

Three Sundays at The Grove

by Dallas Woodburn

When Deepti was born in San Francisco in the summer of 1991, her parents were living in a tiny apartment above an Indian restaurant called “The Golden Sari,” and they were in their Hindi phase. Deepti often wondered whether the Indian restaurant and the samosas her mother craved during pregnancy influenced their sudden conversion to Hinduism. It would make sense, knowing her mother. Over the years she had acquired a wide mishmash of cultural affectations to match her ever-growing palate, trying on religions and customs, discarding some aspects while keeping others, as if the world were an immense shopping mall waiting to expand her cultural wardrobe. Deepti wondered, if her parents had lived above an Italian restaurant instead of “The Golden Sari,” would they have had a Catholic phase? Would Deepti instead be named Mary or Teresa or Anne?

That was twenty-one years ago, and the Hindi phase was long gone—as was her father. Still, Deepti was left with two constant reminders: her vegetarianism and her name, Charusheela Deepti, roughly translated to “beautiful jewel full of light.” These two things, combined with her honey-freckled skin, almond eyes, and unruly wiry curls, made Deepti feel a part of many groups—part Asian, part black, part Hindi—and yet not really a part of any group. She was a one-woman species. Unclassifiable.

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For their first date, Greg took Deepti to The Grove, an outdoor shopping mall in West Hollywood. “They have a great farmer’s market here,” Greg said, taking her hand. They wove their way through the tented stalls, past the bulging pumpkins and squashes, sizzling meat with peppers and onions, tubs of live lobsters. They ate lunch at a stall selling cheap Chinese food—the American version, of

course, with greasy noodles and deep-fried orange chicken that Deepti could not eat. She ordered the mixed vegetables instead, which were mundanely delicious. Deepti only ate “authentic” Chinese food when she visited her grandparents in Oregon, so this was Chinese food she was used to, the watered-down Americanized version she recognized for its illegitimacy and loved for the same reason. And, while her own mother had preferred ordering from Panda Express to cooking recipes passed down through generations, at least she had taught Deepti the correct way to use chopsticks. Greg was impressed.

“I’m terrible at using those,” he said, gesturing with his plastic fork at the chow mein dangling off Deepti’s chopsticks.

“It’s not that hard,” Deepti said. “I’ve been using them all my life. My mom’s Chinese. Her parents came to America when she was a baby.”

“Really? That’s cool.”

Greg didn’t ask for further details about her ancestry, but she told him anyway: “And my dad’s black. They met at Berkeley in the ‘60s. You know—civil rights, free love and all that.”

Greg nodded, his eyebrows slightly furrowed as if he wasn’t sure what to say. The silence stretched. Deepti felt a pit open up in her stomach as the greasy noodles slid down her throat.

“So do you speak any Chinese?” Greg asked.

“Not really. Just bits and phrases.”

“Say something for me.”

“Umm ... let me think.” In truth, Deepti could not remember a single phrase she had learned eight summers ago, when her mom went back to Berkeley in search of her “roots,” or maybe Deepti’s father, and Deepti spent a month living with her grandparents in Oregon. Either way, Deepti was looking out the window for flashes of lightning when her mom’s car pulled into the driveway on a rainy afternoon. She could tell from the way her mother heaved herself out of the driver’s seat and shut the car door with the full weight of her body, as if between its hinges were cockroaches that needed crushing, that nothing—and yet everything—had changed.

To Deepti, that summer was a fierce line drawn in the gravelly sand of her life, separating the way things were from the way things used to be. Her mother left as a loud voice and a flapping coat, jangling bracelets and jasmine incense—a hippie woman-child who gazed skyward with hopeful eyes, giving crinkled dollar bills to every homeless person she passed on the street. When she returned, she seemed audibly softer, smaller—a question mark slouched inside herself. Whatever she had gone to Berkeley looking for, she had not found it. When she came back, she stopped looking altogether.

Two months later, she began showing. Deepti's brother, Alson Jones, Jr., was born during the first whispered notes of spring. He was dark, too—darker than Deepti. Their mother said they had the same father, though she was no magician and another child didn't make Alson Jones, Sr. reappear.

Now, gazing into Greg's expectant eyes, the only Chinese word Deepti could summon was *kuei*. Ghost. Before that summer, her mother flipped through the pages of Maxine Hong Kingston's memoir every day, as if she could glean magic from the touch of her fingertips to the dusty ink on its pages. She memorized passages, quoted them aloud while they were eating breakfast or driving to school or shuffling through the aisles in the downtown supermarket, their basket filled with hard green apples and skim milk. Sometimes Deepti would walk into a room and catch her mother muttering to an imaginary Maxine. Sensing Deepti there, her mother would abruptly turn and smile, and pretend she was singing to herself.

"Kuei," Deepti told Greg.

"Kuei. What does it mean?" he asked.

"Ghost," Deepti said. It was also the word they used for white people, but she did not tell him that.

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Deepti only had a handful of memories of her father. Being carried piggyback along a crowded city street, lulled by the sway of her father's gait and the strength of his sinewed shoulders. The teddy bear her father won at some amusement park and gave to her, though Deepti wasn't sure she actually remembered the broad smile

on her father's face as he presented the bear from behind his back. It was possible she was just imagining the memory.

Most of all, Deepti remembered lying in her bed at night, plugging her ears with her fingers and screwing her eyes shut as her parents' arguments resounded through their tiny apartment above The Golden Sari.

"Who is she?" her mother would scream.

"Who is who?" her father would shout. "There's nobody else! You're crazy, Min!"

"Then explain where you disappear to all night. Huh?"

"I was at Bernie's. Okay?"

"You are such a liar, don't even expect me to swallow that load of shit—"

"You know what? I don't have to take this."

"Fine!" her mother screamed, the last time. "Then go! Just go, Alson! Go!"

"Okay. I'll go!"

"GO!"

"I'm going!" her father shouted, the last time. "Don't worry, Minjun—I'm gone!"

Deepti heard every word, despite her fingers plugging her ears. That was the last time she heard her father's voice. To Deepti, the sharp slam of the front door was the world shattering.

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"My parents are coming to visit this weekend," Greg said. "They want to meet you."

"Already?"

"What do you mean, already? We've been together what, three months?"

Deepti swallowed. "It's just—that's a serious step, isn't it? Meeting the parents?"

Greg smoothed his palms over his blue-jeaned thighs. "Deep, you're an important part of my life and my parents want to meet you. I don't get what's so weird about that."

"It's just..." Deepti sighed, fiddling with the zipper on her sweatshirt. "Are you sure they want to meet me? Do they know I'm not some—some rich white sorority girl?"

"Is that what you think of me?" Greg asked quietly. Deepti could hear the hurt in his voice. "Nothing but a rich white boy?"

Deepti fumbled for words. "No, I'm sorry. I didn't mean that." She reached for his hand. "I would be honored to meet your parents. Really."

"You don't have to."

"I want to. Maybe we could take them to The Grove?"

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This time they did not eat at the farmer's market, but instead at a restaurant with tablecloths and linen napkins and menus written in French. La Tomate Brulante. They sat at a table on the patio. The sun shone brightly in Deepti's eyes, making her squint, but she thought it would be rude to put on her sunglasses. Beads of sweat coalesced on the back of her neck.

"So, Deepti, what are you studying?" Greg's mother asked. She wore her hair in a loosely coiled knot and her blue eyes were heavily mascara-ed. Only twice could Deepti remember seeing her own mother wearing make-up: when she left that day for Berkeley, and in the wedding photo that Deepti had uncovered, framed and dusty, in a box in her grandparents' garage.

"Philosophy," she said.

"What do you plan to do with that?" said Greg's father, his tone an elbow to the ribs.

"Students become doctors, lawyers. I'm thinking of applying for the Peace Corps."

Greg's father raised an eyebrow. "Didn't know kids still did that." He was a tall man, even when seated, with impeccable posture and a closely cropped salt-and-pepper beard.

"It's a very competitive program, Pop," Greg said, his hand finding Deepti's beneath the table.

Later, after a round of appetizers, salad and soup, rack of lamb marinated in lemon and garlic that Deepti had to politely refuse;

after the coffee cups and sugar spoons had been cleared away; after Greg's father made a big show of calculating the tip, and Deepti said, "Thank you for lunch," feeling strangely unsettled at the whole ordeal—later, they strolled past the stores with the big windows and the strings of lights gleaming nearly translucent in the bright sunshine. There was a bridge over a man-made pond, a gaudy fountain, a park swathed with trees and a small stage where a band played Beatles tunes. The four of them settled down on the grass. Deepti closed her eyes, letting the music seep into her chest. Maybe she worried too much. Maybe it would all be okay.

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"They found her," Alson said. His voice sounded too calm for a fifth-grader.

Deepti was still half-asleep. "It's two in the morning, buddy. What's going on?"

"It's mom. They found her."

"Mom?" Deepti sat up. Blood rushed to her temples.

"A policeman came to our house. I'm not supposed to know. Grandma was crying."

"It's okay. I'm glad you called me."

"Deepti? When are you coming home?"

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Deepti stuffed a couple T-shirts into a duffel bag. Greg wrapped his hands around her waist. "I'll miss you," he said.

"It's only three days."

"You're really don't want me to come?"

"Midterms are almost here. I don't want to burden you with this."

"I told you, it's not a burden."

"Thanks, but this is something I need to do myself." Deepti heard the brusqueness in her voice and felt a surge of guilt—Greg was trying, wasn't he?—but he didn't understand. He had the perfect All-American family. His mother with her blush and pearls, his father with his beard and law firm. Their pre-Revolutionary-War lineage. Greg wouldn't understand a mother who one day didn't pick up Alson from school, who wasn't there when he got home, who, they

later found out, didn't go into work that day, either. She just disappeared. No note, no goodbye—nothing. On the kitchen table, she left her faded, dog-eared copy of The Woman Warrior. That was how Deepti knew she wasn't coming back.

Deepti took The Woman Warrior from her bookshelf and placed it in her bag. "I'll see you soon," she said to Greg. She kissed him, hard, closing her eyes to avoid her mother lurking in the corner of the room, gazing at her with a ghostly vacant stare.

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When Deepti left her apartment the next morning, her kuei mother followed, sliding across the backseat of the taxi that took them to the airport. She followed Deepti onto the plane, plopping down on the aisle floor beside her daughter's seat. She was oblivious to the other passengers stepping on her, grunting as they heaved bulging travel bags into the overhead compartments, and the stewardesses pushing carts right through her as she lay sprawled on her side, sleeping, her thin arms folded beneath her head. Deepti had forgotten how sharply angular her mother's elbows were, how hollow her cheekbones. Even when she was alive, she had been thin and ghostly. The last time Deepti hugged her, saying goodbye after winter break, she had been too scared to squeeze at all, as if the slightest pressure would cause her mother's frail bones to break.

"Miss? Chicken or pork?" The stewardess's high-heel was planted squarely through Deepti's mother's chest.

"Actually, can I have your vegetarian option?" Deepti asked. In truth, the ghostly form beside her was not new. Her mother had always been pervasively half-there, affecting Deepti's life from a distance. Her whimsical choices, trying on religions and cultures as if she were a little girl playing dress-up, determined who she, Charusheela Deepti, was and who she would always be. Deepti shifted in her narrow seat, waiting for her mixed vegetables and rice. She would always have to ask for the vegetarian option, because of her mother.

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Deepti held Alson's hand as they leaned against the boat railing, watching their mother's ashes swirl into the dark ocean waves. Their grandparents stood a few feet away, gazing down at the water with unreadable wrinkled faces. Nobody spoke.

Deepti's ghost-mother was there, too. She had followed Deepti from the airport to her grandparents' home, standing silently in the corner as Deepti ate her grandmother's dumplings and played endless games of checkers with Alson. Her ghost-mother sat on the edge of Deepti's bed all night, and Deepti couldn't sleep. She just wanted it to be over—she wanted to say goodbye and be done. Deepti hoped her mother's kwei would float away with her ashes.

She didn't. But slowly, ocean water began to seep into her ghost clothes and weigh down her hair, spilling out of her eyes and squishing wetly in her shoes. Her mother, the drowned ghost. Deepti had stuffed The Woman Warrior into the pocket of her coat before they left her grandparents' house, in case she needed it at the funeral. She wanted to throw it into the ocean's choppy waves. Feeling the cover's flimsiness between her fingers, she almost pulled it out. But she couldn't. She couldn't just throw it away, not with her ghostly mother standing beside her and reproaching her with vacant eyes. Eyes that knew nothing and yet also seemed to know everything—everything, at least, that mattered. Everything Deepti feared. She looked into her mother's ransacked stare and saw a future chosen and waiting for her that she never wanted to claim. Deepti did not want to be her mother's substitute. She gripped the railing tighter.

“Ow!” Alson said. “You're hurting my hand!”

“Sorry,” Deepti said. They turned away from the railing as the boat headed back to shore. Deepti's other hand hung limp and empty at her side. She wished Greg were there.

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On her way back to school from the airport, Deepti stopped at The Grove. It was a Sunday, and families milled about. She leaned against a tree and listened to the band play a few songs. Her ghost-mother sat beside her, dripping wet, muttering to herself or maybe

to Maxine. Her voice was the unintelligible whisper of dead leaves.

When Deepti walked to the farmer's market, her mother followed. They strolled past rows and rows of striped tents selling gyros and rogan josh, pot stickers and palenta. Finally, Deepti found what she wanted. Big Billy's Burgers! a sign proclaimed. America's Best! Deepti could smell meat sizzling on the grill.

"One cheeseburger, please," she told the cashier. And, six minutes later, she had an All-American burger in her hand. Nobody stopped her. Nobody could tell she had never done this before. Deepti sat down at a grease-streaked table with hard plastic chairs. Her ghost-mother sat across from her. Deepti met her mother's eyes as she brought the burger to her lips and took a bite. It tasted strange, a taste Deepti would later associate with forgiveness. She took bite after bite, knowing that within an hour she would be kneeling in front of a toilet in a public bathroom stall, her body repelling the foreign substance. Yet she kept eating, not really tasting anymore, just chewing and swallowing, swallowing and chewing. Thinking. About how her mother was found curled up underneath the fire escape beside The Golden Sari restaurant, not breathing. About the way her mother used to sing her to sleep when she was little, a lullaby, *Just let the west wind carry your cares away, Wei shenme? Mei guanxi.* About her mother's smile, which she caught glimpses of in Alson's gap-toothed grin. Deepti chewed and swallowed, swallowed and chewed, thinking finally about Greg, his hand on her knee, the way he looked at her and she felt her own wholeness expanding inside her ribcage like a hopeful balloon.

When she had licked every morsel of meat and fat from her fingers, Deepti scrunched up the wrapper in her fist and tossed it at the nearest trashcan. She unzipped her duffel bag and took out The Woman Warrior. Always she was surprised at how small it was, how little it weighed. You could carry it around with you all day, in your purse, your pocket. So light a ghost could carry it. Deepti set the book carefully down on the table, smoothing the cover flat. When she got up to leave, her mother did not follow.

