

Keeper of Secrets

... Translations of an Incident



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Anjuelle Floyd



Three Muses Press

an imprint of
Ink & Paper Group, LLC
Portland, Oregon



Keeper of Secrets ... Translations of an Incident
by Anjuelle Floyd

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www.anjuellefloyd.com

Published by *Three Muses Press*
an imprint of Ink & Paper Group, LLC
1825 SE 7th Avenue, Portland, OR 97214
www.threemusespress.com
www.inkandpapergroup.com

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Cover design: Laura Dewing and Linda M. Meyer
Interior design: Linda M. Meyer
Editing: Laura B. G. Meehan and Linda M. Meyer

9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

ISBN: 978-0-9769261-8-4

This excerpt from the book is set in
Palatino Lt Standard and Papyrus
Printed in the United States of America

*To Jon, for all the lifetimes in which he has loved me
and future ones where I will love him again*

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Dancing Siva



Raven stifled a yawn as she stared at the wooden icon of Siva. Another night had passed with her being awakened by the wails of her four-month-old daughter, Kaarin. Raven had gone to Kaarin's bed, taken her from the crib, and cradling the infant, lay down in the bed of the guest room. It had been this way nearly every night since Kaarin's birth. Kaarin never cried during the day.

Raven contemplated the mahogany carving of Siva dancing within the ring of fire. Its eyes, mere slits, appeared to widen. The icon's four arms seemed to reach out, beckoning her. Raven's soul was thirsty, parched from Kaarin's nightly screams.

Absylom's father had carved the statue now standing on the bookcase by Raven's bed.

Absylom had given it to her.

Two months after marrying Drew, Raven aborted Absylom's child. The fetus had been four months.

Now after sixteen years as Drew's wife, and mother to their three daughters, Raven stood searching Siva's face, wondering, as on every night when Kaarin cried, about the life she aborted.

Drew exited the bathroom while buttoning his shirt, and approached Raven. "It's last minute, but I'm meeting a client for dinner tonight. His wife is coming." Drew began arranging his tie. "I'd like you there."

"Why?" Raven turned from the bookcase.

"It'll make him feel safer."

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"That's your job." Catching one last glimpse of the wooden deity, Raven began making her side of the bed. "Besides, my braids need to be redone. I don't know if I can get Nilini to sit." Raven resented the way Drew sought to make comfortable and defended the guilty. He inserted the second cuff link into the holes of his French cuffs, and walked to her, lifted her chin. "You look fine."

"My presence won't wipe out your client's sins."

"But it can help his wife."

"And, why should I help *her*?"

"Because I'm *your husband*." Drew let go of Raven's chin, then in the low, attorney-like tone used when addressing clients in public places, "We can't keep going like this. Kaarin's crying, this lack of sleep—it's making you cranky."

"I'm fine." Raven turned back to the bed and bolstered her pillow.

"You're not. How could you be? You haven't gotten a decent night's sleep since she was born."

Raven went around Drew and began straightening the covers on his side of the bed. "She'll be fine."

Drew followed her. "Let Kaarin sleep with us."

"She needs to learn to sleep in her bed."

"Like that's happening now? That's not what you said about Anisha or Emily. They slept with us for at least a year."

"Kaarin's different." Raven patted Drew's pillow.

"How is that? She looks just like you." Drew captured Raven's hand. She snatched it back, threw down his pillow.

As if knowing what lay hallowed and untouched between them for sixteen years, Drew slapped Raven with a stare of his own. His neck, the color of Georgia clay against his white collar, called to her. Raven searched Drew's brown eyes, inhaled the scent of his cologne, a mixture of eucalyptus and herbs. She imagined burying her lips in his neck above the mauve tie, and resting her head on his chest.

Dancing Siva

She sighed heavily. "I don't want to go with you tonight."

Raven wondered if her eyes were flickering green, as Drew said they did when she was angry. Absylom had said the same. She lowered her head.

"I miss you," Drew sighed. "I want you beside me at night." He leaned forward, kissed her forehead and caressed her shoulders. "The reservation's at eight."

Raven exhaled. Drew then whispered, "I'll be home at six-thirty to shower and change." He pulled away as he added, "if you care to come."

Raven had met Absylom her first semester in graduate school, as the two had stood waiting in line to register for fall classes. Taken by his accent, a mixture of Swahili and Hindi, she was captured by his plans to establish an ashram in the Thar Desert of Rajasthan, India.

"What's an ashram?" Raven had asked.

"A place for healing." Absylom's dark and penetrating eyes had glistened from within his mahogany face. He smiled. Raven's heart warmed.

"How will you help people heal?"

"I will use the skills my mother has given to me. I will teach them to meditate."

Raven was instantly taken. Absylom and his family had fled their native Uganda under Idi Amin's rule. He was educated in London, where his father, a member of the hearty Bakonjo tribe of the Ruwenzori Mountains, taught at a private school. Absylom's mother, born in Kinshasa, descended from Rajasthani stock of India.

Thirty-five and weary from traveling the globe, Absylom had applied to graduate school in San Francisco. He'd made a fortune as manager of a Hong Kong electronics company and wanted to take the necessary steps toward establishing the ashram in Rajasthan, India, that he had always dreamed about. Though Rajasthan was his mother's home, Absylom had never seen it.

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☞ Life as the middle daughter of the first female African American judge in the Ninth Federal Circuit left little time for fun or reflection. Raven's decision not to apply to law school, but rather to pursue a master's degree in psychology had angered her mother.

Raven moved into Absylom's apartment the following month. There she began healing. Wooden masks carved by the Bakonjo hung on the pink-orange walls of their living room along with paintings of the Hindu deities—Siva, his white face held in a blue halo and his consort, Ma Kali, her teeth dripping with blood.

Raven's nightly meditations with Absylom after dinner, followed by their deeper quiet of lovemaking, eased her soul's longing for acceptance.

Using his mother's recipes, Absylom prepared meals brimming with curry and spices. Each night following dinner, he and Raven sat in front of the fireplace and meditated on the wooden statue of Siva, held in the shadow of the hearth. Raven's thoughts about her mother ceased when she meditated on the deity dancing in a ring of fire.

"Dancing Siva," Absylom referred to the icon his father had carved for his, Absylom's, mother.

"A god dancing?"

"Because he is angry," Absylom said. Raven searched Absylom's eyes as she had when they first met. A strange seriousness settled in. "Siva only dances when he's angry, like your eyes sparkle green when you are troubled."

Raven lowered her head.

"Do not be ashamed. Your eyes are beautiful."

Raven's eyes pained her. They were the source and evidence of who she was, and what divided her identity and loyalty to the man she loved as father.

"You will now meditate," Absylom directed.

"But—"

Absylom had kissed her. "I will join you." He placed his forefinger over her lips, and there, beside him, Raven

Dancing Siva

envisioned herself floating in Siva's ring of fire, the deity dancing about her. Her mother's judgmental voice faded.

Raven lived with Absylom for three years.

At the outset of their fourth and final year in school, the man Raven loved as her father began to lose his battle against prostate cancer. Seniors in their last year of graduate school, Raven and Absylom had begun seeing clients at a counseling center in the Haight-Ashbury district of San Francisco. Each night Raven made trips across the bay to Alta Bates Hospital and sat with Daddy Bill. Meanwhile, Absylom, committed to building the ashram in Rajasthan, attended nightly speaking engagements to raise money.

Raven confronted him for not joining her at the hospital, "I need you there with me at night when I'm with Daddy Bill."

"I visit Bill in the mornings before I see my clients," Absylom defended.

"Perhaps if you speak with Theodore—"

"Don't bring Teddy Talbott into this!" Raven flushed.

"But Raven—"

She pushed him away. Her eyes flashed green.

The afternoon Raven learned that Bill Bryant had less than three months to live, she returned to the counseling center early. The student with whom she shared an office had yet to complete a session. Seated by the window in the reception area, Raven stared onto the street three stories below. She had not realized she was crying until Drew, having arrived at the center for his first session, offered his handkerchief. "Can I help?"

"My father has cancer. It's spread to his bones. He's the only one in the world I really trust. If I lose him—"

"But what of your mother?" He seemed determined to help Raven find hope.

"They divorced years ago." Raven banished the image and words of her mother, who three hours earlier had sat stoic and unfazed beside Raven when the oncologist

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delivered Bill's devastating prognosis. "I love Daddy Bill. He means everything to me."

Raven didn't speak about Absylo. Nor did she say she was a therapist training at the center.

Raven went into the ladies' room, wiped her face, and was on her way out when she caught sight of Absylo greeting Drew Clarke, welcoming him for his first visit.

One week later, Raven came to the counseling center early. Drew arrived and headed straight to where she again sat by the window. She had been waiting.

"How are you doing?" He sat next to her.

"Fine." She tilted her face toward the window and forced a smile.

"How could that be? Your father's dying, you're not fine."

The fear and sadness she kept at bay when with Absylo flooded forth. She flushed. Drew said, "When my session's over, I'd like to take you to dinner—that is, if you'd care to eat with me."

Raven's lips trembled. "I'd like that. But I won't be free until six." She said nothing of her relationship with Absylo.

"I'll pick you up at six," Drew said. It was then almost three.

"How about six thirty? I'll meet you at the corner across from the coffee shop." She pointed out the window. Absylo was scheduled to see clients until late that evening—nine o'clock—after which he was meeting a fellow student interested in donating time at the ashram once it was built.

Drew pulled his attention from the street below. "I'm looking forward to it." Raven smiled, then excused herself to the bathroom. She didn't want to chance Absylo seeing her when he came out to greet Drew.

While in the ladies' room, she berated herself for lying to Drew. But his comforting voice and self-assurance gave her hope that she could survive the coming days of Bill slipping away, and his eventual absence.

Dancing Siva

Raven saw her last client, then hurried down from the counseling center to the corner across from the coffee shop. Not knowing what kind of car Drew drove, she peered into all the parked ones. They were all empty.

"Hi. You came early." Raven turned back toward the familiar voice. "I arrived an hour ago, came in here to have tea," Drew escorted her inside the coffee shop. "Our reservations aren't until eight. Would you like something?" He pulled out her chair.

"Coffee." Raven compelled her lips to remain calm, as she sat. Absylom liked tea and was known to stroll down to the coffee shop between clients when he was working late.

Drew returned with Raven's coffee. Over carefully neutral conversation, she sipped her coffee, and Drew his tea. Absylom made no appearance.

Raven ate dinner with Drew at a restaurant in the North End. Across town and away from the coffee shop near the counseling center, Raven became more relaxed. The meal was light, chicken piccata in lemon sauce and herbs with spinach. Drew had mussels and clams with pasta and marinara sauce.

"So how long have you been coming to the counseling center?" Drew asked while winding some angel-hair pasta onto his fork.

Wiping her mouth, Raven let the napkin linger over her lips, then said, "Oh for about a year." She and Absylom had been training at the center for nine months.

"Whom do you see—which therapist are you working with?"

"A woman." Raven placed her napkin on the table beside her plate.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to pry. I'm seeing this guy named Absylom Mugezi." Drew lowered his fork onto his plate. "I've never done this—seen a therapist, that is." He turned away.

"No. It's okay." Raven reached across the table and

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touched his hand. "You're concerned. I like that." Again she felt horrible for lying, leading him to believe she was a client. "Is your therapist helping you?"

"Yeah. I like him." Drew's brown eyes again softened with concern. "You seemed so lost the day I walked in. Do you talk about these things with your therapist?" It was as if, despite what she'd said, Drew considered Absylom to be Raven's therapist—that on some level Drew knew that Raven felt abandoned by Absylom as her father was dying.

"She listens," Raven said. "It's just that no one's prepared for death."

"Our own—or someone else's?" Drew queried.

"No one is. Ever." Raven said.

"I was prepared for my father's death. When I was a child." Drew's lips were straight. "My father served two tours of duty in Vietnam."

Raven sensed venom and hurt flowing underneath Drew's words.

He finished his dinner, silence binding them as she watched and wondered about the nature of this man whose care so calmed her and to whom she was growing more attracted.

Afterward, Drew drove her across the bridge to the hospital in Berkeley.

That night, as they did time and again, Raven sat beside Daddy Bill's hospital bed, Drew next to her. She held Bill's hand as he slept, and Drew held Raven's while she prayed that she would survive Bill's death and find the strength to tell Drew that she was not a client, but a therapist, more specifically, the one who lived and slept with his therapist, Absylom Mugezi.

Raven continued to meet Drew on Wednesdays after she finished at the center. She ate dinner with him, after which he drove her to see Bill at the hospital in Berkeley. One evening while sitting beside Bill's bed, watching him sleep,

Dancing Śiva

Raven said of Bill, "He was a good man," then confided, "Momma was so mean to him."

Drew squeezed Raven's hand tightly. "Sometimes our parents do things they don't mean, things neither we nor they understand. They just want the best for us." Drew looked down. "My father was hard-nosed during my childhood. I hated him." An army colonel, Drew's father was an orthopedic surgeon near the 38th Parallel.

"Is that why you're seeing Absyloom? I mean, Mr. Mugezi," Raven corrected.

Drew's eyes became alert. Perhaps it was the way she had said the name, Absyloom, the lilt in her voice, or just that she had retracted to the formal.

Drew's face, brown with red undertones, relaxed. "Absyloom won't have any of that—me calling him Mr. Mugezi. That's why I like talking to him." Drew again glanced at the floor. "I've got a lot of anger toward him—my dad. I love him—my dad, but—"

Raven sucked in air. Drew embraced her, pulled her head onto his chest, and brushed her cheek. For the first time in a long while, Raven felt safe.

As Bill grew weaker over the next two months Raven's Wednesday night routine with Drew extended to other nights, and throughout the week. Drew became her bulwark. At times, on awakening, Bill talked with Drew. The two of them had an easy way with each other, less formal than when Bill spoke with Absyloom, whom Bill, not unlike Raven, always saw as a teacher.

Eager to maintain support for the ashram he planned to build, Absyloom rarely came home before midnight. Raven often arrived home minutes before Absyloom, relieving her from having to explain her whereabouts except to say on those occasions when she did, that she had either been to the library or was walking to clear her head after a session with a client.

A week before Bill's death, Raven met Drew at the corner across from the coffee shop. He was standing by his car.

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"Can we go inside for a moment? I need a bit of tea." Raven had noticed during their dinners that Drew liked sipping tea after what he described as an exceptionally grueling day at work, or when having left late from his office as in-house counsel for a Silicon Valley company, he had braved thick traffic from the peninsula to San Francisco.

Inside the coffee shop, Drew ordered her usual coffee and his cup of tea. After setting their cups on the table, he slumped down in his chair across from her. "Thanks," he said. "I just needed a moment to gather myself." Drew's eyes retreated. He seemed confused, disturbed. "For a moment I forgot where our reservations were."

"Don't worry. We can grab something over in Berkeley," Raven said, concerned. "In fact let me drive." Drew lived in Palo Alto. "I'll bring you back here to your car, then drive myself home." Drew usually drove them over to Berkeley and then took her back to school, from where she walked home. It was a great cover in case Absylom wondered where she had been.

"No. That's okay. I called my secretary and she told me where she'd made the reservations... I need to talk." Raven grew tense. Two months had passed since she met Drew, and Bill was near death. She had promised herself and Bill that she would tell Drew the truth about her relationship with Absylom. And now he needed her.

"I had a difficult session with Mugezi today." Drew ran his forefinger along the rim of his cup.

Suppressing her fears, she quietly asked, "What did you talk about?"

"My father, as always." Drew regarded her from across the table. "And my mother." Raven released her breath and, without realizing, assumed her listening mode for clients.

"My father had changed when he came home that second time from Vietnam. He didn't drink—just poured the scotch and stared at it. Afterward he'd put the glass in the sink. Nothing would be gone, if only a drop." Drew placed both

Dancing Siva

hands on his cup. "One night when he set the glass in the sink, Mom was on a stepladder. He turned around. He was sullen like always after holding the glass."

Raven grew anxious to hear the outcome of Drew's story. She cared about his well-being, cared about *him*.

"I don't know what happened. But my mother fell—"

"Raven." She whipped around, and took in Absyлом's smooth, dark face. His dolorous eyes slid from her to Drew, who was shaken by the interruption. "How are you feeling?" Absyлом asked, with tea in hand.

"Today's session was a little rough." Drew sat up straight.

"He was just sharing it with me." Raven forced the words.

Absyлом smiled, apparently reassured that Raven was with Drew, then said to him, "It seems you found someone to talk to."

She knew Absyлом would not divulge his relationship with Drew. *How absurd*, she thought. *He doesn't know. Neither of them know.*

"I'll leave you alone," Absyлом said. "Call me if you need to." He left.

Drew relaxed his shoulders. "That was my therapist."

"I know."

Again Drew searched Raven's eyes.

"I mean, I've seen him around the center, when I've been waiting to see my therapist." Raven tried covering her tracks. "He seems nice, like he really cares." Drew continued to inspect her eyes as when she had said Absyлом's name, and while Drew had spoke of anticipating his father's death in Vietnam, and of Drew making a decision to seek counseling.

"I'm hungry." He tore his eyes from Raven's and stood. "And you need to eat." They left with Drew acquiescing to her offer to drive and also that they skip dinner in the City.

Over Korean food at a little place near the hospital in Berkeley, unspoken questions cast a pall over their meal.

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The awkward silence persisted as they later sat at Bill's bedside.

An hour passed with Raven keeping vigil beside Bill, his hand sandwiched between her palms. She had not reached for Drew's hand, nor had he offered it. On seeing that her father was not about to wake—the nurse had given him a dose of morphine—Raven silently gathered her purse to leave.

They had just cleared the doorway and entered the corridor when Raven turned to Drew and said, "I know your therapist."

"Is Mugezi your therapist too? I know you said you were seeing a woman, but—"

"No," Raven said. Drew's eyes seemed to search for links explaining what Raven had sensed Drew witnessed flowing between her and Absyloom when he encountered her and Drew in the coffee shop.

"We're in school together," Raven said. Drew's energy faded. She added, "I've lived with him the past three years."

He grew still, his eyes silent yet sharp, as if he had been hit with unexpected information while in court.

"I'm not a client," Raven said. "I'm in my last year of study for my master's in psychology. Absyloom and I are seeing clients as required for graduation."

Again Drew studied her eyes. He pushed his hands into his pockets, and walked away.

"How will you get home?" Raven rushed after him. Drew kept walking. "Let me at least—"

The elevator doors parted, and he stepped on. They closed. Raven felt hope diminishing like a treasured sailboat released onto the water and drifting away.

Raven returned to Bill's hospital room and watched the nurse plump the pillow underneath Bill's head before heading for the parking lot and San Francisco.

On the approach to the Bay Bridge, Raven called Alfreida

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and explained her dilemma. "I'm worried about him," she said of Drew.

"As well you should be." A judge, Alfreida was good at dispensing judgment. "Drew Clarke is not the sort of man to put up with Absylom's leftovers."

"I'm not ashamed of my time with Absylom."

"If that were the case, then why did you wait so long to tell Drew the truth?"

"I didn't want to hurt him."

"It seems you've done just that."

Raven had found in Absylom a well of compassion. She had learned much from him. And then Daddy Bill grew sick with cancer. Drew gave Raven constancy, safety. She wanted to share, live out with Drew what she had learned from Absylom.

"Momma, I'm calling you for help."

"And I'm giving it."

"No you're not. You're just judging me as always." Alfreida had been furious at her for moving in with Absylom. Raven resented the fact that she didn't have a therapist with whom to discuss these issues.

She had started seeing someone at the outset of entering graduate school, but attempting to discuss her frustrations toward Alfreida became more than Raven could tolerate. Remaining with Absylom, meditating with him each night, became her form of escape from her and Alfreida's own conflicting brew of emotions that bound them together.

Alfreida's words resounded through the cell phone and sliced through Raven. "You need to call Drew and apologize. Tell him that you made a terrible mistake moving in with Absylom." Drew respected Absylom, something that Alfreida refused to acknowledge. "That's what you say, Raven. And I beg to differ. With you in his life, Drew would have no need for Absylom." Raven also knew that taking Drew into her life would rid Alfreida's life of Absylom.

"I love Drew, Momma. But Absylom has taught me a lot."

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"And you know where I stand." Alfreida had met Drew when Raven had invited him over for dinner. As always, Teddy Talbott, Alfreida's longtime confidante, had been present. Alfreida liked Drew and all he represented, and Teddy was glad to see Alfreida smiling, particularly at something Raven had done.

Alfreida said, "No woman's life is big enough for two men, unless she wants to end up dead, either by their hand or by killing herself in an attempt to love them both."

Raven clicked off the phone.

On arriving back at the apartment in the city, Raven went directly to bed. She was asleep when Absylom arrived later and slipped into bed beside her. She awoke early the next morning, went to class and then to the counseling center. She would tell him about Drew that evening.

Seconds before her first client was due, the telephone rang. Raven placed the receiver to her ear. Alfreida's voice announced, "Bill just died."

Raven entered the apartment and went to the kitchen where Absylom stood, his back to her, adding curry to the simmering chicken. Hearing her, he turned and said, "Ah, for once we're both home before sunset. I've got this—" He turned around and the joy in his face seemed to drain away as if sucked up by Raven's unstated grief from Bill's passing. "It's interesting," Absylom continued, not knowing that Bill had died but fumbling to piece together what Raven knew had cracked, "funny how you chanced upon my client. I'm glad you were there for him to talk with. He's a really nice—"

"I'm dating him," Raven said.

Stunned, Absylom's dark face went blank, gave way to Raven's words.

"Your client—Drew Clarke. We've been seeing each other for two months." Raven felt life slipping away from her as when the doors of the elevator Drew had boarded slid

Dancing Siva

closed. A vacant chill, as if the wind of death, enwrapped and rushed through her. "He's gone with me every night to the hospital to visit Daddy. I've told him about you and me. And since Daddy Bill has died—"

The constant sadness of Absyлом's eyes seemed to emit a glow that overtook his ebony face. He reached for her.

Raven stepped back. "I'm going home." Her gaze swept the room then drifted to the wooden Siva standing in the shadow of the fireplace.

"We complete our studies in June." Absyлом said. "And then there is Rajas—you cannot go back to Alfreida."

Again Raven searched the orange and pink walls, like those of the houses in Jaipur. "I can't."

"What of our plans for the ashram?"

"Ashram!" Raven seemed to come alive as her universe within was disintegrating. "My father just died, and you're talking about some goddamned ashram! That's the problem with this relationship." She grabbed her head. "It's always about the ashram. The ashram! I'm sick of you and this idea of an ashram!" Her words tumbled out.

She turned to the cloth painting bearing the blue-white face of Siva and his consort, the dark and vengeful Kali, blood covering her lips. Their eyes appeared to darken as if summoning her. Raven's thoughts entered a silence of her own making. Her numbness receded.

"I don't want to go to Rajasthan."

"But you must. It is your dream, ours to share and to hold."

"Not anymore." Raven again turned to the mahogany carving of Siva dancing, the ring of fire encircling the deity. Raven's life seemed to have no beginning, no end, rather a continuous ring of tormented thoughts fueled by Alfreida's rulings. And now Daddy Bill was dead.

Absyлом knitted his brows. "Everything I will build in Rajasthan sits now with us. If you go—"

Raven went to the bedroom and packed a suitcase.

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"I'll be back later for the rest of my things," she said on reentering the front room.

"When?" Absylom stood from in front of the fireplace. He'd been sitting before the wooden statue of Siva.

"I don't know." She headed for the door.

He caught up to her as she put her hand on the knob, pulled the door open. Absylom caught her hand, placed the wooden carving of Siva upon her palm, and folded her fingers around it.

"Om Nama Siva." Absylom had taught Raven to recite that in an effort to silence thoughts stirred by Alfreida's criticisms. Drew had seen Raven through the ebbing of Bill's life. With Bill gone, and fears of having lost Drew encroaching, Raven chose Alfreida as a lighthouse to guide her battered ship to land. Unlike Drew, Raven refused to admit the many ways Alfreida had betrayed her and her sisters.

"*Siva is you, and I am Siva.*" She touched Absylom's wavy black locks, and left.

When Raven arrived, Alfreida asked Teddy to leave. She took Raven to her old room, turned down the covers and lay down with her middle daughter. Hours later, the phone rang. Alfreida went downstairs. The doorbell sounded minutes afterward.

"It's Drew." Alfreida said, after knocking on Raven's door. "He's come to pay his respects."

Downstairs, Raven sat across from Drew. She thanked him for coming, and then, feeling unsure of how to proceed, "I told Absylom about us."

"I know. He called."

"When?" Raven's face grew warm.

"This evening." It had only been an hour since Raven had left Absylom. Drew added somberly, "I don't think it's a good idea for me to continue with him as my therapist. Neither does he."

"What are you going to do?"

Dancing Siva

Drew fell silent, as he had last evening in the corridor.

"I'm sorry," Raven hated having interrupted Drew's work with Absylom. Absylom was a good therapist. "Please forgive—"

"I'm lonely," Drew said. "I'm lonely, and I like you." Raven heard Absylom's voice: "Om Nama Siva." His words pierced the veil separating her and Drew.

"Marry me," Drew said. "Marry me, and let me take care of you. Give me something beyond work."

Raven envisioned Absylom eating alone. She forced back the sobs. Drew gently embraced her. "I'm lonely too," she said, and laid her head upon his chest.

Three days after Bill's death, Raven strained to see beyond her tears as Bill Bryant's fellow painters lowered his casket into the ground. January had slipped into February that morning. Alfreida stood to Raven's left, Drew to her right, and Teddy was next to Drew. Unbeknownst to them, Absylom observed from a distance.

Raven remained at Alfreida's throughout the winter, immersing herself in school and her counseling practicum. Drew visited each day and steadily the three made plans for Raven and Drew's wedding in June. She neither had nor allowed herself the time to think ... *for better or worse*. Raven rarely saw Absylom at school, and never at the counseling center.

In late April, Alfreida hosted Raven and Drew's engagement party. Teddy, having taken an immediate liking to Drew months earlier, introduced him to the San Francisco and Northern California legal worlds. With skill and alacrity Teddy introduced Drew's parents, a retired army colonel and his pearl-bedecked wife, to those same colleagues. The idea of doing this with Absylom had been out of the question as far as Alfreida was concerned. And Teddy's heart pumped continuously in attendance to Alfreida's concerns.

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Several hours after Teddy and Alfreida raised their champagne flutes to toast Raven and Drew's engagement, Raven drove across the Bay Bridge to Absyloom's apartment, seeking closure, release. She unlocked the door, entered the apartment, and was surprised to find Absyloom there. Without a word, she turned to leave.

"No." Absyloom placed his hand over hers on the doorknob.

Hours earlier at the engagement party, Raven had not understood the pendulum of her emotions. Ecstasy had engulfed her when Drew slipped his mother's engagement ring onto her finger, but she had grown sad when observing the political maneuvering of those presumably gathered to honor her and Drew. The guests, familiar with each other, all held positions in the society of law and justice. Feeling lost and out of place, Raven had longed for the serenity of the apartment she shared with Absyloom, with its walls of Jaipur orange and pink. Raven was not a lawyer. Led by her own desires and losses, Raven assisted people in acknowledging and embracing their problems, their yearnings and regrets, not hiding nor denying them behind the letter of the law. Raven snatched her hand from under Absyloom's, removed the dancing Siva from her pocket, and gave it back to him.

"You need to meditate," he said.

Raven grew angry. The flames of Siva encircled her. Her eyes met his and flashed a challenge. She began to undress. Absyloom took her into the bedroom, laid her down, and bid entrance to her temple.

Alfreida. Daddy Bill. Teddy. The names receded into Raven's mind as the lingam of Absyloom's soul held court in hers. All that Raven was and hoped to be rose and died in the silence. She closed her eyes, saw them flickering green, and herself, Raven, dancing in a ring of fire.

Raven married Drew in June. She aborted Absyloom's child two months later.



Dancing Siva

Drew left for work that morning, and Raven resigned herself to the task of accompanying him to dinner in the City with his client. It would be the same restaurant where Drew took all his clients—the one in San Francisco's North End where he had taken Raven on their first date.

That evening at the restaurant, and growing weary of the conversation between Drew and his client, Raven excused herself to the ladies' room. She had flushed the toilet when a muffled cry rose from the next stall. Raven tore off some paper, bent down, and passed it underneath the divider. The woman took it. The ragged sobs continued. While drying her hands, Raven considered going back to knock on the stall door and ask if there was anything she could do, but instead she left the woman alone and slipped out the door.

Back at the table, Drew continued speaking with the client whose wife needed comforting, and Raven, somewhere between eating the Iranian osetra and Moroccan squab, lost herself in contemplation of the hollowness of her life.

The wife was a nice enough woman. While they made polite conversation, Raven's attention drifted; she caught sight of a woman with shocking-pink hair. The woman was exiting the hall that led from the ladies' room. Her round face bore lines of strain befitting the tears Raven had heard from the bathroom stall.

The woman proceeded to a table on the other side of the restaurant, sat, and unfolded her napkin. She wiped her eyes and glared at the man across from her. The lines upon her face deepened.

Raven knew that sort of anger. It rose in her each time she heard Alfreida's voice and then Kaarin's cries at night. It had risen in Raven that morning when Drew asked her to join him at dinner for his client, and again with, "Kaarin's eyes are just like yours, with hints of green that flicker each time she cries." Raven didn't hate Drew, nor Kaarin; she merely loathed what she had done at the outset of her marriage, hated that the fear stirred by Alfreida had guided

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her, Raven. The “now” haunted her each time she picked up Kaarin, gazed into eyes as green as her own; it spawned confusion in Raven about her own identity and her love for Drew.

Ten-year-old Raven Bryant had not been conscious of the green flecks in her eyes as she watched her mother sworn in as a superior court judge. She had been standing beside Theodore Edward Talbott, otherwise known as Teddy, her mother’s longtime friend and colleague from law school.

Raven and her sisters knew Teddy Talbott as Uncle Teddy. He had been instrumental in helping Alfreida secure her judgeship and eventually brokered her appointment to the federal bench. This was no small feat for anyone, even a white man with green eyes like Teddy’s.

Alfreida had demanded a divorce from Bill Bryant after giving birth to Raven’s younger sister, Micki. Raven was eleven when Bill, an abstract painter, loaded his supplies and the last of his paintings into his van, and left. Alfreida then spent her free time, which was in short supply, with Teddy, who made her laugh.

Raven missed Daddy Bill. Every Friday, Bill took Raven out for ice cream or an A’s game when they were playing at home in Oakland. While Raven never questioned Bill, she did wonder why he didn’t bring her older sister Lauren along. “You’re my baby girl,” Bill always said to Raven. “And I’m your Daddy Bill.” Lauren had called Bill *Daddy* too. She had also said to Raven, when angry with their mother, “Don’t get confused about Daddy Bill just because Momma loves you better.” Life with Alfreida, a strict disciplinarian, was trying.

Four years after Alfreida had divorced Bill, when Raven was fifteen, she had found Lauren searching Alfreida’s desk drawer. “What are you doing?”

“I need my passport.” Lauren, then nineteen, had kept rummaging.

Dancing Siva

"Why?"

"Because I don't intend to end up like her."

"Her who?"

"Our mother, Judge Richardson Bryant." Venom laced through Lauren's words.

Though Raven hated the way their feelings toward their mother stood between them, she secretly admired the way Lauren stood up to Alfreida. Raven was afraid of losing her older sister on that afternoon, but said, "Momma's strong."

"Yeah, but does she love us? Look at how we live." Lauren waved her hand. "She's never around. We have no father."

"There's Daddy Bill."

Lauren then said the words: "Bill Bryant's not your daddy, Raven. Neither is he mine, nor Micki's."

"That's a lie!"

Lauren came from behind the desk, took hold of Raven's shoulders, and forced her into the bathroom off their mother's study. She flipped on the light and shoved Raven in front of the mirror.

"Your eyes are green like Uncle Teddy's. Momma will never say it, but he's your daddy."

"That's not true!"

"It is." Lauren's brown eyes held tears and fears. She gripped Raven's chin and turned Raven's face toward her. "This is why I'm going to marry Kenny. I want my children to know their father."

Raven glanced across the table at Drew's client, Mr. Marshall. A balding man less than five feet tall, he wore a nicely tailored black Italian suit, a suit not unlike Drew's. It seemed ominous in contrast to Raven's fuchsia dress and the pearls about her neck and in her ears.

"It was a simple mistake." Marshall flashed his palms. "I miscalculated the profits."

"The IRS doesn't see it that way," Drew said, in the matter-of-fact manner that led his clients to stop pleading

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their innocence, and trust that he, knowing their guilt, would defend them vigorously.

Marshall squirmed. His wife patted his hand. Red-faced, he snatched it away.

Drew leaned in. "Now is not the time to make enemies." Legally, spouses could not be compelled to testify against their husbands or wives. They could seek divorce, however, making them fair game in the court system.

Raven looked across the table at Marshall's wife, at the crow's-feet extending from her hazel eyes, at her lips, overdone by the plastic surgeon and painted pink like the hair of the woman across the restaurant. The wife obviously loved her husband. Raven smiled despite her roiling frustration with Drew...and Kaarin's green eyes...and Kaarin's nightly crying.

Marshall continued his defense. "My friends have done much worse. I can't believe they'd send me to jail over this."

Raven wanted to reach over and slap him. *How could anyone mislay twenty-nine million dollars?*

Why have I never demanded Alfreida tell me who my father really is?

The pink-haired woman across the restaurant fired another loathsome glare at the man across from her. She pushed her hand further into her purse, holding something just out of sight.

Drew's client pounded his fist and rattled the crystal and dinnerware. "I'm not going to jail."

"Calm down," Drew whispered.

The sound of Kaarin's screaming filled Raven's head, and she remembered...

A month after marrying Drew, Raven's waning nausea returned. On arriving at Alfreida's for her annual Fourth of July barbecue, Raven ran inside the house and rushed past Teddy midway on the stairs and into the second floor bathroom. Minutes later and her stomach calmer, she emerged to find Teddy searching the linen closet.

Dancing Siva

"I can't seem to find the blue and white tablecloth your mother wanted."

Your mother.

The words burned in Raven's ears. Teddy routinely referred to Alfreida as "Freddy" when with friends and colleagues. To Raven and her sisters she was "your mother," the words signaling a distance, a divide that neither Raven nor Teddy had ever crossed. This Independence Day was special. Teddy had recently made Drew partner of his law firm, and Drew enjoyed working there.

Raven closed the bathroom door, stalked to the closet, and began rummaging through the piles Teddy had searched.

Her silent disapproval simmered just below boiling point. Raven had never liked Teddy, resented him for receiving the love Alfreida should have given Daddy Bill.

Teddy placed his hand upon her shoulder. She pulled away, folded and gripped her arms as if defense of something. The lessening of Raven's nausea signaled time was running out to end the pregnancy. At eleven weeks she had one week to go before special documents were needed to have the abortion.

Teddy said, "This year hasn't been easy for you. Bill's death, Absylom leaving, the wedding..."

That Teddy would venture to understand anything she had undergone stirred Raven's seething fury at him. She turned back and met green eyes that resembled hers, a reminder that Theodore Edward Talbott had gained Alfreida's love and affection, little of which had been shown to Raven and her sisters.

"Bill was your father," Teddy said with kindness. "Then you married Drew after ending what some would call a marriage with Absylom."

"Others would say it makes me an adulteress." Raven said, putting voice to Alfreida's judgment.

"Sometimes our hearts are divided. Yet to love one person more fully, we sometimes have to leave the other.

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It's the only way we can stay whole—otherwise we bleed to death." The light in Teddy's eyes dimmed. He had ended his marriage within months of Alfreida divorcing Bill.

The fluttering inside Raven's womb grew still.

"Bill was a good man," Teddy continued, "I'll always respect him for being there. If you ever need—"

The nausea that had subsided returned, threatening to engulf Raven. She rushed back into the bathroom, and there she remained until after the meal.

At the close of the barbecue, with Raven sitting next to Drew, Teddy led everyone in a toast to Drew's partnership with the firm. Raven smiled and clapped, all the while wondering where Absydom was at that moment, and whether she could ever attain forgiveness for having chosen to love Drew more fully. Softly she kissed Drew, opened her mind to the mahogany carving of Siva dancing that stood on the table beside her bed, and prayed that one day all would be made right.

Raven's nausea disappeared in late July, three weeks beyond the stage at which any reputable physician would perform an abortion. Unlike her elder sister, Lauren, Raven went to Alfreida.

Alfreida was with Raven the morning of the abortion, two months into Raven's marriage to Drew. In the following days, Alfreida reassured Raven she had done the right thing.

Raven smiled at the client's wife across from her and again wished for things to be set right. Alfreida would be serving Teddy dinner that night as usual.

A flicker of light from across the room caught Raven's attention. She turned and saw that the woman with pink hair had relinquished her purse and was holding the knife, its serrated blade reflecting light. In one fluid movement she stood, and lunged the blade toward her companion's neck.

"Are you fucking crazy?" The man tried to stand, but the

Dancing Siva

woman had come around the table, and was behind him. She wrapped her arm about his neck. All eyes were held hostage. "Sit down before you make a fool of yourself," he whispered.

"I *was* a fool for marrying you!" The woman dug the blade's edge into the pink skin of his neck above the collar.

"Please," the man's voice dipped. The woman appeared stricken but still defiant. Without hesitation, Raven stood and made her way to the table. She was convinced this was the woman she had heard in the bathroom.

Drew followed hurriedly. "What are you doing?" he asked, in the same low voice he had used with the client back at their table.

Raven ignored him and extended her hand to the young woman with pink hair. "You don't want to do this." The women made eye contact. "I heard you crying in the bathroom stall—I handed you some tissue."

"Why do you care?" The woman, her face plump and smooth, her eyes raw with emotion, couldn't have been more than twenty-eight.

"Give yourself time."

"For what?"

"To think, and heal."

The woman pushed the edge of the knife further into the man's neck. He winced, and closed his eyes. The color drained from his skin. The breaths of the onlookers sounded desperate.

"Please," Raven said.

The woman's brown eyes darkened. Slowly she moved the knife away from the man's neck and extended the shiny blade toward Raven's palm.

"Thank you." Raven reached for her wavering hand.

Then the man blurted, "You knew I wanted a family from the start; I never lied. A family and—"

The young woman pulled back the knife, rewound her arm around the man's neck and aimed the blade at his

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jugular. Drew rushed from behind Raven, grabbed the woman, and shook her wrist. The knife dropped to the floor. A young waiter scurried forth, grabbed the weapon, and dashed back toward the kitchen.

Later, Raven handed the young woman a tissue and squeezed her hand. They were seated on the curb outside the restaurant. "During times like this, we have to know we're doing the best we can: trying to survive." The words flowed from Raven's lips as if under the command of a greater power. "Then maybe next time—"

"Will there be a next time?" The pink color of the woman's hair faded into the milky haze of the mid-July fog.

Raven heard Absylom's voice: *Siva is you, and you are Siva.* The desperation she sensed in Kaarin's nocturnal crying resounded in her heart.

Alfreida had urged Raven to save her marriage. "You think Drew won't know the child isn't his? There's not that much love in the world."

But Daddy Bill, Bill Bryant ...

The ambulance arrived at the restaurant. Raven accompanied the young woman to the van where, after stepping inside and saying, with a melancholy smile, "Thank you" to Raven, paramedics explained to Raven they were taking her to the hospital.

"Where will she go then?" Raven asked.

"Depends on whether the man decides to press charges." Another van had driven him to an emergency room.

The doors closed, and the van started down the street. Raven wiped her face and went back to Drew.

The drive over the Bay Bridge into Oakland was quiet. Drew said little as he drove, and Raven sat mesmerized by the lights playing against the water. Once home, she and Drew chatted with the sitter as Drew wrote the check and reiterated his appreciation for the sitter's coming on

Dancing Siva

such short notice. Dinners out, like this evening's, were a mainstay of his profession. The events of this evening, however, had been far from regular.

"No problem," the college student said, halfway through the front door. "Anisha and Emily fell asleep during the movie." She paused for a moment. "Oh, and Kaarin—she was quiet all night."

"Quiet all night?" Raven met Drew's gaze.

"Not a whimper." The sitter left.

Drew closed the door. Raven nestled her fingers in her braids and shook them. "Perhaps I'll get some sleep." She started upstairs.

"That was dangerous, what you did, trying to stop that woman," Drew stated quietly.

She climbed two more steps. Drew followed. He stopped midway up the staircase. "She had a gun in her purse."

"I know." Raven was on the landing. She turned to face him. "What you did wasn't so safe either."

Drew said nothing.

"I don't like this work you're doing," she said. Drew's clients committed corporate crimes—nothing for him to sully his hands with. He didn't handle murders or kidnappings, but instead helped businesses and individuals maintain their ill-gotten fortunes.

"It's how I feed our family." Drew climbed the steps toward her.

"I don't mean to sound ungrateful. It's just that—"

"What would you have me do?" Drew raised his palms. "Start an ashram?"

Raven's shoulders sagged. Her secret took as heavy a toll as the enormous fees Drew exacted from his clients. She retreated down the hall toward their bedroom.

Raven tossed and turned, dreaming about Alfreida, who was frantic to drown the cries of an infant, and stuffing paper into a trashcan from which the sounds intensified. The infant's screams rose to the volume of a siren. Jerked into consciousness, Raven sat up and heard Kaarin crying.

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Another night came and went with Raven separated from Drew as he slept alone in their bed. Kaarin, comforted by Raven's presence, finally slept soundly in the guest bed.

Two more days and nights came and went with Raven separated from Drew. Comforted on each occasion by Raven's presence, Kaarin slept peacefully in the arms of her mother.

On the third morning after the restaurant incident, Raven staggered into her and Drew's bedroom from which she was feeling completely exiled by the weight of sixteen weeks of sleepless nights—nearly half of a complete pregnancy. She swallowed a yawn that easily could have transformed into tears, and regarded the mahogany carving of the dancing Siva. For the length of their marriage, it had stood within a shadow's breath of their bed, first on Raven's bedside table and now in the far right corner of the bookcase overlooking her and Drew's bed. Sixteen years Raven had risen each morning and searched the deity's eyes for favor, sought repentance for what she had done to Absylom.

Drew's hands landed on her shoulders and his "I love you" claimed her attention as Absylom's had done nearly two decades earlier as she had sat in the coffee shop, transfixed by Drew's explanation of why he had entered therapy.

Raven retracted her gaze from the icon and abandoned her thoughts, redirecting to the events at the restaurant two evenings earlier. "Will the man with her press charges?"

"I doubt it," Drew said. "He came by my office yesterday, wanted to talk."

"Oh?" Raven glanced back, surprised.

"I gave him my card Monday night. He's the woman's husband. She aborted their child without him knowing."

Raven's lips trembled, wondering what Drew had sought to gain in offering the man his card. Drew kissed the space beside the strap of her gown and eased his hands down her arms, soothing her.

Dancing Siva

"I need absolution too," he whispered.

She turned in his arms, cupped her palms around his brown face, smoother than it had been last night. The scent of his cologne filled her nose. Sunlight bounced off his cuff link.

He kissed her lips, said "I love you," and left for work. No sooner had the door closed downstairs and Raven removed the clothes from the dryer, than the phone rang.

"This is Fiona. From the restaurant two nights ago." The words came at Raven after she answered.

She asked, "How did you get my number?"

"My husband, Dan, went to your husband's office this morning. They had a long talk. Dan said you were both worried about us. I suppose he just needed to talk to someone older, who's been married longer."

"How are you doing?" Raven leaned into the warm tumble of clothes on the bed.

"Fair, I suppose, all things considered." Raven didn't bring up Fiona's abortion. She asked to see Fiona, but Fiona put her off, saying she needed space to heal, as Raven had suggested.

"Look," Fiona said. "I can't talk long. They don't allow cell phones here." She laughed. "I wanted to say thank you, again. Dan said your husband's a nice man."

"It's hard being married."

Again, Fiona chuckled. "That's what Dan said your husband told him."

Fear encircled Raven as she considered the strangeness of that night's events, her conversation with Alfreida, and now this call. Fiona continued, "He told Dan that you'd just celebrated your sixteenth anniversary."

Between Drew's client briefs and Kaarin's nightly crying, the day had passed six weeks ago, but Raven had said nothing. She had awakened the next morning to find a vase of Asian lilies on the table beside her bed. The attached note read, "*With all my love, Drew.*"

"Marriage is something you have to work on each day," Raven said.

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"I suppose that's where Dan and I have to start. We've only been married a year. It's hard." Fiona's voice was slow, either from tiredness or the medication she had likely received.

Raven made ready to say good-bye, but Fiona said, "I thought you should know I wasn't the woman in the bathroom last night." Raven swallowed. "At first, I thought you might have said it just to make me think you cared. Then, I looked in your eyes and heard tears, like the cries of an infant. You're a good person. I suspected that the other night. Now I know it." Raven heard snuffles from Fiona's end.

Raven had heard Kaarin's screaming in the voice of the woman crying in the bathroom. She had also heard her own voice searching for Absylom. Raven had interceded into Fiona's argument with her husband out of a desire for silence.

"Fiona then said, "I loved my husband when we first married. But I didn't want the baby. I just wasn't ready for a child. I just wanted *him* for now at least—that's all."

Raven's heart sank beneath Fiona's conflicting statements and entered a land where words could not travel. She closed her eyes.

"I'd better go," Fiona said, and thanked Raven for listening.

Raven washed and folded two more loads of clothes in between preparing breakfast for Anisha and Emily, then taking them down the street to practice with their friend Sasha for the next day's soccer match. Kaarin lay asleep on the bed, encircled by the warm piles of folded clothes. Raven was on her way to the dryer for the final load when the phone rang and on lifting it from its base, heard Alfreida's voice.

"How are you?"

Raven braced the phone between her shoulder and ear as, with clothes in hand, she made her way to the bed, careful

Dancing Siva

to avoid waking Kaarin. "Rushed and tired, no more than usual. I was just—"

"Kaarin still not sleeping?"

Raven resisted another yawn. "She'll be fine."

"Perhaps if I came over and took her for the day," Alfreida offered, "and let you get some sleep." As Raven's eyebrows rose, Alfreida added, "Then you and Drew can join us for dinner later this evening. Teddy says he never gets to see Drew anymore." Drew was now third partner at Teddy's firm.

"I don't think so."

"Surely you need the sleep."

"I mean for dinner. Drew and I were out Monday night—over in the City. He met a client for dinner. This week's been busy." Raven separated the bath towels from lingerie, her thoughts flipping through images of the client's wife, then to the woman crying in the bathroom, and the events that followed.

What you did was dangerous, Drew had told her Monday night, and then her conversation with Fiona hours earlier. *I loved my husband ... wasn't ready for a child ... I wasn't the one crying in the bathroom ...*

Raven spoke into the receiver while folding a warm towel. "Besides, it's too late to get a sitter."

"Bring Anisha and Emily. Kaarin will already be here."

"Don't you have to work?" Raven snapped.

"I cancelled my afternoon session of court, was reviewing documents my clerk completed over the weekend. Then Teddy called, suggested that I invite you, Drew, and the kids—"

"Didn't you hear me?" Raven's attention flashed to the statue of Siva dancing on the bookshelf, and then to Kaarin lying asleep amid the piles of clothes on Raven and Drew's bed, from which Raven, pulled by Kaarin's incessant crying at night, was becoming more and more estranged.

"I don't want to have dinner with you! I don't want to

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see Teddy!" Raven slammed the phone down onto its base and gripped her face in horror. She had never done that to anyone, least of all her mother.

A whimper arose from Kaarin upon the bed amid clothes now growing cold. Raven turned to find the infant stirring, her tiny hands and fingers reaching into the air. She watched her youngest daughter lying upon the bed, her brown fingers reaching, her green eyes searching, wanting. Kaarin whimpered again, and then let out a cry. Raven reached for her. And then the phone rang.

Raven turned, stared at the receiver. It rang again. Lifting the baby, she crossed to the phone on the desk and saw that the number was Alfreida's. Kaarin let out a searing scream on the fourth ring. By the sixth she was bawling as if terrified.

Raven patted her daughter on the back, yet Kaarin's cries grew louder and more violent, like a tearing away. The phone continued to ring. Barely able to hold her head up, Kaarin began to sway back and forth in Raven's arms. Holding her with one hand Raven grabbed the phone, clicked it on and off, threw it onto the carpet and held Kaarin tighter than ever. The ringing stopped.

Kaarin's tiny chest beat upon Raven's heart. Her wails settled into loud sniffles then soft whimpers. Raven undid her buttons and pulled open her blouse, revealed a full and swollen nipple, and brought Kaarin to her breast. All went quiet as she lowered herself onto the chair by the window. Raven leaned back and closed her eyes.

Relief and sadness had filled Raven that spring morning when the officials swore Alfreida onto the federal bench. Teddy Talbott had stood beside Raven and clapped as Alfreida received her robe and gavel. Bill Bryant had been nine blocks away, directing the hanging of his paintings at a gallery on San Francisco's Market Street.

Teddy Talbott was Raven's father, and she knew it. Like Lauren, Absydom had spoken of it. "He is your father. And you need to face up to it."

Dancing Siva

“But I love Daddy Bill.”

“You can love them both.”

Raven had grown up knowing and loving Bill Bryant as her father. She would not allow anyone to take his place. Raven had sensed Teddy’s desire to draw close to her in the years since Bill’s death.

“You need to allow your heart to expand,” Absylom had said.

“I can’t! I won’t!”

“Then you will never know peace.” Absylom had said these words on the night they slept together, hours after Raven and Drew’s engagement party.

Raven opened her eyes to Kaarin’s, flecked with green and filled with love. The infant grew calm as she suckled, her expression intent and focused on Raven. Raven brushed the infant’s cheek then caught sight of the wooden icon of Siva dancing on the bookcase across the room.

The heartbeat of Absylom’s child, sixteen weeks along, had sent flutters of worry and fear through Raven’s womb at twenty-four. At forty, Raven gave birth to Kaarin, who would be her last child. In the years since the abortion, Raven had often wondered if the child she aborted had her bright golden or Absylom’s dark skin. She had imagined its hair to be dark and wavy like Absylom’s. She brushed Kaarin’s warm face, reddish-brown and smooth like Drew’s.

Would the baby have had green eyes? Just then, Kaarin’s green-flecked eyes fluttered open and met her mother’s. Raven always confronted herself during these quiet moments. It was what she loved and hated about gazing into her last child’s eyes.

Absylom’s words spread through her thoughts and body. *“Siva dances only when angry. Siva dances in your eyes when you are angry—dancing and twirling, changing the world in you and me.”* Siva is the destroyer, the arbiter of death after which only life arises.

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Kaarin paused from suckling, and extended her tiny hand. Raven leaned down, felt her daughter's fingers touch her cheek. Easing forward she stood, and with Kaarin in her arms still suckling and looking up to her, moved toward the bookshelf as she had every morning for sixteen years. She fixed her eyes on the dancing deity held within the ring of fire, a snake about its waist. Raven stroked Kaarin's cheek a second time, seeing not only her eyes, but also the beauty of her skin, like that of red Georgia clay.

"Siva is us, and we are Siva." Siva is change—or rather our acceptance of what has been faithfully present.

The reality of Kaarin's identity slid across Raven's consciousness, diminished her need to hope, to wish that the spirit of the child she aborted sixteen years earlier lived within Kaarin. She kissed Kaarin's cheek.

Raven pulled into the driveway, turned off the ignition, took a deep breath, and got out. Reaching the back of the house, she skirted the pool, its water clear and reflecting sunlight. Now barely a month since Fourth of July, it was as sharp and luminescent as it had been that first July, weeks after Raven had married Drew and then encountered Teddy on her way out of the bathroom.

After knocking several times on the screen door, Raven tugged on the handle and found the door unlatched. She stepped inside the kitchen. The aroma of onions and porterhouse steak, Teddy's favorite, overwhelmed her senses, took her back to the day when it first became warm.

- Raven was eleven, had arrived home from school and was started up the driveway toward the back of the house. She met Bill coming from around back. And then she noticed his blue van, its back doors swung open. All his belongings were inside along with the painting supplies he usually transported between home and his studio. The house Raven lived in was no longer his home.

"Where are you going?" Raven ran to meet him.

Dancing Siva

He went around her, loaded his pillow and blankets into the back of the van, then came back. He knelt down, placed his hands on her shoulders, and looked up to her.

"I'll always love you, don't forget that." He shook her as if to make the words stick, go down and settle in her heart, and then, "You're my little lump of brown sugar—with a twist of lime in your eyes." Bill's eyes had been wet as he stood to leave.

In that moment Raven became conscious of what would transfix the men significant in her life, the very thing she loathed—flecks of green in her eyes that, when in just the right light, when Raven was excited, hurt, or angry, sparkled like emeralds filled with passion—and what Raven deemed had separated her from the man she worshipped as a child, Daddy Bill.

- Again at her childhood home, and apprehensive about why Alfreida had left the door unlocked, Raven edged through the kitchen and headed for the staircase. A sound arose of footsteps descending. Alfreida set foot on the staircase landing between the first and second floor, and turned. Raven met her mother's look.

"I suppose you've come to apologize." Alfreida continued down, halting as she reached the last step.

Raven slid her keys into her pocket, taking a moment to summon her courage.

"I assume you won't be joining us for dinner." Alfreida let go of the banister, stepped onto the floor, and brushed past Raven who followed her into the kitchen.

"Where're the children?"

"They're with Nilini."

Alfreida slid on her oven mitts. "So much for difficulty in getting a sitter ... and Drew?" She opened the oven door and reached inside for the casserole dish.

"Probably on his way home."

Alfreida lowered the dish onto the counter, then removing her mitts, closed the oven door and turned the dial to *off*. Alfreida laid her mitts on the counter beside the hot dish.

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"Why haven't you married Teddy?" Raven said.

"Are you suggesting I should?" Her mother's words were cold and sharp.

"I'm just asking in light of the fact that you left Daddy Bill to be with him."

"If I left your father to be with Teddy, as you say, then don't you think I would have married him?" Alfreida's tone bristled with indignation.

"Perhaps the real question is why did you leave Daddy Bill?" Raven moved toward her mother.

"Now I have one for you," Alfreida said. "When was the last time you spent the entire night with Drew?"

"I'm sure it hasn't been as recent as you with Teddy."

Alfreida reached out and slapped Raven. "You think dignifying your insolence will make Kaarin sleep through the night?" The sixty-year-old woman's nostrils flared.

Raven flinched, but stood her ground. "She's no longer crying."

Alfreida gave a faint chuckle and crossed her arms. "Oh, so you hung up on me and that makes everything alright?"

"Everything will *never* be alright." Raven felt herself growing weary and weak. Harboring a dead spirit was heavy business, especially when you felt it was linked to the soul of your child. "I killed my baby for you. And now it's crying out, but not through Kaarin, through me."

"Is this some psychobabble you learned in school?" Alfreida snapped, her forehead furrowed under arched brows.

"It's what I know. I loved that child. But I'll never know what she or he would have looked like."

"And that was a decision you made."

"I made it for *you*."

Married to Drew for two months, Raven had gone to Alfreida hoping for answers; Alfreida had urged Raven to have the abortion.

Dancing Siva

Alfreida's voice dropped to a hush. "You did what was needed to do to save your marriage."

"I wanted your love."

"And you think accusing me of making Kaarin cry will garner that?"

"Kaarin's been doing what I can't. What I never let myself do—cry for this child, your grandchild."

"You speak as if it's living inside of your right now."

"I feel that it is." Raven again felt phantom flutters inside her abdomen.

"This is insane." Alfreida swept past Raven.

"What I *did* was insane."

Alfreida whirled around. "Oh, so you're saying that you don't love Drew, that you never loved him, that you never came to me wanting my help?"

"I've always loved Drew, and I did want your help. I also loved the child I was carrying by Absyloom."

"That was a mistake. And when we make mistakes we have to then make choices to correct those mistakes."

"Is that what you did when divorcing Daddy Bill—correct your mistake?" The smell of cooked onions and roast, Teddy's favorite, stirred Raven's anger. "Choose Teddy over him—over us?" Alfreida's house, the kitchen, had never felt as warm as it did that day, nor as safe as it had felt when Raven was a child.

"What I did with my life was my business." Alfreida's tenor changed; her eyes grew fixed and stern. "I complained to no one. And you girls never went lacking."

"Except for your love."

The operating room's antiseptic smell should have grown stale but instead cut through the years and filled her nose as it did each night when Kaarin cried out. Raven felt herself grow numb, as she had when being anesthetized for the abortion.

"*Om Nava Siva,*" Raven had whispered as Alfreida left the room that day, a string of rosary beads dangling from

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her hand. "I don't want to go through with this, but I love Drew."

She repeated those same words now. *Om Nava Siva, if only for Siva to stomp upon their heads and deliver absolution.*

Raven inhaled the aroma of onions and roast. She didn't want Kaarin in bed with her and Drew. She wanted to continue imagining, hoping that Kaarin was the child she had aborted—hers by Absylom—now reincarnated, and no part of Drew. But the crying had worn her down. Kaarin's wails held Raven's unshed tears for the child she aborted.

Raven's desperation and fury stirred to a new level. "We gave up so much for you." Her thoughts flashed to her elder sister Lauren's botched abortion, from which Lauren had nearly died. "It's amazing that Lauren has even had any children by Brian."

"I never told her to run off with that fool, Kenny."

"She took up with him trying to get out from under your thumb." And then there were Raven's own bouts with postpartum depression that had resolved after Anisha, and then Emily's birth. It had worsened upon delivering Kaarin.

"I will never let Anisha, Emily, or Kaarin endure what you put us through."

"Don't be so haughty," Alfreida said. "The road between hope and reality runs wide. All parents have plans for their children."

"And you haven't answered my question."

"To which you know the answer."

"Why didn't you love Daddy Bill, us, like you do Teddy?" Raven applied a new tactic.

"Why did you leave Absylom?" Alfreida shot back. "And don't tell me I made you do it."

"You never liked Absylom."

"You were a grown, twenty-four-year-old woman."

"I needed your help—"

"And I gave it."

Dancing Siva

"You threatened to disown me if I married Absylom."

"I was never going to support your following a man into the Indian desert to build some sort of temple—throwing your life away. No. You were my child. I wanted you safe."

"You wanted me here with you, in *your* world," Raven said.

"I wanted the best for you."

"You wanted me *without* Absylom's child, and I wanted your—"

"Absylom Mugezi has been out of our lives for sixteen years. Why are we talking about this now?"

"I killed my child sixteen years ago for you—the same length of time Daddy Bill's been dead!" Raven sobbed. "Sixteen—the number of weeks since I had Kaarin—sixteen weeks that she's been crying."

"You did what was needed to save your marriage."

"I needed your love! Just like now," she said, choking on her words. "I need you to tell me why I have this child's voice inside of me, this infant crying, why I want to cry and can't."

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"I'm mourning my child, but there's another death around me. I feel it."

Alfreida started away, but Raven followed and tugged at Alfreida's arm.

"Did you want me? Or am I just imagining something? Was I the reason you left Daddy Bill—your mistake? Who am I!"

"You're my daughter." Alfreida whipped around. "*My* child." She hit her chest. "That's all that matters."

The screen door opened, and Teddy stepped inside.

Raven turned to him, her eyes wet with tears meeting his, green and sparkling like she knew hers were.

Raven ran past him, fearing herself about to crumble, life as she knew it and as she knew herself, transforming, ebbing into something new.

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As she reached her car, she heard her mother's voice resounding from inside the house.

"I will not tell her! I will not!"

"But Freddy—"

"Don't *but* me. Raven is *my* child. Mine! Do you hear me, Teddy? She's my child." A door slammed.

—

Anisha and Emily were asleep in their beds as Raven turned from the dancing Siva upon the bookshelf and looked at Drew lying in bed. His arm was entwined about Kaarin, her small warm body held close to his heart. Father and daughter were asleep. It was midnight.

The infant opened her eyes, and smiled in the dim light of the lamp. Kaarin was Raven's child, but not the one fathered by Absylom. And Alfreida was a Chinese box, some of whose doors remained closed, while others opened to secrets locked behind walls that came in and out of view. Her sphinx-like ways came and went. But Kaarin's nighttime crying, constant since birth, had ceased.

Kaarin's eyes flickered green. Raven leaned down, and as she had earlier that afternoon, allowed the child's fingers to touch her cheek. Amid the quiet surrounding them, tears for the child she would never see christened Raven's mournful face and slid between by the tiny fingers of her last child.

Siva is you, and you are Siva.