

# He stands in front of me enlightened

by Claire Leona Apps

Or so he tells me. The air is thick with irony; while his tone suggests a union of my lips and his penis. “Have you heard of a Chakra?” the enlightened one asks with a laugh.

I have.

I’m a nonbeliever. Spinning orbs by my heart, throat, and lonely sex seem too poetic to exist. Swallowing in lieu of speech, I quickly escape. Carefully, my tiptoes maneuver around the muted colored mats in search of a refuge.

The open-aired Shala is full of ladies with a bristle I associate with survivors. The windows to the men’s souls are either vacant or mischievous. One steals attention by leaping into a handstand. With a whoop, he returns to his unnecessary feet. A bro whimpers, then barks, then whimpers again. His round eyes are distracted by the curve of a beauty’s back.

“Go to your mat.”

I do.

“I hope you’re ready for this”

I am.

“You’ll have to learn to breathe.”

I know.

“And meditate”

I hope.

“And learn about yoking of mind, body, and spirit. So you too, maybe, can become enlightened like me.”

There is a fury of flying Lycra as everyone disrobes down to side boobs and happy trails. Being a practiced practitioner, I’ve accepted unveiled love handles and the occasional freed nipple. If nipples could speak, they would say: “Remove me from these antimicrobial wireless cups so that I may nourish the world!”

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Baaaa. My eyes meet those of an atrophied elderly lady on the adjacent mat. She blinks; her eyes are unusually far apart. I force a smile. Finding the nakedness of socializing challenging, I press my forehead onto the mat. My reptilian heredity allows me faith that stillness equals invisibility.

*My teacher back home would demand I dedicate my movements to a guru who brought me into the light. Everyone has a guru because everyone was born from a womb.*

The Enlightened chose the mat configuration that ensures everyone an unobstructed view of him. Across this pulpit, I watch the bro remove his cap embroidered with an L mixing into an A. His tongue flaps out of his mouth before he energetically puts his cap right back on.

BAM! A majestic orange flicks in front of me. The Enlightened glows with his long grin.

“Stand on your mat, feet together, thighs together, stomach in.”

He punctuates, “Clench. Your. Anus,” as his icy stare drills through me, and the class begins.

I’ve repetitively returned to spaces like this throughout adulthood. Desperately attempting to ease the hammering behind my eyes, third or otherwise.

Peck: you are failing.

Peck: even at meditating.

Peck: it doesn’t matter, in a way, nothing matters.

Peck: but therefore, everything matters.

Peck: breathe in, warrior two.

Peck: breathe out, reverse warrior, keep your front leg at a ninety-degree angle.

Down to the ground, in one breath.

Breathe in.

Breathe out.

I’m here for when the pecking stops.

Suddenly, a paw is on each of my shoulders. My head remains tilted down, eyes locked on his enlightened toes. A confident pressure is applied. Touch does not have to be sexual. Touch can be practical. Touch is always intimate.

Breathe in.

Breathe out.

I wonder if he'll touch me again.

I abandon my eye line, my Drishti; never a good sign. Beyond my fingertips, I watch him speak in hush tones to his favorite pet. Their familiarity quivers the room in envy. Bam, Bro's tail hits the floor. Bam, Bro's ears perk with dedication. His coat and teeth look clean. He's not too fat and not too thin. The enlightened looks after his pet.

Breathe in.

*My teacher back home always reminded us that it's a dedication, not a prayer. This is not about you.*

Breathe out.

Backbends are bliss. My hands press the ground as my navel drifts upward. Enlightened paws suddenly grip my torso. With a flip of his wrist, I rise and trip onto his bare chest. He steadies me. The wind from the open-air Shala does nothing to lower our temperature.

"You drop back?"

Yes.

"Control it. Press your thighs against my leg."

Questioning why I blindly trust in particular situations, I fall backward. Three of my fingers scrape the floor, not long enough to hold my own weight. His claws don't shy away from my curves. Flip. I'm up, stumbling again. My clavicle brushes his fuzzy torso. Although my view is over his shoulder, I sense a smile. The wind from the open-air Shala gives me goosebumps.

Locking my bandhas, I squeeze my vagina shut as I exhale to find the floor. An enlightened thigh thrusts between my legs.

Breathe in. Flip. This time, I do not fall onto him. Our bodies float two inches apart. Only his claws remain; they hungrily penetrate deeper. His tail sweeps the floor collecting spices and dead bugs. This time he does not smile. Is it because I didn't fail?

Breathe in.

Breathe out.

He's somewhere else, and I'm in the most complicated variation of side plank.

Peck: you want to impress the room.

Peck: you want to impress him.

Peck: you want to feel his enlightened claws guide you back into his arms.

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Touch is not always sexual.

Touch can be practical.

Touch is always intimate.

*In my early teens, I wrote a story and asked my older brother for feedback. Halfway through, a couple fought. The husband slammed his fist on the table as they do in tween novellas. 'I need you' the wife pleaded. My brother had circled these words in red, advising that as a female creative, I have a responsibility to never have a woman tell a man 'she needs him.'*

*The Enlightened Fox has no sisters. He has a brother, a son, and an estranged baby mama who swears his name into pillows under tropical sunsets. Her followers are informed she is destined to wander in lust or wanderlust; I'm never sure of the distinction. My online stalking before signing up to this retreat revealed that everyone associated with the Enlightened Fox gathers in Venice, California, between stints in Asia. There they utilize the medium of still photography to hawk goods to strangers. The prism that I view influencers through is red. Pain creates judgment, judgment creates anger, and anger will stop me from purchasing your mushroom coffee. It looks gross.*

Breathe in.

Breathe out.

Placing a block under my sacrum, I cross my legs.

“Make sure your back is straight to let the prana pass through your line of Sushumna.” I know what’s coming. The Sushumna Nadi—a line of energy that potentially runs up my spine—is only mentioned before mantra chanting.

The lambs, puppies, and monkeys all compete at LAMing, and VAMing and RAMing the loudest.

“New girl.”

Yes.

“I cannot hear your LAM. La La La La.” His mouth is enormous as he flicks his tongue with every La. “There’s a blockage in your anus chakra.”

*My teacher back home calls in 'base.'*

The wind is now my friend, helping me nest. The smell of turmeric fills my nostrils. My senses delight at being somewhere new.

Off in the distance, I hear tuk-tuks charging and coconuts cracking. Suddenly, the room erupts in chatter.

*My teacher back home would not allow this. “Mauna—quiet in the shala,” he would shout while winking at me.*

I open my eyes to the beautiful sashaying animals. Hiding my anti-social temperament, I roll my mat with intensity. Sneaking a peek, I locate him leaning by the door. His fans patter around, trying to lick him. Look! The bro puppy has found a female puppy! She’s wrapped ear to paw with straight-out-of-Bali tie-dye. They both hold their front legs at ninety degrees, keeping their pads accessible for high fives. Oh, how positive and energetic their sex is going to be.

Something taps my toe. An elderly woman in a sun-beaten saree is sweeping with coconut sticks tied into a broom. Her untouchable back has spent too long bent over.

She picks up some Venice Californian snot paper. No, this cannot be. I immediately assist.

*My teacher back home would say Shaucha: purity, cleanliness, and clearness. Keep your Shala clean.*

A block hits the ground behind me. Startled, I turn to see my neighborhood lamb, precariously holding five blocks between her hooves. I pick up the one she dropped. The three of us continue to tidy in silence. As the sun sets, we creep away: three untouchable females that only just belong.

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I ground each toe into the teal pattern tiles. Earth is my element. My feathers fluff, enjoying the shock of cold.

The lamb stayed by my side throughout dinner. She spoke even less than I did. Feedings complete, everyone retired to hammocks to pretend they could play the ukulele. After one too many conversations about crystal healing, I’m starting to conclude that Venetian Californians are fond of neither science nor asking questions. In fact, the only one I was asked was where I was going.

To fetch a scarf from my room.

“You can borrow mine!”

No. Thanks.

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“If you change your mind. It’s right here.”

They recommenced barking to out of tune strumming.

I now stand draped in a silk weave of sapphire blue that matches and clashes with the paisley tiles. The blackness through the window is foreign to me. City life is well lit to imply everything is necessary. Nothing exists outside this dark: no Bay of Bengal, no Himalayas, nor the Thar Desert.

*A few years ago, I met a Thai yoga massage therapist that told me to meditate on the earth. He also tried to engage me in a threesome with a six-foot-tall Australian nurse, Willow. I knew my boyfriend then would never have pardoned such exploration, so I declined. Willow responded by hitting me over the head with a didgeridoo and swimming naked in the ocean. Both acts were glorious. As I stared out to sea watching Australian Willow bob in the waves, the Thai yoga massage therapist explained how the elements are mine: the earth, the wind, the fire, the boogie, and the wonderland.*

My room consists mainly of a Jacuzzi sized bathtub. The kind of bathtub only a colonial prick would demand. The brass faucets require all my strength to move. Finally, with a thundering noise, the water forces free, disturbing birds outside my window. “Dumb human,” they squawk as they fly away.

My dry throat is eyeing the yellowish water filling the tub. There’s a fountain at the bottom of the marble stairs. Just swoop down and fetch some purified water and stop being paranoid and overly sensitive.

*My ex-boyfriend would repeat such things to me. His laugh hurt. With an abrupt stop, he’d ask: how could he possibly respect me.*

I hop around gathering empty bottles. In my hunt, I find my holiday book. It’s a semi-erotic feminist thriller, which I can’t wait to consume after years of not reading. It’s hard for shadows to find the time. If I did, I was jealous of all these women that had agency. These strong females lived in a world of green opulence. I place it by my bath. Bare-footed, gambling silence against spider bites, I descend the stairs.

Between me and the fountain, there’s a doorway. I can hear the Enlightened’s voice. He’s quoting from the Vedas with bits of the Upanishads, and Bhagavad Gita threw in for good measure. Peeking around the corner, I see him cross-legged on a chair, higher than the rest.

On his right is Bro puppy, who is drooling. The female puppy tries to listen while scooting her sacrum on the rug. Most of the lambs are wrapped in fabric screen-printed with Hindu gods. One monkey has his palms together and is successfully not masturbating. Another stunning monkey is strumming that appalling ukulele while swaying to the words of his leader. I wish I had Jell-O to throw at them—orgy already, goddammit.

I open my scarf and soar across the threshold.

“New girl”

Yes.

“Sit with us.”

I shake my head, busying myself refilling bottles.

“It would be good for you to hear what I have to say.”

This bottle is one-third full.

“The West doesn’t focus on what’s important about the practice. What makes us content.”

*Sometimes my ex-boyfriend would pin me down. While he was inside me, he’d state that I was terrible at being a woman.*

Flicking his tail, he’s next to me. I want to snatch it and rub the fur on my cheek. He leans on the wall, invading my eye-line. His muscles are visible through the thin fabric of his tapered vest. The beautiful creatures from the West Coast of Los Angeles peer at us. His right claws lift. His right claws wrap. His right claws dig into my shoulder.

The flood of emotion is overwhelming: I need him.

Enough. I’ve yoked and meditated and gone through cognitive behavioral therapy. I have no evidence that I need him; I only met him a few hours ago. I have no proof that he’s a nice person; I might have some for the contrary.

I flash the fox a smile and a sapphire flutter before skipping back to my nest above. Just before I swoop inside, something wags in the shadows. It’s the puppies! They must have used my distraction to ditch the group and are now sniffing each other’s butts while circles of smoke dance around. Bro puppy raises his cap to lash at an itchy spot behind his left ear. Girl puppy studies a spider ascending the wall. Her tail enthusiastically bams on the floor. Turning his spliff around, Bro puppy offers it to me. How tempting. But the last thing I need after coming out of a long-term relationship is a pet. I don’t have the

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infrastructure to create a happy home. Slipping away, I decline with an appreciative nod.

The bath is now complete. There's fluttering outside my black window. My bird friends have returned to be quiet with me. The warm water engulfs my anus chakra. I dunk my head under; water is now my element. Reemerging, I study the ornate stucco above.

*Think of your guru. It's not a prayer.*

*I must forget everything he said. He said: I pretend to be strong. He said: no one wants a little girl. He said: I deserved nothing. How many times that second bottle of wine would create a towering presence, dismantling and crippling, as I would disappear into corners of the room, into the corners of myself.*

I wipe away the salty water coating my cheeks. How long have I been crying?

Knock.

My head cocks. The light casting through the base of the door is partially blocked by a set of even placed hind legs. Please be my lamb. It's not. Females prefer an unequal division of weight. Constantly swaying from limb to limb for the enjoyment of our hipbones. He is stationary. A flicker of orange darts across the opening.

Knock. Breathe in.

My body freezes, fingertips clench. The doorknob turns. Did I not lock it? The keys are easy to find; a copy hangs on a hook above an unmanned desk. I try to disappear into the corner of the bath. The sound of wood gliding across my paisley tiles echoes through my room. Stay still—you can be invisible. I inch my head until I see the reflection in the mirror above the washbasin. His steely blues glare down at my naked body. I have only a semi-erotic feminist thriller as protection. I want to scream. He is not allowed to come and consume me just because he is an opportunistic feeder. The key to my mind, body, and spirit should be far away from his enlightened paws.

Before words learn to exit my mouth, his tail gloriously arches as he backs away. He bends out of sight and then shuts the door. He left the Bhagavad Gita for me. And I am left untouched prey.

\* \* \*



We settle into child's pose as a secure gait enters the Shala.

"One must be willing to surrender."

Breathe.

"Stretch your arms in front, open your palms up to the universe...."

Dedicate your practice.

"Yoginis think they know everything."

He laughs, "we were all stupid once."

My blood boils as I struggle to activate my Ujjayi breath and awaken my kundalini. Come to me primal energy, help me fly. Instead, I remain a sack of hollow bones.

*Foxes pounce on their targeted prey. They use their hind legs to leap up, join the earth's magnetic field, and land on top, trapping their victims with great force.*

In head-to-knee pose, Parsvottanasana, my hamstring, attempts to stretch. At sunrise, my muscles are as cold as my mind. I feel his paws touch my back. He pushes one inch. It feels different. He pushes two inches. I feel unsafe. My muscles seize, attempting to create a barrier against his intentions. He pushes three inches. Please don't pin me down. Please be non-violent, Ahimsic. He slams my torso until the creases in my neck reach my knee. My shoulder blades buckle, trying to explain to his biceps they must stop.

My pain is audible. One. Two. Three explosions echo through the open-air Shala. Buckling, the ground finds me before my mind catches up. He darts off and lets me fail. My talons scrape the earth for support as pain shoots up the back of my leg. Everyone else is vinyasaing around, churning dust of spices and dead bugs. Through my tears, I see the puppy, standing on his puddled mat, ears perked, eyes large and tilted as if he was drawn by Disney himself, looking at me. Nervously rotating his cap between his paws, the L and the A beneath his calloused thumbs. He's a good boy.

Two monkeys raise into handstands. What a slap in the face. But monkeys can be little buggers. Enlightened Fox takes the opportunity to whisper sweet nothings to his pet. Bro puppy nods and becomes a warrior. As he moves, I catch a glimpse of sad slanted Disney eyes under his cap. It's not your fault, puppy; even Hitler had a dog.

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“Remember, you need to keep your chakras in line, or you’ll injure yourself,” he says. “If you don’t have enough breath to stay up with the class, go to child’s pose.” His golden tail hits me in the face as I move my useless limb under my body and lower my head in defeat. I smell the country, the turmeric and sweat, the incense and mangos, the social system, and tropical flowers. Now, I compose a new mantra. Pressing into this ancient earth, I whisper: I will not remain still.

Breathe in.

Breathe out.

Paws scratched at my door all day, wondering where I was. While I sat and listened to the birds outside my window cooing for revenge. Finally, everyone heads to their pens, evening spliffs stubbed out, and tight bras yanked over ears. And the Enlightened Fox lays naked above his sheets.

I reach through my sapphire blue and turn the doorknob. It opens. Did he forget to lock his door? He chose the room with no air-conditioning. The moist fur on his chest forms a line running from Adam’s apple to cock. He doesn’t notice my uneven gait limping towards him.

The moonlight casts over his naked body, the Vedas and the Upanishads. He doesn’t have the Bhagavad Gita because he gave it to me. Almost by his side, something is below my foot: a set of Mala beads. With a deep breath, my fingers undulate over their roundness. Wrapping it twice around my neck. This will be my trophy, my lucky fox foot.

From beneath my silk span, I pull out a blade. My lips form into a beak and coo: Himsic, Himsa, Harm.

*After morning practice, I struggled to the nearest shop. My request was met with calm.*

*I want that one, the one with the wooden handle.*

*I waited as they scraped it against a piece of leather hide. The irony had not escaped me: I will use a blade sharpened on the back of a dead animal against a vegan. As I waited, a delightful child appeared. She twirled once before asking if I was a friend of Beyoncé’s.*

*No.*

*“You should be. She’s a great woman.”*

*The child serenaded me with the sweetest version of 'Single Ladies' as her bright pavadai daavani bounced around. When the blade was sharp, she pressed a bindi between my eyes.*

*Thank you!*

*Her father disapproved, nodding from left to right. Unprepared to lose my third eye, I grabbed my knife and faded away.*

\* \* \*

Placing the blade atilt upon his tail, the knife pulls against the grain. The hair surrenders, clumping upon the metal. I rub it on my limp thigh, watching the orange fur fall to the earth.

*You stay still. You keep the Shala clean. You are untouchable.*

*Breathe out.*

I return the blade to the tip of his tail. As his hair rolls into balls, years of emotional abuse evaporate.

*You don't know my yoga, my meditation.*

*The blade reaches his anus.*

*My teacher back home called it base.*

*His tip quivers. His appendage is more awake than his mind.*

*You are not Ahimsic. You hurt me.*

*My teacher back home told me to practice for a guru.*

*Dedicate my movements: to him. He would undress, his steely eyes upon me. My teacher back home held his cock in front of my face, expecting a union with my lips. My teacher back home pinned me down, while inside of me, he snarled, "you're horrible at being a woman."*

The blade's at the base of his enlightened tail. I press it into his flesh. But he is not my teacher back home.

I look around at the discarded underwear from the companies who sponsor him to just be. He's a messy little fox. All he wants is some attention in a world oversaturated with yoga teachers. He wants smiley faces with heart-shaped eyes and fifty-two thousand people to scroll past his thoughts on sequence formations. He is destined to wander in lust or wanderlust. How fast I judged him from my non-enlightened pedestal.

I stroke the blade a final time against my limp leg. Did he enter my room because he heard my tears? Did he think I needed him? Too bad he didn't have a little sister. Even the pain he inflicted could have

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been an accident. Touch can be a mistake. I decide to leave a gift: a semi-erotic feminist thriller. Have a read of my spiritual text.

The birds start chirping as the sun reminds us of its power. My sapphire blue, third eye, and beaded neck descend the marble staircase. By the entrance is my lamb with her hooves on either side of the threshold. As my bare feet hit the grass, I whisper to her: “The only one you need is you.”

The wind is now my element. Lifting my arms into the world outside of the Shala, I twirl my sapphire wings. I lift one, two, three feet off the ground. Soaring upwards in a tornado of breath, I spot the puppies playing on the lawn. Bro puppy notices my ascension, and his tail jumps alive, wagging with the kindness of a conscious male.

Tucking my legs beneath me, I rise to the tree canopy. I explore my wings’ width they both match and clash with the teal of the morning sky. With every flap, this bird understands flight. With every spin, this bird abandons anger. As I soar upwards, I decide to reach a height where I need me. I will dedicate this movement to me.

It’s my prayer.

Breathe in.

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CLAIRE LEONA APPS: Raised in Hong Kong and educated at the London Film School, British-Canadian award-winning writer/director Claire Leona Apps's debut feature *And Then I Was French*, released in 2018, is a psychological thriller compared by critics to Andrea Arnold and David Lynch. Apps is known for her cross-cultural perspective and for using dark comedy to challenge ideas about society as we know it.

Previous writing and directing credits include *Gweipo*, *Girl Blue Running Shoe*, *Ruminant* and *Ages of Man*. Her work has been screened on the BBC, shown at The Great North Museum and premiered at prestigious festivals such as St. Louis International Film Festival, Cork Film Festival, East End Film Festival, Florida Film Festival and North East International Film Festival. Her most recent script *Her Country Too*

Claire Leona Apps

was a Film Fatales Fellowship Finalist and rewarded a scholarship for Stowe Story Labs 2023. She is a BAFTA LA newcomer and has worked with outstanding actors such as Francesca Annis, Olivia Poulet, Joanna Vanderham and Rebecca Hall.

Claire is currently working on her original fiction Audible podcast, *Aqua Tofana*, a family crime drama with fairy tale charm to be released in 2024. In her spare time, Claire runs the Soho House Women Writers' Salon at Holloway House.