Letters I Wrote When You Couldn't Read

For every parent who has something left unsaid

SUBHRA ARABINDA MOHANTY

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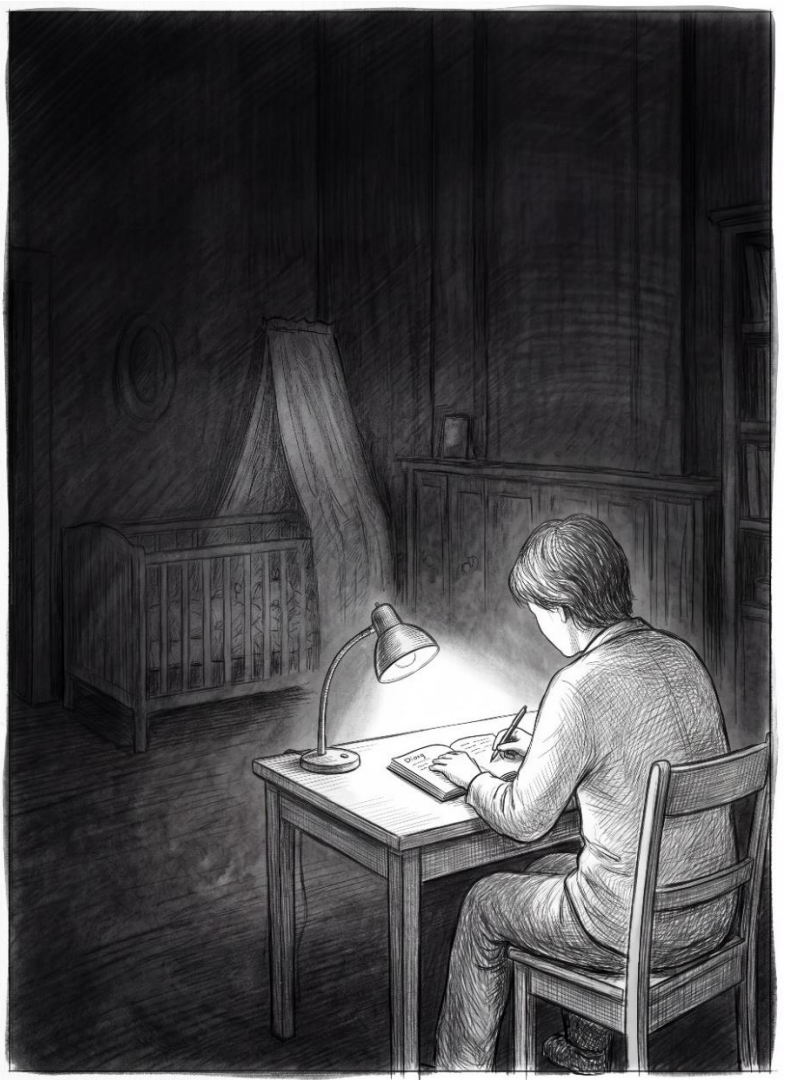
Preface

Why I Wrote These Letters



On 4th July 2021, a Sunday, my wife and I became parents to twin daughters.

I was an anxious father-to-be. I paced up and down outside the operation theatre, unable to be still. For eight months I had been thinking of what I would say to them when they arrived. The thoughts simply would not stop coming. I had decided I would write to them even before they arrived.

And then they arrived. And I forgot everything.

That is the honest truth of it. In the joy and the chaos and the sheer wonder of those first hours, the letters I had planned simply vanished. It was only on the second day, when I sat quietly and the world slowed down for a moment, that I remembered. So, I began. Not knowing exactly what I would say. Not knowing when they would read it. Not even knowing if the platform I was writing on would still exist by then. I wrote in one of those early letters, which I simply posted on Facebook every day for posterity: "If Facebook is obsolete now, please preserve this." That line still makes me smile. And worry a little.

I was afraid of something very specific. Not of forgetting them. I could never forget them. But the thoughts. The strange, curious, slightly mad thoughts that arrived with them. The way I looked at two tiny faces and suddenly understood things I had spent decades not understanding. I was scared I might lose these thoughts by the time they were old enough to hear them. I was scared I might lose the ability to tell stories to them by the time they are old enough to comprehend them.

So I wrote them down.

Twelve letters, across the first three months of their lives. From the second day, when they had just arrived and I was still trembling, all the way till they were about five months and held both in my laps and participated in the annual religious rituals. When they were calmly sleeping besides me, I scribbled what all memories and experiences were dear to me and were the building blocks of my life story. I wrote about music and fearlessness, about trains and books, about friendship and the divine. About their names and what those names mean. About the rain that fell the night they were born, and why I am certain it was the universe playing music just for them.

These letters were written for my daughters. But somewhere along the way, I realised they were also written for every parent who snuggles into bed with their tiny treasure, hoping that the little one will somehow understand their own hopes, dreams and experiences.

For every parent who has held a sleeping child and thought something they were afraid to forget. For every parent who has wished their children could

truly know, not just who they are now, but who they were in those first trembling days. For every parent who has something left unsaid.

Because the greatest thing I understood, sitting down to write on that second day, is this: the thoughts you are most afraid to lose are exactly the ones worth keeping.

Write them down. Now.

About the Book

In July 2021, a father began writing letters to his newborn twin daughters. He wrote on the second day of their lives, knowing they could not yet read, afraid that his thoughts would disappear before they could.

Twelve letters followed, written across the first three months. About music and fearlessness. About trains and books. About the rain that fell the night they were born, and the universe he was certain was playing music just for them.

Letters I Wrote When You Couldn't Read gathers those letters into a book for children to read at bedtime, for parents to read aloud, and for every family that wants to begin their own.

About the Author



Subhra Arabinda Mohanty is a father, a reader, a traveller, a sitar player, and a hopeless optimist who has been known to brew knowledge slowly and arrive at thoroughly impractical conclusions. He is, by profession, an IT consultant. His daughters find all these details less interesting than playing with him and asking all sorts of bizarre questions.

He believes the only capital worth possessing in unlimited quantities is the intent to help and the power to think.

He began writing these letters on the second day of his daughters' lives. This is his first book.

Contents

Chapter 1

You Chose Us 1

Chapter 2

The Universe is Playing Music for You 5

Chapter 3

Laugh for No Reason 8

Chapter 4

Reach Out with Open Palms 11

Chapter 5

India Lives in Its Trains 14

Chapter 6

Books are Your Oldest Friends 18

Chapter 7

Give Without Asking 22

Chapter 8

Your Name is Your Story 26

Chapter 9

The Goddess Sent You 30

Chapter 10

The Best Conversation 34

Chapter 11

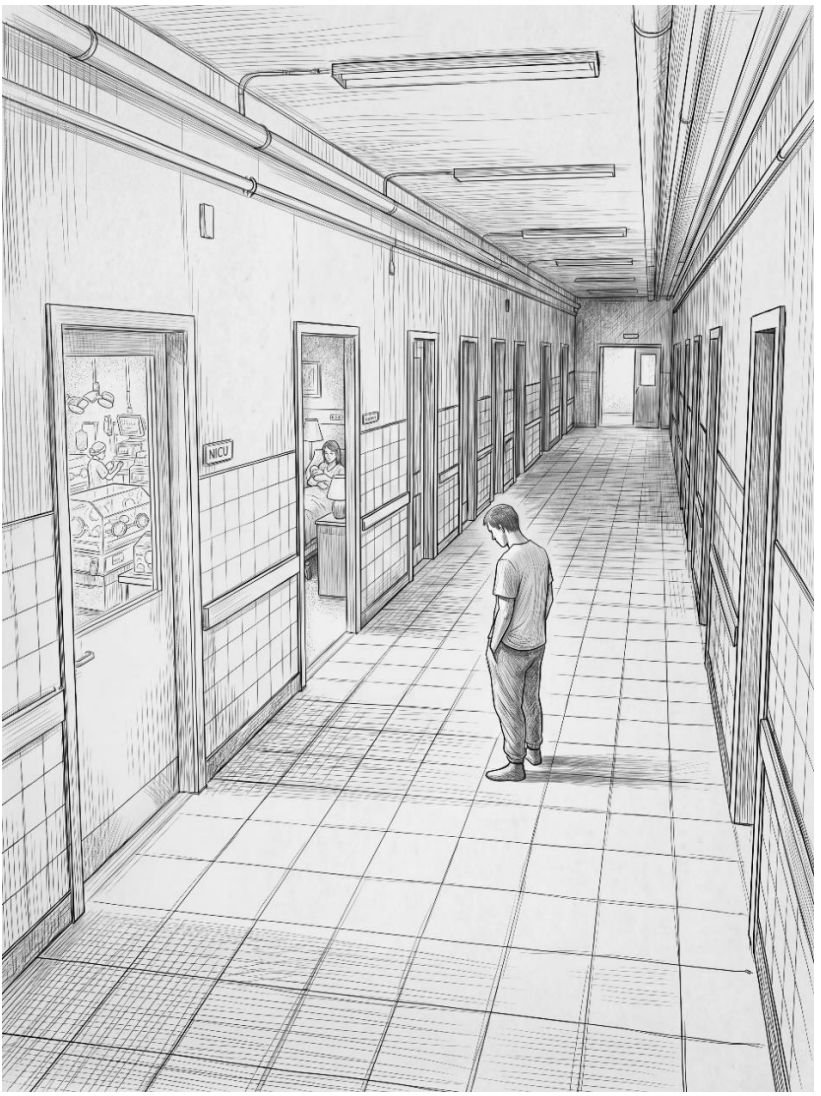
Arjun is You 38

Chapter 12

We are all Figuring it Out 42

Chapter 1

You Chose Us



My dear girls,

The night before you arrived, I got jittery.

I sat down and wrote a long letter. Not to you. **To my own parents**.

I wrote to them about how I finally understood. All those years of growing up, watching them make decisions I did not always agree with, wondering why they did things the way they did. I wrote to them and said: I understand your imperfections now. I hope my children understand mine later.

I was not sure I would be an ideal father. I still am not sure. But I decided I would try. I would really truly try.

And then you arrived.

When the nurse announced it, I could not believe myself. I stood there and the words did not fully reach me. Because the news came in two parts.

Ridhi came back to the room first. Warm and new and here.

Sidhi was in the NICU. Underweight. Steadfastly fighting. Alone.

(We named you instantly with pet names & your formal names came after, more about it later, they also have a meaning)

And so I did what fathers do when they have no good choices. I paced. Back and forth between two rooms. The room where your mother was, where Ridhi was, and the NICU where Sidhi was doing something very brave by herself. I filled out forms. I answered questions. I nodded at doctors. I walked corridors I do not remember walking.

I was so overwhelmed I went numb. And somewhere in all of that pacing, all of that in between, I forgot everything I had planned to say to you.

The second night came. Your mother was finally sleeping. One of you was close. One of you was still fighting down the corridor. And I sat with my diary open and realised I had nothing prepared. No beautiful words. No grand thoughts.

Just fear and anxiety. And love. Which I feel are the same things held from two different angles.

So I wrote. Not because I had something ready. Because I was scared it would all disappear before you were old enough to hear it.

I am not perfect. I know I will be absent sometimes. But every time I am absent, I am always thinking of both of you. I hope you understand.

Becoming a parent made me understand that parenting is not those cute videos you see. It is the daily grind of childcare, of earning a bread, and yet not letting go of the dream of raising a life.

Remember, you are in this world for a beautiful purpose which only a Higher power knows. Each one of us is here for a beautiful purpose, very few feel it. I wish you both are amongst the few.

Let me give you a thought on how to feel that higher purpose. Two mantras:

1. See everyone around as your own. The earth, the wind, the sun and the moon. The rain, the dew. Every person on this earth. They are there so that you can feel them, interact with them. See you have an entire universe that cares for you.
2. Faith that an almighty is constantly looking after you and smiling to you. That power is greater than any person and possibility on earth. And that power shall always guide you.

You did not arrive because we wanted you to. You arrived because you chose us. Both of you. Ridhi and Sidhi. You looked at this family and decided it was yours.

I am your papa because of you. Your mother is your mama because of you. You did not just arrive into this family. You created it.

The universe has been looking after you since before you arrived. Even in the NICU. Even in the corridor in between.

I am just the one doing the pacing. And holding the pen.

WORKBOOK

Every parent has a second night. The night the chaos slows and something quiet and true arrives. Write yours here.

Write to your own parents first. What do you understand about them now? "Becoming a parent made me understand _____."

Write the thing you most want your child to forgive. "I am not perfect. I know I will _____. I hope you understand."

Now write the first thing you want your child to know. "Dear [name], I want you to know _____."

Did they choose you, or did you choose them? "I believe _____."

Chapter 2

The Universe is Playing Music for You



My dear girls,

It was raining on the days you were born.

I am not sure you know this yet. But I want you to know it. Because I do not think it was ordinary rain. It fell on the glass windows and made a pattern I have never seen before or since. Like the universe had set up its own instrument outside and was playing just for you. Just for this moment. Just for us.

I have a theory about sound. Every sound in the world is music waiting to be heard. The birds are the melody. The wind through the leaves is the flute. The thunder is the drum. And the rain that night was Jal Tarang. An instrument made of water, each drop a different note, together making something so beautiful it has no name.

I sang to you that night. A beautiful song from a classic Hindi movie I grew up with. *Mere Ghar Ayi Ek Nanhi Pari*. A little fairy came to my home. I did not plan to sing it. It just came. The way things come when you stop thinking and simply feel.

Learn to sing. Learn to play an instrument if you wish. But above all learn to understand the rhythm of music. Feel it before you name it. That is where it lives.

There are two ragas I feel describe you. Raag Bhairavi and Raag Darbari. One is the raga of dawn and longing and tenderness. The other is the raga of the late night, of depth, of something vast and quiet. Between the two of them, you are both fully described.

Start with Indian classical music if you like. Do not forget the eternal Bollywood classics. Find your way to Mozart if you wish. And then move on to whatever you love best. Music has no wrong direction. Only your flow.

But here is what I really want to say. Very soon you will get to learn the language of humans. Words and sentences and all the beautiful, complicated mess that comes with them. But please,never forget the language you already know. The language of the universe. The rain on the glass. The lullaby that arrives before you remember learning it. The sound of someone who loves you, singing in the dark.

The entire universe was joyously playing music on the days you arrived. I heard it clearly. I hope someday you hear it too.

WORKBOOK

What is the sound of your home? The music that fills it without being asked.

"In our home you will always hear _____."

What lullaby did you sing, or wish you had sung?

"The song I want you to remember from your childhood is _____."

Write about a moment of music you do not want to forget.

"I want you to know that one day _____."

Chapter 3

Laugh for No Reason



My dear girls,

I want to tell you about the moment I became sure.

I was visiting Sidhi in the NICU. A room full of babies, each one small and brave and fighting in their own quiet way. I called out. I did not even think about it. I just said, where is my princess?

And out of all those babies, only Sidhi made a sound.

Just a slight noise. Barely anything. But it was enough. It was her way of saying here I am papa. I heard you. I have always heard you.

And then there was Ridhi. So small she fit entirely into my palms. She snuggled into them one day with a smile so contented, so completely sure, that I understood she had never had any doubt. Not for a single moment. She knew whose hands those were before I did.

Those two moments made me sure in a way nothing else could have.

Today, I want to talk to you about joy. Not the big celebrations, not the occasions we mark on calendars. But this. A sound in a room full of sounds that finds you anyway. A smile that arrives for no reason and needs no reason. This is the real thing. This is what I want you to keep.

You are sometimes smiling for no reason. Exactly maintain that. Do not seek reasons to laugh and smile. Just laugh and smile.

I will make mistakes in my parenting. I know this. Once you are old enough, do point out where I go wrong. We shall talk it out. But do indulge me a little. Be a little more forgiving than I am for myself.

Have a sense of humour. Laugh more at yourself than at others. Take yourself a little less seriously. This is not a small thing. There will be days when nothing goes right, when the world feels heavy and unyielding and you cannot see the way forward. On those days a sense of humour is not a luxury. It is the only tool that works. It does not solve the problem. But it makes you bigger than the problem. And that is enough to keep going.

You will have a mad side to yourself. Everyone has. As long as it does not harm you or others, be a little forgiving to yourself and sometimes indulge that mad side as an occasional treat.

I presume one day you will read this on your bed, cozily together, laughing at your papa's weirdness. Please laugh. That is all I ask.

Because the best conversations I have ever had were not made of words. They were made of a slight noise in a NICU. And a contented smile in the palms of my hands.

WORKBOOK

Write about a moment your child smiled or laughed for no reason.

"The moment I want to remember forever is _____."

What is the one thing you want them to always do, no matter what?

"I ask only one thing of you. Always _____."

Write your deal with your child.

"I promise you _____. In return I ask only _____."

Chapter 4

Reach Out with Open Palms



My dear girls,

From the very beginning, you reached for everything.

It did not matter what it was. A shape. A light. A face you had never seen. A sound coming from somewhere you could not yet understand. You did not wait to be told it was safe. You did not ask permission. You simply reached. Wide open palms, stretching towards whatever was there.

I watched this and understood something I had forgotten somewhere along the way.

To your little eyes, we are all unknown shapes and colours. Some moving and some still. The whole world is a mystery and yet there you are, arms outstretched, completely unafraid. Not because you are fearless. But because you have not yet learned that fear is an option.

I want you to hold onto that for as long as you possibly can.

When you grow up you will see most people being afraid of the unknown. Unknown professions. Unknown countries. Unknown people. Unknown versions of themselves they have not yet met. And that fear stops their growth. It stops them mid-reach, arms halfway out, and pulls them back to what is familiar and safe and small.

Please do not let that happen to you.

Yes, you must have worldly caution. The world requires it and I will not pretend otherwise. But caution and fear are not the same thing. Caution is wisdom. Fear is a closed fist. I want you to move through this world with open palms.

There is nothing truly unknown in this universe for you. You belong to it and it belongs to you. Whatever you seek with earnest shall come to you because the universe loves all its creations. Every unknown is simply the next thing waiting to be known. Every closed door is just a room you have not entered yet.

You taught me this. Both of you. Reaching for everything, every day, without a moment of hesitation.

I am the father. But in this, you are the teachers.

Keep reaching.

WORKBOOK

What unknown are you hoping your child will reach for without fear? "The thing I most hope you are not afraid of is _____."

What did fear stop you from reaching for? Write it here. "I wish I had reached for _____. I stopped because _____. I hope you do not stop."

Write your wish for them. "Go towards the unknown with _____. Because _____."

Chapter 5

India Lives in Its Trains



My dear girls,

I want to tell you about the way I grew up travelling. And why I want you to travel the same way.

We never travelled in pomp. My parents believed in the lowest denominator. Second class. Simple lodges. Street food eaten standing up. At the time I did not always appreciate this. Looking back, I understand it was the greatest gift they gave me.

Because when you travel frugally you see the real thing. You cannot hide behind comfort. You are right there, in the middle of it, whether you planned to be or not.

India lives in its trains. I want you to remember this. Not in airports, not in five star hotels, not in air-conditioned cars sealed away from the world outside. In trains. In a train you see India change slowly outside the window. The language shifts at every station. The food changes. The faces change. The landscape rolls from one version of this enormous country into another and you are sitting there watching all of it, talking to strangers, and understanding without being taught that this country is vast and endlessly surprising.

I travelled through most of South India as a young boy & man and it made me who I am. The street food of Kolkata. The serenity of Shantiniketan. The madness of Chennai. The regalness of Madurai. Weeks meandering through the ancient streets of Ujjain. Adventures in the far off places of Uttarakhand.

And then there was the Ambassador.

In 2002, our family piled into a rattling old Ambassador and drove from Kanyakumari towards Rameswaram. It was just me, your Baba & Mami, your Gudupapa & Dida. The car shook on roads that were not always roads. And somewhere along the way we drove through a dense jungle that people did not take lightly in those days. Veerappan was still out there. The forests were his territory. The locals knew it. We knew it. The Ambassador did not care. It rattled on regardless.

I remember the trees closing in on both sides. The road narrowing. The quiet that is not really quiet when you listen carefully because the jungle is always talking, always moving, always watching.

We came out the other side. Of course we did. But I want to be honest with you. I would not recommend you take that particular road without knowing what you are getting into. Adventure is not the same as carelessness. Your grandfather knew those roads. He had done his homework. We were not being reckless. We were being brave with information.

That is the difference I want you to understand. Fearlessness without knowledge is just foolishness. But fearlessness with preparation, with awareness, with someone who knows the terrain beside you, that is travel. That is how you see the world and come back to tell the story.

Know where you are going. Tell someone your plan. Travel with people you trust. And then go. Fully. Without holding back.

I want you to travel whenever you can. Keep a backpack ready. Always. Not packed and waiting in a corner gathering dust but ready in your mind. Ready as a habit. Ready as a way of living.

Start with Odisha. It is where you come from and most people do not know it the way they should. The temples of Bhubaneswar. The beaches of Puri. The tribal heartland of Koraput. The waterfalls hidden in forests that have no names on most maps. Know your home first. Know it deeply.

Then India. All of it. North and south and east and west. The mountains and the deserts and the coasts and the plains. Every state has a version of India you have not met yet.

And then the world. Go everywhere. Europe and Africa and South America and Southeast Asia and everywhere in between. The world is large and it is waiting and it has been waiting specifically for you.

But always come back. Come back with stories. Come back with the smell of somewhere new still on your clothes. Come back and tell me everything.

And when you grow up and are ready, travel alone too. See the world on your own terms. Write me long letters about it. I will travel in absentia. I will read every word.

WORKBOOK

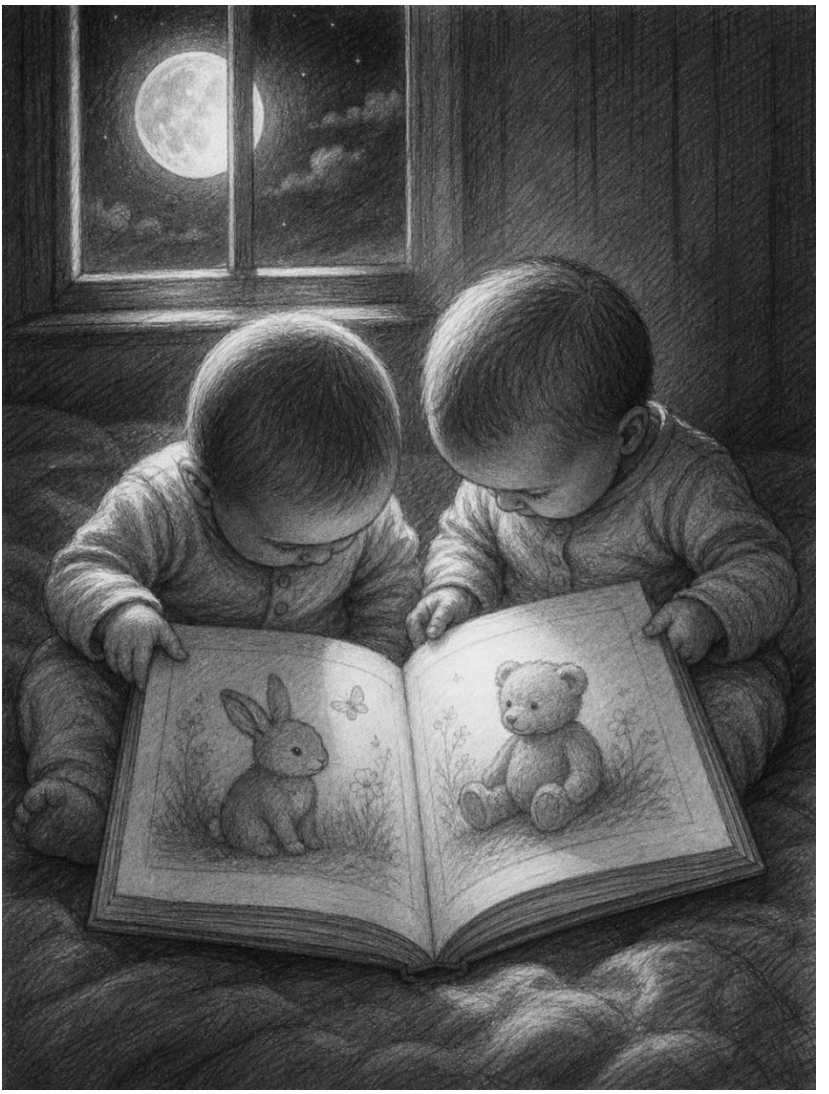
What is the journey you remember most from your own childhood? "The trip I will never forget is _____ because _____."

What is the one place you most want to take your child? "I want us to go to _____ together because _____."

Write your travel wish for them. "I hope you always have a backpack ready. Because the world will give you _____ in return."

Chapter 6

Books are Your Oldest Friends



My dear girls,

During my Childhood, I have never been to the English countryside. Forget the English countryside, I never sat on a Flight.

I have never sat on a checkered cloth in a green meadow with a hamper full of sandwiches and lemonade and hard-boiled eggs and the particular kind of afternoon that only seems to exist in Enid Blyton's books. I have never walked a London street in the fog, coat pulled close, the cobblestones wet and the gas lamps just beginning to glow like it happens in Agatha Christie's Whodunits.

And yet I can see both of these places completely. Every detail. The colour of the grass. The sound of the fog.

Enid Blyton built the first one. Agatha Christie & Charles Dickens built the second. I was a boy in Odisha with no particular reason to know either place. But those books got inside me when I was young enough that the images simply stayed. They are part of my visual memory now. As real as anything I have actually seen.

This is what I want to give you. Not a reading list. Not reading improving habits. It is the power of imagination fuelled by words of a book.

There is a smell to a book that a screen does not have. It is difficult to describe. Paper and time and something else, something almost like a door opening. You will know it the moment you smell it. Your nose will understand before your brain does.

Read everything you can get your hands on when you are the right age for it. This part matters more than people tell you. There are books you must read at eight that you cannot fully feel at twenty. Books meant for thirteen-year-olds that hold something that slips away if you wait too long. I came late to Harry Potter and I have never quite forgiven myself. By the time I tried, the door was still open but something had changed. Some books are only fully yours if you arrive at the right time.

So read them when they are meant for you. Do not rush ahead. Do not let anyone make you feel you should be reading something older, something more serious. The age you are is exactly the right age for the books written for it.

There are Odia classics waiting for you too. Books that smell of home in a different way. That world is yours and it is worth knowing.

And Little Women. Read Little Women. I picked it up once, quietly, not entirely sure why. Four young women finding their conviction in nineteenth century America, in a world that expected very little from them. I was

thoroughly absorbed. I had no idea, sitting there reading it, that I would one day have little women of my own. Life has a brilliant way of hiding hints in broad daylight which one doesn't understand.

Exchange books with people you trust. This is not a small thing. A book someone loved and pressed into your hands carries something extra. It arrives with their belief in it. Talk about what you read. Argue about it. Agree passionately. Disagree more passionately. A book discussed is a book that lives twice.

These will be your oldest friends. They will never leave. They will never outgrow you or you them. Long after the people who were briefly important have faded, the books will still be there. On the shelf. Smelling of paper and time. Waiting.

I gave you your first books on the night of Kumar Purnima. The full moon of October. You were barely three months old. You could not read a word. You held them with great seriousness anyway. You looked at the pictures as though considering them carefully.

I believed then that you already understood something about them.

I still believe it.

WORKBOOK

List the books that shaped you. The ones you want them to read at eight, at thirteen, at twenty.

"At age ____, read _____. I want you to read it because _____."

Write about a book that built a world inside you that you can still see.

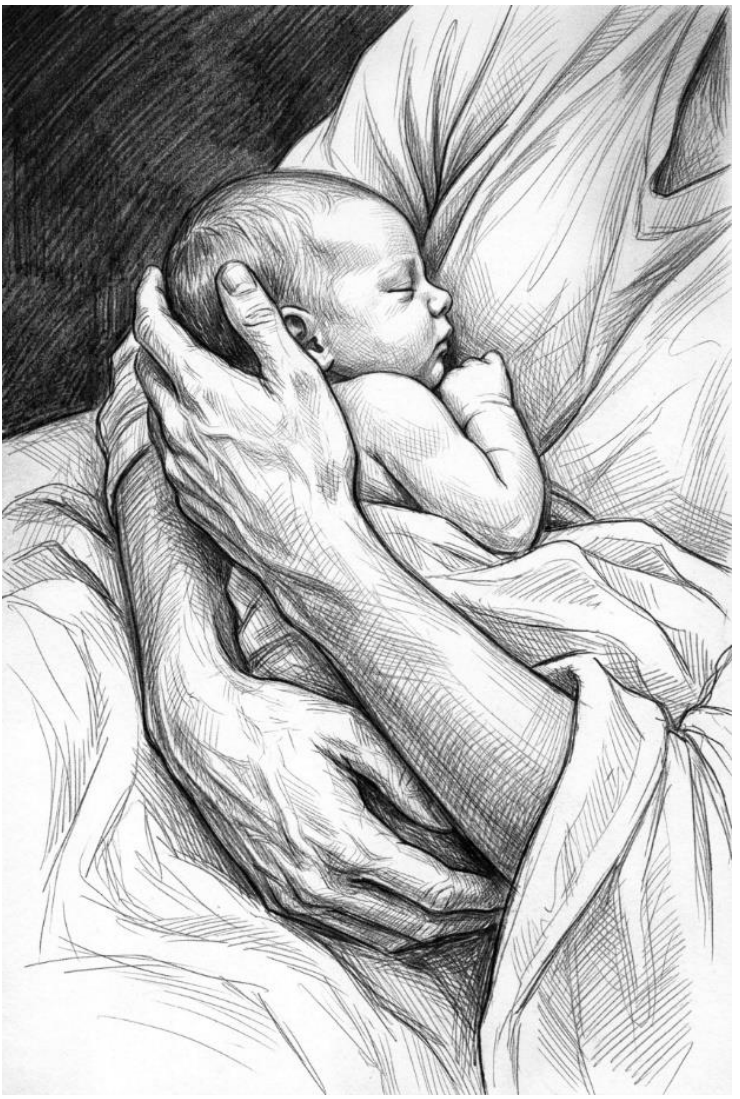
"The book that made me see a place I had never been was _____. What I still remember is _____."

What book do you wish you had read at the right age?

"I came to _____ too late. By then _____. I hope you read it when _____."

Chapter 7

Give Without Asking



My dear girls,

I had not often held babies before you.

Not out of dislike. Just wariness. Too small, too fragile, too much that could go wrong in my bony angular hands. I kept a respectful distance from other people's infants and nobody seemed to mind.

Then you arrived. And the moment the hospital staff said it was time, I held you.

You slid in. Both of you, at different moments, in the same way. As if my arms had always been exactly this shape. As if you had been waiting, somewhere before all of this, for these particular hands.

I cannot fully describe what happened in that moment. I have tried. The word that comes closest is surreal. Not unreal. Surreal. Because it was completely real and also impossible at the same time. You were there. Warm and small and completely certain. And I sat there not quite believing that I had children. That these two people in my arms were my own. My creation in this life.

Nothing prepares you for that feeling. Nothing should. Some things are meant to arrive without warning.

You settled into my palms and I understood something I had not known before that moment. That love is not a feeling you wait to receive. It starts with you. With your hands, open, finally willing. With the decision to hold on before you are sure you are ready.

This is what I want to tell you about love and friendship both.

They always begin with giving. Before you know if anything will come back. Before you have any guarantee. You extend yourself toward another person, without condition, without a safety net, and you find out what you are made of in the reaching.

Acceptance is the whole thing. Not the edited version of a person. Not the parts that are easy. The whole complicated human being, with their sharp edges and their fears and their particular way of taking up space in the world. That is who you love. That is who you call a friend.

I will tell you honestly. If you grow up and have everything the world considers valuable but you do not have this, I will worry. If you grow up with good people around you who love you and whom you love back, people you would call at any hour, people who know the real version of you and stay anyway, then I will feel I have done something right. That is the wealth I want for you. It cannot be inherited. It has to be built, slowly, with your own hands.

Give first. Always. Without keeping score. This sounds simple. It is not simple. The world will teach you to be careful, to protect yourself, to wait and see. And worldly caution has its place, I will not pretend otherwise. But do not let caution become a closed fist around your own heart.

Your not-often-held-a-baby-before father figured this out the first time he tried.

All it took was one moment of sliding in.

WORKBOOK

Write about a moment of love you do not want to forget.

"The moment I remember most clearly is _____. In that moment I felt _____. I want you to know that moment existed, and that it was you who made it possible."

What are you afraid of getting wrong? Write it honestly.

"The thing I am most afraid of as a parent is _____. What I hope you understand is _____."

What kind of friend do you hope your child becomes?

"I hope you are the kind of friend who _____. Because _____."

Write your wish for them.

"If you grow up and have _____, I will feel I have done something right."

Chapter 8

Your Name is Your Story



My dear girls,

Your Dida spoke your names into your ears. *(That's what you chose to call my sister)*

That is the custom. Soft, close, so that the very first time a name enters the world it enters through the child. Not announced to a room. Not written on a form. Whispered. As if the name belongs first to you and only then to everyone else.

Labanya Lalitaa. Kabya Koushikee.

I stood there and listened and the names fell on me like lyrics from something I had not heard before but somehow already knew. Flowing and unhurried. Each syllable finding its place. Your Dida's voice steady and certain, the way voices are when they are carrying something old and important.

I understood in that moment why names are given in ceremony rather than simply decided and announced. Because a name is not just a label. It is the first story told about a person. And the first story deserves to be told properly.

Labanya means grace. The ultimate grace of the Supreme Goddess Lalitambika, who is power made beautiful, strength made gentle. That is what we put into your name, Lalita. Not a hope exactly. More like a recognition. As if we could already see it in you.

Kabya means poetry. The most beautiful poetry in the world. And Koushikee is Goddess Durga in her full splendour, her full power. You are named for both at once, Kabya. The beauty of language and the force behind it.

Between the two of you, between grace and poetry, I think we got it right.

Names in our tradition are not chosen lightly. They carry the weight of what came before and the hope of what comes next. The rituals around them are old, each one with a story behind it, each one connecting this small new life to something much larger and much longer than any of us in that room.

I want you to know your rituals. Not as obligations. As stories. Every ceremony your family observes has a reason underneath it, sometimes practical, sometimes philosophical, sometimes simply beautiful. Ask about them. Find out why. The meaning deepens the moment.

And then go wider. Learn the rituals of other communities, other religions, other ways of marking the sacred moments of a life. You will do this naturally when you read and when you travel. You will find that every tradition, at its root, is trying to do the same thing. To say: this moment matters. This life matters. We are marking it so that it is not forgotten.

Your names were whispered into your ears on the twenty-first day of your lives.

Labanya Lalitaa. Kabya Koushikee.

Like the opening lines of something that has not finished being written yet.

WORKBOOK

Write the story of your child's name. Where it came from. Who chose it. What it means.

"Your name is _____. It means _____. We chose it because _____. The moment it was first spoken, I felt _____."

Is there a ritual or ceremony from your child's earliest days that you want them to understand when they are older?

"The ceremony I most want you to know about is _____. What it means to me is _____. The tradition I hope you carry forward is _____."

Write the one thing you want them to know about where they come from.

"Your name connects you to _____. When I hear it, I still feel _____."

Chapter 9

The Goddess Sent You



My dear girls,

You were born in July.

Navratri & Dasahara come later. Autumn. The season when the air changes in a way that is difficult to describe to someone who has not felt it. The fervour that builds slowly across nine nights. The smell of jhuna rising from households everywhere. Something in the world becomes quieter and more charged at the same time.

It was during that season that a simple thought arrived and stopped everything.

The goddesses had come to my lap.

Not as a figurine at a mandap. Not as an image in a frame. As two daughters, born three months earlier on a July morning, now asleep somewhere in the house while their father sat in the autumn quiet and finally understood what had happened.

I had never truly believed in karma before that moment. Not completely. I respected it as philosophy. I understood it as idea. But there is a difference between understanding something and feeling it land in your chest like it was always meant to be there.

It landed that evening.

What are the chances. You tell me. That the same season you grew up feeling most alive in, most connected to something larger, would be the season you finally understood what had arrived in July. Two daughters. In a tradition where Lakshmi and Saraswati stand on either side of Durga. Grace and knowledge flanking power. The three of them together, complete.

I was not conscious of any of this when you arrived. I was too overwhelmed for anything that subtle. New fathers are not philosophers. They are people trying to remember which corridor leads where.

It took the quiet of an autumn evening, months later, for the realisation to find its way in.

This is how the sacred usually works. It does not arrive with announcement. It arrives in the gaps. In the moments between one thing and the next, when you are not trying to feel anything in particular and something true simply surfaces.

The sacred is not a separate place you go to. It is not confined to rituals or temples or the correct words said in the correct order. It lives inside ordinary life, quietly, waiting to be noticed. In the timing of an arrival that could not

have been planned. In a thought that comes from nowhere and lands like it was always yours. In the feeling that something larger than any of us is occasionally, without fuss, arranging things with more care than we give it credit for.

I am not asking you to believe what I believe. That is not how belief works. Belief that is handed to you is not really yours.

But I am asking you to pay attention. To stay open to the moments when something larger seems to be present. To not be in such a hurry that you miss the quiet arrivals.

Your father almost missed this one.

He was three months late.

But it came anyway.

WORKBOOK

What festivals does your family live by. Not what you do. What you feel.

"In our family, _____ is the festival that means the most to me. When we celebrate it, I feel _____."

Write about a moment when the realisation of what had happened hit you. Not at birth. Later. When the quiet came.

"The moment it truly landed for me was _____. What I understood then was _____."

What do you want your child to know about the sacred. Not religion. The feeling underneath it.

"I do not ask you to believe what I believe. But I hope you stay open to _____. Because once I felt it, _____."

Chapter 10

The Best Conversation



My dear girls,

By October you were blooming.

Not the fragile, eyes-squeezed-shut newborns of July anymore. You had arrived into yourselves. Full smiles that came without warning and left you wondering what you had done to deserve them. Sounds that were not quite words but were clearly meant to be something. Hands that reached and found faces and stayed there.

I had the best conversation of my life with you that month.

No words were exchanged. Not one sentence, not one question, not one answer in any language either of us formally knew. Just gurgles and coos and those smiles arriving like small sudden gifts. Your hands on my face, resting there with the complete confidence of someone who has always known exactly where they belong.

I wrote afterwards that our conversation was not hostage to the complexities of human relationships. I meant it. Every conversation I have ever had with another adult has carried weight underneath it. History, expectation, the unsaid things sitting alongside the said ones. Even the best conversations have that. Even with the people I love most.

With you that evening there was none of it. Just three people, one very large and two very small, talking in the oldest language there is. The one that existed before words were invented and will exist long after we have forgotten most of the words we know.

It was the purest thing.

I know you will not remember October. Those months belong entirely to the one of us who was old enough to keep them. That is the small sadness in it, and also the gift. I am keeping every bit of it carefully. Every gurgle. Every hand on the face. Every smile that arrived from nowhere and asked for nothing in return.

But that October conversation was the beginning, not the whole of it. You were talking to me without words then. Soon you had words. And now you have opinions and questions and something that is clearly the early shape of an argument. Our conversation has been growing since that October evening and it is nowhere near done. The best conversations between a father and his daughters happen slowly, over years, built out of all the smaller ones. That is what I am waiting for.

One of the languages I want us to build that conversation in are movies. Watch movies with me, and with each other. Not as background noise, but

properly. Lights low, full attention, the kind of watching where you forget you are watching. Cinema is the closest thing to dreaming with someone else.

Start close to home. There are Odia films waiting for you that carry the smell and light of where you come from in a way nothing else quite does. Then the great Bollywood classics, not just the ones your generation discovers, but the ones from the 1960s, 70s and 80s that your papa grew up with. Aradhana and Anand and Mughal-E-Azam. Sholay on a large screen if you ever get the chance. Hrishikesh Mukherjee's quiet comedies that understood ordinary life better than almost anyone. These are not old films. They were about people, and people do not change that much.

Then Satyajit Ray, because he is ours and the world is still catching up with him. Then the timeless classics of every other language: Tamil, Malayalam, Telugu, Bengali. And beyond India: Kurosawa and Fellini and Bergman and all the others who proved that cinema, at its best, is not entertainment. It is literature you watch.

Go to film festivals when you can. There is a particular kind of film you only find there, slower and stranger and more honest than what plays in multiplexes. Some of those films will sit with you for years. Some will change how you see.

I want us to argue about endings. I want you to show me something I would never have found on my own, and I want to show you the ones that shaped me before you arrived. A film watched and talked about afterwards is very nearly as good as a book discussed. Sometimes, on the right night, it is better.

That October conversation had no ending. It just changed shape. It is still going. I expect it always will be.

That October evening you gave me the most expensive garland I have ever received. Studded with smiles as gems and your hands on my face as the golden thread.

You did not know you were giving it.

That is exactly why it was so precious.

WORKBOOK

Write about a wordless moment with your child that you want to remember forever. A look. A hand. A sound. A smile that arrived from nowhere.

"The moment I want to preserve in these pages is _____. No words were needed because _____."

What do you hope your shared language becomes as they grow older.

"I hope that one day our conversations are about _____. Because right now, before words, they are already about _____."

What is the first book you gave them. Write its name here. Write why you chose it.

"The first book I gave you was _____. I chose it because _____. What I hoped it would give you was _____."

Write about a film you cannot wait to watch with them.

"The film I most want to share with you is _____. I want you to see it because _____. The conversation I hope it starts is _____."

Chapter 11

Arjun is You



My dear girls,

I do not know what you saw in that fire.

You were five months old. You had no words for it, no framework, no way of explaining what held your attention so completely for so long. But you were still. Both of you. Gazing into the havan fire with a steadiness that made the adults in the room glance at each other.

Three hours. The full Gita Jayanti recitation. And there you sat, looking into the flames as though you were reading something there that the rest of us could not quite see.

I have thought about that stillness many times since.

Children that age are not still. They are movement and sound and reaching and protest. Stillness in a five month old is not nothing. It means something has found them. Something has reached in past all the noise and held their attention from the inside.

Maybe it was just the fire. Fire is old and children have always looked at it.

Or maybe you already knew something. Maybe some part of you recognised what was being recited across those three hours and settled in, the way you settle into a place you have been before even though you cannot remember being there.

I cannot prove this. I choose to believe it anyway.

The Gita has been with me for a long time. My spiritual journey began with it, with the Ramcharitmanas alongside it, two texts that ask the largest questions a person can ask and do not pretend the answers are simple. I am not asking you to read them out of faith or duty. I am asking you to read them one day out of curiosity. There is a difference. Curiosity takes you deeper. Duty only takes you through.

There is one shloka I return to when things are hard. The last verse. The one that says: wherever there is Krishna, the lord of all Yog, and wherever there is Arjun, the supreme archer, there will be victory and prosperity and righteousness.

I want to tell you what I understand this to mean. Because it is not about a battlefield. It has never been about a battlefield.

Arjun is you. With all your effort, your courage, your willingness to try even when the outcome is uncertain. Your archery is whatever you are attempting. The thing you are working toward with everything you have.

Krishna is your inner consciousness. Not a god sitting outside you passing judgement. The voice inside you that already knows. The part of you that is connected to something larger and quieter than the daily noise. The part that knows the difference between what is right and what is easy.

When things are difficult, and they will be difficult, bring the two together. Your full effort and your inner knowing. Your hands on the bow and your stillness in the fire.

That is the whole instruction. Everything else is commentary.

I recite this shloka when I begin something hard. Not as magic. As a reminder of what I already have available to me. What you already have available to you.

You were gazing into the havan fire at five months old with the stillness of someone who was paying attention.

I think you already know this.

I am just writing it down so you do not forget.

WORKBOOK

What is the one belief you want to pass on. Not a religion. Not a rule. A way of seeing.

"The one thing I believe most deeply, that I want you to carry with you always, is _____. When life is difficult, I hope you remember _____."

Write about a moment your child was still in a way that surprised you.

"The moment I saw something in you I could not explain was _____. What I felt then was _____."

What is your shloka. Your verse. Your one line you return to when things are hard. It does not have to be from any sacred text. It can be from anywhere.

"The words I come back to when things are difficult are _____. I found them _____. I hope they find you too."

Chapter 12

We are all Figuring it Out



My dear girls,

Now you are almost five years old and you have started asking questions.

Not the easy kind. You come at me with bated breath and hurried sentences, eyes wide, completely certain that I have the answer and that the answer will be fair. Why can't I have the ice cream. Why does she get more. Why can't we stay up. Why why why, each one arriving before the last one has been fully answered.

And I stand there, your father, the one who has been writing letters full of wisdom since the second day of your lives, and I discover that some of these questions are not as simple as they look.

The ice cream question sounds simple. It is not simple. Behind it is the whole enormous subject of fairness, and desire, and boundaries, and love expressed as yes versus love expressed as not right now. Behind it is the fact that I am making this up as I go along, the same as every parent before me, the same as every parent who will come after.

I did not tell you that last part. But I am telling you now.

Here is what I know about the years ahead. My relationship with you is growing the same way you are growing. It is not fixed. It is not the relationship of a father who knows everything and daughters who are learning. It is something more honest and more interesting than that. It is four people, you and your mama and I, all of us stumbling forward together, all of us becoming something we have not quite been before. We are figuring out this particular thing together.

I will make mistakes. I have already made some and you were too young to notice. You will notice now. That is as it should be. When I get something wrong, tell me. We will talk it out. I promised you this in one of the earliest letters and I am promising it again here at the end because it matters more now than it did then.

Do not let me pretend to be perfect. I will be tempted to appear perfect sometimes. The notion of perfection is a comfortable place to stand when you are the parent and they are the child and the power is uneven. Do not let me stand there. Call me back down to the honest ground where we are all just people trying.

The beauty is not in getting it right. I have thought about this a great deal and I am certain of it now. The beauty is in the trying together. In the stumbling and the getting up and the conversation that happens in between. In the ice

cream negotiation that teaches all four of us something none of us expected to learn that afternoon.

You are growing into people I am only beginning to know. Every month there is more of you. More opinions, more questions, more of that particular light in your eyes when something delights you or outrages you or makes you think. I watch this and feel something I could not have predicted on the second day of your lives when I first sat down to write.

I feel like I am being introduced to you. Slowly. One hurried sentence at a time.

What a privilege that is.

I started these letters afraid I would lose the thoughts before you were old enough to hear them. I wrote them down quickly, in the stolen quiet of those early months, holding on to everything I did not want to disappear.

But here is what I did not know then. The thoughts do not stop coming. They keep arriving, new ones, different ones, shaped by whoever you are becoming. There will be more letters. More conversations. More questions I did not see coming about ice cream and fairness and everything larger that those questions are really about.

We are not at an ending.

We are at the beginning of the part where you can talk back.

I cannot wait.

WORKBOOK

Write about a moment your child asked you something you did not have a ready answer for.

"The question that stopped me was _____. What I felt in that moment was _____. What I wish I had said was _____."

Write about how you are growing as a parent. Not what you are getting right. What you are learning.

"I did not expect parenthood to teach me _____. But it has. And I am still learning _____."

Write your promise for the years ahead.

"I promise you I will not pretend to be _____. What I promise instead is _____. And when I get it wrong, I hope you will _____."

Write the last thing. The one thing you want them to carry from this whole book.

"If you remember nothing else, remember this. _____."

Acknowledgements

For the Two Who Chose Us

Labanya and Kabya,

These letters were always yours. Every word in this book began as a thought I was afraid to lose before you were old enough to hear it. You were the reason I picked up the pen. You were the reason I could not put it down.

I do not know exactly who you will be when you read this. But I know you will be more than I can currently imagine. You already are.

Thank you for choosing us. Thank you for the hurried questions and the full smiles and the stillness in front of the sacred havan fire. Thank you for introducing yourselves to me, slowly, one sentence at a time.

I am paying attention.

Your Papa

For Lopamudra

In a traditional Odia naming ritual she was christened Padma. The lotus. It suits her completely and always has.

She has been steadfast through a difficult twin pregnancy that tested everything, patient with an anxiety that did not always know how to be quiet, and present in every moment I was too overwhelmed to be fully present myself. These letters are mine but this life is ours.

Thank you. For everything that goes unsaid because some things are too large for acknowledgements pages.

For Baba and Mami, Gudu and Kandhei

Last in this order. Not in any other.

They gave me an upbringing full of experiences. Not things. Not comfort carefully arranged. Experiences. Rattling Ambassadors and train journeys and street food eaten standing up and the understanding that the world is large and worth knowing firsthand.

I did not always appreciate this when I was living it. I appreciate it now every single day.

Whatever is good in these letters, whatever wisdom found its way in, the roots of it are what we lived together.

I am still learning from them. I hope my daughters say the same of me one day.