

Karma Blues

Ann Beltran

*“Whatever action you performed in
the past becomes your destiny now.
Whatever action you perform now
becomes your destiny in the future.”*

Muktananda, “Resonate with Stillness,” June

Sunday, April 1, 2007

Confronting yet another failed attempt to cast a male figure as her husband and her daughter's father, Liv was seriously considering whether they could just do without. *Aren't my family and friends enough?* She was tired of her recurring frustration of failing to secure in one person a husband whom she would care to be in bed with and stand to talk to, and a father who genuinely cared for her biracial, in-your-face, adorable child. After all they'd managed for six years. Family had protected and supported them. And Liv provided for most of their needs. Really, what was she looking for?

A firm knock at the door interrupted her meandering mind. Before Liv completely opened the door, Elyse was pushing it farther to grab Liv and do a twirl hug. "Hey girlfriend, I've got really big news – Cory proposed last night!"

Liv, still in her grey sweats, felt the mug in her hand tip and slop coffee on the carpet. Her contemplative eyelids of a moment ago popped fully open. "Oh my god! Oh my god, finally, I'm sooo happy!" She took Elyse's hand looking for a ring, and seeing none, raised her eyes.

"No, we're not doing an engagement ring – no blood diamonds for this couple. But I don't care. I'm just floored that after all this time – what has it been, three years? – all this time, with no particular occasion, he cuddles up and asks me while we're in bed. I'm still in shock!"

Friends since college, the twosome were approaching twenty-nine. Occasionally they still had a night out at a bar and whomever Liv didn't pull in with her Euro look – a northern coolness in sync with an increasingly pragmatic assessment of men, yet enlivened by a sunny smile that drew them in - Elyse did with her Hispanic attractions – warm, inviting eyes that signaled a good time to be had, while concealing an easily triggered

sarcasm about ineffectual men. Both career savvy now, their interests covered urban Seattle life. Liv was deeper into the nonprofit sector. She'd left her job at the International Rescue Committee to work at a family multi-service center at the north end of Lake Union where she helped women improve their financial situation. Elyse was embedded in city hall moving from the neighborhood development program into serving as staff for a city council member. That neither had moved into an explicitly permanent relationship with a man suited their friendship. Although these last years, Elyse had come much closer.

"Here, sit down and share the shock. Do you want some coffee?"

"A little – I'm just so wired already."

Liv brought a cup out from her tiny kitchen alcove into the sunnier area of the apartment, located a floor down and a wing across from Elyse's apartment. The place had grown comfy and disheveled as IKEA furnishings became interspersed with second-hand treasures, and then layered with the scratches and stains of a child's activities, and not just any child, but as Elyse called Shakti, 'a wild child.' Meant mostly in fun, the assessment was initially based on the feral look the toddler embodied, tangled hair sans barrettes hanging over calculating eyes, dirt under her nails, and a premature willingness to let curiosity take her beyond her mother's comfort zone. Now, while the hair still needed taming, 'wildness' pointed more to a primordial uncompromising spirit, a challenging consortium of precocious and extroverted behaviors for a single mom. A child who thought she was always right.

"So, what moved him to propose? It seemed like you guys had a groove that wasn't going to change."

"Funny you should ask, because honestly that was my question too. When he whispered it in my ear, my first words were, 'you're kidding.'"

"And?"

"He was hurt a little and said, 'no, I'm not kidding. I think it's time.'"

"Time for what? Because of?"

“Here’s the odd thing. I’d been thinking it was time too. Not that I said that to you, but I was. Maybe when he turned thirty and we had that party last August, the one you missed, I started wondering then, well, what now? Are we headed into something together? Will this just be status quo until my biological clock goes off? And then when his dad died this winter, it hit him hard. And I could tell he was having to change, be more attentive to his mom back East, asking me if we could go visit her, keeping up more with his older brother too. Family stuff.”

“So that’s what you think moved him to propose, but he didn’t really say?”

“Not so far. But come on – I’m not going to interrogate him at one in the morning! I just said yes, a big yes, where I hopped out of bed and jumped around naked shouting, ‘YES, YES!’”

Liv lowered her eyes and stared at her mug. “I didn’t know you wanted it so badly.” Each had always prided herself on having complete access to the other’s feelings with rare notable exceptions. As well as Liv knew her friend, and kept up with her activities with Cory, she hadn’t seen this one coming.

“Honestly, neither did I! Neither did I. But it was a huge rush when it sank in that he’d proposed, it just made me so fucking happy!”

Liv laughed and hoped she was concealing the negativity she sensed in her heart. Six years has passed since she’d ended a steady live-in relationship with her college boyfriend, Devin, the relationship she’d destroyed when she’d arrived home from Mumbai pregnant, carrying another man’s child. Rama’s. She’d chosen to have no further contact with him. Six years of totally immersing herself into motherhood, working to transform what had begun as a big mistake, at least to others. Years of a modest social life that were sporadically punctuated by sexual relations, varying in length and strength from exclamation points (one-nighters of passionate sex followed by little or no contact), to commas (ho hum repeaters who faded out), and worse, the three dot encounters (stretched over

months with ups and downs that appeared to have some meaning but then fizzled out.) Indeed, it was just last night that a three-month sexual hiatus was almost broken when the nerdy Indian Microsoftie finally began some heavy petting aimed at getting her clothes off. History now. Just move on. That was an exit strategy she seemed to have perfected over time, first with Shakti's father Rama, then with Devin, and since then with others. Just end it when you know it won't work. Back to square one, although she hated that board game metaphor as though there were some 'right one' out there she needed to get to. More practically, she needed to remind her dad not to bother any more bringing computer geeks home.

Elyse sensed Liv was holding back. "Let me guess. I know you're happy for me, but it also makes you sad because there's no good man in your life right now?"

Liv nodded.

"What about Madhu?"

"Crashed and burned."

"That bad?"

"Unhuh. I will never fall into that trap again of thinking some computer nerd actually has lust in his veins, especially if he's from India and feeling guilty for having sex outside of marriage." Her gaze traveled to a stack of self-help books on her makeshift coffee table. Following last night's encounter, she'd searched for consolation, and seen the words 'a journey toward wholeness.' Yes, that was the crux of it, needing to learn to find completeness within herself. *The Four-Fold Way* was now on top of her stack, attracting her with its mantras for every season. Spring's was about healing: 'pay attention to what has heart and meaning.' *Last night certainly did not have heart and meaning.* Although considering how she'd derailed Madhu's awkward efforts to get her into bed, she found satisfaction in her ability to blend compassion and respect with honesty, realizing that the harder he tried to be macho the less attracted she was. She ejected him out of the bedroom, out of her apartment, and out of her life as gracefully as she could. In the past, she would have given it

more of a try, but then had to deal with a deeper masculine wound at being rejected post intercourse. Better to do it up front.

“Well, we knew that wasn’t going anywhere.”

Liv snapped back. “But that’s partly it – why do things have to go anywhere? Why are you so fucking happy that Cory proposed? Why does the be all and end all for us, for women, have to be getting married?” *Mad, yes I’m mad.* The attempts of well-intentioned others to set her up left her mad that someone, some societal culture producer/director, was demanding that she fill this role. And mad at herself for always falling into the trap. She made a vow as she bit with vigor into the stale doughnut and slurped her coffee with milk: *I’m good on my own. Make it work.* An inner mentor continued the advice: if someone comes along organically, naturally, well then great; if not, there will be other activities. *With whom? girlfriends?* Yes, just let yourself be, no more managing to gender structures. Be a great mom, a loving person to all. And create a life you love. *But I want a man in my life!* These were not new thoughts, but indeed a refrain that followed a melody that always ended on a low note. Yet, after another dismal evening, Liv felt more fiercely the need to break the shackles of others’ expectations. And her own.

This inner dialogue had moved out loud so many times between Elyse and Liv before that it bore a label: ‘feminist rants.’ The rants were triggered as Liv would lament, “I need a father for Shakti,” or Elyse would sense how her world had grown with her up-and-coming civil rights attorney boyfriend, Cory, and yet fear losing herself in his career, who she was and could be in her own right. Elyse would counsel Liv: look, you brought this magnificent child into the world on your own, and you don’t have to sacrifice the rest of your life to some father-type who doesn’t really cut it for you. You need to hold out for a relationship that rings your bells. Shakti’s going to grow up fine with or without some guy trying to father her. Wait for the right person. And Liv would have back at

Elyse: if anyone can hold her own in a marriage, it's you. And you don't have to get married, just enjoy the relationship. And even if you did have kids together, surely a civil rights attorney would appreciate the need to hold up his end of parenting, no?

Sometimes, their rants were about other women they saw capitulating, marrying down just to have a handy-man in the up-scale homes the women managers were buying, or a great looking stud at the parties they threw. They hated all versions of the Cinderella story. At the rant's foundation was the fundamental question whether a woman could and should be happy on her own regardless of the choices and happenings in her life, or whether women, well young women in particular, well Liv especially, needed to always be looking for that special something with a guy who would transform the repetitive travails of single momhood into some happy ending of couplehood.

They were both quiet. Elyse's bubble at the door had popped. "It's weird, I know, how I feel about the proposal. It just was such a release to hear it, like I'd been wondering if it would ever come, and suddenly it was there. Like I'd won some contest. I can relax into what I wanted all along, to have something together with him, to have a partner I can be me with. We can get on with real life, whatever that means." What Elyse was thinking that moment was living in a nice house, having a dog, and then having a baby. Stepping out of herself, she saw how attractive moving into a new life style, 'arriving' in a sense, was to her.

Liv moved, sat next to her and put down the mug. "You know I get that, I totally get that. And I am really, honestly, so happy for you. And I want that kind of relationship too. Today, this morning, not always but often on weekends, that's what I want too. And it just feels like it's never going to happen, that it's too complicated with Shakti, that guys I'm really attracted to don't want to become instant dads, and guys who might go for the whole

package, the Liv and Shakti package, well, they're just too..."

"Boring, I know."

"Or judgmental. Or controlling. There's always some fatal flaw." They turned and hugged. "Elyse, please know I'm really happy for you. And if I don't get to be your bridesmaid and Shakti doesn't get to be your flower girl, I'll be crushed!"

Elyse laughed. "God, what kind of flower girl will she be! She'll doubtless steal the show. Where is she anyway?"

"She had a sleep-over at my brother's. She loves playing know-it-all older sister to little Jeff."

"How do Ryan and Mimi like their new place?"

"Oh, they're thrilled to be in a home of their own.

The deal they got last year, almost no down payment and a low interest rate, they finally have what they wanted. They keep showing me the lower level they're fixing up to rent, and suggesting I move over there and be closer to work."

Elyse considered. Her concern turned to what would happen when she and Cory moved in to a place together between now and the wedding. That was all up in the air, but Elyse knew those discussions of a wedding date and a place to live would be coming up soon. She and Liv had lived here for five years as she raised her daughter while holding down a fulltime job. Elyse had been such a backstop, pinch hitting in all kinds of ways to help out with Shakti: babysitting, pick-ups and drop-offs at daycare, just being there to talk. Moving out would have a huge impact on their relationship, a particularly sobering consequence of beginning anew with Cory. Her mom liked to say as troubles had beset their immigrant family in Yakima, 'when one door closes, the Lord opens another.' But Elyse's happy event felt more like a door opening wide for her, and causing one to shut on Liv. "It's just occurring to me how me and Cory getting married, how it will affect us, like me not living here anymore."

Hearing that was like a full force six-foot wave knocking Liv flat. She sat back, dropping her head

dramatically on the sofa. “Shit, you’re right. Crap. What will I do without you? This is serious.”

“I thought of it because of what you said about your brother wanting you to live there. Maybe you really should consider that. I mean, wherever Cory and I wind up living together – most definitely, still in the city – my habits will change and I can see where I might not be as available to you.”

Liv brought her face close and used her sweetest voice. “Of course, you’ll need to make dinner every night, and do his laundry.”

Elyse punched her shoulder. “Just quit it. But seriously, there would be solid advantages if you lived in the same house as them. Think about it: Shakti and Jeff would have each other, lots of shared help with babysitting and meals. And you wouldn’t have that nasty two bus commute anymore.”

“True. I’m pretty sure there’s a bus from Phinney Ridge that would go past where I work. Definitely a plus. And Ryan said he’d give me a good deal on the rent.” Liv was already hosting an internal debate. “But what about my quote/unquote love life? Living downstairs from my brother? Shakti upstairs when I have a guy over and am engaged in indecent relations?”

“Well, you’d just have to date guys who have their own place, clean enough to spend time in. And you’d always have to drive over so you have a get-away car available.” That reference sprang from the nights they’d picked each other up in rescue mode from a date gone wrong in some guy’s pad, causing chortles over “the one who forgot to say he lived with his mother!” “That bastard with the SM set up!”

Liv moved to get another stale donut, offering half to Elyse. Together, they silently dunked. “Well, change is good I suppose. We couldn’t have kept this routine up forever. Shakti enters first grade in the fall. The daily contact with Ryan, Mimi and Jeff would be great. I’d save time and hassle on my commute. Maybe I could finally get

the grad school thing going. I can see a lot of it working out.”

Elyse was shaking her head slightly in disbelief: “We’re actually moving on. It makes me feel old.”

“Me too.”

“Maybe there’ll be a single dad at Shakti’s new school?”

Liv squished her face in disdain. “Right, I’ll use one of those job descriptions we have at work, and post it on the school bulletin board: “Single mom seeking single dad.”

“Just but don’t leave out the requirements of sexy and good in bed!”

As Liv drove over to Ryan’s about noon, she took a route past her workplace in Fremont and paused to study the bus sign. The 5 stops here. She’d check later to see where it stopped near Ryan’s place.

Change. Maybe it's what needs to happen. Almost seven years had passed since she’d agonized over whether to abort her ‘love child,’ another Elyse moniker at the time, for Liv’s lusty affair in India during her college internship there. Her decision to protect the life within then led inevitably to the next choice point as to whether to give the baby away. Liv journalled those following summer months, entries often generated by emotionally intense conversations with her family: her mom who as a teenager had given up Ryan only to reconnect with him when he was thirty; her aunt who had an abortion after being gang raped in college; and her half-brother who couldn’t stomach someone giving up their own flesh and blood. And then there had been that time with Grandma that struck a deep chord about holding on to one’s own thread of life in a world of adversity and trauma. Finally, Liv had started writing down conversations with her unborn child, which grew livelier once she learned that she carried a girl. As college ties were fading away, save for Elyse, Liv began succumbing to a deep relationship that was more

meaningful to her than any other, except possibly that with her own mother Katherine.

Liv knew by the time she turned twenty-two that July, she was falling in love with the one who kicked her insides and made it increasingly difficult to sleep at night. She'd been so enthused and excited to meet the baby. When Shakti finally arrived that evening of November 14th, Liv, coached by Elyse, came face to face with the miracle of one becoming two. She'd been enthralled! To finally see the baby after looking at so many photos of fetus growth, to be able to touch the precious fingers and toes, to bury her nose in the baby's dark curls and smell the fresh life of her. The baby suckling at her breast was a stunning achievement for Liv: I made this baby. I'm able with my own body to keep this baby alive. While other mothers may have been experiencing a blue period, for Liv it was prolonged euphoria.

She'd welcomed the dependence that made her heart so expansive, so loving and giving. After regrets about how things ended with Devin, after rehashing her affair in India *ad nauseum*, her days became filled with thoughts and actions focused on another. Caregiving suited her, at least when it came to Shakti. And the delights! The pure joy of the little hands in hers, the snuggling and cuddling, the dressing and undressing, the playfulness, there was so much happiness in their togetherness. Her mom had said, "I would never have guessed you had it in you." Nor had Liv.

Of course, she had so much help with the baby, at home for over a year with her mom who cut her own work hours a bit. A family friend, Karuna, babysat too, as Liv re-introduced work into her life. Meanwhile, Elyse gave her psychological support in nearly daily phone calls. The move to an apartment in Elyse's building, Liv's parents covering the cost of daycare for several years, really it wasn't until after the first few years that Liv became pre-occupied with her single status. She wasn't dating as Elyse was, she didn't have a lot of friends her age. She dedicated all her energy to being a good mother, to vindicating

herself in other's eyes, showing them that she could make good on her mistake – indeed, that it wasn't a mistake because what was not to love about Shakti and Liv together?

Fortunately, the crew at the International Rescue Committee and her refugee clients being re-settled in Tukwila fleshed out a lot of her days. She'd felt really at home there, operating out of the resettlement office, dealing daily with making life more understandable for her clients who were bewildered by technologies and systems Americans took for granted. Her favorites had been the 'lost boys of Sudan,' especially David and Jonathan. They'd taken turns doing part-time work for the IRC at different times, using their knowledge of the languages of Sudanese and Ethiopian people to help others out. At first, she'd felt motherly towards them, as though they were older brothers of Shakti. Later they became part of her social life with Elyse.

There came a point when, damn, she wanted to be with a guy who wasn't so much a brother to her, to have some fun, and not to have to explain Shakti to them. Her concern for the well-being of David became more than that along the way. But he had no time for girls, all work and study for him. And, in any event, Elyse and she had made a pact not to flirt with David and Jonathan lest mixed messages only compound everything else they had suffered in their very long journey from being refugees on the run to being here in Seattle.

Instead, what began was the litany of set ups by her dad and mom. Gary and Katherine were both in hi-tech, he a consultant, she at Microsoft. The trickle of mostly young men her parents added to get-togethers in their home in Sammamish was now the stuff of family jokes: remember the guy – one of the first before Gary learned his lesson to mention in advance Liv was a single mom – the guy who went from draping his arm around Liv on the sofa, only to be out the door in a hot ten minutes after Shakti toddled in! By contrast, the forewarned older programmer came on super nice to Shakti, except she

screamed and screamed until he left, convincing Liv that Shakti could see auras. Katherine kept eyeing young Indian men in her building until she learned from experience that a single mom with a half-Indian child actually didn't appeal much due to lack of purity. Even Ryan, Liv's brother, had tried a few fix-ups on the family boat, inviting Liv out *sans* child to meet some of his buddies from Fisherman's Terminal. One had fishy-smelling hands that were a turn-off; another couldn't stop talking to Ryan about boats and didn't even try to converse with Liv, as though she would be attracted to his technical know-how. Elyse had tried too. Cory had loads of attorney colleagues and while Elyse found many of them lacking in any real depth, occasionally one would stand out because of his interests in the world, or because he was Hispanic, or black, or Asian and offered that cross-cultural perspective that Liv craved. That one attorney from El Salvador had turned into a good relationship for Liv for the better part of a year. But he was too interested in the events and causes of Central America to stay for long in the Pacific Northwest, while Liv was not about to lose her support network at home or walk away from a good job. Losing Jose was big for Liv and it caused her to conclude that if a young man was intellectually and culturally attractive enough to her, he'd have more enticing things to do than settle down and be a father. That was certainly true of David who had his sights set on law school, and then returning to Sudan.

The cumulative effect of these experiences colluded with fresh challenges from Shakti's precociousness to bring Liv down. Not that she regretted her choices, not at all. But as her own mom had said to her seven years ago, whatever you decide, there are consequences. And the passage of time will confront you with them in ways you can't predict.

Now with change coming to her deepest friendship, with Elyse moving on to a home and husband of her own, Liv had to acknowledge the inevitability of it. And, how blue it made her feel. Life seemed like it was only going to get harder. Even if this move to Ryan and Mimi's

place worked out and some aspects of life became easier, beneath the surface there were troubling concerns. Yes, great to share babysitting. But being part of her half-brother's family, living in his walk-in basement apartment, it didn't meet her need for self-fulfillment and independence. He would judge her, that was the fear. There would be clashes of parenting styles. She'd have trouble having a guy over for the night.

With a resigned spirit, she drove up to the hill-top house looking down to the locks below leading out to Shilshole Bay. It would be better than staying put and missing Elyse every day.

She parked and walked across the street toward her brother's home, assessing it and the neighborhood with a fresh eye. Plain beige house with some craftsman touches on the windows and doors. A real front porch. Pleasant. Sizeable trees. Some totally renovated homes down the street, others still on the funky side. Ryan and Mimi had been thrilled to find the place and take advantage of the market's easy loan conditions - a dream come true, especially for Mimi.

Together they'd made a lot of transitions over the past years: getting married, changing work and jobs, and then having a child two years ago. In their thirties now, Mimi, an untraceable adoptee from Vietnam, finally had her own blood relation and it was huge for her. Ryan, having reconnected with his birth mother, half-sister and grandparents going on ten years ago, didn't feel the birth of their child in quite the same way as Mimi did. But little Jeff arrived at the culmination of so many dreams that the milestone of his birth impacted him substantially too. He'd transitioned out of his dangerous but lucrative fishing work into a steady-enough marine repair business down at Fisherman's Terminal that paid a lot of their bills. Mimi left her work as an assistant producer at Paramount Theater downtown after securing her teaching credential. She loved her job as an ESL teacher and drama coach at a

Beacon Hill school that touted enrollment from over thirty language groups. They were stable, financially and emotionally, when they brought little Jeffrey into the world.

His name solidified the family heritage that had broken when Ryan was given up at birth. He and Katherine, his birth mother, hadn't made much early progress in building more than a genealogically relevant relationship. Ultimately it was Grandpa Jeff of Scandinavian stock who really healed the family after the thirty-year disconnect begun at Ryan's birth. First, it was simply that Grandpa, a World War II Navy man, loved having a boat in the family. That was thanks to Gary, Katherine's husband, who made Ryan a partner in the boat. And when Grandpa shared his war stories at sea or the family's sailing trips, Ryan was an avid listener. In hearing his grandfather describe a near-death experience during the battle of Midway, Ryan's feelings surprised him, how happy his grandfather's survival made him. The grandson began claiming a heritage: they were people of the water. When Ryan lamented his financing problems in growing his marine repair business, the need to buy expensive boat lifts and lease space at the Terminal, Grandpa piped up and said he'd like to invest in the business.

This connection to his grandfather layered the veneer of legacy over Ryan's existing sense of responsibility to his family, and his own ambitions. A family business. Ryan would say he 'worked his ass off' to make it successful. While the dot.com bubble bursting diminished some of the luxury boat work, it had started coming back in the last two years. Coupled with his commercial fishing boat repair contacts, the business was doing well now. Well enough, that fulfilling Mimi's incessant desire to have a real home had come next. Life was good.

Liv noticed there was a walkway around to the yard in back. The house sat on the western slope of the street, two-storied from the front, but really three in the

back with a daylight, walk-out doorway to the yard. The views were all out to the southwest which meant good sun on the days Seattle offered it. I'd have my own entry, was her first real affirmation of the space.

When Mimi opened the door, it was Shakti who threw herself at Liv. "Mommy, Mommy, finally you're here. I've got so much to tell you. Guess what I did to little Jeff, Mommy? I changed his diaper, poop and all!"

"That's great, honey," Liv affirmed with enthusiasm. She picked Shakti up for a hug and rolled her eyes at Mimi. "That must have been fun." Liv's sarcasm leaked through, causing a stare from Shakti, who not only knew when Liv was being phony, but also called her on it.

Mimi was laughing. "I'll describe it later – if you want to hear the details." She shook her head and mouthed the word, 'messy.' "Come in – are you hungry for some lunch?"

"Sure. All I've had is a stale donut and coffee. Oh, guess what, Elyse just got engaged."

"Really? To the attorney guy?"

"Yep. Cory. She is so, so happy, bouncing off the walls happy."

Mimi didn't want to spend much time on Elyse's good news, intuiting that at this fresh state, Liv might be feeling a little jealous, or even sad. "But what about you? How was the big date?"

Liv saw that Shakti's round eyes, sharing Liv's changeable sea colors, and popping out from a mass of dark brown curls, were totally attentive to what would come out of her mother's mouth next. Shakti was always on the alert for clues about what Liv called 'the daddy dilemma.'

Shakti was a quick learner and precocious in her behaviors, absorbing details of the adult world around her, eager to act just as the older girls did, especially her mommy. No sooner did Shakti graduate from going everywhere in strollers, then she began pushing her dollies, bunnies, and other stuffed animals around in her own mini-stroller while mimicking all her mother's

actions. Just as Liv rarely left the house without her shoulder bag, backpack, and baby kit bag, Shakti accumulated her own assortment of purses and bags, flinging them over her bird-like shoulders with a sophistication that would make Elyse laugh out loud. In short, not much of what Liv said or did escaped her daughter's watchful intense eyes that caught all the details in high definition.

"Mommy, I made this for you!" Shakti eagerly held up a drawing, a primitive rendition of a little girl in bed next to a crib with a baby and then outside the house was a woman and man walking hand-in-hand. "See I showed you going on a date." The little girl was mostly a head of brown curls, just like the woman on the date had too.

"That's really good! Here's you and Jeff in the house and that's me outside, right?"

"Of course. See your hair."

"And who's that figure?"

"Oh Mommy, you know, that's the man from the date. Did you like him?"

This was always so hard for Liv. Early on she'd learned that for her own peace of mind, she needed to craft honest answers for her child. And for Shakti's sake, they had to be simple and not upsetting. Those first years after Shakti's birth had been easy, but then the questions had come. Liv and Elyse had a recurring discussion about how Liv should talk about Rama, Shakti's father in India. Elyse called it Liv's lusty affair, but for her it was more like destiny. Liv could never say she regretted what had happened. It was too real and meaningful, too much of a step out of a stale college relationship with Devin and into a world of defining choices and consequences, a world of being an adult. No, she wouldn't disown those choices. Especially not when the great feminine power of the universe, Shakti, was incarnated as her own child to love and care for. Given Liv's time in college longing to be more worldly and interesting, to not continue living the lifestyle of a white privileged girl, she and Elyse had long ago concluded that it was as though Shakti arose from Liv's

own yearnings, a modern-day virgin birth of the thought becoming real. Except Liv was no virgin.

But how do you tell your inquisitive youngster at three years old about her missing daddy? Because of course, the questions started coming once Shakti was aware of daddies dropping off and picking up their kids at daycare. "Mommy, where's my daddy?"

That broke Liv's heart. That was the hard part of all this. Even before the question came, Liv ruled out claiming Rama was dead, unwilling to engrave that inscription on Shakti's life. She'd tested the divorce idea on Elyse, thinking that would be a common enough word among the children as Shakti grew up. But when Liv rehearsed the story, 'I met a man in India who's your father, but we're divorced now,' she didn't like the after-taste of that either. Elyse suggested that Liv could talk about it in a way that made Rama seem inaccessible to Shakti and avoid the questions about seeing him or him visiting Liv. In the end, it simply evolved as simple answers to questions Shakti posed.

Liv began a journal while pregnant and now in a second book she continued it, recording favorite moments, but also keeping track of what she said to Shakti about her father.

Shakti: "Jason has a daddy. Do I have a daddy too?"

Liv: "No, not right now." (Liv noted for history that Shakti was asking about a relationship in the moment, not whether she had a biological father.)

Shakti, next day: "Why not?"

Liv: "Because it just happens that way. Not all children have daddies all the time. Sometimes they have a daddy and then other times they don't. Right now, you don't have one. We have each other. And you have Grandma and Grandpa, and Uncle Ryan and Aunt Mimi, and Auntie Elyse. And we all love each other very much."

When Shakti was four, little Jeff was born. Then she began seeing her aunt and uncle and the baby together a lot. New questions arose.

Shakti: "Little Jeff has Uncle Ryan for a daddy. Can I have a daddy too? Can Uncle Ryan be my daddy? When is it my turn to have a daddy?"

Liv: "Well, your Uncle Ryan is sort of like a daddy to you. But really, for you to have a daddy, Mommy has to decide that she loves a man very much and wants that man to live with us."

Shakti: "When will you do that, Mommy?"

Liv: "I need to meet the person first and then go on dates with him and decide I like him."

Shakti: "What's a date?"

Liv: "A date, it's like time for just me and him to get to know each other. I might let you stay with Grandma or Elyse, while I go out and get to know someone."

Shakti: "Do I get to meet a date too?"

Liv: "If I think that's right for us."

With kindergarten, the questions got tougher. Some idiotic teacher, oblivious in Liv's opinion to current societal conditions, decided doing family trees was a great way to teach about familial relationships. By then, Shakti was savvy enough to absorb the idea of fatherhood, and that there must be someone out there already who was her father.

Shakti: "Mommy, who is my father?"

Liv: "Why are you asking?"

Shakti: "Miss Martinez said everyone has a mother and a father. And when I told her I didn't have a daddy yet, that it wasn't my turn, she said, everyone has a father. So, who is my father?"

Liv had known this time would come, and again had rehearsed conversations with Elyse.

Liv: "Yes, that's right, everyone has a mother and father. But sometimes mothers and fathers don't

stay together. They're together for a while and then they separate. I separated from your father before you were born. So yes, you have a father."

Shakti, next day: "Who is my father?"

Liv: "Rama."

Shakti: "Rama. Where does he live?"

Liv: "In India."

Shakti, a week later: "Mommy, where is India?"

Liv: "Here, I'll show you on the globe. Here's where we are in Seattle. And all the way around the world, here's India."

Shakti: "Is that far?"

Liv: "Very far. Even by airplane."

Shakti, a few days later: "Mommy, Marcella says that it's not possible for Rama to be in India because mothers and fathers have to be in the same place to make babies."

Liv: "Marcella's right. Before you were born I went to India. And I met your father. And we came together and made you. And then I came home, and you were inside me. And then you were born."

Months passed. And then just last week, Liv recorded their most recent conversation.

Shakti: "Can I go to India and meet my father?"

Liv: "Someday, if you want to."

Shakti: "Can we go now?"

Liv: "No, the time is not right."

Shakti: "Why not?"

Liv: "Because...because I say so. Someday, when you're all grown up, then you can decide if you want to go."

Liv knew that the questions would keep coming and continued mental preparations to craft the shortest, simplest answers she could. At some point, she knew she would need to share the letter from Rama tucked in the journal pocket addressed "To my child." When she'd

received the letter in response to hers informing Rama of his child's existence, she'd been tempted to open it. But it felt sacred. For Shakti alone, at the right time, eighteen Liv hoped, but the right time whenever that came. Someday, Shakti would comprehend the complete unvarnished truth and would make her own decision to read the letter.

In the meantime, Liv kept alive her correspondence with her friend, Arita, Rama's former co-worker still living in Mumbai. A couple of years ago, Liv learned from Arita that Rama married and had a job with the government working in agriculture. The news of his marriage pierced her heart and saddened her, surprising in its revelation of some latent hope or dream that was deeply buried.

Just a few months ago, Liv received an email from Arita about her latest feminist activist events, mentioning at the close the birth of a son to Rama. Shakti had a half-brother now! Liv immediately wanted to get on a plane and go meet this new relation. Of course, she couldn't. Wouldn't. She'd cried at the time, tears of both joy and sorrow.

"Mommy, earth to Mommy, did you like the date?"

"Oh, sorry, sweetie. I don't know where my mind went." Liv's eyes refocused on her daughter. "No Shakti, I really didn't like the man on the date." Shakti's drive to know if daddy material was in the making quickly transformed into sad eyes and a droopy mouth. She tore up the drawing. Liv looked at Mimi for help.

"Hey, where did Jeff go? I thought you were watching him?"

"Oh, he's downstairs with Uncle Ryan and that other man. They're working."

"Well let's all go and invite them to the excellent mac and cheese lunch you helped me make, okay?" With that, Mimi put her hand out to Shakti, who looked at her mother as though she'd flunked a test.

Liv knelt beside her. "I have to find a good one for

us, darling. He has to be just right.”

Shakti smiled and hugged Liv. “Okay, you’ll try again, won’t you?”

“For sure.”