

Shakti Rising

Ann Beltran

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This book is dedicated to
the divine feminine force of the universe

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of Thorns. And what would a modern writer seeking historical facts do without the Internet!

And Sara Bareilles, thank you for your haunting ethereal voice that opens my heart. Words are so flat on a page. I encourage all my readers to listen to her song, *I choose you*.

Lastly, it was fun to be with fond memories of Lonavala, India where my husband and I met in 1994, at an Institute of Cultural Affairs conference. Thank you, ICA!

"Always say 'yes' to the present moment."

~Eckhart Tolle, *The Power of Now*

Sunday, November 8, 2015

The soft sound of the bowl-shaped gong grew stronger as the meditation leader increased her pressure on the mallet.

Where was I? Liv ever so slowly pulled her mind into consciousness of her body and the surrounding space of the meditation hall, becoming aware again of the slight residue of incense. She didn't want to open her eyes.

The meditation leader's calm, comforting voice caressed Liv's ears. "Slowly, bring yourself back into this space and time. Become aware of your breath. When you're ready, you can open your eyes."

Liv became aware of her lotus posture on the thick moss-colored carpet. Feeling the need to move, she inhaled deeply, then pressed her palms to her eyes. Lifting her wide eyelids, the leader's gentle smile floated in as her first impression.

"Take time to make some notes in your journal about your meditation experience. And then we'll take a half-hour pause. Light refreshments are available in the lobby. Remember to keep your silence."

The image that visited in this last meditation of the retreat was of her kayaking in a stream that ran near but deviated from a river. The folk on the river were many, they'd wave when they saw her, enjoying reunions where only sandbars and islands between the stream and river separated them. But always she went back to her rivulet where other odd souls occasionally paddled too. Were these voyagers who chose solitary people-powered craft over speedboats and larger leisure boats that populated the river, were her kind in the stream of slow learners? She didn't think so. But there was comfort in the narrow shallow pathways near forests, that let her drift under magnanimous willow tree boughs hanging wide and low and providing dappled secluded spots. The mainstream? No, she hadn't foregone an abortion fifteen years ago to preserve a bright future in the river. Nor had she given up the baby. And she hadn't compromised by marrying a non-medal winner in the husband and father competition who would have required constant concessions by her and Shakti. No, in those ways she hadn't settled one bit, swerving out instead from the traditional promise

of the big water - a perfect career life for a single attractive girl followed by the ideal match – no, she'd explored other byways of life.

Not that there wasn't a clear pattern to her existence that one might call 'settled': a comfortable life style as a single mom, a way of being that mostly worked, albeit forsaking vague dreams and aspirations to work internationally. Not that she didn't put forth effort to achieve either; indeed, she'd pushed herself relentlessly to excel at her local nonprofit fundraising work. At thirty-seven, she was by others' standards successful in her choices, weathering the consequences of them daily in good spirits, skilled in her capacity to mother, to work, and to be a solid family member and friend.

And yet, in her meditation, floating in a backwater of slow current seemed to be aging her, the image being an older woman in the kayak. Had she been out of the mainstream too long? She'd been living in her brother Ryan's household in the lower flat for seven years, engaged in collective child raising with his wife Mimi and their two kids. Liv's desire to cross cultures had played out in strange ways as she reflected on comparable harem-like existences throughout the world. Take away the sex of course, and she inhabited a two-mother, one father family. They'd grown so comfortable with it, they joked about it on occasion: the harem, the Mormon polygamist compound, the Muslim man's entitlement to four wives. When Ryan would wax romantic and seek more action in bed than his tired wife might be up for, she'd tease him about the need to add another wife. When Liv would retire from a family gathering upstairs to her apartment below, she'd laugh with Mimi about being the unloved wife, the retired wife who spent her nights alone.

Of course, Liv pursued romantic interests. How long was it now? Two years going on three since Marco had come into her life? It was good. True enough, her early adulation of him for his environmental activist career had waned into a more reasoned respect, accepting less enthusiastically his living in a bedroom he built in his garage while he rented out the house. Yes, there had come a time when Liv's parents' assessment of her downward mobility become more pungent. But the strong connection between Shakti and Marco's son Cezar created a familial context and glue that made a break-up of their parents unthinkable. And

the sex was always great - when Marco was focused on her and not totally into the next protest he was organizing.

His ten years seniority over Liv, coupled with their relationship being a third priority to his work and son, she had come to judge as helpful. It provided chunks of time to work longer hours. She'd excelled last year at the YWCA and exceeded the most recent capital campaign's bold multi-million-dollar goal.

Liv picked up the beautifully bound journal she'd bought for this retreat. Handmade and covered in deep blue silk it offered unlined pages to accommodate the images she liked to draw. She sought to capture the stream and the river, adding a small backwater offshoot from her stream where she placed her kayak. The reflective nature of the space prompted questions that she wrote down. *Am I stuck? Or simply settled into patterns that work? Is there something I'm missing out on over there in the river?*

She stretched her arms and pushed herself up, then rubbed her neck as she tilted it to one side and the other. While bending her back backwards and to each side, she looked around the group of twenty who were attending this three-day weekend retreat, fellow travelers in their loose, white and beige comfort clothes, all familiar to her in the precious space of enforced silence.

During this last break, she relished the quiet of not having to share her experience. It was enough to smile at the faces she knew from coming to programs at this spiritual living center for the past months. Yvonne at work suggested she come here about the time Shakti graduated from middle school last spring. While she'd always been an unruly child, for many years the brother/sister, Ryan/Liv, parenting duo had channeled Shakti's strong will into productive behaviors, including helping with Ryan's younger kids. But a fresh undercurrent of anger had surfaced. Shakti had spent a weekend in seventh grade at her girlfriend Natalie's house where she lived with her mom but spent every Sunday with her dad. That bit of normal divorced parenting had fueled an explosion when Shakti returned home: why can't I see my dad like Natalie does?

When Shakti turned fourteen last November, the fireworks really began. She had opinions on everything that she shared at inappropriate times, refusing to back down in losing arguments, and prone to increasing her volume to get her way.

Liv could mostly still manage to tap into their deep bond, connect, and nudge her into a better space; but this year had definitely taken a huge toll on Liv's patience, straining her capability for compassion. Marco, who had no interest in exercising the authority of a father, supported Liv, counseled her, and encouraged Cezar to tame Shakti. Which helped. But still.

Recalling those rough waters during the program break made Liv wonder, God, why do I think I'm settled or stuck? Shakti is unsettling me on a regular basis. An inner voice emanating from the meditative space was not persuaded: you are aging and getting left behind.

As Liv sat for the last afternoon portion of the retreat, and in an unacknowledged way began her re-entry into real life, her energy changed. There was something unsettling that she needed to deal with when she returned to work.

A new board member at the Y would be her challenge tomorrow. Liv had joined the YWCA staff in 2010, landing a higher paid, more responsible position in fundraising and communication after putting in her years at the Family Multi-Service Center and finishing her grad work in marketing at the University of Washington. She'd opted for that degree with an emphasis on communications instead of going for a nonprofit management certificate at Seattle U. She knew she wasn't leadership material. No, where she excelled was in really identifying with her clients' stories, writing them in engaging ways, and sharing them in fundraisers that caused donors to dig deeper into their resources and give more. She'd even choked up at the last event, recounting a particularly harsh story of a woman they'd rescued out of poverty.

In her time at the Y, she'd moved up to manage the multiplicity of fundraising activities, from direct mail to events to cultivating donor relationships, while learning some management skills in the trenches as she went. She was good at what she did. Executives praised her work, especially most recently on the huge capital campaign to expand their physical facilities for families. No one labored harder at meeting the \$40 million goal that included not only donations, but leveraged funds from the city.

Now, a new sun named Ian was dimming the glow of her success. The Board had recruited a handful of fresh members over the summer, and put one of them, a high-level director from Amazon, on the fundraising committee. The guy oozed money, not in his informal dress but in his commentary, and boasted of his wealthy workplace connections. Liv was shocked initially to experience a new controlling force above her, especially a man. She preferred the world of female nonprofit leaders, and he was a new rooster strutting around the hen house, ruffling her feathers. Yet to board members, Ian's presence was desirable. His ability to cultivate new high-tech contributors matched with their vision of building a training site for young women, one with a strong focus on skills useful in the technology field.

The first time Liv saw him, she sensed an aura surrounding him that was trouble inchoate. And so it was playing out. Liv wasn't alone - her whole department was rankling under Ian's latest ideas that were pushing their way out of the Board room into staff meetings. Tomorrow, he was actually sitting in on one, ostensibly to learn more. The department was in an uproar over their fear of a Board member micro-managing staff, and clearly labeled it an 'orientation' session to acquaint Ian with the important work they did. Liv was one of those who had to brief him on operations. She knew already what to expect: the interruptions, the suggestions to try something else, the phony pep talk laying out Ian's version of the training center. While Liv was ready to interview focus groups of clients about the types of training they wanted - she recalled only too well the diverse business successes of women in her former employer's micro-credit loan program - Cynthia, her department head, had already warned them to expect a heavy tech training focus for the new site.

Driving home from the meditation center, Liv dreaded tomorrow's session. Yet, pulling up in front of her Phinney Ridge home, her thoughts turned to prepare herself for the vibe she'd be walking into. Would Shakti be sitting doing her homework as she was supposed to be doing this time of day? Would she perhaps have started making dinner, seized by an increasingly rare whim to please her mother? What mood would she be in? Liv reminded herself that she'd just spent the bulk of three days in

quiet reflection, and that she needed to bring that spirit of openness and calm into her home.

Halfway down the walk way to their lower level entry, Liv heard Kelly Clarkson beating out Shakti's latest favorite, "Catch my breath..." As Liv entered, no smell of cooking greeted her, nor a teenager at the table with her laptop doing homework. Her daughter was lying on the worn sofa with her smartphone in her hand, texting. Liv decided not to turn down the short-of-blasting music, at least not first thing.

Oh well, so it goes. "Hi! How was your day, sweetie?"

Shakti finished her text before acknowledging Liv's greeting. Looking up, "Ah, the meditator returns. What wonderful images did you think about today?" The sarcasm was so frequently present these days that Liv integrated it as an annoying pattern structuring their conversations. Pinpricks she refused to let draw blood.

Just ignore it and don't engage. "It was good. Thanks for asking. How did the days with Marco go?"

"Oh, he dragged Cezar and me to a meeting of some Black Lives Matter people."

"That's interesting, usually his meetings are more oriented to the environment."

"He's got so many friends and contacts who are into so many things – he lectured us in the car on the relationship between social justice and environmental justice. We were younger than everyone else so after a while Cezar and I just hung around outside doing our own thing, while people were arguing about where and when to protest."

"Got it." Liv looked around, noticing a book opened on the floor near the sofa. "What have you been reading? Is it homework?"

"English class, it's about a girl raised in Africa." Abruptly coming to life, Shakti sat up. "Here's what I don't get, Mom..."

As the forceful, compelling musical voice energized the room with "THIS IS MY LIFE!" Liv stiffened at Shakti's lead-in, one of several familiar cues that would raise Liv's defenses in anticipation of attack. "What do you not get?"

“You. And how you’ve made all these decisions about how I have to live my life.”

Liv recalled the day’s guidance about breathing deeply. “What decisions do you want to talk about?” Liv counseled herself to keep the conversation focused, specific, and limited to one thing at a time.

“All of them – well, forget that you decided to have me. But why is it I listen to all these kids talk about their divorced parents, and hear – and even sometimes go with them on stuff with one parent one weekend and the other parent the next - and you won’t let me connect with my father? Why? I just don’t get it.”

“You know the reasons, Shakti. We’ve talked about this before.” They were carefully rehearsed explanations Liv adhered to after seeing a counselor last year. The advice was not to introduce an absent parent at the difficult time of teenage rebellion. Wait until Shakti was at least sixteen, if not eighteen, and more mature and capable of handling all the feelings it would bring up. Like having a father bringing up his other children but not her. Assuming he’d even agree to meet Shakti. The blows to Shakti’s esteem could be immense. Liv herself also hated the idea of moving in that direction, preferring that Shakti initiate it when she’d grown up, if that’s what she still wanted.

Shakti turned down the music. “Like I’m just not grown up enough to handle it? Give me a break, Mom! Why has it been okay for a little kid to grow up not knowing her father when you know who he is? Look at other kids, my limited number of friends for example, they handle divorce and all kinds of ugly arguments. Adults are always doing bad stuff to kids – yet heaven forbid I should want to face something, then it’s like I’m too young and delicate. REALLY? Let’s face it Mom, you slept with him and made me. I know that. I’ve got an unwed single mother, I mean that’s worse than divorce. I have to live with that. But I’m not old enough to meet my father?” Shakti was gesturing emphatically, throwing her arms out, picking up things and slamming them down. “Your reasons suck!”

Liv could take the back talk up to a point, when it involved things they did, what they ate, who they spent time with, what they watched, well, mostly everything. But a personal attack quickly diminished her ability to manage the conversation in a constructive way. “Look here...” she began, trying to gauge how

real the pain on Shakti's face was. Eye to eye as they were now in height, Liv was confronting a thin, scrawny girl with developing breasts under a tight t-shirt and a head of hair, long and tangled, that suggested she led an untamed life. The haunting blue eyes in a thin caramel colored face were filling with tears. Liv wanted to pull Shakti close, pull back those Irish curls and press their cheeks together.

"I'm waiting." Spear-headed words as pointed as Shakti's glare. Except her glares were never that good because her eyes were just too round for a truly harsh look.

"Let's sit down together."

"I don't want to sit down! I don't want to make nice. Mom, I'm reading a book about a girl brought up in Africa – how come I wasn't brought up in India? Kids at school are flying everywhere with their parents, vacations in Hawaii, trips back to China and Japan. There are airplanes, Mom, like thousands of airplanes going everywhere every day. I could go to India. It's no big deal." She swiveled around and picked up her laptop. "Facetime, Mom! SKYPE. Whatever. There are kids with dads in war zones who get to talk to them on their computers and phones. What's the big fucking obstacle in your mind? Nobody gets it."

"Who did you talk with about this?" Liv came closer, her arms crossed and voice low. "You have no right to be out there talking this up with your friends, making me look..."

"I have NO RIGHT?" With that Shakti threw the laptop at the sofa. "Yes, I'm out there talking to my friends and nobody understands what your problem is. You're beyond weird."

Liv was stunned, her blood pounding as it circled through her body, her mind numbed by the emotional outpour aimed at her. She held the table edge as she lowered herself into the chair. Her instinctive behaviors kicked in. *Shut up. Don't fan the flames. Withdraw.*

"I'm waiting. I can outwait you Mother. You owe me an answer."

Liv reached inside for the personal mantra she'd been coached to craft during the retreat. *Seek light. Create joy.* Her mind was grappling with the sequence of the silent reflective days she'd just spent and the life she walked back into. Tears started to roll down her cheeks.

“Don’t do that Mom! Don’t cry on me. You know I can’t stand it when you cry.”

“Then don’t look.”

A loud, long ‘ugh-agh’ sound came out of Shakti’s mouth. She pounded her feet as a three-year-old might in a temper tantrum. Minutes passed. Shakti sat back down on the couch, stealing looks at her mom. She hated seeing her so upset, she loved her so much. With an exasperated sigh she rose and sat next to Liv at the table, bringing her chair close and hugging her mother. “Okay, I know I shouldn’t have said some of those things to you. And it’s not like I really talk about this stuff to anyone but Cezar and Natalie. Well, maybe Sophie too. But Mom, please, honestly....”

Liv leaned into Shakti’s embrace. “I know, sweetie. When you say how crazy it seems to you, I do hear you. I’m getting it. You are more grown up – I mean it’s happening so fast, especially with high school now. The world is different than when I was your age.” Liv raised her eyes to her daughter’s, seeking communion. Arguing about seeing Shakti’s father, Liv was reminded, as so many times before, of the mystery of the recessive gene match to hers in Rama’s family tree.

“I already know what you’re going to say,” Shakti continued in a gentler voice, pulling back and assuming a dreamy face. “Let me think about it.” Shakti frowned.

“I will, honey, I promise, I will think about how you’ve changed, and we’ll talk some more soon. Promise.”

With that, the storm passed, they cooked, ate dinner, and Shakti got on with her homework.

Liv texted Elyse, let’s facetime tonight. When they connected, each’s first thought crossed in communication. “What’s the matter?”

What Elyse was seeing beyond the still somewhat puffy face and lack of makeup was how Liv’s recent haircut was not flattering and made her look like an aging woman who didn’t know what the hell to do with curly hair. The droopy waves Liv was re-enforcing each morning either weren’t long enough to be sexy, or too tightly done. Her hair color had dulled, and she needed highlights. Liv saw Elyse’s extra layer of skin fat that

appeared with this her fourth month of pregnancy. And her roots were showing in an unflattering way, which Elyse was determined to endure to protect her baby from chemicals. As though that would do it, Liv would point out in her Marco-inspired bursts of anti-pollution rhetoric. Meanwhile, Elyse was shoveling the food in and packing on the weight.

Elyse fessed up first. "I just got on the scale this morning – I'm already ten pounds more than I should be. Cory said on Halloween night that I should have just draped some orange cloth over myself and become the Great Pumpkin."

"Oh, it's not such a big deal. Remember how I was with Shakti, I packed it on early too. It'll all come off."

"Maybe. But you were a lot younger and it's easier then. Plus, you had more leisure time at your folks to breast feed a long time. I'm not sure with work that I'll make it past six months."

"Elyse, just be happy you're finally prego."

She and Cory had been trying for over two years when finally, she conceived. Workaholics and career-focused, their stress levels were usually high and their downtime for relaxing short – assuming they even relaxed together. It took the long planned two-week vacation to the Caribbean to create the desired result. Elyse was in fact grateful, extremely grateful. Her expressed priority of wanting kids had been undercut for years by her own deep, competing priority of building a foundation for a long political career. Finally, she'd reached the point, indeed gone beyond it, where she'd learned what she needed about city hall and county council. She knew all the players and had an enviable web of connections, including most neighborhood leaders. She was in her prime to run for city council. At the same time, she didn't want to press her luck and put off baby-making any longer, the idea being to squeeze one in before her first campaign, and then a few years later, go for number two. As she'd known before they married, Cory would be of little help. Although now that he had several substantial civil rights wins under his belt, he too was established and thinking more expansively about life.

Liv felt so much older than Elyse, especially now that she was pregnant, while Liv had made it through almost fifteen years of parenting. Yet Elyse had been a reliable companion all those years, even as jobs came to consume more time. In her visits since

Shakti started high school in September, she bore witness to the ongoing changes in the girl's attitude and language. Elyse was the beneficiary however of the common dynamic where every adult who is not a parent is given credit for more smarts, more cool, and if not that, at least the malleability to be convinced to side with a teen against the parent and help make their arguments.

"I AM happy I'm pregnant." A phony smile appeared which grew into a sincere one. "Very happy. Now I get to share in all your bliss."

"Right, wait till you hear today's attack on me."

"She went after you personally?"

"Oh yeah. I am now this hopelessly weird mother who won't let her meet her father in India. You should have heard her yelling at me about all the airplanes that could take her there, all the facetime she could be having with him, just like all her friends with divorced parents. Who, by the way, she's confided in about this situation."

Elyse grimaced. "Nasty."

"I'm half-tempted just to throw it all back at her, give her what she wants and let my 'sophisticated young woman' – she dropped that one on me last week – let her deal with whatever happens."

"Well...what are you afraid of? You're always so good at cataloguing your litany of fears. I mean obviously he might reject her, that's number one. Could she handle that?"

"It's a big concern. The child psychologist I saw a while back talked about how in these early teen years, they're such a mix of child and adult. What they say is not what they feel necessarily – as if we adults get that right all the time – but the thing is, she thinks she's ready. But if she's not and he says no, it could really affect her development. She may think I screwed up her life, but at least she knows I really wanted her; and no one has ever rejected her. What a blow to her vulnerable female psyche if her dad rejects her."

"In a way I lived some of that with my dad not being around much. It's hard, really hard to overcome that sense of unworthiness. On the other hand, it made me an over-achiever compared to others."

"Yeah, well, next on my list of fears, say we get beyond that, he doesn't reject her. I take her to India, we go to meet him."

Rama's married with sons, Elyse. Arita says his wife is very sweet. He's not going to tell her. We'd have to meet on the side. Somehow."

"That's not so bad really, is it? Cleaner."

Liv didn't know how to say the next thing, so paused.

"So, what else?"

"Okay, I know this is selfish. But what about me having to be there. I always imagined I'd help set it up when she was eighteen or older and she'd travel alone. I don't like that I'd have to go too."

"Why? Afraid you'd get re-attracted?"

"A little, I mean I don't think about him really at all, I haven't since the first few years. Why do I have to expose myself to him now?"

"Especially with that bad hair you've got right now."

Elyse could never resist.

Liv stuck her tongue out across their virtual space.

"Liv, you can deal with that. We've all changed. He'll have grown into someone you hardly relate to. And you'll feel for the wife and kids." Elyse checked her battery. "Hey, let me plug in, I'm almost out of charge."

"Then there's one other thing which is as hard as him rejecting her."

"That she rejects you because he's the amazing one now?"

"Exactly. The counselor said it was preferable to not interject a missing parent until after the worst of the rebellious years pass. Seizing on Rama - who God knows, might give her encouragement, gifts - attaching to him while I'm still the bad parent enforcing homework, curfews, and discipline, that could shift her loyalties. It would hurt, big time. It's been hard enough this past year without bringing him into our quarrels."

"I get that. Teens can be manipulative and given Ms. Shakti's track record in that sport, yeah, it's a real fear."

"So what do I do?"

Elyse, the continually decisive partner in their friendship was quiet. A rare response surfaced: "Keep thinking about it. Maybe something else needs to happen to help you decide."

"Like what?"

"I have no idea. But focus on it as you are so good in doing, and I bet something new will happen to move your thinking."

Liv was skeptical. "It's just weird to hear you say that."

"Yeah, well, hey, I've got to go. Cory just came in. I'll call soon, or you call me."

"Ciao."

That evening as Liv studied her image in the mirror, wondering what to do next with her hair, she realized she hadn't given any more thought to the big meeting tomorrow. That meant getting to work early to do another round of psychological prepping. All her materials were ready, it was just the dealing with Ian issue that she wanted to brace herself for.

She knocked on Shakti's door, knowing she'd still be awake, either with a book or her phone.

"What? I'm almost asleep."

Liv peeked in to Shakti's room, no longer a place of sunshine as it'd been in the first years, but with two red walls now covered with posters ready to peel off and littered on the floor with books and props from plays. Liv called it 'the dive.' Shakti scrambled to hide the phone and scoot under her sheet. "Sorry, I just wanted to let you know I'll be leaving extra early tomorrow. So don't ignore your alarm. I'll let Mimi know too, and she can come down and make sure you're up, okay? And I'll leave some breakfast out on the counter."

"Okay." As Liv started to back out, Shakti said in a soft embarrassed voice, "Mom, aren't you going to give me a kiss goodnight?"

Liv welcomed the chance to revert to a loving routine that was growing out of style. As they snuggled in a hug, Shakti volunteered, "Mom, I know it's a really big deal to decide about meeting my father, it is scary, sometimes to me. But let's talk it through again, okay?"

"For sure. And I'll be thinking about it."