

"Divakaruni is a brilliant storyteller; she illuminates the world with her artistry." —Junot Díaz

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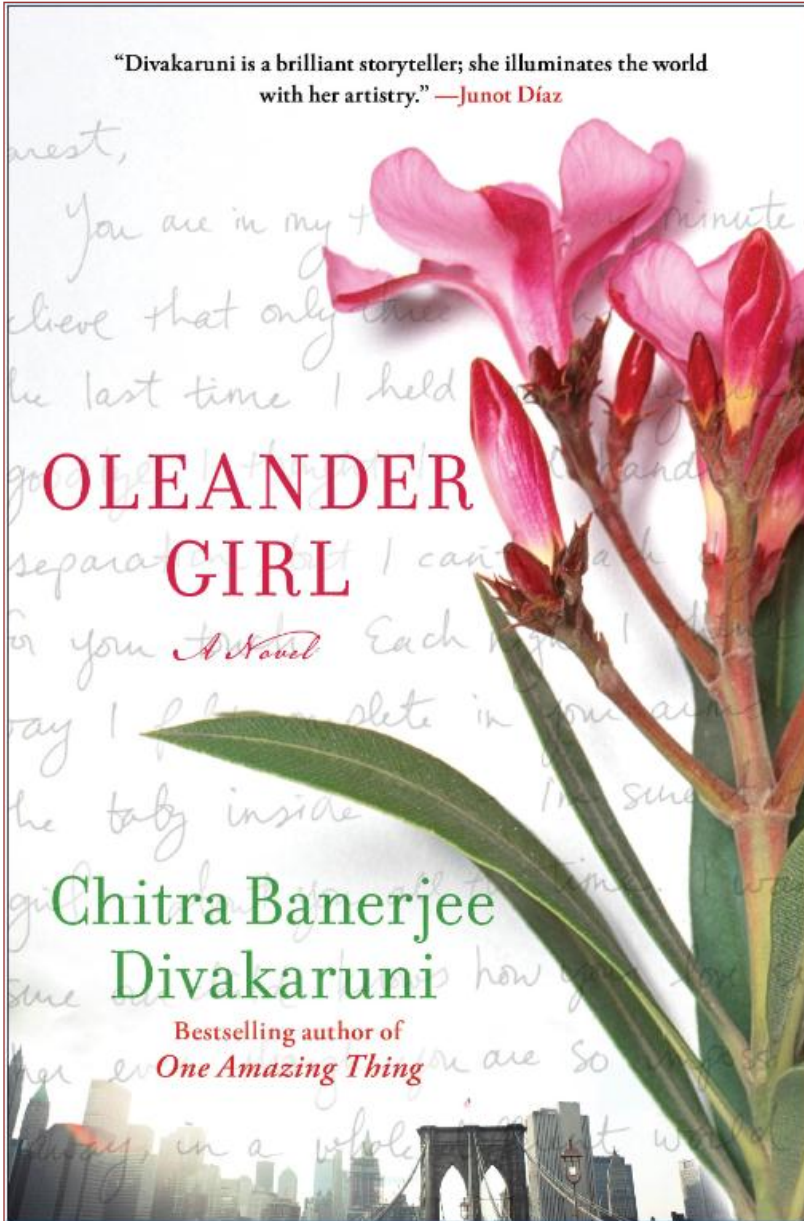
OLEANDER GIRL

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Divakaruni

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I'm swimming through a long, underwater cavern flecked with blue light, the cavern of love, with rajat close behind me. We're in a race, and so far i'm winning because this is my dream. sometimes when i'm dreaming, i don't know it, but tonight i do. sometimes when i'm awake, i wonder if i'm dreaming. that, however, is another story.

i smile and feel my mouth filling with cool, silver bubbles. rajat's fingers brush the backs of my knees. even in my dream i know that if i slow down just a bit, he'll grab my waist and pull me to him for a mischievous kiss. imagining that kiss sends a shudder of pleasure through me. but i don't want it yet. the chase is too much fun. i surge away with a splashy kick. Hey! he calls out in spluttering protest, and i grin wider. Competitive, he slices through the water with his fierce butterfly stroke and lunges for my ankle. i wait for his strong, electric grip to send a current through my veins. My mouth floods with anticipation of our kiss.

then out of nowhere a wave breaks over me. salt and sand are on my tongue. i try to spit them out, but they fill my mouth, choking me. Where's rajat when i need his help? Gasping, i thrash about and wake in my bed, tangled in my bedsheets.

in my mother's bed, i should say. the bed i used every year when i came home from boarding school for the holidays. the bed that's made with the same sheets she covered herself with as a girl.

As my eyes adjust to the darkness, i know at once that someone is in the room. My heart flails around. it's impossible. i always lock the door before going to sleep, and the window is barred. but there it is, in the armchair in the corner of the night room: a still female form, black against the darkness of the room, looking toward me.

"Mother?" i whisper, my fear replaced by a yearning that's as old and illogical as anything i can remember.

i know so little about my mother, only that she died eighteen years ago, giving birth to me—a few months after my father, an ambitious law student, had passed away in a car accident. Perhaps she died of a broken heart. i never knew for sure because no one would speak to me of them. My grandparents had to put aside their own broken hearts to care for me, and i'm grateful: they did it well. still, all through my years growing up, i longed for a visitation from my mother. the girls in my boarding school whispered stories about such occurrences, deceased parents appearing to save their offspring from calamity. i prayed for it in secret and, when that didn't work, tried to put myself in calamity's way, figuring either my mother or father might appear. but i only ended up with bruises, sprains, a case of the whooping cough, and, finally, a broken ankle. My adventures led to detentions, confiscation of pocket money, and a somewhat exaggerated reputation as a daredevil. they also resulted in numerous tongue-lashings from our harried principal, which didn't matter to me, and, finally, a long-distance phone call from my grandfather, which did.

"korobi," Grandfather said in that stern, grainy voice that i had adored from babyhood, "i'm too old for this. besides, why would a smart girl like you do a stupid thing like walking on the upstairs window-ledge?"

the canny old rascal. he knew me well enough to appeal to my three major weaknesses: my vanity, my guilt, and, most of all, my love for him. he was, to me, father and mother rolled into one, and the thought that i had distressed and disappointed him made me burst into tears. thus ended my attempts at forcing my parents into making an appearance.



Oleander Girl

now, years after i had armored my heart and accepted that my mother was gone from my life, here she is.

how can i be sure it is her? there are some things we know, in our breath, in our bones.

it makes a certain sense that she should visit me now. tomorrow i am to take my first real step into adulthood: i will be engaged to rajat and thus begin the journey away from this family into another one. Perhaps my mother has come to say good-bye, to give me her blessing? is she concerned? A strange tension seems to emanate from her. Perhaps she can't go to her final rest until she's certain that i am loved. i think i know why.

some years back, during one of my vacations, i'd been going through Grandfather's library looking for something to read. i finally chose an old book of poems, its pages thumbed soft with loving use. As i flipped through it, a thin sheet of blue paper fell to the floor. someone had left a half-finished letter inside. As i read it, my heart beat so hard i thought it would break through my chest.

Dearest,

You are in my thoughts every minute. I can't believe that only three months have passed since the last time I held you in my arms to say good-bye. I thought I could handle this separation, but I can't. Each day I ache for your touch. Each night I think of the way I felt complete in your arms. I talk to the baby inside me—I'm sure it will be a girl—about you all the time. I want to make sure our child knows how your love surrounds her even though you are so impossibly far away, in a whole different world—

it was beautiful and heartbreaking, this note from my mother to my dead father. it brought them close to me, made them real in a way none of my imaginings had. i couldn't share it with either of my grandparents, but i memorized every word on the page. i hid the note carefully in the bottom of my trunk—my first, cherished secret—and took it back to boarding school with me. nights when i couldn't sleep, i would hold it in my hand and wish that someday i might find a love like theirs.

“**r**ajat is a wonderful man, Mother,” i say, throwing off the bedsheets and sitting up straight in my excitement. “**h**ow i wish you could have met him, and Father, too. **t**hen you’d have no doubts that i’m making the right choice. **h**e’s smart, funny, and caring—not only to me but to my grandparents. i’ve loved him from the moment i met him—it sounds silly, Mother, but it’s true. At first i didn’t think it would work. **h**e comes from such a different kind of family. **t**hey’re so rich and modern and fashionable that it’s a little scary. And you know Grandfather—proud to bursting of our heritage, of the old ways. but i was amazed at how well they got along from the first. Maybe it’s because Grandfather saw that **r**ajat loves me just the way i am, that he never wants me to change. And i—i feel complete in his arms, Mother, just like you’d written in your letter. Why, i love him so much, i could die for him!”

My mother makes a small, agitated movement, as though distressed at something i’ve said. she turns toward the window. is she leaving? Desperate to recapture her attention, i blurt out something i haven’t confessed to anyone else.

“**t**he real reason i love him isn’t his good looks or charm—it’s because underneath it, i can sense a secret sadness. **n**o one else can see it. **n**o one else can cure it. but i’m going to find out what it is, and i’m going to make him happy!”

i’m breathless from my confession, but still the air in the room hangs uncertain, incomplete. My mother continues to look out the window. Why will she not speak to me? Where is the blessing kiss i’ve wanted all my life, cool as a dew-drenched breeze on my forehead?

A terrible thought strikes me: **h**as she come, like ghosts in tales, to warn me of an impending disaster?

i struggle to get to my feet, but my body is suddenly too heavy.

i *will* go to her. i *will* find out what she isn’t telling me.

suddenly the window behind her is filled with light. **O**utside i see an ocean, over which a sun is setting. **h**ave i fallen, then, from one dream into another? she points over the ocean, leaning toward it with such sad longing that sorrow twists my heart. i understand.

she hasn’t come to learn about me. All the things i said to her—she

Oleander Girl

probably knew them already, being dead. she has appeared now, instead, to tell me something.

but what?

“talk to me, Mother.”

this time when she turns to me, i notice that my dream mother has no mouth. she points again.

“there’s something out there you want? beyond the ocean?”

she nods. her face is glowing because i’ve finally understood. now she points at me.

“you want me to go and get it?”

she nods.

“Where must i go? What am i to look for?”

My mother’s frame shivers with effort as though she longs to speak. she begins to dissolve. i can glimpse the ocean through her tattered body, waves breaking apart on rocks. An urgent sorrow radiates from her disappearing form. then she is gone, and i am finally awake, blinking in the first rays of the sun entering the room through the bars.

i need someone to interpret this dream. it means something, i’m sure of that, coming at this crucial moment in my life. i can’t go to Grandfather. When my mother died, he destroyed all her photographs because he couldn’t bear to look at them. When i was six, he told me never to bring her up. it was too painful.

i imagined it at night when i lay in bed, alone with my longing: that sharp, silver word, *mother*, like a chisel, chipping away at Grandfather’s heart.

Perhaps i can tell my dream to Grandmother. she, too, is reluctant to speak of my mother—but she can be cajoled.

