



# Shrinking

by Kerri Devine

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## Shrinking

"Jess?" I call to the short blonde in black yoga clothes orbiting the room. "Jess? Help. I don't think I'm all the way in." I cannot see her through the blue silk shroud covering my body like an Egyptian mummy, but I know she is there. The drape is one of twelve such sheets suspended from pine beams running in a grid on the ceiling of the Agave Yoga Center. It's attached by a knot to a black nylon strap with the aid of a metal carabiner, the kind on water bottles and hiking equipment, only bigger. "Each hammock can hold 1,800 pounds," Jess calls out from somewhere behind me. That's about right, I say to myself.

I'm at a wellness retreat with Nathalie, an old friend from our days in DC. Her idea of a present to ourselves as we enter the new year, somewhere in the middle of our sixth decade. We landed at the airport and hopped the courtesy van for the hour-long ride to the resort.

I poo poo'd the groovy stuff in the online course catalog, but by the time we landed and had our first prickly pear iced tea, I was feeling adventurous. I signed up for Reflexology, Floating Meditation and Cardio Drumming.

We're in the Floating Meditation class. The idea is to experience the calming benefits of induced meditation while we are gently elevated above the floor in a hammock and rocked to the soothing vibrations of crystal bowls. We're meant to release our mind's

stress while we float weightlessly in the air. Only I weigh 180 pounds, and my ass isn't all the way back so I feel like I'm falling out of my hammock in the first row, through the picture window onto the cactus rimming the Santa Catalina mountains.

In a few minutes, Jess will help us connect to our seven energy centers, or Chakras, through a guided meditation.

I arrived in Arizona ambitious, feeling maybe this was my time to reclaim myself, to get healthy, to finally commit to losing those last few pounds.

In our mind's eye, we are always younger than we think. I can't believe it's been a dozen years since I found the tall redhead I wanted to be when I turned 40. I was in my bedroom flipping through the day's mail when I came across a page in a catalogue. I don't remember the company. It was a picture of a woman who was tall and lean. She had short chestnut hair, just the right thickness, with a whisper of red. In the picture, she was laughing and lithe, the perfect attitude and shape for the perfect wardrobe. She wore some sort of jodhpurs. Brown. Maybe a tan cashmere sweater or wrap. Or was it orange? She looked so comfortable, not just in her clothes, but in herself. This was what I wanted at 40. It would be my year. My decade.

Now I am turning 53. I have lost the same five pounds a dozen times, and in the intervening years, put on over a dozen more. Packing

## Shrinking

before my trip out west, I'm in the bathroom in my blue terrycloth sweatpants, the ones that came with a zippered jacket in a set everyone had to have a few years back but now appear flashy, like something the Real Housewives would pair with heavy gold jewelry and a designer handbag to brunch. My pants are faded, and sadly misshapen. The legs are somehow too short for me now, wide at the ankle where the fashion is to be skinny, low slung at the waist, unable to cover my muffin top no matter how much I try to pull them up. In a way, I am this pair of sweatpants—dated, trusty, a bit out of shape—and I'm on my way to Arizona with the woman in the mirror who's committing to make this year the year everything comes together for her, when she feels healthy, and can finally wear the size 8 dresses lining her closet that still have the tags.

I thought about those dresses when Nat called to suggest the trip. I thought about them at my annual check up, too, where my doctor talked to me about my weight and about the link between inflammation and other problems like heart disease and diabetes. A slight woman in her mid-30s whose wrap dress accentuated her 24-inch waist and whose metabolism had yet not come to the screeching halt mine had, she gave me four months to demonstrate I was serious about losing weight. "Get it together," she said, upbraiding me for my lack of consistent movement and my droopy disposition. "You don't want to spend the next decade on medication." I lowered my

head, muttered something in the affirmative, and remembered the tiny blue pills I had left over from a wrist operation that might help both of us feel a little better about things.

Dressing after the exam, I thought about my mother's health problems, my teenage daughter, my own mortality. I pictured how good that damned doctor looked in her DVF. And I pictured my future: a stream of doctor visits wearing mauve hospital smocks and bottles of pills stacked on my bedside table. I am in my head, where I am convinced I am still in my 30s, the gal more than one person had confused with Julia Roberts in the supermarket check-out line. Recently, a stranger at the movie theater came up to me at the concession stand to tell me I reminded him of that actress in the Woody Allen movies. "Her name will come to me," he said, as I stood at the counter, lips pursed, waiting for the customary compliment along with my M&Ms. "I've got it!" he cried. "Diane Wiest."

Diane Wiest. 69. Winner of an Academy Award for her role in *Hannah and Her Sisters*. BEFORE I GRADUATED FROM COLLEGE. Diane Wiest. THE PREACHER'S WIFE IN FOOTLOOSE. Diane Wiest. SAG, AFTRA, MEDICARE, SOCIAL SECURITY. My ego was smarting. My doctor was right. Things were obviously headed in the wrong direction. I was looking thick in the middle, matronly. But I was also frightened. My feeble future was calling to me. I could either be a size 8 card-carrying AARP member with low triglycerides and a closetful of Tory Burch or a

## Shrinking

60 year old with new orthotics, a hip replacement and an electric-powered shopping buggy. I determined to find new ways to move, and new things to eat. When Nat called, I said yes.

“Tuck your feet into the fabric and push,” Jess says. She’s helping me get my ass in the sling. The room is solemn as the participants make their final adjustments.

We lie back in our cocoons while Jess talks about mindfulness, the practice of bringing awareness and acceptance to the present. “Take a minute to scan your body,” Jess says. “Notice your breath.” She tells us the idea is not to change, fix or guide the breath, but merely to tune into it. As someone who is always trying to fix something, this is new for me.

Jess walks around the room giving each person a little push by their toes. Then she returns to play the crystal bowls and recite the seven Chakras. “These are our vital centers of energy,” Jess says. She tells us about the Root Chakra, at the base of our spine. The Sacral Chakra, just below the navel. The Solar Plexus Chakra, our stomach area.

Another push. We are swinging. Plink! Jess taps a bowl with the white cylindrical stick she was holding earlier. Jess’ stick must be circling the bowl because the plink expands, the sound stretching into a deep, reverberant song. I am floating.

She tells us about our Heart Chakra, in the center of our chest. I seem to have fallen asleep to the enchanting sound of the chimes. I awaken to Jess talking about The Third Eye Chakra, on our forehead, just between the eyes. Did I need a better eyebrow wax? And finally, the Crown Chakra, on the top of our head.

Jess asks us to unfurl from our hammock as she says some final chants and incantations. She sends us off with encouragement to remember what it felt like to float, and to embrace the healing calm that can help us attract a deeper sense of health, happiness and abundance in our lives. Namaste.

The next morning I am in yoga class. It is my second class this week. I am finding myself more engaged here in the desert than back in South Carolina. This is Rise & Shine yoga with Alyssa—a Happy Hips style class that feels like the naps we took on woven blankets back in Kindergarten, but the blankets are Mexican cotton and there are cookies. It is frankly just my speed.

As the class advances, the moves become more complicated. We are in Downward Dog, Pigeon, and Warrior Two. I am doing my best to follow along, even when I do not know the positions.

After the Warrior sequence, Alyssa asks us to stretch to the ceiling and do a series of Forward Folds. With every stretch to the ceiling, I feel taller. With each thrust forward I get

## Shrinking

closer to the ground. We take out our bolsters and sit cross-legged. Then we extend our legs forward and remove the bolster. We are in Savasana, or Final Resting Pose. During the meditation, I consider all the ways I have stretched myself today. Then I think about all the ways outside this room I have tried to fold myself in, to make myself smaller.

Alyssa asks us to think of things we are grateful for. I consider that I am grateful for this new decade and for the chance to watch it unfold. I am also grateful I am not on the two-hour desert hike.

At the end of our Savasana, Alyssa heaps a lot of praise on us for our “practice” and reminds us to leave all of our disappointments and hurts right here in the yoga studio where they will dissolve, never to be seen or heard from again. She tells us to trust in the things we cannot see. But her class takes place before I have had breakfast, and on my way over, I saw the people lining up at the Cactus Flower restaurant for omelets. When class is finished, I wipe off my mat and go in search of “prana” and some of that coconut chia pudding I saw at the juice bar.

Later in the afternoon, I am with Nancy, the nutritionist, for her session on anti-inflammatory diets. The night before, Nat and I attended a special dinner with drinks created by a bartender named Josh to pair with each course. I wonder what kind of wellness retreat this is that plies its guests with alcohol. Then I remember Alyssa reminding us to be

grateful. So I am grateful for the chips they serve in the bar. And the rose champagne. It was that good.

The nutritionist tells us about the hallmarks of an anti-inflammatory diet: 6 or more servings of vegetables a day, 2 generous fruit servings, 40 grams of fiber, the majority of protein from plants. We should avoid stripped or unnatural grains, cheese, milk, butter, processed meats, sugar and alcohol, all my favorite food groups. I wonder if Nancy has met Josh.

On my last day, I attend Cardio Drumming. We are in The Roadrunner Room next to the pool at the Body Mind Center. Placed across the floor at a distance of two feet are body-sized, inflated yellow balls—like the kind you whale at the other players in dodge ball, only bigger—resting on stacked, purple platforms. “Grab two drumsticks,” the instructor, Sally, tells us. I wonder if Sally has seen me at the buffet bar. Sally is dressed in a blue leotard with tights. She looks like Jane Fonda, only without the leg warmers.

Sally turns on the soundtrack in the AV closet and dons her headphones. Then she talks to us about why we are here. She talks about the rhythm-brain connection, the release of endorphins, and feelings of well-being. “Plus, it’s fun,” she says.

“Everyone in the center,” Sally says.  
“Let’s go.”

We warm up to a Bruno Mars song, all of us tapping in rhythm.

## Shrinking

Baby girl, what's hatnin'?  
You and your ass invited  
So gon' and get to clappin'

Go pop it for a player, pop-pop it for me  
Turn around and drop it for a player,  
drop-drop it for me

I'll rent a beach house in Miami  
Wake up with no jammies  
Lobster tail for dinner  
Julio, serve that scampi

You got it if you want it, got, got it if you  
want it

You deserve it baby, you deserve it all

"Hands up," Sally says, tapping the invisible  
ceiling with one drumstick, then the other.  
Then she directs us to spin 180 degrees to  
the right, tapping our neighbor's yellow ball,  
then 180 degrees to the left, drumming on  
the other side.

The whole class is in rhythm except my  
neighbor to 10 o'clock who has been one  
step off all class, perpetually moving in the  
wrong direction, hitting out of time. I shoot  
her a compassionate glance.

The last song is Bonnie Tyler.

I need a hero  
I'm holding out for a hero 'til the  
morning light

Somewhere after midnight  
In my wildest fantasy  
Somewhere just beyond my reach  
There's someone reaching back for me

I do a ring around the rosy, circling the  
stations, then move around the room in a  
conga line, tapping the ball in front of me  
every other step. I return to my place. I strike  
the center of the yellow ball, bend my knees,  
tap the purple platform. The sound of the  
drumsticks on the plastic echoes through the  
studio, bouncing off the glass walls.

Somewhere just beyond my reach, there's  
someone reaching back for me. I think it's me.  
I'm not any smaller. In fact, I've kicked the  
smaller me to the curb, the one who shrunk  
not in size but away from things. I've learned  
to float from the ceiling, soften the self-  
criticism, say yes to the chips with a side of  
self acceptance, and rock the droopy  
sweatpants. I think I am finally finding  
my rhythm.

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