - reminding me again that my decisions will be made for me. I was always left feeling embarrassed and anxious after their reactions.

For instance, I told one of my friends about the guy I had a crush on. At first she was surprised. She wasn't expecting me to have a crush. She asked me a hundred times if it were true. Then not only did she laugh at my face but also went around telling others about how silly I was being. They kept talking about this for days! I was so embarrassed that I stopped sharing things with my friends.

All these experiences have led me to ask myself if it is 'hard to love me'. If I was irrational for thinking that I’d find a guy who'd be compatible with me. If I was silly to believe in love.
I’d also wonder why it was so hard for people to understand that I wanted the same things they did. That I had expectations too. Wishes. Desires. Dreams. Fantasies. The same ability to fall in love and be loved.

I remember daydreaming about my first crush and wondering if they’ll ask me out. We weren’t in the same classes, but I would get a chance to see them at school everyday. I never got an opportunity to talk to them because they were popular, while no one even knew my name; I’m pretty sure they didn’t even know that I existed.

But that didn’t stop me from dreaming about it all. I still think about how magical it would be if they had felt the same. How my friends would tease me with their name. How they would take me out for a coffee and how we could talk about everything and anything! It was so beautiful just thinking about it. Dreaming about living this fantasy.

It is simple for me. I don’t want a ‘caretaker’ disguised as a boyfriend. What I want from the person I choose is respect and love! I never wished (or wish) for a partner who would overlook my disability. My disability is a part of me. I wish for a partner who is ready to let go of his inhibitions and is willing to learn about my likes, dislikes and even my quirks.

I believe love is much more than doubts, risks, and definitely more than sympathy. In fact, it’s nothing like any of this. If it brings risks, it also brings new learnings. If it brings doubts, it also brings acceptance. No one should ever be told that love isn’t made for them. Love doesn’t mind. Everyone deserves to love and be loved.

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*Dil Vil Pyaar Vyaar, a Rising Flame campaign, was originally published on Love Matters in 2020 and 2021*
All I see around me looks like love

Dr. Deepa Venkatesh

From mutual friends to Facebook friends

I heard about him through a common friend. He was a senior at college, a person with a disability and a dentist like myself. The moment I found out about his disability, I decided that he was the one.

His disability is a little milder than mine, which attracted me to him, as I felt he wouldn’t look down on me, and that we would also be able to support each other. I began thinking of ways to get closer to him. Through Facebook, I texted him a query on our subject. To my elation, he replied immediately. I then got his WhatsApp number, and we began to message on each other’s status, always very formally.
‘Sometimes, the simplest things are what we need the most, and all I wanted was to catch his attention. I never told him, or anybody else, about how I felt, but I think I secretly loved him. My life felt like a Tamil song – kanbathellam... kadhaladi... (all that I see around me looks like love!’
Regrets and Desires

I have always regretted not being like any other person my age. I missed doing the things young people generally do, like flirting and having fun with guys. Even though that’s not the kind of thing I actually wanted to do, I couldn’t help but think, why am I not like them? Why can’t I even talk to guys? Would I appeal to anyone?

Every time I met someone new, I would yearn for them to be my potential life partner, but they only left me heartbroken.

Once, in a conversation with a colleague and a good friend of mine, I told her that I wished to marry a dentist. She immediately exclaimed, ‘You are quite overconfident.’

My dear friend, is it wrong to wish for a spouse from the same profession? Would you have said the same if a so-called ‘normal’ person had expressed the same desire? Do people with disabilities not have a choice when choosing a life partner?
Finally, a first date

I am 34 now, and while most of my friends are married, I am still looking for my soulmate. After two years of formal messages on WhatsApp and Facebook, I decided it was time to tell my secret crush how I felt. I could not help but think, what if he rejects me because of my disability?

But we had common interests, and he seemed too good to miss out on, so I finally sent him a WhatsApp message expressing my feelings. To my surprise, he said he would call me the next day. My heart was pounding with anxiety. We spoke for an hour, got to understand each other better, and my love for him only increased. We decided to meet, and I travelled 250 km to meet him in a café.

This time, I didn’t want to leave any stone unturned. I groomed myself well, got my face bleached to become two shades lighter, grew my hair from a short pixie to a shoulder bob, curled my hair, wore my best blue dress, carried my crutches, and took a gift for him.

This was my first time speaking to him in-person, and he was just dashing! He looked like a superman to me. I noticed his cat eyes, a colour midway between white and black, and his blue and white striped t-shirt.

Nothing he said about himself was new to me, other than the fact that he was a strict Brahmin. He asked me about my family background too, which left me a little irritated. I am not from an ‘upper class family’.

All I am looking for is someone who can stand by my side physically, mentally and emotionally. Truly beautiful relationships are not meted by terms and conditions, but by two people who can trust and understand each other.
Holding on to hope

As the date came to an end, he left saying we were friends. My heart couldn’t settle for just this. I didn’t give him the gift, just thanked him for spending time with me, and left without turning to look back.

When there was no message from him the next day, I wrote one myself, thanking him again for the most wonderful first date. His reply was formal, wishing me luck with my future endeavours.

Still, there remains something undeniably attractive about him that I cannot express. It’s a love that feels unfathomable and unbreakable. We continue to message each other on status, and I am still hoping for a message from him saying he will marry me. It’s the possibility of having a dream that makes life interesting, isn’t it?

Dr Deepa Venkatesh is currently working as associate professor in Kodagu institute of medical sciences Madikeri. She is an avid writer, passionate entrepreneur and a canine lover. She gets her joy from small things around her and is especially inclined towards music. She is one of the I Can Lead fellows 2020 at Rising Flame.

This piece was copyedited by Zarah Udwadia

Dil Vil Pyaar Vyaar, a Rising Flame campaign, was originally published on Love Matters in 2020 and 2021
I have a disabled body but an abled heart!

Kavya Mukhija

Out of the Movies

Around the time of puberty, when love hormones spike inside us love birds, I too had the teeny-weeny feeling bloom within me. I was 12, studying in Grade 7 in a reputed school in South Delhi. I had a crush. Let’s call him Arnav. Arnav was tall, his hair hazel brown, the kind you see in movies. He looked exactly like he was out of one.

I first saw him on our first day of Grade 7 in early April. He was a new admission and our class teacher had called him up to the front to introduce him to the class. He was smart, lean and extremely cute. He had the perfect teeth and a sparkling smile. Arnav had a wheatish complexion and eyes as blue as the ocean. In the young heat of April, he felt like a whiff of cool breeze.
Arnav didn't have the slightest idea how much Kavya liked him. A part of her wanted to break it to him when he came back one time to class to grab his water bottle during a lunch break. But what stopped Kavya from doing so?
The back bencher

As the days passed, I got to know that he was a sportsperson as well. And as stories of his sportsmanship made rounds, I got to know that he’d set the basketball court on fire when he played. I, however, never got a chance to watch him play live. The teachers in my school were very scared that the ball might hit and injure me and thus, I would stay inside the classroom during PT periods.

You could find Arnav sitting in one of the last benches while my seat was reserved in the very front, just across the teacher’s desk. So, while it is evident that we were far away in terms of physical proximity, somewhere deep down I had the feeling that we were even farther apart in other terms too – I was a girl with a disability and he was non-disabled.

Love is all around

During these delicate years, everyone around me was in love, tasting crumbs of the newly-born relationships. Love was in the air quite literally. My friends would tell me with a lot of excitement about how their boyfriends and girlfriends gifted them chocolates or how the date they went on was, and I would think to myself when would I get a chance to be the protagonist in a story like this. Or will I ever get one?

So when love surrounded me, I was skeptical. None of my friends really knew if I also liked someone - someone from their own class. I don’t think they could fathom that I was capable of having a crush because my heart knows how to love, even when my body might not be able to express. All my fantasies stayed where they were - inside my heart.
Almost told him but...

Even Arnav didn’t have the slightest idea how much I liked him. A part of me wanted to break it to him when he came back one time to class to grab his water bottle during a lunch break. It was a Wednesday, the day when we would have our PT class. (I remember because he was wearing the sports uniform - blue house t-shirt and dark blue track pants. He looked like his usual self - hair ruffled, frameless specs perched upon his nose making him look like the greatest nerd ever and his skin glowing beautifully even in May heat.)

But a part of me was scared of what might follow. I didn’t know how he’d react. I also didn’t know if he’d laugh, or say that he didn’t feel the same way and all my yearnings would come crashing down right there.

Friends forever?

Though we didn’t date, we were friends - really good ones. Over the years, we talked about psychology, books and poetry. I’d call him up and we’d talk about anything. He was an extrovert and I, an introvert. So, he was the one who did all the talking, and I listened patiently.

His thoughts were deep, people with thought processes like his are rare. His sense of humour was great. He had this magical power to uplift anyone’s (read: my) mood with the click of a finger. Being with him felt like being free, owing to the space he had provided me with. He was a movie lover and would binge watch his favourite blockbusters as soon as they’d hit the screens. His favourite movie was the psychological thriller named ‘Split.’ Of course it had to be - love for psychology ran in his blood. With all that he was about, how could I not fall for him?

We had become friends over a piece of literature. It was when I had written a piece for an online publishing website that he’d pinged me personally about how he’d loved it. Though we were in the same class, this is how our first interaction turned out to be!
Out of sight, out of mind?

As the years flipped by, our friendship grew. Though I couldn’t devour his matches live, I made sure that I wished him all the luck before every match. Once when I wished him best of luck, he said, ‘Now I’m certain that the victory is ours!’ He even winked!

Trust me, it was everything I could ever wish for. But once we were out of school, our calls lessened and our friendship faded. We’re, however, virtually connected through social media and sometimes, I even stalk him online. I still think of his sparkling smile and all our treasured conversations, and wonder if he remembers me too.

I never told him what I felt for him and how could I? He was in a relationship already and he looked happy too. Moreover, I wanted to keep this little friendship of ours safe. Seeing him together with his partner made me feel jealous. It also made me hate my naïvety of keeping mum. Sometimes, I do think that if he had hinted on his likeness for me (if there was), maybe I’d have let him know about my fondness for him too. But I think we were both headed on the same path with different intentions.

My idea of relationship

When I think of being in a relationship, I think of two best friends living together. These people are free to share whatever they feel like, not judge their partners and love them a lot. They crack jokes, go out on dates, or have a date night at home itself.

That’s the relationship I want for myself - where there is loyalty and freedom, care and compassion, love and tussles, and I know one day, I’ll have that someone special in my life too, with whom I’ll share a relationship like this.

Kavya, 21, is a graduate in Psychology and an author and lives in Jaipur.

Dil Vil Pyaar Vyaar, a Rising Flame campaign, was originally published on Love Matters in 2020 and 2021
We connected in the most magical way

Shivangi Agarwal

Prettiest girl in the town if...

Love can be a complicated feeling when you have a disabled body. In my adolescent mind, I always thought that people would only love me out of sympathy. Would I have the same people in my life if I wasn't born with a disability? Would the people around me treat me differently if I was able bodied?

I often remember a moment in my middle school when a girl told me that I could be the prettiest girl in the whole school if I adorned fake prosthetic legs. I didn’t really care for her opinion on my body or my choices but that comment stayed with me for a long time.
As a disabled, queer and trans* couple, we are constantly aware of the fight it takes to exist in this society that only acknowledges a nuclear family structure. Our story is not like those that you see in Bollywood films. On our first date, the most important thing was to respect each other’s struggle and experiences.
Now that I think about such moments in my life, I don't think my disabled body could ever fit into the society that we all grow up in. I cannot make my body uphold the expectations of getting an education, a job, then marriage and giving birth. I don’t have to follow this typical and let's be honest, quite a boring progression of life to be authentic.

**My first love and now..**

Therefore, it was never about ‘coming out of the closet’ for me, I always knew that I was queer. My sexuality was the most ‘normal’ thing for me in my ‘abnormal’ world. The first time that I fell in love with someone as a 12 year old kid, the gender of that person was hardly a concern, only the fact that they were an able-bodied person who never saw my disabled body as lovable.

And even today, while I am in a meaningful committed relationship, what matters is how much in love I am with this person and how we can be there for each other.

Nikita and I met online in June of 2018, and we connected in the most cosmic and magical of ways. The love between us is cute and sexy. The love we share is easy, comforting and kind. But love also needs constant work, understanding, and growth.

Our story is not like those that you see in Bollywood films where actors pretend to have disabilities. We are a non traditional family defined outside the rules dictated by our prevalent culture.

**Our first date**

On our first date, the most important thing that we did was to respect each other’s struggle and experiences, but at the same time giving the space to let the stories flow out naturally instead of asking intrusive or triggering questions about the past. This is something that we have continued to practice and the keys are patience, affirmations and of course a lot of affectionate cuddling.
As a disabled, queer and trans* couple, we are constantly aware of the fight it takes every single day to exist in this society that only acknowledges a nuclear family structure with legitimate blood bonds.

My relatives do not understand the connection between me and Nikita, and even though they have never created any problems, we are still always ‘friends’ in their eyes.

We know that friendship is also an extremely meaningful bond that our socio-political environment overlooks. We must remember that this is the kind of society that recognises documents and papers as the only admissible source of who the person is, instead of the person themselves.

For example, our government issued disability certificate is the most valid proof of our existence, rather than the presence of our disabled bodies and experiences. The percentage of disability outlined in that certificate will define the amount of benefits that we can access, instead of our socio-economic status. As if people around us check our percentage of disability before they decide if they should discriminate against us.

In such times, we always need to ask ourselves who we hold near and dear to us, because as we know very well, the personal is political. We cannot talk about relationships without considering the revolutionary, political act that love and friendship is.

Love should not be defined by the imaginary or literal borders, whether it be a country, a gender, a blood relation, a religion or caste. Love is borderless, it is a community feeling, not a competition of who is winning at it or who has achieved the most of it. And love is definitely not a capitalist holiday of flowers, chocolates and ornamental hearts that only comes once a year in mid-February.

Shivangi, 27, lives in Delhi and is a consultant, artist and a traveller

Dil Vil Pyaar Vyaar, a Rising Flame campaign, was originally published on Love Matters in 2020 and 2021
I am 32 and I’ve never been in a real relationship.

My face doesn’t give away that fact because it’s ‘conventionally’ pretty. However, my body does, because it’s not ‘conventional’. But hey, that doesn’t mean that I haven’t experienced the pain of (almost) being cheated on and then being involved with someone who wasn’t sure about how badly they wanted me.

I’ve experienced enough to write twenty-one poems, seventeen blogs, eleven songs, four books, three movies, and two stand-up specials.

I’m not going to get into the details of why this one boy that I was in love with wasn’t sure about me, because his reasons are not going to be any different than what you’ve heard before.
“I mentioned my disability in my Tinder bio. And, oh boy! Men still swiping right on me is not what I expected.”
And I might be slightly embarrassed about being a sympathy-seeker who thinks that the prime reason for the former is her disability. Although you and I know that it is the prime reason, or wait, maybe he really doesn’t want to be with anyone right now?!!

Uff, I’m done with analysing the same things over and over again.

Agar Tum Saath Ho plays in the background as I pen this article. Though I’m happy to report that it is definitely not the background score of my life.

It was only recently that I managed to mention my inability to walk without crutches in my Tinder bio. And, oh boy! Men still swiping right on me is not what I had expected. But as expected, some conversations started with - “Wow! You’re brave and honest”, or “Your profile is so inspiring!” Umm… why is being comfortable with one’s disability an act of bravery?

Some men seemed like they were worth my energy but they did end up friend-zoning me. I decided to go on a date with a guy after *only* chatting with him for three days straight. He was handsome, not too tall (which worked for me), and had dimples that could kill. Actually, his looks didn’t matter as much as the fact that we were hooked into each other for three days. He greeted me with a hug and held my elbow while walking - with the intention of helping me even when I didn’t ask for any of it. The food was great, but I wish I could say the same about the company as well.

Amidst all the small talk, he went on to call me ‘inspiring’ more than 11 times in two hours. I told him that by saying that multiple times, he was completely invalidating the fact that there was more to me than my disability; to which he said, ‘But, hats off to you, ya! You’re so strong, and I’m only acknowledging that.’

I tried to flirt but he dodged it. He just wasn’t open to the fact that I could be desirable despite (even with) my disability. I think disabled women should go on dates with a disclaimer that says - *We might need some help here and there, but we definitely don’t need help to make you come(cum).* Needless to say, we did not connect after that lunch ‘date.’
So When Do We Call it A Date?

It’s tough to keep hope alive in a day and age where people don’t want to label ‘things’ as ‘dating’ even if they’ve been doing ‘things’ for more than six months.

It’s evident that some enjoy the cushion of ghosting because they don’t have to be accountable for their actions. And that’s what makes dating with a disability tougher. I was ghosted on Tinder before and after I mentioned my disability, and it was tough both times.

Dating with a disability is tough because I never really know whether being ghosted is an outcome of popular culture or whether it’s simply me and my clearly visible “shortcoming”. I probably didn’t meet all of my online ‘ghosters’, but the insecurities that those experiences fuelled were real. Every time someone calls me inspiring or strong, it reminds me that I’m going to be perceived ‘differently’ regardless of everything that I am beyond that one thing that is different from other girls.

But The Story Continues...

Rom-coms still give me a warm, fuzzy feeling!

They fill me with the smallest fraction of hope of being with a partner without having to alter my expectations from a relationship and give up my aspirations for life. That’s what I was told to do when I was testing the waters of the arranged-marriage market.

Apparently, if you’re a woman with a disability in a conventional setting, you need to brave the double-edged sword of ableism and patriarchy. You need to be okay with whatever comes your way and whoever agrees to say ‘yes’ to you. Beggars can’t be choosers, you see.
But I’m happy to report that I have chosen to be a chooser and wait until I am with someone who gives me warm, fuzzy, real feelings. I have chosen my own happiness and will continue to do so, even if that means that I have to feel left out in a room with my school friends who are busy feeding their kids and “coupling” with their husbands. Love matters, but not more than my happiness.

Oh, also, if you think you want to strike up an interesting conversation, you can hit me up on Instagram. *Wink wink*

In addition to being a full-time awesome person, Sweta is an MBA turned writer and disability rights activist who stumbled upon comedy quite accidentally; just like the other things that she stumbles upon while walking. Through her endeavours, Sweta aims to construct accessibility and initiate inclusion in people’s buildings, minds, and lives.

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