

Open Space, Forever Shining

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“O Goddess . . . reveal your transparent presence within this lotus heart as open space, forever shining.”

Lex Hixon, *Mother of the Universe: Visions of the Goddess and Tantric Hymns of Enlightenment*

I rinsed the soapsuds off the last unwieldy stainless steel pot and balanced it artfully on the pile of drying dishes lined up on the sideboard. Upstairs, I could hear the crowd growing, their bare feet stomping in rhythm to the beat of the drum, the two-headed *mridanga*. Silvery sounding hand cymbals chimed out as guests and devotees danced and whirled on the walnut parquet of the temple room floor directly above my head.

As I swept the red tile floor, gathering the detritus of vegetable peels I'd strewn in my haste, I conjured up the conversation I'd had a couple days ago with Madhu, the temple president. I still burned hot whenever I thought about it—his audacity in telling me when I should get married and to whom! We sat in his office, a room brightened with the intense afternoon sunlight so characteristic of Denver and decorated with hanging bleached wicker baskets of delicate ferns adding a Victorian air. Madhu, a slender, pale, insipid man in his early thirties, spoke with such a pronounced Aussie accent that it was hard to understand him, although after three years, my comprehension had improved markedly. At this point, I hardly ever had to ask him to repeat words. His wife Devi brought in a pot of herb tea and a couple of mugs for us and glanced at me sympathetically. He stared down into his mug as we talked, rarely meeting my eyes. I refused her offer of tea, not planning to be there long.

“Lata, I think it's time for you to get married,” he began. “You've been at the temple several years now, and your guru agrees with me about this. I know it's sometimes difficult for us Western converts accept the idea of arranged marriage but it's a long tradition in India and for the most part, has worked out well.”

The wicker chair I sat in creaked slightly as I shifted my weight, trying to somehow get comfortable. I had known he planned to bring this up with me yet I felt put on the spot. Devi warned me about this a few days ago as we sat on the temple room floor, chatting and stringing delicate yellow marigolds onto cotton twine with long, wicked-looking needles, making long garlands to decorate the altar. Devi was a friend of mine, kind and sweet and way smarter than her husband. How on earth did she manage to stay married to such a dolt?

“With all due respect, Madhu, there's no one I'm interested in marrying.”

He slammed his mug down on the desk abruptly, causing some of the tea to slop over the edge. He wasn't used to insubordinate women. “Still, there is someone who would very much like to marry you,” he countered. “Kapila das.” Kapila was a short chubby guy with a great sense of humor and a scholar's inquiring mind. He seemed nice enough, an earnest, hardworking monk who would probably be a great husband for someone. Just not for me.

“I'll think about it, Madhu. Really.” Like hell I would. I rose from the chair and slipped through the door before he could continue describing his plans for me, almost

bumping into Devi, who stood semi-hidden, listening at the doorway. She gave me a slightly guilty look as I hurried by.

Revisiting this incident now seemed to give me the fiery energy I needed to quickly finish the sweeping, my last task in a long day. After I was finished, I tossed the broom into the corner where it teetered against the wall briefly, then fell to the floor. I didn't bother to pick it up. I was so tired. I'd been cooking the feast for hours, stirring the huge pots of milky sweet rice with a wooden paddle so they wouldn't burn, and frying the vegetable pakoras in wide woks full of the clarified butter prized by Indian cooks,

Just as I hung my damp apron on a peg and was getting ready to head back to the ashram, Bhakti came by the kitchen, peeking around the corner of the doorway. She was festively decked out in a fancy turquoise silk sari bordered with lots of gold *jari*. Carved conch shell and red coral bracelets lay heavily on her wrists. The opalescent beads threaded into her pale braid in tandem with the dusky *kajal* eyeliner she'd applied made her look like a mysterious Scandinavian gypsy.

"Coming to the feast, Lata?"

"Oh, Bhakti, I don't know. I'm completely wiped out. All I really want to do is to go back to my room and collapse in exhaustion." And something I had seen at last Sunday's feast was bothering me. My stomach tensed at the indistinct remembrance but I couldn't pinpoint what had troubled me.

"Come upstairs for a few minutes. Sajjana brought her new baby and she wants you to see him. He's a complete darling," she pleaded.

"Okay, I'll come up for a minute. But then I'm going to take some rest,"

We hurried up the stairs from the basement kitchen and swung open the heavy wooden door, the sounds of chanting now intensifying. Nag champa incense wafted through the temple room and it seemed as if hundreds of people stood crammed into the space, all chanting Sanskrit in staccato unison. An old Indian woman, her eyes closed, her arms raised in supplication, gyrated near me, silently mouthing "Radha, Radha," as if in trance. The woman was oblivious to the state of her sari, which had fallen off her shoulder and trailed on the floor.

The huge altar at the front of the room awed me as always. Statues of gods and goddesses resided on the gleaming black marble altar that ran the entire width of the room. There were Rama and Sita, Krishna and Radha, Hanuman and Ganesh, fashioned variously of brass and marble and wood and standing marvelously adorned in jeweled silk and fresh garlands of carnations, freesia and roses.

I squeezed past the old mataji and stood at the back wall, chanting and clapping my hands as I looked around the room. No austerity here—Hinduism was a riotous, never-ending carnival of colors and aromas and flavors and sounds. This ecstatic style of worshipping had drawn me into the community initially. For the first two years I'd felt fortunate to live in a place so saturated with such sensory opulence.

Lately, though, my enthusiasm for this sort of life had wavered. Forget my high-minded plan of being a Hindu nun for the rest of my life—that scheme was definitely a no-go at this point. Dragging myself out of bed in the desolate hours before dawn to shower and meditate had become excruciatingly difficult the last few months. I seemed to be angry all the time, a free-floating sort of resentment that permeated everything. And I missed sex fiercely, but more than that, I longed to be emotionally intimate with a lover again.

Now as I scanned the crowded temple room, Kapila being mercifully absent, my eyes rested on a clutch of young women, some straightedge girls with body piercings, wildly colored hair, dressed variously in sheer gauzy blouses, vintage dresses and ripped fishnets. Suddenly, I remembered why I hadn't wanted to come upstairs tonight. At the fringe of the straightedge group sat a young woman in her mid-twenties, her legs bent beneath her, her knees poking out from ripped jeans, her short indigo-dark hair a fine fuzz covering her head. She gazed thoughtfully at the altar as her fingers thrummed against her thighs, matching the drum's rhythm. This same woman had showed up last week. I leaned against the temple wall momentarily; closing my eyes and feeling my stomach roil with tension. I needed to leave the room now, this second.

The delicate soft night air played over me as I emerged from the overheated temple. I'll have to see Sajjana and the baby another time. Crossing the street, I ran up the cement stairs of my house, tripping once over my sari's hem, narrowly missing a fall by grabbing the iron handrail. I walked quickly to my room in the back, not bothering to greet my roommates chattering together in the living room.

I stripped and put on my nightgown, the comforting smell of freshly laundered sheets sheltering me as I lay on my futon, willing myself to sleep. I stared up at the ceiling, where water damage had made odd shapes that shifted weirdly as the violet moonlight stole through the room. Bits of hushed conversation slipped through the dark as Suni and Dhana talked of their upcoming marriages. Prattling toads, I thought hatefully, surprised at my own venom.

My anxiety-soaked mind didn't even give me a break even at night. Recently during the rare times when I could sleep I'd had terrible dreams; vivid, epic nightmares that spun on seemingly forever. I might find myself in a filthy alley, surrounded by decaying garbage and debris and the howls of wild crazed animals. Or living among an impoverished family struggling to find enough to eat, our torn and shredded clothing barely hiding our emaciated bodies. Once I dreamt I sat in a dreary college classroom, the steel clock with its stark black numerals above me ticking ominously, a stern professor lurking over my shoulder as I took an exam I was doomed to fail. Often I woke drugged in the morning, unable to figure out where I was, afraid and alone, my bedclothes sticky and tangled.

I knew it was time to leave this place—I'd felt it in my kishkes, my guts, as my grandmother would say, for a long time. But if I left the community, where would I go? Not back home. Absolutely out of the question. I had no money—the small bank account I'd had when I joined was exhausted long ago. And I knew no one in Denver outside the temple.

Unable to sleep again tonight, I let my fingers slip in and out between my legs, the sensations soothing me as I called up images of sleek androgynous girls who longed for other women. The handsome shaven-headed young woman I had seen at the feast stole into my room upon a cloud of passion and sank beneath my covers, joining me. In my imagination, our bodies tumbled and flowed over each other, our tongues seeking out the other's sweetest places. Just before succumbing to my phantasms, I felt a surge of despair. It seemed I would never overcome the desires of my body, no matter how much time I'd spend on my meditation cushion.

The next day at the main library downtown, I bent over the stack of books before me. A devoted bibliophile, I loved it here; it was my refuge and sanctuary. Fluorescent lamps strung from the library's cavernous ceilings reflected, halo-like, off the wooden desk's varnished top. I was reading a tome about the incorruptibles, those Catholic saints whose bodies didn't decay after death. Photographs showed their corpses displayed in shrines and glass coffins, their remains darkened by decades and millennia of accumulated soot from

candles and incense but still miraculously well preserved. Especially amazing was St Bernadette of Lourdes, who had died young in 1897. Her body, now reposing in a chapel in France, had only discolored slightly in a few places a hundred years after her death. She looked eerily radiant, a holy Sleeping Beauty, as she lay in state in her full habit, eyes closed and a wooden rosary encircling her hands.

Enthralled by these stories, I didn't see the woman until she stood right in front of my table. Through the stacks of books, I noticed a pair of legs clad in khaki cargo pants on the other side of the desk. My eyes slowly rose to take in the owner. It was the dark-haired woman from the feast, now wearing a beat-up tan leather jacket, the soft furze of her hair outlining the shape of her head.

"What are you planning to do with all these Catholic books? Flagellate yourself? She grinned, her dusky brows raised above her deep-set eyes, finding humor in her own joke. Her voice was a little deeper than I expected and she was even better looking close up. Unable to formulate a suitable retort, I looked down at my hands, which were of their own accord straightening the books into neat piles and aligning the spines perfectly with the edge of the table.

She picked up a volume, quickly flipped through the pages, taking a bit longer with the table of contents, and set it down again. "Repression incarnate," she remarked in a teasing tone, smiling mischievously at me. "I saw you at the temple last night. You live there?"

"Yes."

"Really. For how long?"

"A little over three years. I joined when I was eighteen," I said, my face rouging slightly.

"Wow. Impressive." I wasn't sure if I was being taunted or complimented. "Were you raised Hindu?"

"No, Lutheran, actually. German mother, Jewish father." I flashed momentarily on the starkly decorated church I went to as a child, its severe wooden pews, the morose, balding pastor lecturing us from the podium, my mother pinching my leg hard in order to quiet my whisperings to my sister.

The woman sat down uninvited in the chair across from me and our conversation continued, a bit stilted at first. Her name was Ginny, and she was a couple years older than me, a grad student in anthropology at CU Boulder who worked in a local café as a "barrista," that last word pronounced mockingly. Sometimes Ginny would run her hands through her hair, hardly disturbing the gelled spikes, or tap her fingers on the table, tattooing out a rhythm that seemed to echo in her head. She seemed at ease as we talked; her speech peppered with bantering remarks that seemed designed to dissipate my wariness. If I didn't know better, I'd think she was flirting with me.

"So," Ginny said, "do you ever go out to movies and concerts and things like that?" She rocked on the legs of her chair, artfully balancing for a few seconds each time she leaned backwards.

"No." I wished I were wearing anything but this worn cotton sari, pale gray with a maroon striped border. I felt odd and awkward. "I know it sounds strange, but if you are trying to live a sacred life, those things are considered distractions."

"You know, I respect that but no way could I live like that. If it works for you, though . . ."

But it's not working for me.

Ginny reached out her arms above her head in an exaggerated stretching motion, as if rising from sleep. “The life of a grad student, you know. Perpetually exhausted.” Her t-shirt rode up slightly as she lifted her arms, showing a bit of her tanned torso. I looked at her midriff for a second—a completely unconscious movement—and felt my face pink with chagrin when she caught me staring. She raised her eyebrows a millimeter in surprise and then glanced out the tall windows of the library that overlooked the art museum courtyard and its modernistic hulking and twisted red metal sculpture, a slight frown settling on her face. “Jesus, it’s starting to snow again. Do you want a ride back to the temple? I’ve got to go to work.” She stood up abruptly and pushed the chair back under the table, shoving her hands into her back pockets as she faced me. Something in her stance seemed to challenge me.

“That would be great. Thanks. It gets cold waiting for the bus sometimes.” I gathered my books together, dumped them in the plastic reshelving bin and accompanied Ginny the short distance to her vintage Toyota. I read the lavender sticker on her car’s bumper: “Your silence will not protect you. Audre Lorde.” That’s so true.

I had never revealed I was gay to anyone except a few close friends and, of course, my high school girl friend. But in remaining silent I’d abandoned myself. What made me me at my core felt withered and parched and scarcely alive. No wonder every day I descended lower into despondency and hopelessness, a massive slab of angst weighting down my chest.

As Ginny and I drove towards the temple, I glanced at her, noticing how the planes of her face with their high cheekbones reflected the diffused streetlights. Her dark straight brows were knitted in thought as she navigated the glacial roads. I couldn’t help imagining how Ginny’s small breasts would fit snugly into my palms and how her skin would smell and taste as I bestowed featherweight kisses behind her ears, down her neck, in the hollows of her clavicle.

Sinking further into a daydream as the car sped along in the dark, I mused about my high school love, a tall, Rubenesque girl with deep-set eyes. I remembered pillowing my face in Liesl’s silken breasts and the delicious friction that resulted when we rubbed our naked bodies together. The memories of the men I’d slept with before moving into the temple were hardly more than specters. Only the lovemaking I’d shared with a woman lodged in my daydreams like a bee encased in sweet, petrified resin, a treasured amber talisman.

Suddenly, Ginny pulled the car to a stop in front of the temple. Snapped suddenly out of my reverie, I teetered on a precarious edge for a minute and then my words tumbled out: “Where do you work? I’d love to come by and see the café sometime.”

“Sure, that’d be nice. It’s called Penny Lane, on Pearl Street, a couple blocks down from the Boulder Co-op.” As she smiled, I noticed her front teeth were slightly crooked, giving her a rakish look.

“By the way, I’m planning to come by the temple again next Sunday for the love feast,” she said, slightly drawling the word “love” and trying to suppress a smile at the trite double entendre. Our eyes locked for a long second and then I grabbed my books with one arm and opened the car door with the other. As she drove away I strolled into the women’s ashram, humming and smiling. Even Suni and Dhana and their damned eternal wedding chatter weren’t going to get me down today.

Every Sunday for the next two months, except for once when she had to lead a study session, Ginny showed up at the feast. We would sit together and eat and talk about

everything and anything. Sometimes Madhu and other devotees cast stern questioning looks toward us but I didn't care. I felt exhilarated when we were together.

Every chance I could, when I had a break from my temple duties, I'd sneak out and meet Ginny downtown, where she spent a lot of time researching her dissertation. I'd steal out of the ashram with a sari covering some street clothes, usually jeans and a shirt, my hair caught in a chaste braid, and catch the bus a few blocks from the temple. All the way down its Colfax route, that crazy patchwork avenue of pawnshops, upscale furniture stores and art galleries, bohemian coffee houses, pagan supply shops and Salvadorian panaderias selling delicious pastries stuffed with thick cream, I'd be restlessly looking out the grimy bus window, counting the slow blocks until Broadway as the bus chugged through the congested traffic. I always wore sunglasses so I could more easily avoid conversation with the lowlifes, prostitutes, drunks and assorted ruffians that made up the major percentage of Route 15's patrons. Although I had grown up in LA and was pretty street-savvy, I felt nervous on the 15 and usually sat on the edge of an aisle seat as close to the front of the bus as I could get, just in case yet another fracas broke out.

Once the bus pulled in at the busy Broadway intersection I'd bound off, quickly unwind my sari, stuff it in my backpack and then undo my long braid. It felt great to just let my hair go free, wear normal clothes and look like everyone else for a change. No puzzled stares, no smirks, no one coming up to me and asking for spiritual counsel or a copy of the Bhagavad-gita, and most fantastic of all, no evangelicals wanting to engage in a belligerent discussion of imminent Armageddon.

Usually Ginny was already there, waiting for me, impatiently shifting her weight from leg to leg, wearing her ubiquitous sunglasses and backwards baseball cap, chewing on a toothpick. A transient smile would cross her face when she saw me, and then she'd remark dryly, "Always waiting for the femme. Story of my life." I'd hug her hard, enjoying her closeness and her scent, a mixture of coffee and soap and the sandalwood oil she daubed behind her ears.

Our arms around each other, we'd stroll over to the little Irish coffee house on Wazee across from the Tattered Cover and spend hours nursing mugs of French roast and nibbling on almond biscotti (me) and chocolate chip scones (her) while we chatted. Sometimes we would just read our respective books in silence for long stretches, our hands clasped across the rickety-legged wooden table. Often we'd wander over to the bookstore, mainly to browse, although sometimes Ginny would buy something she could use for her research on Chaco Canyon and the mysterious civilizations that had made this barren New Mexico valley their abode centuries ago. Then we'd park her Toyota Corolla strategically on a deserted side street behind a copse of trees and make out. How had I gone so long without touching a woman, I'd think in amazement.

I wasn't sure what the hell I was doing with Ginny but I guess in any other context that this would be called dating. One thing was certain. Since I'd been seeing her, my horrific nightmares had for the most part abated and I felt like I could survive the temple routine, at least for a little while longer. Ultimately, though, "things fall apart; the centre cannot hold," as Yeats declared. One afternoon as Ginny and I wound up another marathon session of lovemaking in her car, she started in on me.

"So, Lata, are we just going to keep screwing in the back seat, hiding out from the devotees, or are we going to think about having a life together in plain view of the world? Something needs to change here. I can't handle this much longer."

I buttoned up the front of my shirt and combed my tangled hair with my fingers. “What do you want me to do?”

“Well, in a perfect world, I’d want you to move to Boulder so we could see each other more, go out at night, do things together, you know, have regular lives,” Ginny massaged her temples hard, a sure sign she was stressed and a migraine headed her way.

“That sounds like a great plan, honey. But I don’t think there are too many places in Boulder hiring for a Hindu priestess. I’ve never been to college, have no marketable skills, and my trust fund only has a few pennies left.” I checked my hair in the rearview mirror, wetting my fingers with spit to make the frizzy front ends lie down.

“You can be really obnoxious, Lata. And pessimistic. You’re not alone. I’ll help you. I have friends you can crash with for a while. You could go to school, get student loans, a part-time job. You’d be able to make it. You just need to decide when you’re going to grow up. You’re twenty-one and, let’s face it, you’re only in the temple because it gives you some sense of security.” She took a deep breath and let it out in a great sigh as she pulled her T-shirt over her head and tucked it into her pants.

Shot through the heart and you’re to blame. A fragment of a long-forgotten song lyric blew through my head and I felt numb inside, chilled by the possible loss of this gender outlaw who made me chant litanies of ecstatic moans whenever she touched me and who could beguile my mind for hours as well. She was drawing a line and I knew it and she knew I knew it.

“I have to go now. I’m cooking the evening offering,” I said, locating my backpack squashed under the front seat and hoisting it over my shoulder. “But you’re right, baby,” I murmured into her neck as I hugged her goodbye. “I’ll think about it and figure something out.”

“I know you will. I’ll call you soon,” Ginny said, trying unsuccessfully to catch my eye and gauge my mood as I got out of the car and ambled toward the bus stop in a stupefied way, wondering what to do with my deranged, disarrayed life. She peeled the car from the curb and gave me a brief wave as she headed back to Boulder and the café and her normal dyke life with her friends who were obviously so much more mature and together than I was.

As soon as I came in the ashram door later that afternoon from the bus, I rushed into the bathroom for a quick shower before heading over to the temple kitchen. As I soaped up, I recalled where Ginny had stroked and kissed me that day—I could see faint red swellings rising up where she’d bitten my breasts. I cherished these hidden marks of our lovemaking on my body; it made our clandestine affair more real somehow. When I finally came out of the bathroom, Suni and Dhana, who had been obviously lying in wait, confronted me in the hallway near my room.

“Tadit told us she was shopping downtown today and she saw you walking around in *karmi* clothes and holding that girl’s hand,” Suni said heatedly.

“We told Madhu and he wants to talk to you right now. He said to send you over as soon as you got back,” Dhana chimed in.

“I knew something weird was going on. You didn’t sit next to her every week at the feast just to preach to her,” said Suni, her broad face reddening. “I can’t believe this. We’ve been living with a lesbian all this time. It’s disgusting. I’m surprised you didn’t try to come on to us.”

“Dream on, Suni,” I muttered, willing myself to be civil. What had I expected? On some level I had known I would be found out eventually.

Suni and Dhana kept up their haranguing, their voices echoing through the hall where we stood, me still wrapped in a towel, my hair dripping down my back. Then their voices seemed to merge into a low humming somnolent sound like that of a swarm of honeybees, gathering at a great distance. They were drones, these two, mindlessly serving their colony without question, their lives tracked along a narrow rut that traveled between hive and flower and the next flower and then back again to the hive, a uniformity of purpose that tolerated no dissension.

I had to leave, now. And I had to do it for me, for my sanity and survival, not just to keep Ginny around. Whatever happened after I closed the ashram door behind me for the last time was an absolute conundrum. I was terrified. Those mystics I so loved to read would have urged me on with phrases like “Embrace the mystery! Walk into the fire!” and other clever axioms that sounded rousing and inspiring on paper. I felt, though, as if I was setting off for a journey through an English hedge maze, its dim cramped paths bordered by high, thorny, sinister bushes, the route full of frustrating dead-end passages. I might stroll for hours or days, entangled in the intricate meandering network of walkways, unable to see more than a few feet ahead, the towering foliage blocking my view. I might never get to the center at all.

Pushing past my now silently staring roommates, I walked to my room and stowed into my backpack a few belongings, toiletries, underwear, a couple of books Ginny had bought for me and some letters from friends. Pulling on a bedraggled pair of jeans and a donated olive twill jacket, I neatly folded my saris and other devotional clothing in a mound on the floor, ready for the next new devotee woman to wear. May she wear these in good health and with many blessings. May we all be blessed and at peace in this crazy world, I prayed as I slipped through the front door and into the alley, heading out to Colfax and the bus that would take me to Boulder.

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