

Baby and House

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Imagine a yoga studio with pale yellow walls. Corduroy pillows piled under windows shaded with rice paper. Beige carpet, the texture of felt. Ginger incense, harmonic chimes. Wall sketches of the Raj of Aundh in each of the 12 postures of the Salute to the Sun. On the wall opposite, a charcoal drawing of Gandhi.

I lie on my back in the corpse pose, feet spread apart, arms straight out from my body, my cold palms upward.

"Breathe," says the yoga instructor to four rows of six students spread-eagled on teal green mats.

Notice me at the end of the last row, trembling. "Close your eyes and relax your body," she says. "Relax your toes . . . the soles of your feet . . . your ankles. Relax your calf muscles . . . your knees . . . your thighs . . . inhale deeply . . . be aware of your abdomen and thorax. Relax the muscles of your hands, arms, waist, back and shoulder. Loosen your spine. Breathe."

Not very long ago, my husband came home with this yoga book. The cover featured the author – a lady named Gaia – in the cobra pose, a white yogatard pulled taut against her nipples. The first chapter explained how yoga is a form of mental control. Techniques like Emotion Culturing help to transform negative states into positive ones. You can learn to cope with the strains and stresses of life. Acquire poise, grace, a sense of harmony and peace. All that's required is a little time to add a completely new dimension to your life.

So I am in yoga class. While I'm here, my husband vacuums and cleans up the kitchen. Probably he thinks he won't have these chores much longer. Because a good course in yoga, says my husband, could lessen my mood swings and help me sleep. I just might take care of the house, go back to work, even get the Silky Terrier I've always wanted. Right now, I just wish the ants would stop crawling into my brain.

The teacher's yogatard shimmers in pink. "Breathe," she says. "Feel the surge of energy each time you inhale and the waves of relaxation as you exhale."

The ants trail downwards. As I exhale, they drop out of my mouth and crawl down my neck. I try to raise my right hand to smash them. I can't.

"Calm your mind," says the instructor. "Note how your abdomen rises and falls as you breathe. Count ten cycles, watch how the movement becomes regular and slow. For the next ten, feel your breath going into your abdomen as you inhale. Relax as you exhale. Feel your body sink into the ground."

Ants reach my chest, moving fast. I don't hear chimes or smell incense. I don't watch the Raj worship the sun or study Gandhi's face. I arch my back when the ants scour my belly. Screams start from my root chakra and explode out my throat.

I don't recall the ambulance or arriving at the emergency room. I do remember being wheeled to a room with two other women with dazed expressions.

At first no one says much. After a couple days, we start to

complain about the industrial-strength sheets and how they make us itch. Then we ask each other how we wound up in the hospital.

Baby, well over thirty, sucks on a blanket, even has a pacifier. Repressed childhood memories have surfaced; she's regressed to age three and seems to be stuck there. "I want my turtle," she says. Turns out her turtle died the day after her mother walked out.

House, the only black patient on the unit, is beautiful, never mind that her hair is out to there, she takes up all her bed and then some. Her skin's the color of cinnamon and her teeth are white as piano keys. Tiny dark freckles on her face scrunch up when she laughs. And believe me, when she laughs, pretty soon you're laughing just as hard. Other times she's all locked inside herself and won't get out of bed. Bandages cover her left eye where she's gouged her face. Doctors aren't sure she'll regain vision in that eye.

Baby, House and I move from group therapy to behavioral therapy to occupational therapy. We make little calendars and learn to knit. Baby and I play ping-pong. I have to show her how to serve but she smashes the hell out of my return ball. Not bad for a three-year old. House and I find a couple of decks for Canasta. For some reason, she draws all the red threes. When I catch her dealing herself extra cards, she laughs and I come down with the giggles. But then, looking right at me, she tries to sneak the top card from the discard pile. "Oops," she says. Starts me giggling all over again.

We can no longer tolerate the sheets on our beds. We find the key to the laundry room and search for something better. Way in back on the top shelf, House spies some soft blue ones. House gets down on all fours. I climb on her; Baby climbs on me and grabs them all. No problem, we have our sheets and hightail it outta there.

But time's up. We're on day nine of ten that our insurance pays for, so says the lady from the financial office.

Baby keeps sucking on her blanket and crying about her turtle. House can't fit into her hospital gown, so dispenses with it. She likes to sing at all hours. At 4:00 am, nurses find her in the TV room, naked and singing her heart out. A diet is not in her plans.

I'm having a bad reaction to the meds. Until I'm stabilized, my doctor refers me to a place for women who're discharged from the hospital but not ready to go home. Baby and House get the same referral from their doctors. My husband thinks more yoga is all I need. The doctor insists on a residential half-way house.

So Baby, House and I end up at Claire Hall, a residence for women, near a couple of missions, shops, some blues joints and a famous bookstore. We each have our own room. We can go out during the day, even see a movie. I check out the famous bookstore and take Baby to visit a gospel mission. However, there's a curfew and some rules. After breakfast is group therapy. Missing even one therapy session is not an option. After all, we must learn how to take life on life's terms. Acquire coping strategies. Heal ourselves. Not get too hungry, angry or tired. How are we going to manage the holidays coming up? What are our plans for the future? On the other hand, we must take one day at a time.

House says to Baby and me, "Fuck that shit. How 'bout checking out one of the blues joints around here?"

"Don't even think of it," says Baby.

"Why not?" asks House. "You got something against blues?"

"No," Baby says. "Remember our 10:00 curfew."

"We can sneak through the back," says House.

Baby asks, "How do you know that?"

"Let's say I have some privileged information," boasts House.

"From who?" Baby inquires.

"Well, now, if I told you it wouldn't be privileged, would it?"

House answers, winking her good eye.

Baby just shrugs.

So the three of us head out one night to this dive. On a little stage is a guy playing blues on a beat-up piano. Baby, House and I stand by the door. After we adjust to the smoky candlelight, House, with a black patch over her eye, and a dress cut way too low, leads us to a table. Baby trails behind, sucking on her blanket. As soon as we're seated, House orders three beers. Baby and I want cokes. So we get three beers and two cokes. Before we slurp half our cokes, House has downed the three beers. I'm beginning to get a little nervous.

The blues player finishes a song and the small crowd applauds. House bangs her fist on the table. Stands up. "Who's that nigger up there?" she yells. "Cain't sing worth shit."

The audience gasps. I'm shaking. Baby sticks her pacifier in her mouth.

The blues guy gets up and looks straight at House for a long time. Not a sound in the joint. All of a sudden he smiles. "Hey honey, that you?" he says. "Well, I'll be goddamned. Come on up here!"

House lumbers on stage.

"Ah darlin', so good to see you," he says. He hugs her, pulls away, holding her shoulders. "Hey, what'd you do to your eye?"

"It ain't nothing, Sammy D.," she says.

"Hey everybody," says Sammy to the audience. "This here's House McCall. Me and her used to work together back ten years ago. Yep, I played the blues while she sang. And out of nowhere she reappears. House, whatcha been doing all these years?"

"Goin' fuckin' insane," says House.

Sammy laughs. "That's no excuse for not singin'."

"Just got too tired, honey, that's all."

"Well, I ain't gonna let you give me that excuse this time. You gonna sing for us tonight!"

"I cain't, Sammy," says House. "Not tonight. Some other time."

"There may not be another time, sweetheart."

"Sure there will," House replies.

"House, darlin', do it for old times. Do it for love. Do it for Sammy D."

Sammy tries to put his arm around her but he can't quite reach, so he rubs her back instead.

"Honey," says Sammy. "How about singing, I Want A Little Sugar in My Bowl?"

"Nah. Ain't gonna happen. I hardly remember the words."

"Ah, c'mon," says Sammy. "Do it for me. Who knows when we'll be together again?"

With that, he starts humming and playing some chords.

The audience starts humming.

Then Sammy sings:

I want a little sugar in my bowl

I want a little sweetness down in my soul

I could stand some loving oh so bad

I feel so funny, I feel so sad

In almost a whisper, House repeats:

I could stand some loving oh so bad

I feel so funny, I feel so bad

House moves a little closer to the floodlight. She wrinkles up her nose, so her freckles bunch together, squints her good eye and looks straight at the audience:

I want a little steam on my clothes

Maybe I can fix things so they'll go

I want some sugar in my bowl

She lifts up one side of her dress, kicks out her leg, expands her ample chest and purrs like Nina Simone:

Watsa matter Daddy, c'mon save my soul

I need some sugar in my bowl

I ain't foolin'

I want some sugar in my bowl

She stomps, quivers and shakes. Her hair gets bigger and wetter. Her teeth sparkle in the floodlight. She beckons the audience to sing with her:

You been acting different, I've been told

Soothe me

I want some sugar in my bowl

Now House is dancing and I'm worried. She's gonna come outta that dress. She's all over that stage; but the only things wiggling are her hips. Somehow, she's straight-jacketed her boobs. Thank goodness.

Then, just like that, she's done.

Sammy fingers the last piano chord, jumps up and kisses House twice on both cheeks. They hold hands and take bow after bow. The audience's on its feet. Baby and I clap and scream.

We slip in the back door of Claire Hall late, about 2:00 a.m. No problem at all and we sleep through breakfast. Group therapy, too.

At lunch, House looks different. Her lips are painted purplish red and her hair's slicked back. Her eye is brilliant. Might be the blue eye shadow.

I'm still in shock over her radiant voice. "Why, House I had no idea you could sing like Nina Simone. How come you haven't sung in ten years?"

House just laughs while I cut up Baby's pork chop.

In the afternoon, House takes a nap. Baby drags me to a toy shop where she insists on conversing with a stuffed parrot. She won't cross the street unless I hold her hand. At the bookstore, we find a huge music section. Shelves full of blues books. We can't find one that mentions Sammy D. or House McCall. We notice some pictures that aren't identified. Could easily be Sammy and House.

When Baby and I get back about 3:00, my husband is there to greet us. The counselor stands with him. We've violated two rules – missed group therapy and ignored curfew. No second chance; we're out. Baby's told to move uptown with another girl. She might, however, be allowed a little turtle.

I run up to our rooms. No sign of House. I dash down to inquire. "She walked out of here singing and all dolled up," says the counselor.

I'm back at the yoga studio with the pale yellow walls and rice-paper shades. Someone is chanting.

"Breathe," says the yoga instructor. "Relax your calf muscles . . . your knees . . . inhale deeply . . . be aware of your abdomen and thorax. Breathe."

Yoga is all about letting go of the past and being fully present in the moment. But I miss Baby and House. Wish they were here. Baby'd be in the child's pose, with her pacifier tight in her fist. House'd be doing some serious thoracic breathing while in the upward dog. I'd be giggling. □