

NATIONAL BESTSELLER

Poser

my life in
twenty-three
yoga poses

paper

Claire Dederer

"A powerful, funny, richly layered narrative." —The New York Times Book Review

Additional Praise for *Poser*

“Let me be honest about something: I love yoga, I live for yoga, and yoga has changed my life forever—but it is very difficult to find books about yoga that aren’t incredibly annoying. I’m sorry to say that, but yoga sometimes makes people talk like jerks. Thank goodness, then, for Claire Dederer, who has written the book we all need: the long-awaited funny, smart, clear-headed, thoughtful, truthful, and inspiring yoga memoir. To simplify my praise: I absolutely loved this book.”

—Elizabeth Gilbert, author of *Eat, Pray, Love*

“Dederer proves an effective storyteller. She knows how to set up a punch line, how to foreshadow a big moment, how to create drama out of the everyday bits of life. Yoga is the catalyst, the act that repeatedly forces her to look inward.”

—Bill Eichenberger, *The Cleveland Plain Dealer*

“An unusually welcoming and unpretentious spiritual memoir, one in which love is the measure, and yoga just one of several ways to find it.”

—*Whole Living*

“Dederer uses acerbic wit and intelligence to help explain how something as seemingly simple as nursing has become another fraught factor in competitive parenting.... An admirable lack of sentimentality...a charming and clever writer.”

—Amy Rowland, *The News & Observer* (Raleigh, North Carolina)

“Her descriptions of [Seattle] over the past decade are often hilarious, but it’s the close-to-the-bone soul-searching that will stay with you.”

—*Seattle Weekly*

“Unfailingly hilarious...[A] strong voice and wisecracking style.”

—Joanne Latimer, *Maclean's*

“Even non-yogis won’t be able to get enough of this funny, honest memoir.... Dederer is an irresistible narrator.”

—Elisabeth Egan, *Seattle Times*

“Dederer’s writing is sharp and often acidly funny.... It’s Dederer’s touching introspection that makes *Poser* an inspiring read—she’s not some self-righteous disciple of yoga, she’s a skeptical, vulnerable person.... She demystifies both yoga and domesticity, delivering a meditation on the subtle comforts that bring us peace and joy, both on the mat and in the world.”

—Jeanne Kolker, *Wisconsin State Journal*

“*Poser* achieves something rare: It’s a contemporary book about yoga that doesn’t leave you squirming, suspect, or bored.... The illusion of commiseration here is really just a triumph of truth-telling, of a writer having the courage to confront her limits and sit, uncritically, in the messy present. Like a yoga pose, it doesn’t have to be perfect to be exquisite.... [It] is the output of a curious, vibrant mind, one that opens every box and asks questions about its contents.”

—Judith Lewis Mernit, *Los Angeles Times*

“Dederer immediately establishes herself as a relatable, down-to-earth narrator, a person who might

kick up to headstand at a party, but only after a few drinks.”

—Jennie Yabroff, *Newsweek*

“A deeply personal, often hilarious memoir of her practice of yoga, and yoga’s transformation of her heart.”

—Anne Saker, *The Oregonian*

“Dederer’s...charming memoir is about figuring out how to be at once good and free.”

—Jennifer Bradley, *The New Republic*

“*Poser* is a bracingly honest investigation of family and freedom, parenting and perfectionism. It is also funny enough to make most writers swoon with envy.”

—James Marcus, author of *Amazon*

“While what Dederer learns in the yoga studio is the thread that holds the work together, it is her exploration of her inner self that makes the work shine. Dederer, an accomplished journalist and professional book reviewer, faces many of the same nagging insecurities that most adult women experience at some point. Her concerns about being the perfect mother, being a supportive wife, and being a career person are ones that will resonate with readers. *Poser* is by turns funny, sad, and serious. Some of Dederer’s revelations are at times surprising, but the work is as quick-paced and fluid as a yoga ‘jump through.’ Fans of yoga definitely should not miss this work, though it is a great read for anyone.”

—Mollie Smith Waters, *The Montgomery Advertiser*

“Dederer’s book is clever, witty.... Her journey...is about her relationship with yoga, told through the poses she attempts, and the lesson(s) she learns from those poses. Mothers may relate to much of what she writes...but readers will still be able to relate to her reflections on...how she struggles to deal with what she perceives as the loss of her professional persona.”

—Muna Khan, *The Express Tribune*

“Dederer’s humor is tangy and precision-aimed; her targets are the sine qua non of memoirs: motherhood and marriage. A book reviewer and social critic with bylines in *The New York Times*, *Slate*, and *Vogue*, Dederer acidly deconstructs hip, politically correct Seattle.... Dederer writes superbly and offers sharp insights into family dynamics as well as hatha yoga’s impact on American life, the focus of a growing number of groundbreaking books.”

—Donna Seaman, *Booklist*

“This funny, spectacularly well-observed, and moving book does what even yoga can’t: It provides solace while making you laugh. I feel three inches taller.”

—Henry Alford, author of *How to Live*

“Thoughtful...full of grace.”

—Suzi Feay, *The Independent* (London)

“Dederer’s wickedly humorous look at liberal West Coast culture seems to have struck a generation on the nerve.... Yoga works as a metaphor for the book, which is about finding one’s balance in every sense of the word.”

—Chris Henry, *Kitsap Sun* (Washington)

“The wry, self-deprecating tone is a wise choice. It punctuates pretension, and makes Dederer’s periodic forays into seriousness all the more convincing.... [An] ambitious book.”

—Olivia Laing, *New Statesman* (London)

“Claire Dederer is all these women: a daughter attempting to make sense of an irresistibly nut divorce; a new mother trying to meet the standards of a peculiarly liberal breed of über-moms; a wife struggling to salvage intimacy in a marriage slammed by exhaustion, mortgage payments, and encroaching in-laws; and a lost soul who stumbles into a yoga studio and finds salvation. Above all, Dederer is a brilliant writer whose prose sparkles and cuts deep. *Poser* is a book you will want to immediately share with your friends. It’s hilarious, unflinching, and bursting with love.”

—Maria Semple, author of *This One Is Mine*

POSER

MY LIFE
IN TWENTY-THREE
YOGA POSES



CLAIRE DEDERER

PICADOR

FARRAR, STRAUS AND GIROUX
NEW YORK

FOR
MOM
DAD
AND
LARRY

Even in favorable conditions, a person encounters struggle.

—SWAMI KRIPALVANANDA

Author's Note

Some of the events and people in this story have been “run through the scrambler,” to use Clive James’s phrase. I’ve tinkered with the chronology of a few events for the sake of narrative flow and discretion. I’ve changed the names and identifying characteristics of some, but not all, of the people.

Those changes aside, this is a true story, constructed from memory.

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Prologue: Camel



Taking up yoga in the middle of your life is like having someone hand you a dossier about yourself. A dossier full of information you're not really sure you want.

I hadn't been doing yoga long when the information began to come in. One cloudy January afternoon, twenty of us were lowering ourselves backward into camel pose, as slowly and tentatively as swimmers entering cold water.

We kneeled on our mats, our feet sticking straight out behind us. The idea was this: You reached back with both hands and grabbed your heels. You thrust your hips forward. Meanwhile, your chest rose up into the air. It seemed a little porny, but I was willing to give it an honest try.

I did it once. My hands reached. My hips thrust. My chest, I hoped, rose. My lower back crimped. I came out of the pose, which was at least as scary as going into the pose.

I sat for a moment and watched the other students, reaching, thrusting, rising. Not crimping, at least visibly. God, they really had the hang of it. I sank back in child's pose for a rest and caught a whiff of onions from my hands. I had stuffed a chicken and put it in the oven for Bruce and our one-year-old, Lucy, before I raced off to yoga. The chicken was my passport out of the house. I left the food as though it were a piece of me. Synecdoche: a part representing the whole. A sail representing a fleet. A crown representing a king. A chicken representing a mother.

There was really no need. Bruce was a fine cook, of the manly, spaghetti-with-sauce-from-a-juniors-school. Yet I cooked. A chicken roasting in the oven was virtue discernible. There it was: love, concern, nurturing, all rolled in a four-pound organic fryer. Camel. All right. Time to try again. I lowered gently backward into the pose, at the same time reaching, reaching upward with my chest.

"Release into the pose," said my teacher, Fran. "Breathe into the tightness. Let the mind empty of the day's concerns." I wondered if Bruce had found the good bread I had left on the counter. Good bread. They could chew on it while I hung out in this room, pretending to be in India. I should've bought them roti.

Suddenly I got a fluttery, scary feeling across my breastbone. It felt like something might tear.

I carefully lifted out of the pose and spoke up: "Uh, Fran? When I'm doing the pose, I have this feeling in my chest, kind of a scary, tight feeling."

Fran was adjusting someone across the room. She had a way of looking like a thoughtful seamstress when she made adjustments: an inch let out here, a seam straightened there, and everything would be just right. She might as well have had pins tucked between her lips and a tape measure around her neck. Without missing a beat or looking up, she said, "Oh, that's fear. Try the pose again."

Fear. I hadn't even known it was there.

1. Triangle



Creamy and flushed and covered with fuzz, our baby daughter was like a delicious peach. Only much heavier. Even though I fed her on a diet of breast milk and nothing else, she grew fatter and fatter. She was dense with good health.

The story of how I nursed my daughter has a catch-22 ending. The child was thriving on the milky, unending flow of a food designed perfectly for her. When she was ten months old, I began to feel like we might weigh about the same amount. I would haul her onto my lap, and she would gaze up at me with delight, and, in the parlance of the day, latch on. I would gaze back at her, amazed that she could so easily satisfy another creature. She was intent and happy as she suckled away.

The only problem with the baby was that when I held her in my lap for these marathon feeding sessions she was crushing something crucial inside me. Maybe my spleen, or possibly something larger. I tried lying on my side to nurse her, but she required so much food, provided in such lengthy sessions, that this wasn't really tenable. The milk was making her so, ah, healthy that it was getting harder and harder to actually deliver the milk to her. (That's the catch-22 part.)

Cast your mind back to the late 1990s for just a moment. Nursing, at least where we lived in Seattle, was a strange combination of enthusiast's hobby and moral mandate. Drive thirty miles to the north, where my husband's cousins lived in suburbia, and you'd find mothers happily plugging a bottle of formula into their babies' squalling mouths. In Seattle, only full-time working mothers gave their babies bottles, or rather their nannies did, and those bottles were filled with the mother's very own milk, expressed through a breast pump.

Weaning wasn't allowed until at least one year. This was by the consensus of who, exactly? Us. We were mothers with books. We looked things up. We knew stuff, like, for example, that the American Academy of Pediatrics said that at least one year of nursing was optimal for the baby's immune system and brain development. For the kind of mothers we were, optimal meant mandatory, and one year meant a few. Seattle at that time was a town where little dudes strolled up to their mothers at the playground for a quick top-off, said "Thanks, babe," and rejoined the soccer match.

Lucy wasn't yet ten months, and I wasn't supposed to quit nursing until at least a year. If you think this sounds like a frivolous dilemma, or not worth losing sleep over, then that just goes to show you were not a new mother in a liberal enclave at the end of the last century.

While I debated whether or not to wean her (and Bruce, my husband, feigned interest), the inevitable occurred. My back went out. The middle of my back pinched me all the time, like a salacious old man. I couldn't sit in a straight chair. I couldn't lie flat on the couch. I couldn't lift the groceries. So I weaned her.

Now that I've been doing yoga for ten years, I'm tempted to say something wise, such as: I was ready to wean and my body made the decision for me. But back then I didn't believe in that kind of crap. Instead, I paddled around in a complicated gumbo of guilt and relief. I claimed to feel cheated

my full, god-given, federally mandated year of nursing. I apologized to my husband for my subpar performance. I told my friends: ~~Oh, no! I can't nurse the baby!~~ Inside, I secretly exulted. I had no spleen to myself again.

We lived in Phinney Ridge, a North Seattle neighborhood filled with educated, white, liberal, well-intentioned people. Which pretty much describes all North Seattle neighborhoods. Phinney Ridge is notable for being even more liberal and even better intentioned than most. In Phinney Ridge, people don't have BEWARE OF DOG signs. They have PLEASE BE MINDFUL OF DOG signs.

When I complained about my back, which I did often and with gusto, the people of Phinney Ridge all had the same answer: Do yoga. My doctor said, "There are poses that will strengthen your back." The checker at Ken's Market told me I could buy a good yoga video at a nearby New Age bookstore. The homeless guy selling the homeless-guy newspaper outside Ken's Market said, "Be sure to get a mat! It's really hard to do yoga without a mat."

I had a number of preconceptions about yoga. I thought yoga was done by self-indulgent middle-aged ladies with a lot of time on their hands, or by skinny fanatical twenty-two-year-old vegetarian former gymnasts. I was also unsettled by the notion of white people seeking transformation through the customs of brown-skinned people—basically, to my mind, a suspect dynamic.

Despite these sloppily thought-out but strongly held reservations (my specialty), I had suspected for years that I probably ought to do yoga. I was a nervous kind of person. A self-conscious, hair-adjusting kind of person. A person who practically burned with worried energy. I had a constant tremor in my hands, so that the whole world knew how anxious I was. Just a couple of weeks earlier, I had been hanging out at a coffee shop, feeding Lucy bits of cracker and navigating the coffee cup from the saucer to my mouth with trembling hand. A gentleman approached and introduced himself to me as an "energy shaman." Before I could think of a way to get rid of him, he took my shaking hand in his and pronounced gravely, "You could use a lot of work."

"Oh!" I said, grinning nervously. "I'm sorry! I just, I have this tremor that I've had since I was a little kid, and I'm not getting a lot of sleep because of the baby. And I guess I've had a lot of coffee," I concluded lamely.

"Do you eat a lot of chicken?" he asked. "That can cause energy problems."

I stood up, spilling my coffee, and swiftly loaded Lucy into her stroller.

"Well, goodbye!" I waved cheerfully, and left the café, fairly thrumming with energy problems.

Yoga seemed like just exactly what I wanted: something to calm me down. It also seemed like just exactly what I didn't want: a place where everyone could see what a mess I was, could see my tremor and my anxiety and my worry. There was something about holding still, about inhabiting a pose, that was scary. What was under all that anxious chatter?

But now things were different. I had a baby. It was imperative that I be able to lift her. I would do anything to be able to lift her. Yoga class, however, was beyond me. Like everyone else, I was terrified of a roomful of people who were good at it. Little did I know then that only very occasionally in yoga do you stumble into an entire roomful of people who are good at it. And when you do, they often turn out to be assholes.

I figured a video would be the best approach; maybe I could get the benefits without all the pesky humiliation. On an Indian summer afternoon I decided to head over to the New Age bookstore. Amidst much pinching, I wrangled the baby into her stroller. This engendered another form of mother guilt. Recently strollers had come under the North Seattle mother's list of banned substances. Apparently the baby felt alienated so far away from its mother, and preferred to be snuggled up against the mother's back or—there was no escaping its Perón-like hegemony—her breast. You were supposed to strap your baby into a sling or a Snugli (known around our house as a Smugli). There was some theo-

about the baby wanting to see the world from the same perspective as its mother. Which looks crazy as I type it, but that was the argument. At any rate, putting your child in a stroller was fast becoming yet another way of letting the world know that a) you didn't really love your kid and b) you were an uneducated dumbshit.

That was all well and good for people with those lightweight babies made from balsa wood, but my pleasingly substantial daughter and I were devoted to strolling. And so we made our way through the fall afternoon to the bookshop, the baby graciously tolerating her dumbshit, unloving mother.

I had walked by the New Age bookshop many times but had never gone in. Wrestling the stroller through the door, I was hit with the ecclesiastically grubby smell of incense. Everything in the store was dusty and slightly off plumb. The magazine racks tilted; the books were piled haphazardly; the posters of chakras and mushrooms and stars were at various subtle angles.

I found a teetering wire rack of yoga videos. Some of the people on the covers were orange. Some wore headbands. Some were peeking out from behind swirling, vaguely medieval purple writing. I chose a beginning yoga tape. It looked safe. The woman on the cover was not orange and she wore no headgear. The graphics did not look as if they'd been drawn up in an asylum.

I located a yoga mat, and paid, and then the baby and I got the hell out of there.

That night, Bruce gave her a bottle (to which she had adapted nicely, thanks) and I went into the room with the TV, which, like everyone on Phinney Ridge, we refused to call the TV room. I put on my tape. The blond woman gazed into the camera from her serene world, a place where potted orchids thrived. There was some discussion about not overdoing it and going at your own speed, and then the yoga session was under way. The woman sat there with her eyes shut. I sat there looking at her. Apparently we were warming up.

This pleasant state of affairs continued for a while. Unfortunately, soon it was time to do asanas. This had a forbidding sound.

"Jump your feet about three feet apart on the mat," said the blond lady. This I did. "Turn your left foot in about forty-five degrees, and your right foot out." Done and done. Check me out! "Extend the right hand over the right foot, and gently rest the hand on the shin, the ankle, or the foot, wherever is most comfortable." Tippy, but I was on it. "Slowly rotate your torso upward, and extend your left arm toward the ceiling." Aaand I'm out. I sat down with a thud and watched the woman with her strange, unshifting expression. She was a puddle on a windless day. In a calm voice, the way you talk to old people when you're convincing them to take a few steps across the hospital room to use the bathroom, she said, "Tri-ko-na-sa-na." She lingered on the word, obviously enjoying the sound of the...what was it? Sanskrit? "Triangle pose," she translated.

I rewound the tape. I tried again. Right leg out. Feet turned at an angle. Extend right arm. Drop right hand to right shin. I started to worry. How was I going to get that left arm up? How was I going to turn my torso? Oh, shit, now or never. I flung my left arm into the air and twisted my torso maybe a millimeter up. Pinch.

I caught a glimpse of myself reflected in the darkened window. I was hunched up like "It's Pat" from *Saturday Night Live*. I rewound the tape again, and followed the directions again, and ended up again, bunched in an odd shape. I could feel parts of my body bumping together that had never bumped before. Something hurt. I had a feeling it wasn't supposed to hurt.

Looking back, I can see that I had just learned a paramount yoga lesson: Get a good teacher. Or at least a live one. My back still hurt, and though muscle relaxants exerted a powerful allure, the muscle relaxant lifestyle was not really doable for me. I made my living as a book reviewer. (A terrible idea, by the way.) When I took muscle relaxants, the novels I read for review tended to improve dramatically. Since my critical faculties were really all I had going for me, I reluctantly went dru

free.

~~There was this notion in my mind that somehow yoga was going to make me better. Better than I'd been, better than everyone else. More virtuous. I liked the idea of myself as a yoga person. (I could not bring myself to say yogi, or yogini.) Lithe, probably thin, with some kind of ineffable glow. And my back wouldn't hurt. Clearly it was time to try an actual yoga class. The following week, on a rainy October day, I left the baby with my mother and drove across town to the yoga studio my friend Katrina went to. Katrina was sort of nutty, but she had a gorgeous ass, so I thought, What the hell.~~

Inside the front door of the studio was an entry vestibule, decorated in the style of "Don't Be Afraid, We're Not a Cult." The walls were painted white and screened with tasteful shoji panels; the blond-wood floor was uncarpeted and spotless; neat cubbies awaited shoes. All was white and clean as though the room had been designed for surgery, or Swedish people. The only spot of color came from the Tibetan prayer flags strung over the doorway into the studio.

In flagrant defiance of my longtime policy of never entering a structure adorned with Tibetan prayer flags, I removed my shoes, paid my ten bucks to the wan girl at the desk, and walked into the studio, where eight or ten young women were sitting on their mats. Even though we were there for a beginner class, they all looked incredibly fit and somewhat stern. Their ponytails were glossy and neat. Those ponytails were ready for business. The women sat cross-legged, with straight backs. They all gazed straight ahead into the middle distance, as if they were about to break out into a collective form of landscape painting.

I smiled apologetically. This is my worst habit, and I hope to break it by the time I'm eighty. When I'm an old lady I'll finally be able to swagger into a room with a fuck-you attitude. I laid out my mat and sat on it. I felt the onset of the deep sorrow that, maybe peculiarly to me, precedes any new physical undertaking. I have never been good at sports; I always feel like a spectator, even when I'm in the middle of a game.

The shoji screens filtered the light from the vestibule, spreading it on the floor in a grid. My sense of futility grew larger. I looked at the serene ladies and wondered if they really believed that enlightenment would find us here, in a drafty room in a strip mall in North Seattle.

As I looked around at the fair-skinned women and the prayer flags over the door and the little altar in the corner, my preconceptions about yoga seemed immediately and all too amply confirmed. The scene was the very picture of white female self-indulgence. There were no Indian people in the room, that was certain.

A woman in her late twenties entered and rolled out her mat in front of us. Her thick blond hair was cut in an expensive bob. Her eyebrows were fancily mowed. Her outfit was black and tight. She looked as though she had been a step-aerobics teacher until about five minutes ago. She looked like her name was Jennifer.

"I am Atosa," she said. Like hell you are, sister.

"Come to a comfortable sitting position," she said. "Please bring your fingers into the gyan mudra. Mudra is the yoga of the hands." She made a circle with the thumb and forefinger of each hand, and I followed suit. It felt corny but sort of wonderful at the same time. My hands looked enlightened.

"We will begin the class with one long om," Atosa intoned. "Breathe in, and om on the exhalation." I sneaked peeks around the room. The other women looked peaceful and relaxed, as they were in an ad for bubble bath. I breathed in and let out my om, which came in a wheezing gasp. Atosa's om boomed and wavered beautifully.

"The om travels up from the seat, through the heart, and out the top of the head. It passes through all the chakras." Atosa listed all the chakras by name, location, and color. Yoga seemed to involve a lot of talking.

We did a series of wildly uncomfortable movements that I now recognize to be sun salutation A. ~~We reached for the sky, we touched our toes, we lunged one leg back. Then we pulled back into downward dog: both hands on the floor, both feet on the floor, bottom jutting up toward the ceiling. We lunged again, touched our toes again, and there we were, where we started, reaching for the sky.~~ I was red and breathing hard and trembling. As we sank into a deep runner's lunge, Atosa looked at me with worry. It wasn't "I'm worried about you" worry. It was "I don't need anyone collapsing in my class" worry.

"You need blocks," she said abruptly. She got some foam blocks from a shelf and had me propping my hands on them. She kept an eagle eye on me.

"We're going to work on trikonasana today," she said. My nemesis. "Please turn your mats so theirs are perpendicular to mine. Jump your feet apart about three feet," she said, and then we were off to the races.

We did trikonasana over and over: at the wall, in the center of the room, with a partner pulling on our front arm. Each time I bunched up like a cluster of grapes. I shook; I sweated; I clenched. It was exactly as I had always suspected: Yoga was a kind of magnifier for my limitations.

Triangle was especially baffling because it was, in essence, so simple. You stood with your feet apart and rested a hand on your shin. Easy as pie. Except it wasn't. (Even pie itself is not that easy, you make your own crust.) There seemed to be an infinite number of ways to get it wrong.

Atosa began to lecture us. Well, actually, she began to lecture me. "Think extension. The pose is about creating space." I thought extension. I tried to create space. I bunched.

At the end of class, we all lay flat on our backs in savasana, or corpse pose, sprawled loosely with our arms at our sides. Even this seemed painfully beyond my reach. My eyes were shut tight, but I could sense Atosa looking at me, noticing my tensed shoulders, my knit brow, my clenched jaw.

Finally we sat up. Atosa led the class in a final om, and said that if anyone had questions to feel free to approach her after class. I took her at her word, more fool I.

"Yes?" she said, raising a perfectly shaped eyebrow.

"Uh, I was wondering if you could help me with triangle."

"Oh, you mean trikonasana?" she asked.

"Yes, trikonasana."

"Well, you just need more extension. Here, look at this." She stepped into a beautiful shape, legs angling apart, torso twisting gracefully, eyes gazing upward as if she could see infinity beyond the acoustic tiles. She jumped back to standing. "See?" she said brightly. I was reminded of Julie Petersen showing off her cartwheel in first grade.

I gave it a go. "No," she said. "Try extending your trunk more. You're too hunched."

I smiled apologetically at her and said, "I'll work on it." And I left.

I never wanted to see Atosa again. In a just world, she would've been deported, maybe to an island populated by fully extended human beings.

Even so, for some reason I still wanted to try yoga. The next week I noticed a little storefront yoga place near my house. It didn't look like much. It had a stylized brushstroke drawing of a yogi—or was it a Buddha?—as its logo. I didn't want to do yoga in a place that looked like a half-assed noodle joint. Nonetheless, it was only five minutes away and offered a beginner class at 7 p.m., which is the time of day when I customarily begin to be alert and look around and notice things. I thought I'd give it a try.

It was dark by the time I got there, and the foyer to the studio was a pool of cheerful yellow light.

I approached the desk, which was manned by a serious-looking fellow with a dork knob. My head sank. After Atosa, I couldn't take any more coldhearted grooviness. I introduced myself and gave him

my ten bucks. “Welcome,” he said ominously, Vincent Price in a tank top.

~~I went into the studio. The room was filled with not-girls! Which is to say, there were all kinds of~~ people there. A few young men in workout gear and two older women in stretchy purple Lycra and a couple of slightly lumpy women my own age, clearly moms, all but lactating through their leotards and one old fellow who was wearing jeans and a leather belt. A leather belt! Even I knew better than that. I enjoyed a nanosecond of feeling superior, but was thrown off guard when the students turned and smiled and said hello. In all my days—well, day—of yoga-going, I had never seen anything like it.

Dork knob came in. He sat down silently and I got myself ready for some more vague sanctimonies. Instead, he looked around the room and smiled. Something in him lit up, like there was a big switch on his back that had just been flipped on. He started laughing before he started speaking. “Hi, I’m Jonathan,” he said. “Beginning is hard. But it’s also lucky. Because you have the chance to build something beautiful from the ground up, with no old mistakes, no bad habits.” I know now that this was basic yoga boilerplate, but the thing was, Jonathan really believed it. He finished the speech and laughed again, like: Can you believe we’re all doing this crazy thing in this room together? I looked around. Everyone was smiling.

We sat and breathed for a while. Then Jonathan popped up and said, “Tonight we’re going to work on triangle!”

I got ready for the bossing: First we would jump our feet apart, then we would try to extend whatever that meant, and then I would look like “It’s Pat,” and then the teacher would frown at me. Alrighty.

Jonathan did have us spread our feet apart, but we didn’t jump. We just lazily separated them. Once our feet were positioned, he said, “We’re going to work on angulating our hips. That’s a triangle really is. It’s a hip position.”

His right foot was in the leading position. He cocked his left hip to the left and said, with excitement, “Look! See how the simple action of pulling my left hip back creates a crease between the top of the right thigh and the hip? That crease is what we want. That’s where triangle comes from.”

We all cocked our left hips. As one, we gazed down at our right thighs. And, lo! There were creases. We beamed.

“Look at those hip creases. That is triangle,” said Jonathan. He looked genuinely happy for us. “You are doing it. You can add more. You can extend the right arm out over the right leg, and drop the hand, and turn the body, and raise the left arm to the ceiling. But those are all additions. You are doing triangle right now.”

I cocked my hip over and over again, and watched that crease appear. I had been living inside of my body more than thirty years, and it was showing me a shape I had never witnessed before.

After a while, we tried gesturing forward with our right arm. It felt great, like the movement was growing from that creased hip. Then we dropped our right hands. “Just anywhere,” said Jonathan. “Anywhere that feels good.” Mine landed on my knee. We turned our bodies gently. And then we raised our left arms as best we could. Mine was not exactly straight up. It was in the general direction of up. It was the beginning of up.

Jonathan walked around the room looking at us. He stopped by me and said, “Try pressing the little toe of your back foot.” I tried it, and all of sudden the pose made more sense to me. I was able—or abler—to understand what I was doing, and didn’t feel quite so much like I was at war with my own body. I was amazed by the change. It was like having someone show you that you could fix a car crankshaft by adjusting the side mirror.

Here was a place where someone would tell me what to do, and there were identifiable results. Unlike motherhood, where the rules seemed to shift all the time and the standards seemed as high

the moon.

~~Of course, this was no different from what happened at any exercise class—at step aerobics, for instance, they were only too happy to tell you what to do, and had the headsets to prove it. But I intuited, or guessed, or, let's be honest, devoutly hoped that in yoga there was another outcome. You would do what they said and you would be better. Yoga would allay my anxiety by teaching me to breathe and relax. But it would also allay my anxiety by elevating me to a more superior, evolved state of being, where I would no longer have to worry about whether or not I was doing everything right.~~

Jonathan continued. “Imagine your body is being pressed between two huge planes of glass. Gently pressed, of course.”

I tried to imagine this. It seemed sort of silly.

Jonathan went on. “This plane, this space between the two imaginary panes of glass, is called the coronal plane. You want to keep your body within this plane while you do the pose. Don't lean your torso forward or let your behind stick out. Keep it within this coronal plane.”

This seemed like the most pointless piece of information I had ever heard. In fact, triangle itself was an exercise in pointlessness. Who could imagine herself into being a triangle? It brought to mind that old They Might Be Giants song about “triangle man,” who goes around beating people up. Maybe that song was secretly about yoga.

These thoughts ran through my mind as I tried to fit myself into a triangle. At the same time Jonathan spoke with such confidence, as though the coronal plane and fitting oneself into it were crucial information. Maybe he was right. Anyway, I couldn't quit now. I just stood there and held the pose. This small submission would yield huge and strange returns that would reverberate across the next few years. Yoga had come into my life, with its strange, unknowable, even funny logic. For good or for ill, it had arrived. What the hell, I thought, as I extended my hand toward the sky, and creased my hip, and tried to fit myself into the coronal plane.

At the end of class, we lay in savasana. I felt tired and content. The immobility had a pastoral quality to it, as if trees swayed overhead.

Jonathan's voice was quiet now. “Thank you for sharing this evening with me. In yoga, we say ‘Namaste,’ which means ‘I bow to the divine in you.’” He bowed his dork-knobbed head and said “Namaste.” We bowed back and mumbled, “Namaste.” On my tongue, the new word felt as though it contained its own foreign spice.

2. Eagle



We were a generation of hollow-eyed women, chasing virtue. We, the mothers of North Seattle, were consumed with trying to do everything right. Breast-feeding was simply the first item in a long, abstruse to-do list: Cook organic food, buy expensive wooden toys, create an enriching home environment, attend parenting lectures, sleep with your child in your bed, ensure that your house was toxin free, use cloth diapers, carry your child in a sling, make your own baby food, dress your child in organic fibers, join a baby group so your child could develop peer attachments. And don't quit your job. But be sure to agonize about it. And enjoy an active sex life. But only with your spouse! Also, don't forget to recycle.

Bruce and I were doing our best with the baby. In fact, we were always doing our best. These were the rules: Get your thousand words written, cook your organic dinner, call your parents, go to yoga, good, good all the time. We tried to do everything right, along with all our friends. Plastic toys were avoided because they might off-gas, a terrifying—yet strangely fun to say—word. Mother and baby consumed only organic milk: We had heard the rumors about hormones in dairy causing nine-year-olds to menstruate. Meat had become a problem. You couldn't just run to the corner store and pick up a cut of whatever. You had to schlep over to Whole Foods and buy one of those ruinously expensive grass-fed roasts.

Goodness ruled me. I was thirty-one. All the moms I knew, at least the ones who were my age and lived in my zip code, lived by this set of rules. It was a variant form of that oldie, perfectionism, but without the hang-ups about appearances. We didn't want to look good. We wanted to be good. We wanted a kind of moral cleanliness to touch our lives. This was symbolized by the cleanliness we sought in the world: We wanted the oceans denuded of mercury and the soil divested of arsenic; we even wanted the coal-plant smokestacks scrubbed. We eschewed Formula 409 and discovered the wonders of vinegar. We avoided preservatives and bought organic soda pop. We wanted to be clean inside and out so we could be worthy of our children. We could see they were pure. We didn't want to be the ones to screw up that purity.

Our goodness was driven by an underlying terror: What if we stopped? We didn't want to know the answer to that question. So we never stopped.

Or maybe I was the only one with the terror. Maybe I was the only one who, grinding steamed organic carrots in the baby-food mill, felt as if turning the mill's little handle was keeping something awful from happening. There was trouble lurking at the edge of my effort; all I could do was do everything, and do it right. Having recently become a mother, I was surprised by the level of dread that filled me at almost all times. There was occasional pleasure, but it often consisted of the cessation of dread. It was as if by turning into a mother, I had also turned into Camus.

Certainly I made fun of the ridiculous dictates of motherhood; but I also succumbed, uttering "Om" as I practiced. Yoga was part of my project of becoming a new person. Maybe if I appeared to be serene, I would stop

with the existentialist dread, the likes of which I had not felt since my overcoat-wearin' teenage days

I ate and slept and dreamed yoga that fall. I was like a thirteen-year-old girl with a new pony. I practiced at home, forward-bending while I did the house work. I taught Bruce how to do downward dog. I extolled Jonathan's virtues and quoted him constantly. I fantasized about traveling to India to study with his guru. At night I lulled myself to sleep by re-creating in my mind the exact sequence of the poses that had been taught that day. I could usually remember the first twenty minutes or so of the class pretty accurately, then it all merged together in a sort of indeterminate yoga stew and I would drift off to sleep. The days cooled down and the wind moved coldly through the trees; the trees were red and orange and then too quickly turned brown; and I thought about yoga all the time—yoga and Lucy were my twin pole-stars. Bruce wasn't really in there at all. At the time, I didn't know the situation was dangerous.

My life organized itself around Tuesday and Thursday evenings; they were camel humps on the workaday back of the week. In between I worked on my poses, my breathing, myself.

I wasn't sure exactly what I was doing. I mean, literally. Was this exercising? Or meditating? Or what? Jonathan explained that hatha yoga simply meant any asana practice. There were lots of types of hatha yoga: Iyengar, which was concerned with alignment; ashtanga, which was vigorous; restorative yoga; and, it seemed, countless others. "In this class, we don't do a particular style. We take from a number of traditions. So we simply call it hatha yoga. 'Ha' refers to the right side of your body, to the sun, to energy, to vigor. 'Tha' refers to the left side, the moon, to passivity. 'Yoga' literally means yoke. We yoke these two kinds of energy together. We also yoke ourselves to the infinite."

This seemed unlikely. I was distrustful of these definitions. At the same time, I had a strange feeling that what I was doing was something a little more than exercise. When we finished up with savasana, I didn't feel like I'd worked out. I felt more like I'd churched. I didn't believe in the infinite or in the energy of the sun and the moon. I didn't believe that saying "om" connected me to anything outside myself. More than that: I didn't care. I didn't have an atheist's fervor about this nonbelief; I had an agnostic's indifference.

But. There was this idea that yoga was going to make me better. Maybe it already was, just a bit. Calmer. More grounded. Less afraid. So I chanted and posed and sat. I carried on as I had begun: What the hell. Maybe some of it would take.

On Halloween afternoon, Lucy was napping in her crib. The house was decorated with homemade pumpkin and ghost cutouts. I was boiling potatoes for potato salad. It would be dark soon. The end of daylight savings time was serious business in Seattle, a curtain dropping.

I felt a surge of an under-documented emotion: domestic happiness. It seemed a static, permanent thing, domestic happiness. It involved so many objects: folded, red-checked dishrags in a pile; a box of lemons; narcissus in a flowerpot on a windowsill.

But domestic happiness was in fact as fleeting as any dream. It was predicated on labor, and money, and good fortune, all things that exist in a state of flux. Most of all, it depended upon doing what you were supposed to do.

In the movie *Wings of Desire*, there's a mysterious line. In fact the whole movie is willfully and ridiculously mysterious, but this one line is really great: "The dream of the house in the house." The house was the house we lived in, and there was also a kind of domestic dream, a dream of order and contentment and beauty. The domestic dream is a dream for grown-ups, full of pride and ambition and effort. It's a dream of a world transformed through labor, and taste, and some love. It's a dream that is tinged with dread: What if I can't keep up with it?

Over the course of this evening, others would join me there in my kitchen: Bruce, my baby, my mother, her boyfriend, my father, my friends, their parents. But no matter how many people joined me there, it would remain my kitchen. It was a great machine that produced domestic happiness, and I was the engine that ran it.

We were throwing a Halloween party. Our parents would come and look at Lucy in her bear suit with her tiny nose painted black and whiskers eyebrow-penciled on her cheeks. Our friends would bring their kids and hang around and eat candy. It would be great.

I drained the potatoes into a colander amid a great whoosh of starchy steam: a potato facial.

Bruce came in from the office, looking for more coffee. We had converted a little garage in our backyard into an office. When we were talking to editors in New York, we tried to make it sound romantically rustic. We called it a garden shed or a writing shack. Since we didn't have the benefit of being able to schmooze our editors at the cocktail parties that we were sure occurred every evening in New York, we tried to make lemonade out of our provincial status by cultivating a raw Western allure.

Bruce kissed me and said there was an e-mail for me; someone wanted a rewrite by the end of the week. It was our way to share an account and browse through each other's e-mails. It made the writing life a little less lonesome, a little more like a cheerful cottage industry and a little less like being trapped alone with your weak brain.

"Rewrite! Who invented that, anyway?" I asked.

"Tell me about it." Bruce, also a writer, worked for a magazine that set editors upon his stories like snarling dogs who liked to tear stuff up just for the sport of it.

He poured some coffee into his cup and leaned against the counter, looking at me. He was a tall, thin person with a beautifully craggy face and a single black eyebrow. He looked like an Egon Schiele drawing come to life and occasionally consumed by teen passion. He was a person in whom ethnicity was palpable. Like me, his family went way back, or at least what passed for way back in Washington State. Some of his people were Norwegian farmers from the Snohomish valley; some of his people were Croat fishermen from Everett. He was mostly Norwegian farmer, shy and austere, but the Croat in him grew voluble when he was alone with me.

"Halloween!" he said. "The best holiday of the year. The holiday of candy and fright. What could be better? So, when are people coming?" He plucked a piece of potato from the colander and dropped it; too hot.

"Shh!" I said. "Lucy's still asleep." The line was delivered with a certain amount of bitchiness. My mom was fanatical about the baby's sleep. In fact, I was always shocked when I heard about other mothers who napped when their babies were napping. How could they fall asleep? I needed to stay awake and worry about when the baby would wake up.

Bruce made that little apology rictus people make when they've unthinkingly spoken too loudly. It was easy to wake up the baby in our house, a small bungalow on a hillside street, a street in fact just right for Halloween: houses tightly packed together and filled with kind, liberal folk who would have plenty of treats on hand (though they did not eat sugar, usually).

"OK, I gotta go back out there." He was working on a big feature about decommissioning dams.

As he headed out the back door, my mom came in the front, as though we were in an episode of *The Benny Hill Show*. But without the French maids' costumes.

"Hi, honey! Is Lucy up from her nap yet?"

"Let's go check, she's been asleep for a while."

We crept up the stairs and peeked into Lucy's room under the eaves. Eyes still shut. Some waggling of the rump, but it could've been dream related. We crept back down and my mom took charge of the ham.

"Ooh, you got a honey-baked! Good!" She pulled it from the fridge. "What platter are you

using?"

~~I was still thinking about that rewrite but pulled myself together. I gave her the big plain white platter and watched as she transformed the ham from a glistening hunk of fatty flesh into a Main Course, simply by placing it on the dish. How'd she do that?~~

The baby snuffled faintly and my mom was upstairs like a shot. "Oh, my darling girl!" My mother caught the baby up in her arms, right from the crib, no easy feat.

My mom was a slender thing, long-haired and artistic-looking and deceptively frail, like shrinky-dink Vanessa Redgrave. But there was might in her. Her small body possessed a secret toughness. She could hold the baby for hours, it seemed; she ran a perfectly clean house; her garden, which she took care of herself, always looked as though Vita Sackville-West had just spent the day there, attended by a team of burly men. And she had a will like a root; it was sometimes hidden underground, but it was there, tough and fibrous and sustaining every single thing she did.

The enormous, peachy baby tucked onto her slender hip, my mom moved around the house in her efficient way.

"Do you think the dining table really works like this?" she asked. "Maybe we should move it against the wall."

My mother had a kind of mania for shifting tables. No table was ever in the right place. It was part of getting ready for a party. And of course, maddeningly, she was always right. These tables moved from their old locations into their new locations, made people know what they were supposed to do and where they were supposed to go at my mother's parties. Released from anxiety by my mother's table placement, partygoers moved more freely, chatted more easily. It was typical of my mother. Finally you just had to lay yourself down and let her roll over you, pushing a table as she went.

I sighed. "Let's move it. Just put Lucy in the playroom for a moment."

Mom set the baby on the floor and placed a few toys around her.

"Where's Larry?" I asked as we lugged my huge dining-room table across the room.

"Oh, he had to work this afternoon. He'll be in here in a bit."

Larry was my mother's boyfriend. He had been for twenty-five years. Even though my mom was still married to my dad. Let me just lay it out:

Mom and Dad married in the early 1960s. Broke up when my mom met Larry, who was at the time a young hippie. Mom and Larry have been together ever since. Mom and Dad decided to stay married, thinking it would be easier on me and my brother, Dave.

And that's how it had been ever since. My parents were still functionally married. Dad still got his mail at Mom's house. Dad and Mom still talked on the phone practically every day. Dad and Mom still had their financial lives intertwined. I told a friend once about this arrangement, and she said, "Well, there are all different kinds of marriage." I said, "But they're not really married!" And my friend said, "Oh, yes, they are."

It read like a false syllogism: Mom and Larry were a couple; Mom and Dad were married. Therefore...what, exactly? I would be tempted to say, "You do the math," but there was no math. Hmm, you might be thinking. This woman appears to have two husbands. All I can say is this: Maybe that's how many husbands my mother needed. Did I mention her will of iron? On the other hand, maybe my dad needed only a fraction of a wife.

"There!" said my mother. All we had done was move the table, and the room no longer looked like my dining room. It looked like party central. "A tablecloth and we'll be set!"

We looked into the playroom and found Lucy sitting on the floor in front of the towering fictional bookcase. A pile of M's (our library was still alphabetized, a relic of pre-children days) faced her. Maupin and Mitford and Munro. She was gnawing on a corner of *Tales of the City* when my mo

swooped down on her.

~~Parties were complicated. This complication was usual for me and my family, as it was for lots of people of my generation. Mom and Dad and Larry clustered in the kitchen, exclaiming over the baby while Bruce's nice parents milled around a bit. Their incomprehension of my family's background was palpable, but they Norwegianly kept it to themselves and we all rubbed along just fine.~~

My dad, with his flyaway hair and his observant eyes and his lanky frame, toggled between the majestic and the laid-back. At the public relations firm he had helped run, he was known as “The Great One,” but now that he had retired, he favored the laid-back. He leaned against the kitchen wall with his arms crossed against his chest, chatting animatedly with Larry about some early snow in the Cascades. My dad was made for skiing.

Larry, sixteen years younger than my dad, was a tugboat captain. Really. And he looked it. Imagine a handsome Italian tugboat captain, with a beard and an elegant nose. Now imagine him cracking up, quietly. There's Larry. He was wearing flip-flops—he usually didn't give them up until December—and jeans and a plaid shirt.

My dad and Larry were civil; my mother was charm itself. The whole thing ran like clockwork. Except it didn't. Lately I had been impatient, even crabby, with my parents. They were bugging me in some obscure way. Now that I was a parent, they got under my skin almost all the time. I ordered them about and sighed when I spoke.

To wit: As I got the white wine out of the fridge to put out on the table, my dad loped in. “Can I get a glass of water?” he asked.

“Sure. Go for it,” I answered tersely, gesturing at the cupboard where we kept the glasses.

My dad got this look I'd been seeing on his face more and more often lately, the look of a person who is a little offended but is suppressing it.

My brother, meanwhile, had bailed. He didn't come to family parties anymore. This had begun years ago, when he had been in a band—the Presidents of the United States of America—that toured incessantly. We thought he would come back to the fold. But he never did, even after he left the band and became a PR guy like my dad, and then a new-media exec. He stayed away. He sent middle-of-the-night e-mail pleas to my parents, on which he CC'ed me. (He was kind of officious, for a former rock star.) “It's time for a divorce,” he would write. Or, “My birthday is coming. For my gift I would like a divorce!”

His disappearance was a function of his total immersion in his wife and daughters. He folded himself into his family tightly, as though he was tucking himself into bed. There didn't seem to be room for anybody else. He and I communicated by means of e-mail, little semaphore signals, mostly about music and our parents, that we sent back and forth across Lake Washington. I was happy to take what I could get.

When we were all together like this, I missed him.

Larry was holding Lucy in his arms, and she was giggling and burying her hands in his full, earthy hippie beard.

“Give me that baby!” I said.

Larry laughed and handed her over.

Larry laughed at everything; it was his great charm. Larry and I had become more related since we had Lucy. She was certainly his grandchild, therefore he and I must be related by blood. Another faulty syllogism, but it had an undeniable emotional truth.

We sat down on the sofa with Bruce's parents near the fire. I loved a shoulder-season fire. A winter fire was pedestrian, but there was something wonderfully profligate about an autumn fire, when you didn't quite need it. I began to maneuver Lucy's legs into her bear suit. She glanced up at me adoringly, as though I was a rock star.

As I drew a tiny black bear nose onto her tiny face with an eyeliner, friends and neighbors began to arrive. Bruce got busy leading kids on short candy-extorting tours of the neighborhood, with Lucy in his arms.

People brought food. The ham glistened fatly. The waxy, sweet smell of Halloween candy filled the air, and for the next three hours people bustled in and out, spilling wine on the rug, taking handfuls of fun-size Milky Way bars.

I overheard my mom talking to my old friend Isabel.

“Did you know that the house out back is for sale?” asked my mom.

“Which one?”

“The one just past the backyard.”

Isabel started laughing. “Are you going to buy it?”

“I think I should!” said my mom. Her hungry eyes looked at Lucy as she said it.

“Not funny,” I said.

“It’s not meant to be funny, Claire. Wouldn’t it be nice? We could make a little path between the two houses.”

“It’s not funny, Mom. Knock it off.”

“Well, I’m not joking. I might just call a Realtor.”

“Are you moving?” asked my dad as he walked by. He had a vested interest. After all, he was married to my mom. They still co-owned her house, even though he lived across town in a wooden house boat on Lake Union.

“Well, did you see that the house behind this one is for sale?”

“Huh!” said my dad, and sloped off lankily to graze on a ham sandwich. Their relationship was friendly and a bit incurious, like the slight emotional distance maintained by, say, longtime next-door neighbors.

“I’m going to buy it!” said Isabel. “I’m calling a Realtor.”

“No way,” said my mom. “It’s mine.”

Nobody would buy the house, I knew. It was just a way to show that they were enjoying my domesticity. Claire, with a house! And a husband and a baby. There was something absurd about it. Except my mom. My mom might buy the house. You never knew. My mom and Bruce’s mom, all the moms, were like barbarians at the gates. Their need for the baby’s proximity was huge; it was the most important thing in my mother’s life.

Larry came in and opened another bottle of wine. My ex-boyfriend, there with his wife and beautiful sloe-eyed baby daughter, demanded another glass. The web of relationships surrounded me tightly.

I slipped upstairs with Lucy and lay down with her on the bed while she lulled into sleep. The sounds of the party, of complications, of life roared softly below.

The next day Lucy and I were slated to go to baby co-op. This was a highly desirable baby class run at the neighborhood center. I had applied right after Lucy was born. At this cooperative preschool, babies socialized with one another while volunteer moms helped run the school. It was impossible not to imagine the babies lounging in armchairs, holding martinis and cigarettes, and lifting their feet from the carpet to let their work-worn mothers run the vacuum.

Even so, it was part of the law of North Seattle that your baby “did” co-op. It was always put like this—“doing” co-op—as though you were doing lunch, or heroin.

At the urging of other moms, soon after Lucy was born I had called the co-op contact line and spoken to a harried-sounding mom, the kind of person whose small efficiencies barely concealed the fact that her life, with its children and part-time job and not quite helpful spouse, was always about

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