# Preface: For Bitiya

Things last longer than men. Who can say whether the story ends here; who can say they will never meet again. – J.L. Borges, The Encounter.

In a flat city, or flattened by the many who walk it, the hilltop of an illusion allowed for a sense of height and depth. It was a clear, early winter morning, and I was looking at my crisp best, dressed as the jaded travelers are: collar-down coat, black of course, a roll-on case with no untidy edges and a distant look. However I was not yet at the airport. It was not only the look that was distant, but the look that had rendered a distance to everything immediate – as is a tactic with those who spend hours in the in-between spaces (of the airports), dreaming (or obversely, dreading) of faraway lands.

The reverie was broken by the announcement of a white van with blaring red lights. I was starkly reminded of where I was; blame it on the cinematographer’s abuse, I had imagined a more dramatic setting.

I was at the entrance of the Safdarjung Mortuary awaiting Bitiya to arrive. We had serious business of the dead for the living to resolve. She was always on her way, never on time. And I found myself distracted from the matters at hand to one hot, summer afternoon years back.

In those times I was an earnest researcher in search of the subjects in the lanes of Govindpuri. I was led into a tiny room, thick with darkness. It was a relief, even though it took me a couple of minutes to find my bearings and the faces of the people present. A huge wooden bed was the only furniture occupying most of the space in this six by four feet room. On it lay a young woman about whom the first thing I remember is her hair; they were spread out like sleeping rivers. The presence did not need any announcement. Baby, my companion, introduced me to an older woman who was squatting at one end of the bed. She was the lying young woman's mother, Salma. Between the two of them, mostly the lying woman, there was very little space on the bed to offer me a seat. She was nudged. Her stillness was absolute. Baby in a high pitched tone informed her that I was there to interview people about their lives; that I was interested in hearing it all. A spark struck. She turned around, though still lying, shifting towards the wall to make space for me, reached for my hand, sat me next to her, and without any courtesies of formal introductions or establishing the intent of my so-said questioning, set out on her soliloquy; my hand merely a prop. For the next hour, and then some, she narrated at length, at once despairing and delighted, about her affair with her lover, Bitiya, of last seven years with whom she recently had yet another altercation.

Her performance was relentless. The interruptions of tea being made in one corner of the room, served and partaken; first, Baby and then Salma excusing themselves on account of reaching their respective place of work as domestic workers, did not deter her. Before leaving, both, Baby and Salma, had tried to intervene and disrupt the performance in which they reckoned I was entrapped as an unwilling audience. In continuing to allow her to hold my hand I assured the two departing women that no coercion was being exercised; they had eventually left, slightly bemused. And thus it was the lying young woman, who had by now gathered herself in a squat, her spread out hair and sparkling eyes.

In spite of the agonies of her affair, every once so often she would break into a childlike enthusiasm about the accessories I was carrying: my bag, the pouch in which I carried my rolling tobacco and the perfect cigarette I was rolling. Half an hour later I had to bid her farewell to keep another appointment. It finally dawned upon her that no formal introductions had been made: She introduced herself, Bitiya. And asked the intent of my visits. I told her. Before I departed she once again reached out to my hand and sought a promise: “You are writing the story of this place, right? Will you write about my love story? I want the world to know that no one can love like me”. I told her there were many other stories I had to consider as well, but of course I will. She left me standing at her porch, her hair swaying, loudly announcing after me that I should make my next visit soon; she hadn't told me anything yet.

That afternoon was almost a decade back. But in the now and here, Bitiya had arrived, effervescent, her brown-eyes sparkling ahead of her and slight jump in her walk. Considering the matter at hand, I wanted to reach out to her and seek apology for not having accompanied her here when she had to come the first time: two-years back in the middle of the night and eight-months pregnant. But together we had seen, felt and grown enough to know that such courtesies were not required between us. Of course notwithstanding the situation and the setting, Bitiya remarked on the tardiness of my roll-on case, which she later did take to pack to her satisfaction.

The first time, in the middle of the night, Bitiya was accompanying Dimpy’s – the love of her life - brutally stabbed dead-body to the morgue. Having heard her wail on the phone, I had not the courage to be there for her then. But in the now and here, we were at the office which maintained the records to claim what Bitiya reckoned was rightfully hers: the dead-man’s name as hers.

As the tales of listening into the others, but not the task of it, folds onto itself, Bitiya and I have a web of the etching of the lanes of the Govindpuri slums, where we laughed, loved, fought, cried, mourned and steadfastly held on to each other, bearing its testimonies on ourselves, poetics and politics. We also have a seven-year old between us, Myshkin, who is putting us to the task of compelling and challenging the practice of our politics, a battle which we had reckoned we had already won. He is our anchor, ensuring that for no seductions and sirens shall we let our politics and poetics of our practice be compromised.

बितिया येह तेरे लिये: [Bitiya, this is for you]

*तुम मेरी नग्मा,*

*कोना और आगर हो,*

*सन्न्न्तत्, शोर और सेहर*

*Postscript:*

As I shared these recollections with Bitiya, she claimed the book by demanding that an inscription of her own to be inserted for Dimpy, the love of her life, ‘*I miss you, Dimpy’.*