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Do You Practice Ashtanga, Too

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I sat at the dining table in my brother and his wife’s house. It was New Year’s Day. We said goodbye to 2012 and hello to 2013, left behind all the theories about the end of the world, and celebrated that nothing had happened. Then you sat in front of me, I stared into your eyes, and I wanted to ask you, not just you but everyone who sat at the large table that night: Do you practice Ashtanga, too?

I had wanted to ask you that ever since I saw you come in. I felt like asking you if you practiced Ashtanga because of the way you walked, and because of the way the muscles in your body aligned as you sat at the table, long firm muscles, not those balls that pop up when you work out on weight machines at a gym. Not those balls of fat and fiber and muscles that curl up in the bodies of those who don’t know what to do with their anger and anguish, and end up keeping it there, in those disgusting balls.

I always admired well-toned bodies. All of us knew that a beautiful body was the reflection of a balanced soul and a fairly pleasant life. That’s why I thought only about the one thing. It was the only thing I expected that night. I was hoping to find someone to spend the rest of my life with. Obviously, not only did he have to be someone with no fat or anguish stuck there in gym-built muscles, but also he had to be integral, balanced, and someone who, of course, practiced Ashtanga.

That night I left my brother’s home around one-thirty in the morning. The dinner had been most delicious: cheese, whole wheat bread, seeds, and sauces. I would have stayed longer to be with you, but my brother said no, I shouldn’t dare, because you were very shy. I asked him right away: Does he practice Ashtanga by any chance? My brother made a face saying W, what’s that?, turned halfway around, and kept talking to his wife.

Before I left, I said goodbye to you and shyly asked for your phone number, and you too asked for mine. You hesitated, and I felt silly. My brother was in the balcony staring toward other buildings, so he didn’t hear us, thank goodness. What would he have thought? Next to his wife, he kept watching people celebrating the New Year with champagne in other cubicles in the air. Those other buildings looked odious. Those cubicles were like illuminated matchboxes, very
high floors with large signs of real estate companies wishing us all a happy new year and brainwashing us into thinking that their matchboxes were spectacular for family life. I suppose none of them practiced Ashtanga. I left the apartment, and in the elevator I fixed my panties. As I reached the hall, I looked at myself in the mirror and retouched the rouge on my lips. I was beautiful.

I reached Plaza Ñuñoa. I was going to walk home, from Manuel de Salas to Bustamante Park, about twenty blocks. I wanted to walk. Maybe on the way I would meet someone who practiced Ashtanga. When I was going down Irarrázaval, I realized that the world would change completely in 2013 if everyone decided to practice Ashtanga. Would it be possible that all of us Chileans practiced Ashtanga in 2013? Maybe everyone was already doing it, but I just hadn’t noticed it. Maybe no one had told me about it. Or everyone kept it one of their great secrets. I wasn’t telling about it either, because I felt ashamed. But during this walk, from Manuel de Salas to Bustamante, no one seemed to have those fatty muscles in their arms. Maybe all Chileans only ate vegetables, seeds, and low-fat cheese, everyone recycled, and no one consumed ice cream, beer or Coca-Cola. Everyone drank water or wine and ate seeds.

I continued on my path. I was thinking about a man, searching the streets for some man, as I didn’t want to spend the night alone. I wanted someone to lift me up in the air like acroyoga or pirouette. Suddenly I started wanting it so badly, and then I ran into a very handsome guy, with beautiful arms, entirely tattooed, and light blue eyes.

Do you practice Ashtanga, too? I asked.

What? he said.

I don’t know why now everyone practices Ashtanga, I said. It’s strange. I looked at him, but he paid no attention. Then I kept on my way with the attitude I had cultivated in recent days: If a man has no interest in you when you like him or you find him attractive, keep on walking, because the universe has someone else in store for you, so don’t insist, don’t be stupid. I kept on going. I continued on my path with my new theory on the universe. Then suddenly, my cell phone beeped, notifying me of a text message. It was from you.

Hello. I’m your brother’s friend. Would you like to have a drink with me?
OK, where?

Where are you right now?

I’m going down Irarrázaval toward Bustamante.

But how far along are you?

Near Holanda.

Oh, you’re right here.

Yes.

Then go back. I’ll wait for you at the corner of the plaza.

Which corner?

Northeast.

OK, I’m on my way.

Then I started going back and saw the handsome guy with blue eyes again. Now he didn’t even look at me. I kept walking toward where you were. I saw you at the corner. I saw you in the distance and walked toward you. I don’t know why, but I glanced at your arms right away. I stared and scanned for tattoos. I didn’t find any. I wanted to find one, but I couldn’t.

Hello.

Hello.

We started laughing. Both of us found the situation ridiculous. We had seen each other only for a few hours in my brother’s place, but we broke the ice right away. You were well balanced and that’s why you were laughing. Surely, you practiced Ashtanga.

Were you on your way home? you asked.
No. I just wanted to go for a walk, to see if I would find something around here.

Oh. What kind of thing?

Anything. A posture.

What? A posture? About what?

Well, let’s go for a drink, I said. Or do you prefer a party?

I don’t go to parties, you said. Smoke bugs me and so do people screaming. The lights at night clubs are disgusting. Besides, people at parties stink. They put on too much perfume on, they reek of cigarettes.

I looked at you. I stared at you. I hated you for a moment. I don’t know why, but I was mad at you for a few seconds. I saw your muscles again and found some tattoos, which were beautiful. I wanted to ask you something. Also I imagined you lifting me up with those arms in an acroyoga move. I felt terribly sad. Things were not the way I’d expected. I didn’t know how to ask you. I stared at you. I didn’t know how to bring it up. My chest hurt. I felt nostalgia. There is nothing like something I want exactly when I want it. I didn’t even know how to ask if you would lift me up that night.

I want to ask you, I was going to say. But I didn’t.

You looked at me. Maybe you sensed that I wanted to ask you something. Something, I don’t know, just anything. I gave you a strange look. I stared at you imagining you lifting me up in various positions to reach together the balance of postures and in the end everything felt sad.

My chest hurt, from my stomach upward. Everyone passed us by for a while. The waiter brought us glasses of water. People shouted, screamed, Happy New Year. They gave thanks as trumpets blasted. The New Year is terrible, I remembered. The cops gave us an evil look, as always, as if we were hiding something, as if we were bothering someone. Would they ever practice Ashtanga, too?

I’d like to ask you something, I was going to tell you. My chest hurt. I felt a weight pressing down on my chest.

Are you going to order something? you asked.
Yes, a glass of white wine. Or, no, a glass of cava. Sparkling wine, sorry. That one, yes. That one, champagne.

OK. I’d like a glass, too, you said.

Listen, the thing is that I was looking at your arms and wanted to ask you something.

Oh, tattoos...! I got them some time ago. A few years back. Look at this... And this... And this... And this...

OK. OK. But, besides that... Ehhh, I wanted to know if.... Do you practice some regimen?

What do you mean?

I want to know if you do something with your body.

Ah, no.

You don’t? I don’t believe you. You’re lying to me.

I don’t know what you mean...

I mean, your arms are very long and sinewy. You’re lying to me. What do you mean you don’t practice anything?

Hey, why are you asking me? I don’t get it...

Forget it. I just wanted to know, but... Just tell me the truth.

OK, yes, I’m telling the truth: I don’t practice anything. Why?

I stood up, grabbed my glass of water, gulped it down. Ciao, I said before banging the empty glass on the table. You remained there, looking dumb, serious, I don’t know. Maybe you thought I was a fakir. Everyone thinks so at some point. You just made a stupid face, nothing more. You raised your arms as if asking for an explanation, but it was too late. I was gone. I don’t know if you were lying to me or you were an idiot who didn’t really practice Ashtanga. Most likely you were an
idiot. I hated you at the moment. Why weren’t you going to practice Ashtanga if everyone was doing it? Why weren’t you doing it?

My chest hurt when I looked at you for the last time.

I started to walk. You had let me down even before we got to know each other. I thought you were very stupid. Why didn’t you practice it? You stupid idiot.

I kept walking down Irarrázaval. One, two, six, twenty blocks. Sorrow faded away as I walked, so did fear. Pedro de Valdivia, Antonio Varas, Manuel Montt, Infante, etc., etc. I didn’t give a fuck if I had to be alone for one more year. You stupid, stupid idiot, I kept saying as I walked. You stupid, stupid idiot.

I arrived home, tired. I had trouble finding the keyhole. It was always difficult. I had one of those security doors with locks that moved from one side to the other, which were confusing. I managed to get inside. I threw my purse on the chair, washed my hands with soap, dried them, took off my shoes, peed, turned on the shower, put my feet in the water, washed them, dried them, put on my pajamas, and crawled into bed. The tightness in my chest was gone. My bed always protected me.

I turned on the TV. I flipped from one channel to another... Everyone did Ashtanga on TV. No one was shrieking or hawking matchbox houses. On every channel everyone did Ashtanga. They assumed more exaggerated postures each time. Then I went to bed. I dreamed about yoga positions. I dreamed about extensions of the body. I dreamed about a long beautiful body. Heads on shoulders. Knees behind arms. Contortions. The flexibility of the mind placed there, in its totality. Legs put one over the other. In my dreams everyone did Ashtanga, various contortions, legs over heads. They had hearts and minds open, which showed in their bodies: heads set over fingers, fingers placed on backs. Sadness was fleeing far away, just like that, with the body contorted. When I woke up, the same thing happened. It was great to see something like this. The body controlling emotions. Lovely. I opened the balcony window and let in some fresh air. The bodies in other buildings had functioned as air purifiers all night. The bent body purifies the air, my instructor said. My neighbors were quiet inside their homes. I looked toward their windows. They were all there, looking gorgeous. Everyone was flexible in mind and body. My neighbors were inside their homes with their windows open and the curtains pulled back. Everyone practiced postures, hands, legs, fingers, and forehead. They looked beautiful. Everyone did Ashtanga. We all did Ashtanga. We breathed a new air. At last.
Claudia Apablaza is an award-winning Chilean writer. Her books include *Siempre te creíste la Virginia Woolf*, *Goo y el amor*, and *Todos piensan que soy un faquir*. Translations of her fiction have appeared or are forthcoming in *Gargoyle*, *Hayden's Ferry Review*, and *St. Petersburg Review*. Her story “I Think I Made You Up Inside My Head” has been nominated for a Pushcart Prize.

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