



‘The violet vibrations blow my crown chakra wide open’

‘**Y**oga student!’ said the rickshaw driver, nodding emphatically in the direction of a bungalow just visible in the fading light, beyond the orange flowers of several flamboyant canna plants.

‘Two hundred rupees! You pay!’ he said, even more emphatically, stopping just short of a grumpy cow, which was occupying most of the narrow road.

This was around £2.50 – a bit steep for a journey of half a mile in India – but if it delivered me to Ortario and Magdali’s Café, reputedly the centre of Mysore yoga student life, well, it would be worth it. I’d only arrived in town an hour ago but I was desperate to start getting to know my yogic soulmates, and I was hungry.

I handed over the money and, after some delicate negotiations with a goat that was trying to make a meal of a poster on the gate, I headed up

the garden path towards a long, messy row of beaten-up Birkenstocks. I added my shiny new orange Birkies to the line, took a deep breath and opened the door to yoga heaven.

There before me were twenty or more beautiful people, draped over floor cushions, daybeds and each other. A harassed waiter, the only person showing any signs of movement, shuttled backwards and forwards through shuttered kitchen doors from which the smell of garlic and fresh coriander periodically escaped.

Smiling weakly, I surveyed the scene, nervously clutching my brand new copy of *The Yoga Sutras of Patanjali* to my chest. I suddenly felt overwhelmed. I had imagined this moment for a long time – my first encounter with the yoga students of Mysore – but where to sit? Everyone seemed so entwined. Unable to work out an immediate way to add myself to this human spaghetti, I hovered at the edge of a small splinter group sitting straight-backed at a low-slung table decorated with empty plates, bits of Naan bread and mint tea.

‘Would you like to join us?’ asked a husky-voiced girl with golden skin and long, white-blonde hair.

‘Thank you, I’d love to,’ I said gratefully.

I attempted to copy their ‘lotus’ position – ankles perched effortlessly on their thighs – but my hips and knees resisted at the crucial 45-degree point. I was forced to abandon the attempt and sit cross-legged – feet and ankles nailed firmly to the ground. I slid my shawl over the offending posture.

‘I’m Lisa, from Sweden,’ said the blonde girl, with a perfect English accent and a warm smile.

‘I’m Lucy. I just arrived today, from London.’

‘*Namaste*, Lucy. Welcome to Mysore.’ Lisa raised her hands into prayer position and bowed her head. ‘This is Greg, and Shanti.’

‘*Namaste*,’ said Greg, pressing his palms into prayer position and bowing his head.

‘*Namaste*,’ said Shanti, doing the same.

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‘*Namaste*,’ I replied, bowing in return and thus completing our round of promises that the spirit in each of us would respect the spirit in each other.

I was eager to find out more about these fellow spirits.

‘I love your outfit, Shanti,’ I said, admiring the tiger-eye browns and yellows of the *salwar kameez* that perfectly offset her mahogany corkscrew curls, olive skin and translucent green eyes.

‘Oh, thank you. Actually it’s very old; my yoga teacher’s wife gave it to me. Isn’t that so sweet? She’s so beautiful.’

Warming to my subject, I added, ‘And your shawl – where did you get it? It’s such a great colour on you.’

‘Oh, thank you so much, Lucy. You know what, before I came here I was in Dharamshala and this holy man read my aura – the shawl was a perfect match. The violet vibrations blow my crown *chakra* wide open, but it also keeps my energy field protected. The gold trim – see here,’ Shanti showed us the intricate embroidery, ‘helps my spirit guides look out for me.’

‘Your shawl is pretty too, Lucy,’ said Lisa kindly.

‘Oh, thank you. St Joseph of Brompton Cross. It was expensive, about two hundred pounds, I think, but on a cost-per-wear basis it’s actually worked out to be a bit of a bargain.’

A small gap seemed to have opened up in the conversation.

Lisa came to my rescue. ‘What brought you to India, Lucy?’

‘I think it was a Boeing seven-four-seven. It was a long journey – into Bombay and then on to Bangalore. I’m feeling pretty awful now but that might be more to do with how much I had to drink on the plane than jet lag.’

There was another gap in the conversation; it seemed a little larger than the last.

Lisa smiled indulgently. ‘What about you, Shanti?’

‘I am here to study *Ashtanga* with Guruji. I told you earlier, before Lucy arrived, that it was my first time in Mysore but actually I’ve been

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to the city before – I just don't remember it. My mom was here in seventy-five when she was pregnant with me – she didn't know she was pregnant so she was doing all these inversions – *adho mukha vrksasana*, *parsva pada sarvangasana*, *hanumanasana* in *sirsasana*. Pretty dangerous really – she coulda lost me – but I must have loved it. It feels like yoga is in my blood.'

'Your mum must have been one of the Guruji's first Western students,' said Lisa admiringly.

Shanti smiled in acquiescence and, with a dancer's poise, slowly unfurled her legs into an easy 180-degree stretch, keeping her back perfectly straight. She flexed her ankles and toes and came to rest with a small tinkle of the hand-carved bells on her antique ankle chains.

Greg, a pale-faced, skinny man with a thin ponytail and a goatee plaited with yellow thread, watched appreciatively. He cleared his throat. 'My father spent some time in India back then – actually it was even earlier – sixty-eight, I think. He was on a rescue mission to bring home my *chillum*-soaked aunt. She'd been hanging out with the Beatles in Rishikesh at Maharishi Mahesh Yogi's ashram. I went to stay with her when she got back home to Woodstock, I wanted her to teach me how to fly over people's heads like the Maharishi but she said I was too young so she taught me some yoga instead. That experience really rocked my world. I was on my path. Yogaaahhh,' he breathed, spreading his palms wide as if to embrace the world. He smiled beatifically, especially at Shanti.

Lisa bubbled enthusiastically, 'I love that we all came to yoga at such a young age. I was given *The Yoga Sutras of Patanjali* when I was thirteen by my older sister. I remember reading it in our summerhouse in Gotland. It was a real turning point for me – a spiritual epiphany. They say that we choose the family that we are born into. It seems,' she beamed, 'that we all chose well.'

Greg and Shanti smiled in agreement. My smile was a little weaker. My favourite reading material at thirteen was *Jackie* magazine; when the

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Beatles and Greg's aunt had discovered Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, my father had been working his arse off to buy us a colour telly; I'd worked in advertising all of my adult life, and the only spiritual epiphany I had ever experienced had been at the bottom of a bottle of Pinot Grigio. I quickly changed the subject – was Shanti a yoga teacher? I thought it likely.

Shanti's diamond nose stud glinted in the fading light. 'Oh yeah, of course. I've been a teacher for eight years. I started by helping my mom with her students. Now I teach privately all over Manhattan, and in Brooklyn, where I live. I have twenty regular students and a website – you can buy my first DVD on it. It's a great flow, I think you'd love it. I'm not pushing it too hard – it's kinda organic. I'm letting it grow naturally.' She fished around in her large mirrored bag and pulled out some business cards. 'Here, take one each – it has my website address. Let me know what y'all think of the DVD.'

We thanked her profusely, admiring the thin creamy cards on which *Lakshmi*, goddess of wealth and prosperity, was depicted in a pink sari and golden headdress, standing in a lotus flower, gold coins pouring forth from one of her four hands.

Greg hurried to give us his business cards, which carried a golden embossed OM, and to tell us that he was studying with Guruji, was also a yoga teacher back home and lived in Brooklyn too, just like Shanti. He described his work as a *Raso Vai* massage therapist with mounting excitement: 'I walk up and down the body, using hot oil to bring energy flow and harmony to the joints. It's an amazing spiritual experience. I invite bliss, love and higher consciousness to pour through me to you,' he said, his gaze fixed on the clear object of his affection.

Shanti smiled and, with her legs still at 180 degrees, lazily stretched her body out so that her torso lay completely flat to the floor, her face resting comfortably in her hands.

'Have you ever slipped?' I asked.

He gave me a stern look. 'I may be heavy with the weight of my spiritual duty, Lucy, but I'm pretty light on my feet, plus I use a rope to

steady myself.’ He got up. ‘I’ve gotta get my beauty sleep – I’m on my mat at five tomorrow morning and I’m hoping Guruji is going to give me some help with my drop backs.’ He gave Shanti one more longing look and loped off into the night.

Shanti slowly raised herself off the floor and languidly rotated her body, bending over one of her outstretched legs so that her head touched her ankle. She raised her head just a couple of inches to tell us that she was starting tomorrow morning at six o’clock. This would be a lie-in as she normally got up at four every day, except Sundays and moon days. She wrapped her hands around her foot and slowly returned her head to her ankle.

Lisa loved getting up early, too. ‘My five a.m. practice is so right for me. It’s such a *sattvic*, pure, harmonious time of day – my mind is clear and my body feels amazing afterwards, so serene.’

I decided not to mention that I was hoping to be on my mat no earlier than nine in the morning but I did have to make one confession: that I wasn’t studying with Guruji.

Shanti raised her head from her ankle and stared at me. There was silence.

Sensing that this gap in the conversation was about to turn itself into a yawning chasm, I rushed to explain myself. ‘It’s just that I did a workshop with Guruji in London and he called me a “bad lady”. I had a collapsing crocodile, you know, the press-up position.’

‘*Chaturanga dandasana*,’ corrected Shanti.

‘Then he tried to get me into that balancing position involving standing on one leg and taking hold of the big toe of the other foot.’

‘*Utthita hasta padangusthasana*,’ said Shanti, helpfully.

Explaining that I’d lost my balance and nearly toppled him and had therefore thought it best to start my studies in India with someone else, I quickly moved on to describe the six-week course that I had signed up for with Mr Venkatesh. ‘He is the author of his own system of yoga – “*Atma Vikasa*” – it means “evolution of the soul”,’ I added proudly.

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'Ah Venkatesh – the so-called “Rubber Yogi”.' Lisa looked down at my crossed legs (the shawl had slipped off) with a doubtful expression. For the third time in half an hour I smiled weakly. Somehow I'd lost my appetite.