

## MOUNTAIN POSE

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Vertigo: benign, positional. I like to say it that way. Reminds me of *Star Trek's* Captain Picard ordering his favorite beverage – tea: Earl Gray, hot. Anyway, it's what I've got and it gives me stories to tell.

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I'm thirty when it starts, one September morning when I'm walking home from the public swimming pool. The carbon monoxide and diesel fumes I inhale along the way, together with the chlorine I've been swallowing for the last half hour, add up to a dizzying combination. I get as far as the metal fence that runs along the far end of my backyard when I'm pulled off to the right as sure as if that side of my body is magnetized or the hand of God has reached down and yanked me over for a chat. The whooshing sound inside my head is all I can hear. I manage to hang on to the fence, chanting "you'll be OK, you'll be OK" under my breath and looking like a broad daylight drunk to the Asian neighbor lady in the next yard. I can tell from the way she goes on watering her parsley patch the size of a welcome mat, as desperate to avoid eye contact as I am to make it.

Ten or fifteen minutes pass before I can let go and meander across the lawn to the kitchen door. I go to bed for three days, which is how long it takes to get my equilibrium back. That was a few years ago. The neighbor lady is probably a grandmother now. No doubt she's aged well, partly because of the parsley, which must have proliferated into enough welcome mats for every house on the block. Instead of lemonade, her grandkids sell dime bags of the healthy green garnish and use the money to buy boxes of frozen

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corn dogs at Wal Mart. Their mothers serve them with pickles and soy sauce and pray at the family altar for the first killing frost, though they love their own mother very much and also pray for her long life.

I don't know. I left town to go to cooking school. Japanese: \$5000 sushi knives, blowfish. That didn't last long. When you drop one of those knives it shatters like a porcelain vase.

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Or maybe it starts when I'm 11. One minute Mom is hauling me around the kitchen by my hair and the next thing I know I'm sitting in the middle of the oval dining room rug wondering how I got there. That scared her and she was nice to me for almost a week, until it happened again and she decided I was faking it.

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I'm crouched on the stone floor near the front door, tying the dirty laces on my Reeboks. Strips of setting sunlight coming through the half open blinds of the window behind me are full of dust. Minnie the cat is watching my feet, muscles poised to spring out of my unpredictable path. I'm about to take a short weave to the Park. Weave instead of walk makes me smile.

I swivel slowly to face the door and pull myself up by the knob. So far so good. Some days I'm as well balanced as the next person. Other days, I have a whole different perspective on life.

It's Halloween and there's a party at the Park for the kids. Trick or treaters never come to my street, since most of the houses are empty and for sale, so the only way I get to see them is finding a bench in the Park and watching them bob for apples or ride the

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merry-go-round. The place is packed. A lot of witches, vampires and cheerleaders are milling around. A tiny turkey wearing a lobster bib and drooling rides by on the shoulders of a man dressed like Ollie Dragon – the turkey’s grandfather, I figure. My favorite is Dolly Parton, especially after one of her foam boobs drops into the apple barrel and floats away from its owner. Friends tell me my sense of humor was arrested in early adolescence. I don’t remember laughing at all when I was a kid.

My dad was a baker. Every Halloween he came home with big trays of chocolate eclairs for the event. In those days people didn’t worry about razor blades in the goodies, though we did get skeptical looks from a few parents. Eclairs weren’t the kind of thing you could toss in with the rest of your loot. They required thought and resulted in some hesitant little hands. That was dad all right, planted in the doorway dressed in his spotless bakery whites, a let’s get down to business look on his face. Good times came with a price.

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I’ve been doing yoga again. They say it’s good for your balance, all kinds. The teacher’s name is Renee. She’s serene, sixtyish with snow white hair and perfect posture, but lithe, flexible. She moves through the positions as though she’s made of warm wax. Mountain Pose, Downward Dog, Warrior, Child, Cat. A soothing CD plays in the background, a cross between Gregorian chant and Enya.

The yoga class is in a spare room at the community center, next door to Poncho Villa High School. Outside our windows, the marching band is practicing for the homecoming game on the football field. Instead of being annoyed by this, Renee asks us

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to invite the sound into our yoga experience, the way we'd welcome good friends into our homes. A few months ago I would have snickered at such a suggestion, but love changes things.

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I move a lot. That's always a mystery to the friends I leave behind. They wonder why a person who has so much trouble walking a straight line would want to go be a stranger someplace. I don't tell them it gets harder as I get older or that I cry a lot when I get where I'm going.

When I move to this town I cry enough to replenish the depleted reservoir. It's New Year's Eve, the sun has set, the hotels are full, and all I can see from the driver's seat of my yellow Datsun are fast food joints and discount auto part stores. Where are all the centuries old adobe buildings I'd seen in Ansel Adams photographs from the forties? I've been lusting after the Southwest since I took an anthropology course in college about the Hopis and Zunis. Have my romantic impulses got the better of me one more time?

I wind up at the Blue Cactus Motel and Pottery Emporium, ringing in the New Year with the TV set on mute and a pint of tequila. It's a sorry night but by mid-afternoon the next day things are looking up. I find the old center of town, St. Francis' Cathedral at one end and the Coyote Café at the other. I buy myself a coffee and take a seat at a table on the roof of the Café. The sun is bright and even though it's January and there's snow on the foothills behind the Cathedral, I have to peel off my jacket and the sweater underneath. People are walking around the streets in shirt sleeves, posing for pictures and browsing the sidewalk vendors for turquoise jewelry that matches the color of the sky. Home at last, my every nook and cranny is shouting.

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Within a week I've rented an adobe casita with stone floors and inlaid tile in all three rooms. I land a job at a bakery on Burro Alley, owned by a couple of women with big plans. They put me in charge of the bread and don't care how many batter scrapers I drop. If there's a place more heavenly, I don't think I'd be able to stand it.

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Renee came to the Southwest from central New York State. She was used to big bodies of water, tall trees, and flat land. The contrast threw her permanently off kilter. She likes to say that the red rock canyons, flowering cactus and cold mountain streams set her at a 90° angle to her old self. Any time she wants she can wave at who she used to be while keeping on with who she is. Along with yoga, trout fishing has become her passion and her livelihood. I've been to the workshop behind her house. She spends hours there every day when she's not teaching, tying flies that are famous in these parts for their beauty and complexity. I want to tell her I'm in love with her for those very same qualities but I can't get the words out. It's like each one is stamped on a tiny self-adhesive square of vinyl stuck to the inside of my throat.

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There are two dreams I've been having ever since I can remember. In one of them the faces change according to where I'm living and who I know, but the action is always the same. Since I met Renee the dream goes like this. She and I are having a relationship whose exact nature is unclear. We have a fight, she calls an old partner and asks, "Do you still love me?" The answer is a slice of deep fried potato shaped like a cupped hand and covered in something red. I have no idea what this means. Is the red stuff blood? If so, whose? Has the hand been abusing Renee or does the red stuff

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indicate what torture it's been for the partner to be without her? Maybe it's just ketchup. I mention this dream to Renee. She says she's just had one where she asked a former lover the same question. She also says, "If there was something between you and me, you can bet I wouldn't be calling somebody else."

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Mountain Pose looks like this: stand tall, legs together, arms over your head reaching for the heavens. Suck in your stomach, stretch your torso, breathe deeply. Your feet should feel rooted in the earth, the energy rising through your spinal column and radiating from the top of your head and the tips of your fingers should make you feel as holy and imposing as Everest. Your purpose is clear, your motives are pure, you do not waver.

I practice this position every day. I can usually hold it for two or three minutes. Once I held it for five, out behind my casita at sundown. The smell of sage is especially strong in the early evening. In the waning light, the Sangre de Cristos look purple, the snow on the peaks a pale rose. The sight makes me want to genuflect.

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The Corn Dance Bakery, where I work, supplies bread to most of the big restaurants in town. We start baking at two a.m. and we're finished by eight. I spend the morning delivering – I drive and Diane unloads.

Diane's one of the owners. She's a black woman from Atlanta, a rare bird in these parts and she loves it. Sometimes we talk about what a change this is for her. "My mother taught me to be a very careful little black girl," she said once. "Polite was good but invisible was best, specially when it came to little white girls." The bane of her

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existence was a blonde who lived on the next block. For years Diane had to walk by her house on the way to school and the girl was always waiting for her in the middle of the sidewalk, arms and legs stuck out, so that Diane had to step into the road to get around her. “Keep your eyes down and don’t say a word,” Diane’s mother said every morning. To this day Diane hates anything yellow.

“I can’t blame Ma,” Diane says. “She was scared and she wanted me to live through my childhood.”

Once in awhile Diane comes to yoga class. She tells me it’s obvious Renee has the hots for me. It’s her way of telling me it’s O.K. to go after what I want, even if I list a little to one side on my approach.

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The second dream I keep having is about watching myself float through space with my arms around an enormous white pillow. It is, of course, completely silent. There are no other objects in the darkness, which is also complete, though I have no trouble seeing myself. The biggest impression the dream leaves on me has to do with the texture of the pillow. It feels like nothing else I have ever touched, nothing that words can describe, but I know that as long as I hold onto it I’ll be safe.

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It’s nearly Christmas, my first in this otherworldly place. Renee has gone to New York to visit her boys - one’s a cop and the other’s an interior designer. Before she leaves I give her a card and tell her not to open it until the 25<sup>th</sup>. On the front is a warmly lit adobe house. A cat is sitting on a corner of the flat roof, two dogs are playing in the snow. A gibbous moon draws the eye toward the far horizon. The message inside is

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*Happy Holidays – Looking Forward to More Time Together in the New Year, Love, Me.*

The folks from the bakery are coming to my place Christmas Day for a few hot toddies and a *Star Trek: Voyager* fest. None of us have family in town and twenty four hours of commercial free *Trek* reruns is just the cure for the blues. All the best episodes will be on, including the one where Captain Janeway and the Borg queen vie for Seven of Nine. Diane's a real sucker for the Captain – brains, beauty, charisma. If she could find the likes of her in black skin she'd die a happy woman, or so she says.

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Sometimes I wake up dizzy. It happens less and less as I get older but it usually means a day or two in bed without turning to the left or right because that makes the spinning worse. It also means, hard as I try to resist, an overwhelming urge to pack up and move on, as though the vertigo will disappear if only I can find the right geographical location.

I could take a lesson from Minnie the cat. Occasionally she gets an abscess at the base of her tail. She spends a few days growling and running away from herself, but then she's better and goes right back to feeling at home again.

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Before Renee goes to New York I invite her to my casita. We're sitting on the floor, the coffee table between us, eating popcorn and drinking hot cider. There's a fire going. Joni Mitchell's *Blue* is in the CD player.

We talk about family, not the ones we have but the ones we used to wish for when we were kids. My dream was that I'd turn into an orphan and be adopted by the big Irish Catholic family down the street. There were six children. Bobby, the oldest girl, was a



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cheerleader at St. Patrick's. We were friends for awhile, until she found out I wasn't really a cheerleader too. Our schools used to play basketball against each other, and one afternoon I ran out of excuses for not being at the game. Bobby asked a girl on our squad where I was and that's when the jig was up. I can't remember why I thought she'd only be friends with me if I was a cheerleader. At the end of that school year, I decided to run away from home. I went to Bobby's house and her mother, a tall brunette wearing a matching shirt dress and a pearl necklace, took me upstairs to her bedroom. We sat down on the bed and I told her my story. She gave me a good long hug, then told me she was sure my mother loved me and was worried about where I was. That made me cry because I knew I'd have to stick it out at home for another six years, until I was eighteen and old enough to move out. The loaded gun in Dad's sock drawer often made me wonder if I'd live that long.

Renee's parents weren't bad, just indifferent. What she wished for was some excitement in her life, a father who yelled NO once in awhile, a mother who cheered her on and told her it was important to play the violin or learn how to spell. Parents who knew how to hug and kiss each other like they were in love when she was peeking through their bedroom door. Real feeling of any kind.

*Blue* came out in 1971. Renee and I both remember hearing it for the first time. I was with my best friend, who taught me everything I know about music and food. Renee was already a mother. "That record used to make me wish I could have my twenties back, or at least play the piano," she says.

"I was in my twenties when the album came out," I say.

Renee smiles. "Play it again," she says.

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I walk to the CD player on my knees and push the repeat button, then over to Renee's side of the coffee table without getting dizzy. I shift into lotus position and admire her profile. The fine lines at the corners of her eye and mouth begin to deepen the way they do when she laughs or has something big on her mind.

"What are you thinking," I ask, topping up Renee's cider from the warm carafe and adding a cinnamon stick.

Minnie jumps onto the table and rubs the side of her face on Renee's chin.

"That things take me by surprise lately," Renee says, petting the cat's back.

"Like what," I say.

"Somebody threw a rock through the window of my workshop last week. I jumped when the glass broke. That's the part that surprised me."

"Anybody would've been spooked," I say.

"I was tying a fly. The hook went right through my finger." She takes a sip of cider, pausing to inhale the sweet spicy steam. "That's never happened before either."

"Let me see," I say.

Renee gives me her wounded finger, still a bit red and swollen. I close my hand over it, careful not to apply any pressure.

"That must have hurt," I say.

*I could drink a case of you,* Joni sings.

Renee turns toward me. She moves slowly, extending her legs on either side of me.

Steady, I say to myself. Steady.

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