

# SHORT FICTION/ESSAYS

## Kundalini

***Anna Smith***

"Sound is welcome," the teacher said. And people sure took him up on it. There were moans, groans, deep sighs, even grunts. Julie was in yoga class. It seemed no one was holding back except for her.

It was mid-May and the world was warming. Yoga met during the evening, as the sky turned pink. That was one more thing that made the class difficult. Only five years ago she had wondered why she was always in a relationship, most of them terrible; was she afraid of being alone? Now she worked as an assistant archivist in the town library, and while lying on the moss green carpet with sweating, groaning, moaning, and occasionally farting yoga practitioners, she felt she was truly an old maid. This class was her attempt to change that.

It hadn't been five straight years of celibacy. There was that six-month lapse when she was living in Arkansas and sleeping with a man named Fred. She was in library school. He had grown up in Mississippi. They met in a bar. After making love they would lie in bed, and he would tell her stories about people who had gone wild from desire and jealousy and who spied on their ex-lovers through windows at night. People were always in danger of going off the deep end; in Arkansas it happened frequently. Not in a neat, therapeutic way, but in the way of hurling bricks through windows.

The relationship was supposed to have been a fling. But instead it was like a trick boomerang that you fling away from you and then wait and wait for its return, until it goes further and further out into space, taking you with it, as if an invisible cord is pulling you from the solar plexus into another universe. In this universe men went home with barmaids, fought with girlfriends--those same girlfriends who threw bricks through their boyfriends' windows. These men went on five-day fishing trips alone. Hurricanes blew in from the Delta. Every apartment had cockroaches. Tarantulas ran fast across the highways. Julie was in another universe, and the scary part was that instead of wanting out of it, she wondered how she had ever lived anywhere else.

One night in May, Fred came back sunburned after one of these fishing trips. They made up and made love and then went to a pig roast at a little house on the side of a mountain. People were outside drinking whiskey out of canning jars. Julie had lost weight, not on purpose, but as a result of having followed this crazy

boomerang into outer space. She had been sucked into a vortex of crazy sex, a narrowing tunnel with no light at the end--the tunnel of the aborted fling. At this party people were getting drunk. The sun had gone behind the mountain, and there were fireflies flashing on the other side of the horseshoe pit. Julie looked around and thought, I've got to get out of here. Two days later she and Fred had a fight in a parking lot. Around midnight that night she hurled a brick through his window. They took it as an omen and broke up. She moved to New England, which had less cockroaches, no tarantulas except pet ones, and a lot of very important dead people in the graveyards.

Around this time she developed an interest in meditation. She began going to a meeting of Christian Buddhists; they gathered Saturday mornings in the Unitarian Church. The group studied the five Buddhist precepts--no lying, no stealing, no killing, no intoxication, no sexual misconduct. Everyone got a little confused at the one forbidding sexual misconduct. After much discussion no one was completely sure what sexual misconduct was, but Julie felt a degree of certainty that it included relationships that ended in bricks flying through windows.

She got a job at the local library and proceeded to go off the deep end. Not in the Arkansas way, but in the orderly, New England, expensive therapy way. She wore a lot of black and never dated. When after three years of no sex she felt *really* crazy, she took comfort in the fact that at least she had donated her body to science--she would be the one to prove that too much celibacy could actually kill you.

Now in yoga class the neat edges of her going off the deep end were becoming frayed. "Uh!" The guy next to her grunted. Julie felt herself try to shrink so that his moans wouldn't touch her. It was as if his moans were sending out a vibratory code that could reach deep inside her and wake up the sex creature. She tried to leave the creature sleeping peacefully because she didn't want it to wake up and start attacking people. She got the idea of this creature from a picture in the shoe room at the yoga center. The picture was of a human figure sitting in meditation with a large snake in its pelvis. The snake was beginning to uncurl and weave its way up the spine. She'd heard from her yoga teacher how the kundalini, depicted as the snake in the poster, can rise up through the energy centers resulting in enlightenment. But sometimes it can awaken too soon and cause people to go crazy.

Julie didn't think the moaning and groaning in this class was necessarily taking her further toward enlightenment, but instead irritating the snake and making it roll around and twitch a bit. The moaning was waking up the part of her that also got awakened by lingerie in the shop windows downtown, even the words

“oral sex,” and the Rolling Stones. She didn’t want to hear people moaning and groaning and sounding like they were in an orgy, especially if they really weren’t and there weren’t even any one-on-one options on the pink horizon.

A blonde woman in spandex on the floor next to her let out a particularly deep moan during the forward bend. Julie hated the forward bend and had made the mistake of letting the teacher, Tom, know this during her first class. He had said, with excitement in his voice, that the postures people hate are the ones they most need to do in order to grow. Julie found this logic unsettling and possibly sadistic, but wanted to keep an open mind. She was that desperate to give up her old maidish life.

The torture of the forward bend soon drew to a close. Tom asked everyone to get on their hands and knees in the table position. If Julie had been fighting off thoughts of an orgy during the moaning and groaning, now in the table position, orgy was the predominant thought. Tom had everyone move from the table into the frog, a posture where the knees are spread wide apart on the floor and the feet are pointing out to the sides like frog legs. The hips move slowly backwards causing an excruciating and delicious stretch of the inner thighs. Tom said that the frog opened up the groin and the first and second chakras.

After class, Tom approached Julie. “How are you doing?”

Julie sometimes thought Tom’s yoga training involved training in mind reading. She felt as if he already knew too much about her by seeing her postures. This was unnerving; her usual reserve seemed useless now. She figured he already knew, so she blurted out, “I’m frustrated as hell.”

He nodded sympathetically, as if to say, I know you are.

Julie pulled on her jumper, put on her glasses, and left. It was still bright at 7:00 p.m. The church bells were ringing in the hour. As she left the yoga studio she came face to face with a man going in. He was a few inches taller than she and thin, with very short brown hair. It looked like his head had been shaved and his hair was now growing out. He had a neat beard and dark eyes. He looked the way Christ would have if he had been a Zen Buddhist. He and Julie locked eyes for a moment. She felt confused; she waited for him to speak. Then she realized he was waiting for her to step out of the way so he could go up the stairs. She obliged. He walked past her saying, “Excuse me.”

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The next week he was in class. The class was all female except for Tom, the moaning man with black socks, and now this new man that Julie couldn’t stop

staring at. The groaning man groaned deeply from his soul; the women let out milder moans and deep sighs; Tom set his grunting example; the Zen-Christ guy never uttered a sound.

For some reason that evening Tom decided to give a more difficult class than usual. He had the class remain for what seemed like an eon in a posture called the fire hydrant. It started from the table position and then involved raising one leg to the side, still bent at the knee, so that the thigh was parallel to the carpet--like a dog peeing on a fire hydrant. What little bit of ego one had left after the physical torture of holding this position was further ground down by the humiliation of, in public, adopting the posture of a peeing dog. Julie supposed this ego-grinding was the point of yoga. It made little difference that the other people in class were also peeing dogs.

Next Tom told everyone to find a partner. He explained in his soothing tones that today the class would learn the headstand. The partner would act as a spotter.

Julie immediately thought of a trust walk she had gone on with a Christian group when she was in high school. On the night of a full moon she had been blindfolded, led down a mountain path, then gone behind the thick, cool veil of a waterfall. She knew by its sound it was a waterfall, but wasn't sure how big it was. Finally the blindfolds were removed. The waterfall was huge enough to be terrifying. Her partner was a boy she had barely known but liked. She knew he played guitar. At the moment when he took off the blindfold Julie felt a merging of fear and bliss--the shock of the moon, the water roaring like a falling fire. She thought of that boy for the rest of the weekend, though they never talked.

As if he were reading her mind, Tom suggested that Julie be partners with the Christ guy. His name was Ian.

Julie let Ian go first. He gave her a look that was almost apologetic and then, without hesitation, went into a perfect headstand. Julie commended him. The rest of the class was still struggling to get up. Tom had them practice a preliminary stance, the crow. A few more went upside down. Ian remained up. Tom came over and said, "That's terrific. Great, Ian."

This entire time Julie was noticing Ian's body. He had nice ankles and calves. She tried not to examine him too closely or imagine any other particulars of his anatomy in this topsy-turvy state.

Finally Tom said it was time to switch. For several seconds Julie felt as if she could get down on her hands and knees and actually stand on her head before this man. He had made it look so easy.

"Don't worry," he said. "I've got you." His voice was quiet and surprisingly intimate. Julie felt exposed. She felt as if she were a young virgin in one of the pornographic romance novels she had read all during junior high and high school and then some of college.

"Do you want us to help you?" Tom was speaking. He was on her left, Ian on her right.

This class was no romance. She was standing on the moss green carpet of the yoga center in her white nylon socks, between two men who were offering to help her stand on her head. Tom was now saying to the class, "Don't be surprised if this posture brings up a lot of fear. The fear of falling is innate, primeval. The headstand involves tremendous surrender. We have to let go of control, while staying strong. Not easy."

"I think I'll wait on this one," Julie said, and left the room.

She went into the restroom and cried. She couldn't even do a headstand with two spotters. It seemed impossible. She felt as if she were doomed to watch other people live life--touching in restaurants, standing on their heads--never joining in herself. It was May. Outside birds were singing, couples in loose summer clothes strolled on Main Street. Time was passing and she couldn't even stand on her head.

As she was putting on her shoes, Ian walked up. He asked if she wanted to go have a bite to eat.

They walked onto the street and suddenly she was part of one of the couples on Main Street. Ian wanted to go to the Japanese restaurant for sushi. That was the first sign of trouble. Julie had managed to avoid this Japanese restaurant after a time there years ago when she had been sick with the flu. It hadn't been a good encounter. Now with Ian she wanted to go to the Indian restaurant down the block where she went at least once a week by herself. Indian restaurants were her favorites. Not just for the fattening, oily entrees, but also the glittering elephant murals, the buxom ladies feeding freely at nearby tables, the shy waiters in their bright white shirts and black pants.

On the other hand, this Japanese restaurant made Julie feel queasy and fat. Immediately, there was the sound of the knife whacking her dinner, wielded by the angry looking sushi bartender behind the sushi bar. She felt too big for the small tables. The other patrons seemed healthy and thin, as if they were all Zen monks or Tai Chi instructors.

The bartender sliced a large arm of squid as Ian and Julie took their seats. A waiter approached and recognized Ian. Julie confessed she knew nothing much about sushi except for the time she had been sick.

"I'll order for us if you'd like," he said. A The California roll is safe. As well as the futomaki."

"Safe?"

"Well, I don't eat any meat at all and very little fish." He paused and then asked, "What about you?"

Julie hesitated. "I eat everything." There was a silence after that so she felt she should say more. "I guess it's because of my upbringing." That statement didn't seem to help so Julie picked up her menu and studied it.

"Wonderful," Ian said finally. "Maybe you'll break me out of some of my rigidity."

But when the waiter came Ian ordered the purely vegetarian rolls. Julie didn't mind. She had no desire to begin a new life of adventure with raw fish.

She ate carefully, wiping her sticky fingers between bites. Soon the conversation moved back to the subject of rigidity. Ian said he hadn't always been so careful, that in his youth he was quite wild. He'd grown up in Hawaii where he'd liked to surf in thunderstorms and stay up all night smoking and drinking. Now he did Shiatsu. For the last fifteen years he'd practiced meditation. He lived for several years in a Zen monastery in Japan.

"I knew it!" Julie said. Then, realizing she might've spoken a little too quickly added, "I mean I would've guessed that if I'd thought about it."

Ian smiled and said, "I hope I don't seem like a monk."

"No, of course not." But Julie could see his monkishness as soon as she spoke.

He asked her if she had a spiritual practice, aside from yoga. She told him she was interested in Buddhism, but didn't know that much about it. She told him about the group of Christian Buddhists. "I guess I'm in a state of religious flux."

He seemed pleased to know she was any kind of Buddhist, even a hybrid.

At this point in the conversation Ian leaned back and loudly slapped his stomach as if he'd just eaten a much heftier meal and were a much larger, more macho man instead of the wirey type he was. Julie tried not to think too much about this incongruity. Instead she suggested they walk to the town common.

She began to feel a little more comfortable with him. Her nervousness was becoming more of an enjoyable excitement. She began wondering if this night was enough of a date to justify kissing. She knew if they could ever get to the first kiss they would be home free, and all his sushi-eating restraint would fall away.

It was twilight. Cars had their headlights on. They walked past some high school girls smoking clove cigarettes. At the town common Ian flopped down on

the ground in what Julie hoped was an inviting gesture. She carefully sat beside him.

Ian lay on his back and tried to see stars beyond the glow of the streetlights. Julie remained seated next to him, then finally lowered herself onto her side. Their faces were about a foot apart. They talked about yoga class. Julie confessed to not liking Tom's philosophy that sound is welcome. "It's terrible. All those people moaning and groaning. Especially that guy in the black socks."

"Paul." Ian said. "Paul's a great guy. I know him from contact improv. He groaned a lot there, too."

Tom had told her contact improv was a form of dance where people touch each other and improvise. The seductive posters around town advertised it blatantly with just one word, "contact," and the date. He had recommended it to her, telling her it would help her "immeasurably." She could only imagine how.

Ian went on, "I don't mean to sound like I'm anti-groaning. Groaning is fine in the right circumstances."

Julie smiled uncomfortably. She wondered if he was flirting. Even if he was, she didn't like the thought of him making the slightest connection between the groans in yoga and her fantasies.

Julie gave Ian a ride the few blocks to his house. She put the car in neutral and pulled on the emergency brake. He sat looking at her for a few seconds. She thought, Maybe the emergency brake was too obvious.

He spoke. "So thanks for the evening. Let's get together again." He made a motion as if he was going to open the car door, but slowly enough so that if she made a motion to prevent him he could still be stopped. At least that's what she thought was happening. She was almost sure he was hesitating. She didn't want to reach out and take his hand because she wasn't sure she was reading his signals correctly. She thought her signals were clear enough after the loud crank of the emergency brake.

His hand finally made it to the door handle. She spoke, "I don't have your number. And you don't have mine."

"I'm in the book. Call any time." He didn't ask for her number.

When she got home Fred called from Arkansas. "How's it going?" He sounded drunk.

"I just got home from an almost date."

"You mean you didn't kiss?" Fred liked to get right to the point.

"No, but we might have if I'd put more effort into it."

"Effort." He had a way of shattering an illusion with just one word.

"I was shy."

"Well, why didn't the guy put any effort into it?"

"Maybe he's very cautious. People don't rush into these things like they used to."

There was a pause. Julie knew he was thinking of how their relationship began; it had not been cautious.

"We were in Arkansas," Julie said, as if that explained all deviations from common sense, morality, and civilization. She felt sad, knowing she would never again feel immune to the laws of karma. "So you think he's not interested."

"All I know is if people want to kiss it doesn't usually take a lot of effort. At least that's my memory of those things."

That made Julie curious. "What happened to that woman you were seeing?"

"Oh, we started irritating each other."

There was no need to say more.

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Before the next yoga class, the sky was gray and the air heavy with a coming storm. Earlier, while Julie had been window shopping, people in stores were snappish. Store clerks looked longingly toward their front doors as if waiting for a delivery. A man on the radio said it was the barometric pressure squashing down on people's heads, making them edgy.

As Julie entered the shoe room, Tom and Ian were in the middle of an energetic discussion about the role of catharsis in mind-body healing. Tom was a strong proponent of it. He felt our repression of tears, groans, wails, and shouts was physically debilitating.

Ian wasn't opposed to what he called "the spontaneous expression of genuine feeling," but felt the provocation of catharsis was useless and could actually cause harm. "All that crying and raging--it depletes us. It weakens the immune system. That's our chi we're crying away."

Julie had spent the entire day drinking coffee and searching through piles of yellowed documents for important bits of town history to then be sandwiched between sheets of acid-free paper and filed in acid-free folders. There had not been a single document on the role of catharsis of any kind, for any reason. She wondered, If I scream now would it be considered provoked or spontaneous?

After the preliminary spine twists and fire hydrants, as well as the mountain, the tree, the frog, and the cobra, Tom again had everyone find a partner. This time Julie's partner was the tall blonde woman in the lycra shorts. Her name was Heather. Tom had them sit facing each other with their legs spread and feet



meeting while holding hands. One would lean backward and pull the other forward, stretching the forward partner's inner thighs. Heather was very stretched out and had tremendously long legs. Julie needed to put her feet on Heather's ankles. When leaning forward Julie felt as if her guts were going to spring forth onto the moss green carpet. When it was Heather's turn to stretch, Julie had to lean so far back that she was finally lying flat.

And then, as if the situation wasn't bad enough, Tom began one of his warm, rambling talks on motivation. How we didn't have correct motivation if we compared ourselves to others. "Some of us are tall, some short. Some fat, some thin. But there's no one way to do yoga. One person may form a beautiful looking posture, but it's completely meaningless if nothing's happening inside. That's the real point of yoga. What can we learn about ourselves?"

At this point, to Julie's surprise, Heather looked up and glared at Tom, as if she had thought he was talking right to her, the same way Julie had thought his pep talk had been aimed at herself. Still lying on her back, Julie wondered how many other people in the class were thinking Tom was speaking to them when he went into his wandering sermons. A tug from Heather pulled her back to the moment. She struggled to an upright position just in time to see Ian tugging Paul forward. Paul had on one black sock and one navy blue one.

After class Ian asked her if she wanted to go for a walk. They walked around the neighborhood in the strange evening light. They seemed to be getting along much better this time. She felt more comfortable, less terrified of saying something too revealing.

They finally ended up back where she'd left her car on Main Street. Now there were a few claps of thunder and flashes of lightning. The wind was blowing hard. She'd been watching him as they walked, thinking how attractive he was, how much she hoped they would sleep together. She liked the way he kept surprising her; he seemed so sober, but actually his mind--like his body--had a lot of flexibility.

Without thinking she said, "Would you like to come over?" He looked shocked. Julie thought, Oh shit.

Eventually he recovered and spoke. "I don't know if that's such a good idea. It's not that I don't want to, but I think we might have different, um, ideas about our relationship."

At this point Julie thought he was going to elaborate, but he didn't. She wasn't about to volunteer her idea first. "What do you mean?"

He took her hand and then let go of it; he began explaining how he was trying to live differently now. He had always been swept into relationships, but

never felt he actually chose them. "I've got to start taking the precepts seriously. I don't feel like I even know what sexual misconduct really means. But if the Buddha were here now I doubt he'd encourage us to rush into anything. We hardly know each other."

Julie felt awful; she told him she had never asked him to sleep with her. But as she spoke she knew this was almost a lie. She wished he hadn't dragged the Buddha into it. She had to confess. "It's not that I haven't thought about it, but it's not all I want. I'd be glad to just sit beside you on the couch." She noticed how pathetic that sounded.

She knew she didn't want to just sit beside him on the couch. She saw the Buddha smiling as if to say, I know how your mind works. He was sitting on the couch between them, the perfect chaperone.

Ian spoke, "Let's get to know each other first."

And because Julie was so crazy about him and the way he could stand on his head, she agreed. She felt it was only a matter of time. She felt almost capable of patience. In her mind, the Buddha smiled.

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Julie had to miss a week of yoga because of a leak in the Special Collections file room--an archival emergency. When she returned, Ian wasn't there. After a few weeks it seemed he'd quit coming. Julie thought of calling him, but didn't have the nerve. She watched the phone at night and tried to think of reasons to call, something she could say that wouldn't scare him, but could think of nothing. She had dreams where they were starting to make love, but there was always some interruption, some tear in the fabric of her dream.

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Julie went to Tom's for his annual fourth of July party. It had been a boiling day. The men were in shorts and the women in light summer dresses. Everyone was barefoot in the house except for Paul who had on brown socks with a hole in one toe. There was reggae on the stereo and a baseball game on TV. On a yoga mat in the corner of the living room two people were doing some form of massage on a third.

Tom approached, seeming to know that she felt shy. He offered to give her a tour of the house. There was a large cage in the den. "Mickey's cage. My ex-wife got a python shortly before our separation." He explained, "She was dealing with a

lot of first chakra and kundalini issues. By the time she'd finished, she moved out. I got stuck with the cage. She said she'd come back for it, but never did."

Julie didn't know what to say after all that. She had never even known he had been married. For some reason she fixated on the snake. "You mean--she lives with a snake and no cage?"

Tom, looking devilish, said, "Well, she might be coming with her boyfriend tonight. You can see for yourself."

And then with the image of a human snake still in her mind, Ian walked in with Heather. There was no mistaking their relationship. Apparently he could get to know some people more swiftly than others.

As Tom again tried to explain the cage, Julie left the room. She spent the rest of the party on the porch swing reading *People* magazine.

At 10:00 o'clock Ian came onto the porch and sat down beside her. She turned a page. He looked at her apologetically. "So how have you been, Julie?"

She watched the moths circling the yellow porch light.

He tried again. "Have you been going to yoga?"

"Yes." She didn't know what else to say.

"Julie, I guess I need to say to you, I learned a lot about myself through our interaction. It was a turning point for me. I owe you a lot." Then, as if he knew he wasn't helping the situation, he added uncomfortably, "I hope it was a positive experience for you."

She gave him a look that said, Are you crazy?

He paused, as if he had to think about it. "What's different now is that I don't always do what women want me to anymore."

She spoke, "You can at least tell them when you're not interested. You don't have to mislead people."

"I didn't think I was misleading you. I thought I was letting you know I wasn't interested, at least not how you were. My instincts told me that a relationship with you would be--complicated."

"But you didn't seem uninterested. You said you were being cautious. I thought you were monkish. I was being patient."

He sat on the porch in front of her and looked for a minute as if he were trying to decide something. Then he told her that when they had gone out he had still been somewhat involved with his old girlfriend; he really had been trying to stay out of other relationships at that time. He made this sound like something virtuous on his part.

Julie couldn't think of anything to say. She wanted to go home and watch TV.

Heather came onto the porch and after giving Julie a hello and goodnight, left with Ian.

Then Tom and Paul came out. They talked nonstop as Tom moved some sprinklers on the lawn. They were in the middle of a discussion about UFO abduction. Julie had never talked to Paul before, but maybe because of having been in yoga class with him for several months now, he related to her as an old friend. He seemed genuinely interested in her opinion. Did she really think these people were being abducted? Had she ever seen a UFO? He personally had never seen one, but had a deep longing to meet aliens and sometimes drove his car out into the countryside at night wishing for an encounter. He'd been to a convention of UFO fans. "They're fascinating," he said. "I guarantee you you'd have a good time." It sounded like an invitation; Julie wondered.

They watched the end of a fireworks display over the treetops. She asked Tom how long he had been married and Paul if he had any white socks.

At eleven o'clock the three of them went inside to watch *Star Trek*. Like a cosmic joke, it was the episode where Spock has sex for the first time in seven years.

At midnight Tom drove them into the country to look for spaceships. Paul was happy to have companions on a trip he had made so many times alone. "You won't be sorry," he said. He added, "It's a special person who wants to meet aliens."

There was no way to deny the truth of that. Julie rolled down her window and looked up. She knew that if they got far enough away from town and kept looking upward, she would recognize the sky again, the same night sky that hangs over Arkansas.