

ALICE WILLIAMS

# BAD YOGI

A woman in a blue tank top and leggings is performing a yoga pose, specifically a Warrior II variation, with her right leg forward and her left leg extended back. She is holding a large, pink-frosted donut with colorful sprinkles in her right hand, which is raised high above her head. The donut is positioned in front of the letter 'O' in the word 'YOGI'.

The **funniest**  
self-help  
**memoir** you'll  
ever **read**



'Funny, aching, honest and true. This book is so damn good.' KATE HOLDEN



Published by Affirm Press in 2019

28 Thistlethwaite Street, South Melbourne, VIC 3205

[www.affirmpress.com.au](http://www.affirmpress.com.au)

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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Title: Bad Yogi / Alice Williams, author

ISBN: 9781925712605 (paperback)



A catalogue record for this book is available from the National Library of Australia

Cover design by Design by Committee

Typeset by J&M Typesetting

Proudly printed in Australia by Griffin Press



The paper this book is printed on is certified against the Forest Stewardship Council® Standards. Griffin Press holds FSC chain of custody certification SGS-COC-005088. FSC promotes environmentally responsible, socially beneficial and economically viable management of the world's forests.



Alice Williams is an author, freelance writer and yoga teacher. At nineteen years old she dropped out of university and lived in a Buddhist monastery in Nepal where she learned that even complete buttheads just want to be happy, so we should probably try and be nice to each other. Who knew? When Alice returned from Nepal, she finished her degree and worked low-level office and hospitality jobs to support her writing. Her first book, *Would it kill you to say please?*, was published in 2007. She celebrated this milestone by having a quarter-life crisis and becoming a yoga teacher. Alice lives in Melbourne with her partner and two young children.

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## Operation New Calling

Last year's New Year's Resolutions:

1. Sever ties with call centre industry. Get dream job.
2. Lose five kilos (not from face).
3. Write Great Australian ~~Novel~~ Short Story Collection.
4. Get in touch with old friends once achieved first three.
5. Move out of asbestos-riddled, carbon monoxide-trapping hovel then get married in way that totally reinvents institution/shows we are not stuffy.
6. Write 'think about having children' on next year's list.

This Year's Resolutions:

1. Get out of bed before eleven. Shower. Don't become 'person of concern'.
2. Find meaning/purpose so I can get through week. Or just today.
3. Find job where I don't have to talk to anyone.
4. Learn how to talk to people.
5. Start last year's list.



Halfway through my session with Esther, I hear myself blurt, 'Sometimes when I get to an intersection on my bike I think, *I could just keep going.*'

Esther makes a 'that's not good' face, which is oddly enlightening.

It's *not* good, is it, letting yourself coast into traffic? I'd hardly call it suicidal, but it's certainly a lackadaisical approach to living.

We start to chat about ways I might firm up my survival instinct.

'The problem is that I don't actually know what's wrong, so I don't know how to fix it,' I say. 'I get out of bed, shower, visit dad, apply for jobs and stare at the computer. But inside I feel like a highly functioning zombie. I don't know what I'm doing here. As in here – on earth.'

'What if you start from there?' she replies. 'Just accept that right now you're in the "I don't know" space. And that that's actually a perfectly legitimate space to be?'

The *I don't know* space. That's the best she can come up with? Sounds like a room in some left-leaning university for arts students to escape law students' oppressive certainty. Serves me right for Googling 'Buddhist counsellors'. But the gift of being ready to scratch yourself to death in bed on Christmas night is that you become open to new ideas very quickly.

'So I'm in the *I don't know* space. Then what?'

'When you're in the *I don't know* space, what you need is *more information*. Look around, investigate, see what you like. But give yourself permission to get it wrong.'

At the end of the session Esther suggests I start seeing her once a week, 'just for a little while'. I think she means 'until you don't have out-of-body experiences when you watch yourself ride in front of a car or take a knife out of a drawer'.

'I don't think I have enough material for once a week,' I say. Esther doesn't seem to think that will be a problem.



The first thing is to stay calm. I may be in the middle of the *I don't know* space vortex, but (what did she say?) all I need is *more information*. And, for god's sake, I need to put some pants on that don't have elasticised ankles.

I pack my bag with stolen notebooks and post-its (plus a label maker that somehow made its way from a casting agent's desk and into my bag) and head out to the bakery-cafe around the corner for a business meeting with myself.

**Monday 9.45am:** I order a coffee and a chocolate-iced jam doughnut (this is serious business, I need reinforcement), grab a window seat, crack open a notebook and ask myself what I want to do with my life. Mmm, good doughnut. What if what I want to do with my life is eat doughnuts and stare out the window? Okay, focus. This is exciting. I am a blank canvas! New year, new me!

But where do I start? (With another doughnut. Thought burns calories, and thinking about your future burns them at twice the speed.) Last time I asked these kinds of questions I was a nineteen-year-old university dropout living in the monastery in Nepal. (I still think a few months in a developing country should be mandatory for wayward youth, like military service. Something about seeing shoeless children with matted hair running up to strange cars and asking for a pen makes you think that if you were lucky enough to be born qualifying for an Australian passport, you should get off your parents' couch, figure out where your talents lie and use them. Unfortunately this sort of trip now comes with labels like 'poverty tourism' and is seen as something young white people do to better themselves. Which it totally is, but young white people are lazy fuckers who need to be better.)

Back then I believed I wanted to be a writer and yoga teacher – *clearly* the wrong path if the last few weeks are anything to go by.

Old goals = gone. Blank canvas. Next?

The Script Coordinator at the TV show took acting classes after work. Well, I do like showing off. And would enjoy being loved by the masses. Isn't that basically what acting's all about? Crapping on and getting claps? And free stuff?

‘Take action,’ is what Esther said. ‘Pick a direction and start walking.’

**10am:** How do you act? Amber said her classes revolved around a scene study. I scull my coffee, Hoover my doughnut crumbs and race home.

**10.17am:** I download the *Aliens* screenplay and print off the scene where Ripley lets rip on a government flunky. I close the windows just in case the chefs in the laneway over the fence are listening, stride to my mark at the coffee table and prepare to address the couch and my sleeping cat, Ginger.

‘These people are dead, Burke!’ I squawk. Ginger startles. ‘I’m gonna make sure they nail you right to the wall for this! Right to the wall!’

Ginger bolts and I break character by laughing nervously. What if Ginger is an incarnation of a former human, currently trapped in a feline prison and laughing at me?

‘No’ to acting.

**10.37am:** I always thought I’d be good at psychology – I love diagnosing my own neuroses, and love diagnosing others’ neuroses even more. Economically viable *and* fun.

**10.39am:** Ring Kate to tell her about my new career. ‘Isn’t your dad a psychologist? Didn’t he tell you once never to do it?’ He did. One day I was prattling on about something when out of the blue he said, ‘Never be a psychologist. You’d be really bad at it.’ What a bastard. I must bring that story to my next session with Esther – it’s top-shelf material.

**10.45am:** What did I enjoy as a child? Dancing. Wildly. And taking my pants off for visitors.

**10.46am:** Dance break. I see my reflection in the television and frankly, am blown away.

Look up dance careers.

**10.48am:** Suffice to say if you haven't been in a tutu since age four, your professional dancing options are limited to spirit fingers in second-hand car advertisements, or 'Lap dance for \$60, no touching'.

**11pm:** Little break to Google 'free student massages'. (Technically, I'm suicidal. Don't I deserve small pleasures?)

**11.15pm:** Hmm ... The training centre offering student massages clicks me through to a course guide for a diploma in yoga teaching. Enrolments close Friday and the final information session is on Thursday. The course is for classical yoga: no bells and whistles, just units on everything from yoga philosophy, pranayama, something called 'yogic physiology', Western anatomy, meditation etc. It looks thorough, old-school and boring.

**11.30pm:** I think my brain has an extra voice. My normal thinking voice says, *You can't do that. You can't do wheel pose and you think fisherman's pants are for wankers.* This new voice says things like, *Remember how much you wanted to teach?*

I did. Passionately. And suddenly I can't recall a good reason why I gave it up. Surely I had one. Maybe this is what Esther meant: pick a direction.

Time to step out of the *I don't know* space and get some more information.

**11.45am:** Back to the cafe. New subject; new notebook. Also, frosted banana cake. When you're on a roll, don't stop the flow. But the woman at the bakery counter remembers me from earlier. 'Wish I had your metabolism,' she says, and I blush. I know she means it

as a compliment – if you’re a skinny girl with a big appetite, people look at you like you’re Jesus. But something about my eating makes me feel ashamed and secretive, though I don’t know why. Lately I haven’t been able to skip meals like I used to either, and if I get fat, people will know I do this.

**11.46am:** Which kind of yoga to teach? For the past five years all I’ve done is ‘try to ignore the Pump class next door gym yoga’, but apparently there are 600 styles. I narrow it down to four main categories:

1. Iyengar
2. Bikram (plus the many Hot Yoga variations)
3. Ashtanga (including its cousins Power/Vinyasa etc.)
4. Classical (the kind being taught at the training centre)

I should probably try them all before deciding whether to do their teacher training – due diligence. I will need my stretchiest shorts, a yoga companion (when Gil gets home from work I’ll let him know he’s to be the co-pilot on my voyage of discovery) and ... an open mind.

**6.15pm:** ~~Yoga companion~~

**6.30pm:** For the first time in five years I set foot in a proper, real-life yoga studio. I tiptoe into the studio, more nervous than my first time because this time I know what I’m in for. Straps hang off walls like chains in a dungeon. No gym bunnies in sight, just a bunch of hard-core fifty-year-olds in tattered shorts strapping themselves into postures I last saw in a book about the Spanish Inquisition.

And there behind a desk, is my old teacher, the pint-sized former Mossad agent. ‘Hello, Alice,’ Pamela says, the corners of her mouth lifting slightly. ‘Long time no see.’

Two hours later I am a bag of pummelled muscle. Somehow I manage to ride my bike home and literally slither from the front

door to the couch. Ginger jumps on my lap but I can't even lift my arms to pat him. Gil wants to watch *Cosmos* and I can barely muster the strength to demand *Snog, Marry, Avoid*.

Iyengar yoga was my first kiss, and it has a lovely way of weeding out the yoga try-hards from the serious yoga dogs who've got shit to sort through (like me!). But ...

Iyengar was  
**Y**oga's fun police. He stood on students' backs and they  
 all looked  
**E**xtrremely constipated. I'm  
**N**ot sure I could I instruct people to 'squeeze the outer  
 skin of your  
**G**luteus!' without laughing.  
**A**lthough Iyengar's focus on alignment is awesome, it's  
 also  
**R**eally hardcore and I'm just not that kind of badass.

Also, you have to practise Iyengar exclusively for **THREE YEARS** before you're allowed to begin the introductory level of teacher training.

1. **Iyengar** (Though I'll keep going to Pamela's class – it's so good, in a masochistic kind of way.)
2. Bikram
3. Ashtanga
4. Classical

**Tuesday 11.30am:**

**Bikram Haiku**

Bikram yoga room so  
 Hot. Roasting hipsters sweat  
 Out crap. So holy!

Devotees intense  
Teacher barks instructions from  
Bikram's script, same-same

Torture heat – don't spew!  
Crimson thighs like frankfurters  
What fresh hell is this?

Class ends, cool air sweet  
What, what's this? Endorphin high –  
Holmes this is the shit!

'Hydrate babe!' Teacher  
Up-sells me drink. Kombucha  
Tastes like lukewarm pee

To teacher train would  
Cost twelve grand for just two weeks.  
Smart money or scam?

Googling, it's sadly  
No. 'Cos Bikram is a  
Rapey lunatic

**Wednesday 5pm:**

1. Iyengar
2. Bikram
3. Ashtanga
4. Classical

Ashtanga is the ultra-fast, vigorous, jumping-in-and-out-of-postures style of yoga whose streaks-of-sinew devotees (Gwyneth,

Madonna, various Naomis) are what people mean when they talk about ‘yoga body’.

I did try a beginner’s Ashtanga class many years ago and all I remember is how much I wanted to cry (hurt cry, not epiphany cry) after every session. I opt instead for Ashtanga-Lite: Power Yoga.

A new studio, part of a chain, has opened up near the university and the first thing I notice about the Live Free studio is that it’s bright! One wall is covered in graffiti-style peace signs, Hindu goddesses that look like MTV babes and inspiring slogans like *No limits, surrender your fears!* Racks of bright yoga tights line the walls and a potted fern almost glows with vitality. And the whole place smells *clean*, if clean is a smell – unlike Pamela’s Iyengar studio above the food co-op, which smells like samosas and tears.

*So far so McYoga Glossy*, I sniff. A scented candle next to the register subtly masks the smell of non-spiritual commerce, and ambient music pipes through invisible speakers. The trudge through the heat has made me tired, but a gentle breeze through the open window blows droplets of water from the nearby fern onto my skin, cooling me instantly. Well, now that I’m here, I may as well stay for one class.

As I slip my shoes amongst the Birkenstocks in the rack, I notice a tall, tanned glamazon twirling on a chair behind the desk, sun shining through her hair. She looks like one of the models on the cover of *Yoga Journal*. Where do they keep the ugly people? Are they ugly-exclusionary?

‘Heeeey girl!’ she calls. ‘First time at Live Free, honey-bun?’

I swivel to see who is coming up the stairs, but there is no one. The glamazon is talking to me! Her name is Suki and I want to be her friend; I want to be *her*. And if I do the training here, maybe I could be?

The class itself is like yoga summer camp. If the staid precision of Iyengar yoga is like the Catholic nun of the yoga world, power yoga is the hootin’, hollerin’ revivalist church. Power yoga is more like a

traditional workout – you work up a sweat while moving quickly in and out of a sequence of postures, often to music. Is yoga allowed to be that much fun? There is swearing! There is a warrior sequence to Katy Perry! (‘Warri-ooors, I wanna hear you roooooaarr!’ yells Suki.) There are crazy poses that I can’t do, but I don’t mind because right when we’re straining so hard we think we’ll die, Suki comes around and tickles our ribs (‘It’s playtime *all the time* at Live Free!’) and we fall about laughing! Pamela would *never* tickle our ribs!

Even though the class feels like it’s on fast-forward and my back goes into spasm when we do a standing twisting balance, I am pumped. Where has this studio been all my life? Pamela is so *slow*, and even though we do hard poses we have to do them *mindfully*. Here you dance in and out of them so fast you don’t have to notice anything if you don’t want to.

At the peak of the John Lennon ‘Imagine’ remix, Suki lets out a whoop and says, ‘Imagine how good your yoga butt is gonna look on Instagram!’ and everyone laughs and for some reason I’m reminded of the TV show’s story room, but I feel so good *I don’t care*. That was the old, cynical me. Live Free, *I don’t know* space me is positive!

Savasana is accompanied by a cover of Steve Winwood’s ‘Higher Love’ that leaves me so inexplicably emotional I have to keep my eyes squeezed shut during our final group ‘Om’ so no one can see my tears. Endorphins *and* cathartic tears – it’s the total yoga package.

After class, as I spritz my mat with organic tea-tree disinfectant, I weigh up the pros and cons. Pro, the whole thing was incredibly aspirational. Or do I mean inspirational? Whatever, I definitely aspire to be as yoga-tastic as my classmates and Suki. Why not? It’s a healthy pursuit! And unlike in Pamela’s class, the tattoos here are fresh and more ‘tribal’ than ‘prison’.

The only downer was at the start of the class when we had to ‘create community and groove with our tribe’, which involved introducing ourselves to the person next to us and telling them one

fabulous thing about our day. I introduced myself to the woman beside me. She wore a yoga-kini with a white horseshoe symbol on it and looked like she had a really clean liver. Just as I was about to lie about my fabulous day, she flicked me a closed-mouth smile and asked if I could move my mat a few inches away so she had room for her car keys and mobile phone next to her mat. For the rest of the class she did the hardest version of each pose, and it was all I could do to keep up with her.

Curiously, I noticed that without exception all the other students' clothes bore the same white horseshoe logo as my neighbour. Even Suki had it. Perhaps it's the studio logo? Something they give you when you sign up?

Now that the class is over, I ask Suki if it's the studio logo and she laughs so hard she has to put down her mason jar of green juice.

'Nooooo, girl, it's *Lululemon*! They're the most amaaaazing yoga brand from Canada. Everything they do is all ethical-focused and they're one hundred per cent into empowering women to *be awesome*.'

Well, I am sold! I think what I love most about Live Free is that their ethos seems to be 'It's okay to be beautiful and amazing and buy things that reflect that because you're worth it!'

Suki tells me about their teacher-training program and the Six Pillars of a Live Free teacher (I currently embody none, but I think with a change in attitude and shorts I could be on my way). As we're talking, students start filing in for the next class. A shirtless man runs up to Suki and lifts her off the ground.

'Heeeeeey, baby!' she bellows and swats him in the six-pack. 'Come to get your groove on?'

Others file in behind him, all chatting happily and high-fiving Suki. It reminds me of the one time I took ecstasy, but without the three-day comedown. I brush off the feeling of being lobotomised with feel-good clichés. Who cares if it's cheesy when you feel this good? I want to join their tribe!

Google tells me there's a Lululemon factory outlet near the old brothel where Kate used to work. I know I'm unemployed, but if I'm going to join their tribe, I need to look the part.

Inside the outlet the walls are lined with images of thin women with long, flowing hair and round, peachy bottoms in complex yoga postures. Okay, so the beauty myth hasn't spared yoga, but, I remind myself, they're one hundred per cent ethical and have great 'brand values' according to Suki. So I will support their mission to empower women, and hopefully they will give me a round, peachy bottom in return.

A bronzed twig bounces over and offers to 'hook me up'. I think a couple of pairs of tights and some shorts will be plenty if I'm practising every day. Then I see the price. Even with a factory discount a single pair of leggings still cost almost a week's rent. But that's the thing about being a yoga teacher, isn't it? You have to live ethically, which means paying more for clothes that were hand-stitched by unionised Canadians getting a decent wage and free on-site childcare.

On the way home I flick through the Live Free teacher-training program brochure. Hundreds of lithe yoga babes line up in rows in Balinese hacienda, studying units on Stepping into Greatness. Old me would have sneered at such a phrase. New me has tasted of the Power Yoga endorphins and wants more. Yes, I want to step into greatness! Or at least just step into normal functioning. Can I call off the search now?

1. Iyengar
2. Bikram
3. Ashtanga Power Yoga ✓✓✓✓✓
4. Classical yoga

Sigh. Esther's *more information* edict means due diligence. I will go to the information night for the classical yoga teacher training course, if only to rule it out.

**Thursday 6pm:**

The training centre is in a narrow city laneway that specialises in boutiques showcasing the work of cutting-edge fashion graduates who don't believe in armholes. I've dragged Kate along for a second opinion. At the entrance to the building a busker playing Django Reinhardt harasses us with aggressive gypsy music.

We take the lift up to the fourth floor and follow the signs to an enormous double classroom. The building overlooks a laneway packed with restaurants, and the huge windows have a clear view into some upstairs bars across the laneway and tiny apartments in the building opposite. The classroom itself looks directly into someone's kitchen. On the downside, I may miss half the yoga instructions because I'll be too busy watching someone cook spaghetti in their underpants, but on the plus side, if there's a *Rear Window*-style murder, I'll be a great witness.

There are massage tables stacked against one wall and Yoga bolsters against the other. The vibe is more grungy and functional than the 'Fluoro white with a dash of fern' aesthetic of the Live Free studio.

Aside from me, there are two other last-minute prospective teaching sign-ups. The first looks like a Fleetwood Mac groupie, with an aqua crew-cut, floaty dress and some kind of pagan squiggle in the middle of her forehead.

'Hiiiiiiiiiii, I'm Jo-Jo,' she croons. 'Are you two gorgeous ladies going to join our sangha?'

One glance at Kate's face tells me she's disappeared to her happy place, so I nod for both of us and pull up some bolsters. On the other side of the circle is Jo-Jo's polar opposite. Mid-thirties, she wears a blazer that I just saw in the boutique downstairs for \$750. In contrast to Jo-Jo's aqua crew-cut, her 'sun-faded' balayage die job looks so natural it must have cost a bomb. The only things that I can relate to are the white knuckles gripping her Goldman Sachs water bottle.

An older man of indeterminate age (grey hair, but looks

deceptively sprightly) strolls in and introduces himself as Graeme, the course coordinator. He rah-rah's about the course (it's classified full-time, not because we'll be sitting in class forty hours a week, but because we're expected to put in an ordinate number of practice hours). Since I'm ninety per cent sure the endorphin-pumping 'make me like Suki' course is for me, I tune out somewhere between 'syllabus' and 'core competencies' and focus my attention on mentally pricing the cost of Goldman Sachs' whole outfit (\$3,500, if you include the watch and hair).

'It used to be that you found a guru and trained with him – very patriarchal I'm afraid – for life,' says Graeme. 'But we believe each tradition has something to offer, which is why all seven of our teacher trainees come from different lineages.' Indeed, the teaching staff include pretty much all the main lineages, except Goat Yoga.

'What we're really here for tonight,' he continues, 'is to work out if *you're* ready to go on this journey.'

Kate pinches me under the table. If anyone says 'journey' within the first ten minutes I have to buy her a drink.

Graeme takes us on a 'short sprint' through the history of yoga, which begins with the first texts (as in, the first texts ever), the Vedas, which were 'mystical hymns' meant to be sung. Somewhere down the line a bunch of sages thought this might not be the most reliable way to pass on wisdom, and so they nailed down the nuts and bolts of the yoga teachings and compiled them into the Upanishads, which are really focused on getting to know the true self, or the '*Atman*'. 'Yoga has been much diluted over the centuries, which is a shame because the original texts tell us as much as about living well in the 21st-century as in the time, thousands of years ago, when they were written,' says Graeme.

One of the most famous sections of the Upanishads is the Bhagavad Gita, which is all about a great warrior who loses it on the eve of battle. As he looks out over the battlefield to survey the two armies (one of which he's meant to lead) he starts to get cold feet. In

steps his charioteer, Krishna, who also happens to be God in disguise (we've all had that wise taxi driver, amiright?) and the whole thing is a dialogue between the two of them, which is really a metaphor for defeating the crap aspects of our inner selves, uniting with our higher self, and basically getting out there and 'living your best life'.

I have to hand it to Graeme: the man is passionate about old-school yoga – the ancient kind, not the high-fiving, Lululemon, 'get your *groove* on, girlfriend!' kind.

'Anyone can qualify to be a yoga teacher these days,' Graeme goes on, 'but only those who submit themselves to the fires of initiation detailed in the first texts are truly yogis.'

Hold up. Is there a way to do this *without* putting yourself through the fires? Could I maybe get recognition of prior suffering and skip the fires? I think of bouncy, happy Suki and can't imagine her ever being broken by 'the fires of initiation'.

Graeme asks us to introduce ourselves and say why we want to be teachers.

Goldman Sachs Bohemian, real name Annabelle, begins: 'I started doing yoga at my gym in London, and now if I go a few days without a class I want to stab my boss in the head.' She gives an icy smile. 'I guess I want to share those benefits with other people.'

I say that I've been doing yoga religiously for ten years (skipping the five I haven't), have always wanted to be a yoga teacher (when I was twenty) and really want to help people. (By 'people', I mean 'myself'.)

Then it's Jo-Jo's turn.

'Where did I get my love of yoga?' she drawls. 'Oh my god, wheeerre do I staaaaarrt?' (Desperately hope she doesn't start with her previous incarnation.)

'I'll begin with my weekend, shall I? It was *juuuust magical*,' she coos. 'I scooted along to the Satyananda ashram in Daylesford for their annual women's retreat, and let me tell you, it was *goooooorgeous*. We rapped about life, and there was so much beautiful

goddess energy.’ She beams at me, which I take as an affront. Do I *look* like someone who believes in goddess energy?

‘The last night of the retreat coincided with the full moon, so *of course* we had a fire ceremony. We got the oils going, a bit of *massaaage* ... It was so organic the way it all came together.’

Graeme tries to interject but Jo-Jo talks over him. ‘Because it was just us goddesses we decided to liberate ourselves from our outer layers and just bathe in that beautiful Luna energy.’ Jo-Jo smiles at us each individually, and despite myself I eagerly smile back. Stop it! ‘And, that’s an energy I really want to bring in to my everyday life. You know?’

I know there’s no way that Goddess Energy isn’t harbouring a serious mental illness. (Not that I can talk, a month ago I was lying in bed trying to scratch myself to death.)

‘Well,’ Graeme says, smiling in turn at Goddess Energy, Homicidal Corporate Bohemian and me, Miss Ride Into Traffic. ‘You all seem like excellent candidates for yoga teachers.’

Afterwards, Kate and I huddle behind a dumpster in the laneway so she can light a cigarette. ‘Everyone I know is starting yoga,’ she grumbles as I shelter her lighter from the wind. ‘I thought you were different.’

‘I *am* different, Kate, I’m your cool friend, remember?’ Kate has been upset lately because all her other friends have started having babies and moving to the suburbs. (‘And Bunnings! They spend entire weekends roaming Bunnings and Ikea. As a destination.’)

I agree that it’s disgusting and will never happen to us. Kate takes one more puff and stubs out her cigarette. She looks at me through narrowed eyes.

‘You’re not seriously considering it, are you?’

‘Of course not,’ I say, peering up at the fourth-floor window.

**2am:** I just had a middle-of-the-night realisation: since Monday I have ticked off the first two of my New Year’s Resolutions without

even trying. (1. Get out of bed before eleven. Shower. 2. Find meaning/purpose.)



Mum picks me up to visit Dad. He's in hospital again, but just for a few days to get pumped full of steroids. She politely tries to suppress a coughing fit in the living room, which is something I've noticed people do a lot when they visit. Gil and I seem to be immune to the crumbling plaster.

'It's a *student house* and you're not a *student* anymore,' my mother says once we're in the car. But I think we were very clever hanging on to this house. Cheap rent because of hazards you can train yourself not to notice (carbon monoxide heater, rising damp, holes in wall). Prime inner city location, which means we can walk everywhere and don't need a car – and we're behind a mafia-owned restaurant strip, so if we ever decide to start a drug habit, we've only to order a large capricciosa 'no ham', and we're sorted.

On the way to the hospital, we get stuck behind a bus that has an ad on the back for a meal delivery service. I recognise the formerly fat actor Warthog from the show. *Do it for YOU*, is the tagline. *If not now – when?*

At the next set of traffic lights a portly fellow in activewear jogs up to the crossing. 'Oh look,' murmurs my mother. 'He's exercising. If-Not-Now-When?'

I fish into my bag for another protein bar. In order to lose five kilos I have been eating normally five days a week and protein bars the other two. Sometimes I mix it up with high-fat/no carb or carbs only till lunchtime. Lately I've been adding a cheat meal on Friday, but sometimes it's okay if that turns into a cheat meal once a day, as long as I follow it with a protein bar for dinner, plus laxatives and long runs. The only problem is, I've been using this approach for six months and I weigh *exactly the same*.

Sometime during the hospital visit my parents start to tag team

with the ever subtle ‘What are you doing with your life, going forward?’ line of questioning. Something tells me ‘yoga teaching!’ won’t get a good response, so I cram another protein bar into my mouth and say nothing.



I get home extremely irritable, and when Gil gives me a hug, I realise it’s all his fault and resolve to do something about it.

‘When are we getting married?’ I grumble romantically. (Getting married for something to do when I’m desperately unhappy seems like the worst idea, but ... what am I doing with my life, going forward?)

Gil pulls away from the hug and gives the sigh of the deeply weary.

‘The more you ask –’ he begins.

‘– the less likely it is to happen,’ I snap. ‘I know.’

‘Isn’t yoga supposed to make you ... I dunno, more *accepting*?’ he asks.

I ignore him and put on my new Lululemon, cost-a-week’s-rent yoga tights. I walk into the kitchen, Gil trailing behind me. I’m just bending down to get the cat food from the bottom of the fridge when Gil says, ‘Nice strawberry knickers.’ I scurry to the mirror and bend over. Sure enough my fancy tights are so transparent you can see the pips in the strawberries.

I check the label to see if I’ve washed them wrong; along with care instructions the label says *Made in Bangladesh*. I beg your expensive-cos-they’re-ethical pardon? What about the unionised Canadians? The on-site childcare?

I contrast the images I saw in the store – beautiful women meditating on rocky outcrops – with images from the news story on the factory fire that recently killed more than one hundred Bangladeshi garment workers, and the unforgettable image of a young Bangladeshi woman bent over a sewing machine while her

baby lies on a thin piece of fabric at her feet.

So much for empowering women.

Further Googling reveals that Lululemon has so far refused to publish the address of their suppliers so they can be externally audited. I also find an interview with Lululemon's CEO who says the tights are *not* transparent – it's just that some women's thighs are too fat to wear them. I think of Suki, the bronzed, taut yoga goddess waxing lyrical about their ethics. Is that one of the conditions of morphing into a yoga demigoddess? That you don't look too closely at anything that might raise inconvenient negative vibes?

I must face facts: I am never going to high-five my yoga-bros or bellow about taut yoga butts mid-class. I will never keep a straight face telling someone to live their best life or saying 'Whassup girlfriend!' to students I barely know. And most of all I will never wear branded yoga clothes in front of students who might get the idea that that's how you become a real yogi. If working on that bloody TV show taught me anything, it's that when I 'try to learn their ways and assimilate' it's not long before I want to scratch my own face off.

No matter how much I'd like to be a yoga glamazon, they are not my tribe. My tribe are povo buskers playing Django Reinhardt. My tribe are aqua crew-cut goddesses who smell like samosas. My tribe are neurotic corporate banshees with white knuckles on Goldman Sachs water bottles. My tribe are seven different lineages that all lead to the same destination.

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## **10 things I learned at the Advanced Diploma of Yoga Teaching Introduction Night:**

### **1. One of my teachers is an extra from *Godspell***

I burst into orientation late, red-faced and sweaty, to find twenty-five faces gazing at me serenely. I locked eyes with someone who looked like a centaur mated with a fortune teller, covered in tats

and piercings. What at first appeared to be half-goat legs were actually furry fisherman's pants (that's fisherman's pants covered in fur; presumably for keeping one's legs warm while poaching seals in central Melbourne).

The centaur beamed at my sweaty face – he had a disconcerting way of staring right into your soul without asking first (rude!). *Please, God, let him drop out at orientation.* ‘You must be Alice!’ he boomed, marking my name on a roll. ‘I’m Jorge. Welcome!’

Jesus wept. The centaur is in the faculty!

## 2. ‘Vibes’ are an acceptable qualification

Apparently what's most important about a person is their ‘energy’. The teachers took turns introducing each other. ‘When I think of Jorge ...’ the Pranayama teacher clapped as she introduced the centaur, ‘... the word that comes to mind is *sprite*. Jorge is one who *frolics*. A darling sprite of the cosmos.’ Did Jorge have any qualifications? Was he equipped to teach us? Did anyone care? Suddenly Iyengar's military-like yoga training didn't look so bad.

Jorge was the campest sprite I'd ever seen. He had a shaved head with a little patch of hair in a ponytail at the back (lame), six hundred earrings and a dozen Hindu tats on bulging biceps (has he never heard of cultural appropriation?).

Curiously, as the Pranayama teacher spoke I noticed something else. Vibes. Happy vibes? Despite the back-of-the-head soul patch, the starry fisherman's pants, despite all the things that say ‘*Warning: Byron Bay Mid-Life Crisis,*’ Jorge the forest sprite was genuinely buzzing.

## 3. I am at risk of diabetes

The sweetness and light were out of control as the mutual love between the teachers continued. Dina, the meditation teacher, had long, flowing hair, and her face was a bliss-filled moon. ‘What can I say about Susan?’ she said, her fingers tracing invisible ‘starlight’

patterns in the air. ‘Susan embodies the divine female energy of Shakti. She’s truly a goddess.’

What kind of sorcery is this? Who is this ‘Shakti’? And is becoming a goddess something that happens to all ladies who do yoga?

Graeme (married to Shakti Goddess Susan) made us do that thing where you pair off and interview each other, then introduce your partner to the group.

A short plump Greek woman called Marta introduced Annabelle. ‘Annabelle is just the most gorgeous woman I’ve ever met,’ she squealed. ‘I feel like I’ve known her all my life!’

Annabelle threw up her hands and blushed. ‘What can I say? She had me at *Namaste*.’

They hugged, *people clapped* and I tried not to throw up in my mouth.

Jo-Jo introduced a Grace Kelly-lookalike in a Camilla Franks silk playsuit. ‘Grace is *divine*,’ she cooed. ‘She’s *just* quit her job as a legal-aid lawyer to do this training, and her goal is to teach yoga to underprivileged children.’ Legal-Aid Grace Kelly smiled and looked into the middle distance. I pointed an imaginary laser gun at her forehead.

(I was paired off with a male nurse called Kevin, who looked as terrified by the love and light in the room as I did. ‘I might just go to the toilet,’ he said when I asked him about himself. He never returned.)

On the break I saw one of the skinny goddesses grab a curvy goddess’s arse: ‘Oh my god, your butt is so *juicy*!’ In my world, *juicy* means *fat*, but Juicy-Butt just laughed and mimed sitting on Skinny Goddess. I missed the sexist, abusive EP from the TV show. ‘The network says no more than two hippies per shot, and tell wardrobe to keep that fat one out of lycra!’

Although it was only orientation, Marta had already ascertained our birthdays from Graeme and not only printed out, but *laminated*

individual excel birthday charts for us all so we can coordinate cake-baking and purchase astrologically appropriate gifts.

**4. There are sixteen other teacher trainees. THEY ARE ALL GODDESSES (except Kevin)**

Along with Goddess Energy Jo-Jo and Corporate Boho Annabelle and Legal-Aid Grace Kelly, there's a social worker, a marketing manager, two vegan superwomen I'd happily slaughter, a grandmother, a scientist and the rest of them all seem to be council workers. Most have the eerie look of children who grew up without television.

I'm beginning to suspect I've made a grave mistake. (Also, there were no other buskers during the entire evening besides Django Reinhardt. He played for three hours.)

**5. Yoga teachers have creepy X-ray vision**

When yoga teachers smile, it feels like they're also looking three layers into your soul and possibly checking out your karma uninvited.

I could feel their eyes scanning my aura when I introduced myself. *Look away!* I thought, smiling back at them. *Stop staring at my chakras!*

**6. We are our own lab rats**

'In order to teach, you first have to experience,' said Dina. 'This is why you won't be getting any "teaching" instruction until the second half of the course. In the first half, you'll learn how to use the tools of yoga to strip back your layers and explore your own sheaths before you teach others to explore theirs. You're your own laboratory!'

**7. We will do unholy things with salty water**

The *shat karmas*, or 'yogic cleansing rituals' are the many and varied ways you can pour salt water into pretty much every orifice and

swoosh it back out again, along with stubborn snots, partially digested food, rusted-on faecal matter and other ‘toxins’. They include dipping a metre-long length of gauze in salt water, holding one end and *swallowing* the rest. You let it soak up all your tummy juice, and then you *pull* the gauze back up through your throat. (And presumably chuck it in the bin or sell it on e-bay.) Another involves pouring a teapot of salt water up one nostril and letting it pour out the other. (They didn’t have Kleenex when the Vedas were written?)

But my favourite one is where you sit naked in a shallow pool of salt water and suck the water up your bum then push it out again, along with any stubborn, tar-like ancient poos. Graeme was quick to point out that although we will be learning the techniques in class, we will have the option of practising and teaching them in our own time.

### **8. A nervous breakdown is a required course component**

‘Intense yoga study of the kind you’ll be required to do has a habit of turning your life upside down,’ said Shakti Goddess Susan. ‘You’re not just *learning* the philosophy and practices of yoga, you’re letting them *transform you*. And I should warn you,’ she said, (smiling at *me?*) ‘these yoga storms happen to *all* first-years.’

Since my life is pretty much in the toilet already, I figure this won’t be a problem. (And frankly, if someone’s ‘stuff comes up’ after a few stretches and an *Om*, they need medication) – wait, is someone sniffing? I looked around the room. Sure enough Annabelle was already sobbing quietly. The teachers beamed at her. What a suck.

### **9. Goddesses cry, frequently**

And when they do, other goddesses pat their backs and say, ‘Let it out, honey.’

### **10. I now report to ... Shakti**

We’ve each been assigned a mentor: someone to serve as a compass

in our Yoga Storms, who will help us apply the ancient Sutras to our modern lives and to whom we address our excuses when we need an assignment extension.

Using the sophisticated method of pulling names from a hat, I was matched with Susan, she who embodies the divine feminine energy of Shakti. ‘And I got the Iyengar intellectual!’ she cried, as if reading my mind. She crossed the room, eyes shining and, brushing aside my outstretched hand, swooped me up into a full-body hug.

I mentally ran through my options. Was it too late to sign up to Live Free? *You’ve already paid the first year in advance.* Dammit!

I tried not to struggle, but to surrender into the hug. Susan hugged me tighter, and I let myself go limp.



**‘Yoga glamazons are not my tribe. My tribe are aqua crew-cut goddesses who smell like samosas. My tribe are neurotic corporate banshees. My tribe are seven different lineages that all lead to the same destination ...’**

When Alice Williams gets ‘phased out’ of her dream job, all the demons she usually silences with food start to get too loud to ignore. Unemployed and depressed, she makes the ultimate middle-class, white-girl life change: she signs up to become a yoga teacher.

**BAD YOGI** is the ‘healing’ memoir for people who hate healing memoirs, a delightful peek at the life-changing truth that lies behind all the gurus and jargon.