

# SHINGARA



ILLUSTRATION: RUMMAN R KALAM

## LYCRA LABEBE CALAMARI

*Tonight we are the sea and the salty breeze...*

It was drizzling outside. A distant brontide playing rhythmically to my favourite 'Iron and Wine' in my room. It smelled like a concoction of petrichor and strawberry shampoo. I was floating somewhere in the South, right around the coast of Bay of Bengal. It was an overcast morning accompanied by a zephyr that was born in the Himalayas, born with the purpose of ruining your hair, which had travelled days just to slap your curls roughly away from your face. The memory felt like water which I could almost trace with my fingertips.

I had made a point of not looking at you whilst worshipping you from my peripherals. You were not swaying gracefully to the rain or the faint music of the waves. You never danced. You just stood there, absorbing like a sponge, breathing in the atmosphere and out. While I had breathed in you, but never out.

That chunk of my life never seemed provisional. In fact, it

smelled like home.

The hammering knock on the door, came just as sudden and determined like the episodes of damage—stubborn like you. Each passing day scraped at the surface of memories we had built, eating away. Those days reeked of a decomposing and dying animal. You'd turn your nose away from the foul smell but it was strong enough to melt your brains.

The knocking went on sporadically as I heard ammu, who smells like antiseptic to this day, quietly say, 'Abrar, Abrar! Come out and help me close all the windows. The storm is getting out of hand.' I dragged myself up from the bed, and got out into the bright lights of the living room. The photons attacked me and shot me with a dose of migraine right away.

After the last curtain was drawn, I decided to go back to my own abyss and let the air in when I heard the doorbell. As I was walking back to my room and to the dizzying smell of your once wet hair, I heard the main door open. A warm whiff of shingara went right up the alleys of my nostrils and

dragged down the stream of headache out of my system.

I heard the splatter of rain as a gush of wind trespassed into the house and along with it, came the sound of a lazy female voice, 'Aunty, got some hot snacks for you. Suits the weather and your beauty, don't you think?' Then a tinkling laughter that felt like ice sliding down my spine. I shivered for no reason whatsoever. Ammu joined in and dragged her inside. The new neighbour's daughter.

'Abrar, come here. Look what the new neighbours sent. Such warm people. Come meet Ira. *Koi, asho?*

'Yes. Coming.' I didn't talk much and the only person who could force out a syllable or two from me was ma. Ira was sitting in the living room and whistling Tagore tune (whistling, mind you) while ammu was arranging all the shingara on her good tray. As I went nearer I could smell her. She was achingly redolent of *chaa*. Resembling the one a tong-mama used to serve near the university before his little stall and dreams were demolished. Remember, how you used to hate it when I made

you stand before the stall while I sipped the *chaa* along with cancerous smoke. *Chaa* that went perfectly with nostalgia, when I used to watch the thunderous skies light up as my boys used to roar with laughter playing FIFA matches, the perfect brew that pointed good things have a way of coming back and the smell of tea leaves that sprouted sub-memories soaked in happiness.

She still hadn't looked at me and in that brief second before her eyes met mine, I decided I didn't want her to stop bringing over shingara. Her beauty didn't attack you head on. It crept up slowly behind you and left you devastated. She looked up, smiled and threw a question at me. 'Hey, hi. I'm I...wait a minute. Nevermind. I'm Ira.'

Ira stammered thinking to herself, 'Why does he smell like home?'

*Lycra Labebe Calamari is a professional stunt bike assistant. She loves rotund garden gnomes slowly gnawing at her toenails while she watches Friends reruns.*