



Sinjini Sengupta

AN EXCERPT FROM “ELIXIR”



‘Listen—are you breathing just a little, and calling it a life?’ — Mary Oliver

When rain hits the earth, it brings a few pieces of the sky down with itself...have you ever seen? The pictures shift as you do...the tall towers, the TV antennae, the row of pigeons on electric wires...and far beyond, if you look, the endless blue of the horizon. These solitary reflections, they last throughout the dark nights....



And then?

Then, on the morrow when the Sun comes calling, they go back. To make the sky one whole again. But wait. Can the sky ever be whole, with such void all over itself?

Manisha believed in these pictures as a child. When other children huddled together to sail paperboats, she'd step aside, stand apart at a distance. Her pictures, they were more precious! She saved her share of the puddle; she wouldn't trade it for the sea.

And anyway, she never had much anywhere to go! Her boats were always frail, as much as she ever tried. They just formed ripples and broke the pictures into pieces, and then they drowned themselves in it. Come next morning, cars would run them over; then, you couldn't even tell them from the mud. It was risky out in the sea, she was sure, she had grown to believe. She loved the confines of the known, instead. The still frames of water held far more promises than the doomed destiny of wet paper mounds. The secrecy, the treasure hunt at the rainbow's end. The pictures on the water, of the sky...they felt like letters from above, to her. Letters, from someone who loved her silly, perhaps, even as a star.

But, rains...what is it that rains had to do with her life?

It had rained the day she was born, Amma had told her. Amma, her grandmother. When the water broke, it rained so much that the car wouldn't start. They took a bus, crowded, bumpy. When they reached the hospital, Maa's shrill screams had turned into faint moaning. The doctors said it was late, now they could save only one of the two.

'Who did you choose,' she'd ask Amma. 'Who, between the two of us?'



Amidst fairytales and mythologies, amidst the dance of shadows on the lonely roof. Reindeers and greyhounds in black finger- shadows, by the wall. Whizzes of mosquitoes, a lone green spiral in smokes in their sole rescue. Amma would tell her stories, by the shadow of the dark, rainy evenings...

At times, she'd tell her stories from the *Mahabharata*. The valour of Arjun. The integrity of Yudhishtira. The foresight of Krishna. The sacrifice of Devavrata. Bhishma. His mother too had left at birth. Like hers. But then, Bhishma had a boon to fall back on—a magic power. He could choose his death. 'Because, you see, he was not just any man. He was an angel, cursed into a mortal life,' Amma would wag her wrinkled fingers, making her point clear, telling one from another. It helps to be able to choose death, Moni thought. At least when you don't want something anymore, you know how to leave. 'And when he would choose to die, he could go back to his own world. There, they are waiting for him to return, his loved ones,' Amma would say, her eyelids drooping with the weight of faith.

'But Amma, would they not call him a loser if he leaves in the middle of the game?' Moni would still ask, shifting closer to her lap. 'What does it matter what others say, Moni? You know your truth the best, you always do.' Amma would lift her closed eyes upwards at the ceiling, speaking in the same voice that she otherwise uses to chant from the tattered pages of the *Lakshmi panchali* at six-thirty on summer evenings.

The conch shell would still be in the air, still, a strange vibration, almost tangible, incoherently mixed with the sandalwood incenses that Pishi got them from their last trip to Puri. Moni never went on vacations, unlike everyone else. You cannot go on vacations if you do not have a mother



to pack the suitcase, help you climb up the berths in the train coupe or hold your arm tightly where the surfs meet the sand. If you go, you could drown.

Nevertheless, Manisha never stopped thinking of the sea either. She inhaled the imaginary yet intense salt in the air until it burned in her tiny nostrils, and then she'd hold up in her hand the seashore sand in a fistful passage of time. Imaginary. You could not drown from imaginations, could you?

Moni meant to ask Amma that. But then, the next evening, Amma forgot all about Bhishma and *Ichchhyemrityu*, and went straight to the great war of Kurukshetra. 'Abhimanyu only knew how to enter the *Chakravyuha*, he always knew that as a child. And so he went inside, gallant, brave and strong. He flashed his swords in his tiny hands...you see, he was still a child, then.' Moni would draw away from Amma's lap, shuddering, her eyes full of flashes, fire and blood. 'But why was he so foolish, why could he not see what was coming?' she would ask. 'Not foolish, no,' Amma would reply sternly. 'He was brave. But you see, the catch was somewhere else. Abhimanyu only knew how to go inside, but no one ever taught him how to come out of it all. It was *that*, what killed him,' Amma would drawl on the syllables, her voice back into the chanting tune, like she always did at the end of the day's stories.

Amma and Moni, cross-legged by the side of the flickering lantern, chewing on puffed rice, waiting for footsteps, tiptoed at the door. Buzzing cricket, fireflies, a herd of mosquitoes for a canopy above the naked flame. Baba would come soon and Moni would rush, leaving it all behind. She would climb up his shoulder, hang by his arm, turn deaf to his questions if he asked if the homework was done. 'Leave Baba alone,' Amma would tell her, holding out a glass of water for her son. But no, Moni would not budge, she'd not listen. Why should she?



‘Who did you choose, Amma?’ she’d ask, still. Amma wouldn’t answer that, though. She saved the suspense as if it is the ending of one of the chapters that could only lead to its next.

And thus Manisha grew up, year by year. From frock to *salwar kameez*. ‘Cover your legs, you are now a big girl!’ From a Chinese cut to ponytails. ‘Baba, can we buy Clinic Plus to grow that Rapunzel hair?’ Incomplete... in half knowledge, in full trust.

‘A prince would come one day,’ Amma would tell her all the time. ‘But I don’t want to go away, Amma.’ ‘Silly girl!’ Amma would say, a toothless grin reaching up the crow’s feet at her eyes. ‘He’ll love you so much, that you’ll not have anyone else to think about anymore. He’ll sweep you off your feet, and take you away with him...far, far away.’

And just like that, many years later, another rainy day had come. By that time Amma was ill, and amnesic. By that time Moni was eleven, had grown back all her milk teeth, and could braid her hair all by herself. It was then, only then, when Amma said it. By the light of the lantern. By the sound of thunders. By the cadence of the rains. That, Baba had chosen Ma. She had told her in whispers, urgently, secretly. She must know! Like she must know, now that she is big, where Amma kept the keys to the storeroom.

‘And you, Amma?’

Manisha felt like an intruder all her life, ever since that day. She was not supposed to be born; anyone could see that, couldn’t they? She was not supposed to have been here in the first place. A mistaken entry. A trespasser, on the face of the earth. An imposter. Watch your steps, girl. Shut up. Listen. Tread carefully. Make them proud. Be sure you make up for all of that!



She tried. Rules over reasons. Obedience over impulses... Science over Arts, Engineering over Philosophy. Just as they wished. She kept trying....

Seven years later, then, when it rained the day she was leaving home for college, she knew she was right on her way. In *her* way. It lifted off the stone she carried in her heart, it melted the fear she was holding back, the pretence of not being who she was trying to be.

The Engineering College she went to had two things in extreme in a rather incoherent way. It was the best in the country and it was farthest from home. It helped, both of it. Amma wiped her eyes with the end of her white saree. 'But you didn't choose me Amma, remember?' Of course, Moni didn't tell her that. Neither did she cry. She never cried, you see! Crying means to give up, to fail, to lose. She was a big girl, brave and strong.

She looked at Baba, nodding her head, taking instructions, warnings, train tickets. Ashutosh put a hand on her head as the train blew its long siren. 'Make us proud. I know you will,' he had told her, after a long, grave, proud silence. She agreed. Easily. She was never enough just by herself, she knew. She had to prove her worth, buy her space on earth, her rights. She had to do them proud.

She tried.

She kept on trying....

From one place to next, up and higher, beyond herself.

She kept on trying....



Strangely enough, her ties with rains never broke. By chemistry or by some fated doom, the rains found her out. Always.

She loved how it took charge of her life, when everyone else failed. It filled her up with loneliness. It filled her up in loneliness. The sound, the smell. The splashes against the wooden frame of the windows, the water dripping in from her palm as she'd reach out to it. Even if she were to be lost, the rains would find her out. The rains would stay. With her. For better or for worse.

It had rained the day Amit had come. The steel green Ambassador had arrived at their creaky, wooden door when it was late evening, past nine o'clock. Manisha stood by her window, watching the puddles splash up at their edges at the touch of its wheels, spitting mud in turn, in row, on their way. She had seen Amit Roy before that, too; through the pale, faint letters on Sunday supplements. Earmarked, ticked in red ink—5'11", fair, handsome, six digits, two houses and car. What else did it say?

Handwritten letters, reply post cards, wait of few weeks as long as indefinite infinities, uncertain and complex. Photographs—look here, madam. Smile! Four inches by six. Unknown families, unfathomable faces, wild guesses. Unknown lives, any of which could become hers....

Around that fourth year into the search for a match, the length of the food menu had grown embarrassingly long, as did the length of her hair under Amma's strict supervision.

Manisha was summoned home for a whole week that week. 'It is important, Moni,' Baba had told her urgently over the long-distance call, for three meetings were scheduled back-to-back.



Amit Roy, the third of the three, had arrived with his parents. A management graduate from Yale, he was well qualified, successful and affluent. He held a senior position at an international bank, waiting to launch his own start-up ‘as soon as it is time’. Amit wore a grey suit, the same dark grey of the sky. Manisha carried in and out of the room the seven-course evening snacks one by one, careful of the ceramic plates, spilling tea cups, the beads of sweat on her face. She took her designated seat, later, so that the rest of the people in the room could become an auditorium. She watched Baba rub his palms while answering their questions, as he checked out the boy from the corner of his eyes over and over again, as he asked a few questions in return. She watched the proceedings, as the proceedings watched her. Moni has always been a quiet child, Ashutosh was offering to them, motioning his hands otherwise to the trays on the table. They were nodding, munching, sipping, gulping, agreeing. And Amma kept looking in her direction, kept saying ‘smile, smile’ under her breath like an evening chant. But how did it matter...wasn’t the match made already?

Manisha knew the destiny was written out by the slivers of rain much earlier that afternoon. A worthy prospect, a lucky match. Clouds clashed against each other in blinding flashes, in deafening bursts of crackers. It seemed that the hills would melt and land would dissolve in water. Does it rain like this when gods get angry, or scared? Threatened and envious of humans, do they send armies to destroy the Earth? But fret not, for they’d send Noah with his Ark to save the world too, later on. Two of each kind. If Manisha were the Woman, will this 5’11” Amit Roy, MBA, be her Man too?

The horizon splits apart with a sharp piercing light, and Manisha suddenly feels a flash of fire across her face. It brings her back to the present. This Sunday night, here, full nine years later. In the middle of the night, sleepless and alone.



She holds the railings tight, her palms wet with sweat. She is waiting for the thunderbolts to follow suit. She closes her eyes in anticipation of a deafening sound. Manisha has grown up by many years, since then. She has changed her place in this world many times since; changed where she lived, changed how she looked, what she talked. So much so that she has, perhaps, also come to accept that the 'Man' that she had always thought to exist is but a creature of mystic faith...found between pages in fairytales, across skylines, beyond boundaries of life and reality.

And yet, as she looks up at the sky from her seventeenth-floor balcony now, as it dawns, she also sees how little has really changed, in a way. These myths of colours and reflections, the smell of pollens, the splatter of these relentless splashes, and the whistle of the breeze...see, how they found her out again! The water travels all the way from her childhood. They carry her letters from Maa from somewhere above, she knows. She also knows she can reach her glimpse of heaven in her handful of water. Whenever, wherever she wants. They hold her sky in them, beyond the doubts of space and time.

A sudden fear leaps upon her and images flash up...clumps of blood, hot flushes, emergency bells. Manisha can still hear the siren of the ambulance from that night, even though it has been four years since. It was a girl, Manisha is convinced. Seven months. Her eyes were formed, they said on the internet. Could she see her, from inside?

Rains, it had made its due visit that day too. A cloudy day, a thunderstruck night, just as this... Amma had flown down to take care of her when the last trimester had set in; only, never to return. Manisha can see Amma...crying, screaming, running, falling over...was it the wound, or the shock that killed her? She could not make out, till today. She also realised she could not cry



anymore. The tragedies refused to form into tears and leave. Two goodbyes, one after another, seven months, and seventy years... Redundant. Cold. Frozen. A loss of sorrow and a sorrow of loss.

But, wait!

Why is she suddenly swarmed by memories from buried times, hidden pasts?

It is a sign. She knows. She can tell.

But, what is it today?

Is something coming? Someone?

An alumnus of Indian Statistical Institute, **Sinjini Sengupta** is an erstwhile Actuary turned into an award winning Author, Columnist and Public Speaker by passion. She writes in several literary genres ranging from social columns to poetry, novels to screenplays, and has won several national and international awards.

In Fictions - As a poet, she won the national level English Poetry contest – Rhyme India – hosted by Times of India in 2016 and several of her poems got published in Feminist anthologies like She The Shakthi, etc. In fictions, her story won at the South Asia FON contest to be published into an anthology. One of her stories made into a short-film got selected at the 69th Cannes Film Festival, 22nd Kolkata International Film Festival among many others and won best film award in Kaleidoscope (Boston), Best Director in Kolkata International among many others. As a scriptwriter, she won the Best Screenplay award in International Film Festival PickurFilms among 550 films from across the globe.

As a Columnist, Sinjini writes mainly on emotional wellbeing, gender issues, social reforms and parenting in a plethora of publications including Huffington Post, Speaking Tree – Times of India, Youth Ki Awaaz, Anandabazaar Patrika, Readomania, Our Front Cover, Baby



Destination, World of Moms, Feministaa and several popular magazines. She was recently awarded the prestigious Orange Flowers Awards 2016 (RU) for her social columns. Sinjini was featured by ICICI Bank among the “inspiration women of India” in their Fund Your Own Worth initiative. She won the “Iconic Woman award” at the Women Economic Forum in May, 2017 and serves as the Gurgaon Chairperson for Readers and Writers of ALL.

Sinjini’s first novel ELIXIR – a woman’s journey through conflicts into redemption through her co-existence in parallel existences in real and dream lives - has been recently published by Readomania.