# World. Ah! A puzzle,an enigma,an illusion, a temporary and yet considered to be the most permanent thing by human mind. It’s full to its brim with people and everblasting with the cacophony of their noises, but inspite of all that how the ears sense music in certain sounds and hearts beat in symphony of those selected few. How do only certain people get attracted towards each other and entangled in relations of a lifetime or may be…lifetimes and make stories.Astounding! isn’t it?

# I am time – non existent , an illusion but yet omnipresent .My hollowness with it’s deafening silence engulfs the whole universe and serves as the fertile breeding ground for these stories to germinate, to grow,to blossom,to wither and eventually fade into oblivion .

# I as a witness can assure you that every life is a story with effusive pains and elusive joys. Pains express themselves in full exuberance and are there to stay forever becoming the soul of life…or soul of all the worldly stories and the stories having pain , having soul gel up instantly for a lifetime…or may be lifetimes and help each other to reach their earthly climax.Moments are mine and the stories unfolding in those moments are treasured by you forever as yours. Your stories? Doesn’t that seem weird. I might seem cruel to you in not owning any of these stories which I give birth to but it is my way of providing you with the missing gaps…or you can say the characters required in your life’s story thus enabling you to weave a colorful tapestry on the canvas of this world. My stories always follow a linear path,starting with the complete innocence of childhood and ending with peace or bitterness or arrogance or humility or any one of the thousand traits, whichever you want to acquire, not my concern – I disown everything.

# *Oh! My child dear,*

# *Many a times I wish to bear,*

# *All your pains and tears,*

# *For which you look down upon me with a sneer,*

# *But I am cursed to pose always like a seer.*

# *Amen…*

**Chapter1**

**Attending the Math'slecture, the last class for the day, students seemed tired and exhausted, this being reflectedbythe obtrusive silence of the class inspite of it being jam packed with sixty odd students, huddled against each other in the sweltering heat of the summer month ,left to be occasionally disturbed only by the screeching of chalk on the blackboard or the grinding sound of antique ceiling fan or the teacher’s lecture.**

**The dilapidated condition of the classroom with its faded green paint and crumbling plaster seemed to be its retaliation towards stuffing of students more than the capacity that it can accommodate.**

Gusts **of *loo* coming in through grilled windows bringing in sand from the playground- which more appropriately resembled a desert burning under the hot afternoon sun, without any trace of anything green or colorful or anything remotely connected with the plant world, was adding up to the dryness and heaviness of the subject.**

**A blotched wooden table and chair with broken cane,which no teacher had the valor to sit upon,were the onlypieces of furniture, a luxury in government schools providing free education to all the children of that small town but attended only by those belonging to the lower middle class.For the children of the other category that is rich and not so rich was a missionary convent school where students in their crisp uniforms and polished shoes alighted from their two or four wheelers thus dividing the society into ‘ours’ and ‘theirs.’**

**In the class of sixty students,the predominance was of boys with the exception of twenty girls, majority of which dropped out after fifth grade when coeducation left out to be the only option which was highly unacceptable to most of the parents.In the jam packed class where it was difficult to differentiate between the silhouettes of the huddled students one face that caught attention inspite of its ordinariness was that of a young teenage girl. Might be fifteen or sixteen , somewhat plump, round faced with a wheatish complexion and hair oiled and tied neatly into waist length pigtails.Her big expressive eyes, the only thing of beauty she was bestowed upon with,were hidden behind the square shaped, black colored oversized plastic frame of her spectacles resting on the bridge of her broad nose that made her distinguishable not only in the class,not only in the crowd of her school but at mostly every gathering at every place of that small town , she being the only one, the one thing that she strongly detested.She detested the name *chashmish*with which she became famous in her school and above all she detested being the butt of jokes while passing by group of rowdy boys whether in the school or anywhere outside on the streets of that small town. Forty years into the twentieth century but still the invention of spectacles was struggling for its acceptance as wearing specs was considered to be the biggest curse for anybody but especially girls diminishing their matrimonial prospects and enhancing dowry demands from the prospective groom’s family.It was only when all her efforts to see far off things, even by squeezing her eyes started to fail that her parents…or more accurately her mother made her to wear specs.**

**Ordinary was her appearance, ordinary was her existence and ordinary was her name – Anita.**

***Sometimes, the moments in which the most desired of the wishes are granted, became the most cursed ones. That one moment – if possible, if could be removed, has the capability ofchanging the direction of many lives- giving them different beginnings and different endings.***

***But every moment belongs to me and I don’t fumble with orwithholdmymoments.***

***My moments are my ways of providingthe missing links of thestories that are going to be weaved in the tapestry oflivesin the future.***

**Chapter 2**

**Luxmi who used to be up by four o’clock in the morning bringing water from the nearby well,fanning the coals in the *angithi*till they ember and the arising smoke leaving behind her with coughing and smoldering eyes,preparing tea for Sattu and Chameli.But today was not like other days and she was not able to get up from her bed making Sattu fuming and make him leave home somewhat early without his morning teaattracting more ire from Shanti.**

**Unnerving silence of the room was intermittently disturbed by restless tossing of Luxmi in the cot with her mother-in-law Chameli staring her with a cold gaze sitting on a *pidi*.**

**It was only when hertongue failed her to find more derogatory remarks , which she had a treasure of , against Luxmi then her killer gaze was her last refuge ,her last effort to hurt Luxmi .**

**Luxmi’s stomach emptied by continuous vomiting since nightwas still revolting inside her.**

**‘Now it’s the turn of my intestines to come out,’Luxmi dreaded. But her anxiety soon turned out to be her biggest joyous moment when *dai*Kunta , after feeling her pulse announced her to be pregnant. Kunta’s cottony white hair and fine wrinkles were a proof of innumerable years of midwifery experience behind her,never ever leaving any space for doubt in anybody’s mind.**

**‘You’re going to be a mother’.**

**‘Are you sure?’**

**‘In my forty years into midwifery not even a single case of my detection have ever gone wrong.If I say pregnant … then it means you are definitely pregnant.’**

**Smile spreaded on Kunta’s thin lips exposing her missing teeth. Lingering smile and glint in her eyes …a clear message of her expecting a reward in lieu of the big news, was clearly noticed by Chameli.**

**‘Me …mother…mother.My fifteen years long wait ,my prayers …at last accepted by my lord.’**

**‘Now maybe lord can also put some sense in Sattu’s mind.’**

**Expressing disappointment with the five rupee note that Chameli had entrusted in Kunta’s hands, she stood up to go.**

**Kunta being one of the most trusted and experienced *dai* had access to all the households,their lives and the gossips doing the rounds of that small village whether in the courtyards of houses among purdah clad women or among *hookah* puffing males at the *chaupal*.The one among many was Sattu’s latest fling with a woman farm laborer.**

**Sattu, Luxmi’s husband had always been supported by his mother in all his(mis)adventures and especially those ones which could hurt Luxmi .**

**…but nowwith the news of impending motherhood filling each and every pore of her body with pleasure and joy feelings of bitterness towards her circumstances,towards her mother-in-law Chameli and towards her husband Sattu were pushed into oblivion, concentrating only on one feeling –feeling of motherhood and feeling of unconditional and unlimited love towards her unborn child.**

***One of my moment in which a wish was granted and a desire fulfilled and Tara was born to Luxmi.***

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**'Ma,ma....,'Tara's blabbering in soft and innocent voice was more than enough to brighten up Luxmi's face bringing smile on her chapped lips exposing her yellowish teeth in the backdrop of her dark complexion. Tara's fair complexion,chubby cheeks and big eyes,for which everybody adored her but not Sattu for whom these very things aroused suspicion in him about Luxmi’scharacter,fuelled by Chameli making it a point of altercation between them.As Tara was growing so was growing the list of Sattu’s allegations against docile Luxmi, connecting her with every man she came across humiliating her.With Chameli’s contribution the point of husband wife altercation which was confined to the four walls of their house becomes public and with that she became the object of discussion among purdah clad women as well as the hookah puffing males of the chaupal.**

**‘I can’t imagine myself stooping to the level as low as your’s.’**

**It was for the first time that Luxmi had gathered all her courage to stand up for her dignity spitting out truth about Sattu’scharacter,unleashing his animal within.**

**‘What?’ cried Sattu.**

**‘Teach the bitch a lesson.’ cried Chameli.**

**Luxmi’s fragile body was no match to the intensity of the kicks and blows and shoves that had been conferred upon her by sturdy Sattu thereafter,startled by hearing truth and that too from timid Luxmi’smouth.The wave of rage passed over leaving behind a devastated Luxmi ,folded on the ground like a mound of flesh.**

**…sometimes mental trauma far exceeds the physical pain bringing an end to the desire to live.**

**Luxmi who had always thanked her angels for the moment in which her wish of motherhood was granted and Tara , the star of her life was born but Sattu’s distrust and now grievous injuries that incapacitated her confining to bed,unable to take care of her daughter made her remorseful for bringing Tara into this world.**

**‘ What will happen to my daughter, who will look after her and who could love her likeme.’**

**Laying in the snugness alongside Tara in the cot, Luxmi’s mind was wavering,churning out fears,assumptions and practicalities of different possibilities that were hitting her mind and heart.**

**‘Sattu , her father.’**

**‘But he has not ever owned Tara,never accepted her as his daughter and how can love be expected from a person whose heart is filled with suspicion of betrayal?Nah'.**

**He had already been proddedso many times by his mother to remarry when Luxmi was unable to conceive. It was Luxmi’sresistance and her continuous threats of committing suicide that refrainedhim from remarrying but not from adultery. But now, with her being bedridden with neither any therapy for that damaged backbone nor a desire to recover she sensed her numbered days. With her being gone, he would be free to do anything he wants and would certainly remarry.**

**‘Tara’s complexion, her appearance is the mirror reflection of her *naani*, whom you have never seen.’ Luxmi’s all efforts and pleas fall on Sattu and Chameli’s deaf ears. Sattu was eyeing this as his last opportunity to get rid of Luxmi and Tara , simultaneously evoking sympathy for himself and then remarrying another much younger girl whom he had already set his eyes upon.**

***Ways of a male dominated society*!**

**News of terminal illness is always difficult to be absorbed, but once absorbed splits the self into two different entities-body and soul, surviving together but without belonging to one another.**

**It was only in the lap of death that Luxmi had started visualising herself a combination of these two different entities.Her physical body,which was soon going to be perished,seeking solution of the problem from her soul and it didn't falter.**

**‘Kamla.’**

**With a smile on her lips and tears in her eyes she clutched her daughter to her bosom. Every worst situation has some best solution and she had found one.**

**'Come soon'-a telegram with the minimum possible words by the sender but having maximum impact on the receiver was secretly sent by Luxmi to Kamla,her youngest sibling whom she had always treated like a daughter.**

**Luxmi and Kamla placed thirteen years apart from each other always found solace in being together,with Luxmi struggling to attain motherhood and Kamla to have a son,already a mother of two daughters.**

**Kamla had only once visited her sister’s house as a newlywed, accompanied by her husband. Sattu’s erratic behavior, Chameli’s displeasure was more than enough not only for Luxmi but also for Kamla to understand that they were not welcome in that household after which neither Luxmi dared to invite her nor Kamla gathered the courage to go there.But now this telegram.**

***Come soon…come soon …come soon…*were the only words, arousing anxiety, arousing fear and arousing every feeling associated with love and concern, hammering inside Kamla’s brain while boarding a bus to Hindola, Luxmi’s village.**

***‘*Why this urgency?Is Tara okay…or Luxmi…or..but why I am called for!Every thing should be fine…oh my lord!my*Krishna .***

**With the heavy sound of engine and leaving behind a black cloud of smoke the overcrowded bus started on a bumpy road.The seven hour journey to Hindola with intermittent stops every few kilometers seemed like an eternity to Kamla.On stepping down from the bus,clutching a floral faded red colored thaila containing her few clothes she started walking towards Luxmi’shouse,of which she had a little idea after so many years.Everytime she stopped to ask somebody for the directions,she ended up getting curious,mocking and dismissive replies getting a notion of not so respectful status of her sister in the society.**

**To die is easy but to let die a loved one is the most unacceptable thing to heart in the world.**

**Sitting by Luxmi’sside,clutching her hand into hers and sobbing her heart out Kamla felt a strong surge of hatred and anger towards Sattu ,on knowing for the first time about his behavior towards Luxmi .But she found herself as helpless as her bedridden sister…past can’t be corrected but future can be planned.**

**‘Can I entrust you with Tara’s responsibility?’**

**‘You will recover’.**

**‘Impossible,assure me that you will take care of Tara.Kamlawith you already having two daughters my decision of putting Tara under your caremight be a difficult one for you but for me it’s the only way out,not only from this situation but also from my life.’**

**'Luxmi'sfeeble voice withtheinherentpain of partinggoodbye broke Kamla up,firmingupher commitment towards her dying sister.**

**‘I might not have given birth to Tara.’**

**‘Hmm..Then you might not be in bed but might have regretted lifelong for not relishing the taste of motherhood. I promise to nurture Tara with the best of my abilities.’**

**Since the time Luxmi was confined to bed, most of her time was invested in staring the roof and she felt a sense of oneness between the rotten logs of wood and her battered life,both shouldering the heavy burden andboth ready to give away with a thud at any time.**

**…and a few drops of tears trickled down the corners of her eyes.**

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**Luxmi guided Kamla in packing Tara’s clothes-few frocks and pyjama kurtas that she had sewn for her,a small quilt and a few toys were the only possessions with which she was going to leave her mother.**

**‘Keep this cash and these few pieces of jewellery with you.This is all that I have managed to save for Tara uptill now. Use it on her education or wherever you think you will need’.**

**With this little Tara was bundled over on a new journey with her aunt Kamla, anticipating a little that this was the beginning of a new life for her sans her mother forever .**

**Holding her aunt’s hand, little Tara entered not onlythe house butthe lives of the people living there.**

***The moment whenshe could have bid her mother her final goodbye was also missing in my treasure.***

**Chapter 3**

**‘Tan , tan , tan’ .**

**The heavy metallic sound of the bell and that too the last one for the day,proved to be a talisman breaking the stupor of students and filling life into that dreary place. They swarmed with activity, closed the notebooks and put the things in their bags.**

**‘Complete the whole exercise in your notebook.’**

**After giving them thehomework for the day,teacher also left the room. Soon after his exit,students picked up their bags and, like a large herd of sheep, started rushing out of the classroom. Everybody was in such a hurry to leave the place as if they were being released from a prison. Anita along with other girls which were few in number ,were smitten in the corner waiting for that rowdy crowd of boys to pass over.**

**‘*Chalo*,’gripping Anita’s hand Tara tugged her towards the door. Tara ,a slim , tall,fair and beautiful girl and Anita’s best friend .And the two with their bags slinging on their shoulders,laughing ,gossiping joined the crowd.**

**Anita’s first encounter with Tara was when she herself was a little toddler, about two-three years old when Tara,under tragic circumstances gained entry into her aunt Kamla's house who was their neighbor. New place , strange faces , absence of her mother- enough for a little child to get scared. Anita was the one whose presence had a calming impact upon her and thus began their friendship blooming all the way from childhood to adolescence.**

**Boys were busy collecting the leftover chalks for writing on the ‘slate’ at their homes, some were discussing to meet at some common place in the evening to complete their homework or forplaying.Deafening sounds of thelaughter, shrieks, shouting , gossips – all got mingled into one loud noise, arising out of every nook and corner of the classroom, of the corridor and of the playground , makingthat ‘tan , tan 'of the bell an enigma.**

**Anita and Tara, unaffected by the chaosof the surroundings engrossedin their own chit chatstarted walking towards the main entrance of theschool.The school entrance became a hub of activity at this time, with street vendors selling their cheap stuff to children, students taking out their bicycles from the cycle stand, rickshaws loading school children and fewparents of younger children waiting for their wards. Anita and Tara had fixed a spot under the shade of a mango tree near the main entrance for their younger siblings(Anita’s brother Jayand Tara’s cousinMadhu) to wait for them as otherwise it would become a very difficult task to locate anybody in that ocean of students, wearingthe same blue colored uniform- girls in blue colored suits with white dupatta and boys in blue colored trousers and white shirt.**

**Fierce storms arising from the neighboring desert state of Rajasthan imparted red color to the clear blue skies with its red sand making summers suffocating and May being the hottest month of the year, with a brightly shining sun transformed the place into an oven.While gossiping,the four of them started walking towards their home.After taking a turn from the dirt road of their school they came to the metalled main road. The small township of Daultabad,a far off place from big cities and close to the boundaries of the states of Rajasthan and Punjab was an en route place for most of the vehicles on their long journey and this metalled main road being the only road leading to exit from the town,so providing good business opportunities to the shopkeepers.Motor repairing shop, juice shop, cloth shop, grocery shop, chemist shop and many more catering to the needs of the people were scattered along both the sides of the main road.Leaving behind the main road and its cacophony they took the crisscross of the peaceful streets lined with small houses whose maintenance indicated the penury of the people living over there.**

**On reaching their home Anita found her grandmother, Janki Devi, a vociferous woman,standing outside waiting anxiously for Jay to return. Taking his bag in one hand and holding the hand with another she took him inside, grumbling about the hot weather as usual, stressing the need for a rickshaw for Jay. For Anita, she was of the opinion that being a girl she should be strong and sturdy, capable of tolerating the adversities of weather as well as life thus having no right to savor the comforts.**

**Following her grandmother Anita also entered the house through a narrow corridor leading to a somewhat spacious courtyard surrounded by two rooms ,a drawing room, a kitchen , a bathroom and a wall shared with Tara’s house.Courtyard,only gateway for the sunlight to reach the otherwise dark and dingy rooms of the house was always disliked by Anita as sheconsidered it to be a intruder in privacy with it being the place fromwhere the ever prying eyes of Jankidevi kept a watch on each and every activity of the house.**

**‘Ma, ma’ .**

**Anita peeped into the kitchen where her mother Vimla sitting in front of *angithi* on a wooden *patra*was preparing the meals.The smoke and heat rising from the coals in *angithi*was adding up to the high afternoon temperatures turning that small kitchen into a *tandoor* and Anita felt as if the burning temperatures had added up darkness to the otherwise wheatish complexion of her mother.Beads of sweat running down forming multiple channels like showers of rain with her wiping them with the *pallu* of her saree.Walls of the kitchen discolored by the smoke of the burning wood and coal, a wooden table bearing the burden of disfigured plastic jars containing pulses and spices ,whose transparency was lost under the thick layers of grease deposited over them over the years and amidst them fully drenched Vimla,everything seemed struggling hard for its survival.Anita always imagined some strong connection between that *angithi*and her mother making Vimla revolve around it for the major part of day or might be for the major part of her life.'Ma let me help you,'said Anita in a voice full of concern and love,taking out her slippers and putting down the schoolbag in a corner.**

**'Nah,go inside and change your clothes .I will serve food for you.'**

**A few marigold flowers ,two apples and a small bowl containing halwa lying in front of idols of god on the small slab in one corner of the kitchen got hold of Anita's eyes.**

**'Ma,any special ocassion today?'**

**Since childhood Anita had always seen her mother lighting a brass diya in pure ghee in the temple and praying morning and evening thusmaking Anita believethat slab to be the most powerful place in the world from where all the wishes were granted.On special occasions fruits and sweets were also offered along with her morning prayers which Anita always felt to be a kind of bribe to the creator of universe in lieu of the favour demanded by her mother,whatever it might be.**

**'Hmm,your mama Brajesh'sbirthday.'Vimla's eyes welled up with tears accompanied by a bright smile flashing upon her lips.**

**‘Go and change your clothes, food is ready ,'repeatedVimla affectionately wiping the sweat from her brow and tears from her eyeswiththe opposite of the palm of her hands.**

**'Let me press your legs.You must betiredofwalking in this scorching heat.Anitaaa… bring a glass of water for Jay.'Jankidevi's loud and shrill voice from the adjoining bedroom electrified Anita.**

**Filling a brass glass upto its brim with cool water of *matka* lying in a corner of the kitchen she rushed to the bedroom where Jay was lying on the bed in his underwear and vest under the fan with Jankidevi pressing his legs.At that time he seemed to be the most dignified and powerful creature to Anita. Bright floral bedcover after loosing the sheen of its youth was quadrupled to form a thick curtain ,now covering the lone window of the bedroom, completely blocking the brightness of the day lowering the temperature .Sanjay,nine years old and youngest of them was sitting beside Jay making unintelligible sounds with clapping of his hands like a toddler reflecting a mismatch between his mental and physical growth.**