

CHAPTER 1

Pittsburgh, Winter 1990

PITTSBURGH SEEMED CLOSE to freezing as I waited for the bus, the 71A Negley. It was late winter 1990, and I just wanted to be at home in my new apartment. Warm, comfortable, and safe. When the bus arrived, I quickly got on. Tucking my long, black wool coat around me, I nestled myself between two other passengers. I didn't have a car yet, so I rode the bus back and forth to work at the bank. I removed my burgundy leather gloves, placed them inside my matching Coach purse and looked down at my wet mahogany boots. In this outfit, I felt like someone from *Essence* magazine, a fine example of an African American career girl. As a twenty-three-year-old corporate marketing database manager, I was *That Girl* from the 1970s TV show, a woman who chooses to have a career first instead of getting married and starting a family. So between *That Girl* and *Essence* magazine, I had grown up to be That Black Girl.

As the bus drove to the next stop, I wiped the steam from my glasses, and suddenly tears crowded into my eyes. The “ding” from the stop-requested bell transported me back to a scene from my past.

I am five years old. My father comes home from being out late. The door slams shut, and just like the “ding” that started the Ali-Frazier fight that I'd watched on TV, I'd hear a ding inside my head, signaling that the fight

in my house was about to begin. All night I listen to my father beating my mother. The next day I see her black eye peeking out from behind her dark sunglasses.

Even though I was looking down, I knew that we were passing the Kaufmann department store building with its spring fashion collection in the window, an image I saw twice daily as I rode the bus back and forth to work. Again, I heard a “ding.”

I am eleven and sitting beside my paternal grandmother. She pulls bright shiny brass knuckles from a brown paper bag. Drunk, she whispers “your grandfather uses these on me. Don’t ev-ver let a man hit you.”

I looked toward the bus driver, then out of his partially defogged window. The round dormitory buildings of the University of Pittsburgh. “Ding.”

I am thirteen and my mother has just thrown a sewing box filled with sharp needles, scissors, thimbles, and thread at my younger brother. It misses him.

Head hung low, teeth grinding, hands shaking, I pulled the cord, hard. “Ding!” Inside my head, I yell, “Stop! I want to get off.”

At Negley and Ellsworth, I staggered off the bus, overwhelmed and desperately wondering why I was suddenly having these horrifying memories for the first time. My legs shook as I walked across the street toward my apartment. Blinded by my tear-speckled eyeglasses, I fumbled for my keys.

Emotionally exhausted, the small flight of stairs left me winded. I opened the door to my apartment, took off my coat, and sank to the floor, back against the wall. I looked around at the empty rooms, bare walls, and curtain-less windows, seeing only a futon mattress for sleeping, an expensive All-Clad cooking pot, a professional chef’s knife, and a secondhand four-piece Mikasa fine china dish set.

It wasn’t that I couldn’t afford to begin furnishing my place. The truth was that I wasn’t sure I wanted to. I didn’t want to fill it up with the should-haves from the latest TV commercials. It was my first place, and I wanted to decide what furnishings best represented me. Part of me liked not having furniture. It gave me the feeling of building a new life from the ground up.

I started to cry again, and my salty tears came down like a monsoon with snot hanging from my nose. I sat on the floor like a four-year-old, hugging my knees. Then I heard the voice of my mother inside my head: *“What are you crying for? I was the one who suffered all those beatings.*

“Girl, you’d better go on and be happy. You got a ‘good’ job. You make almost three times more than I do. It’s hard raising four kids on less than \$10,000 a year.” She paused. *“You have a college degree, and your own apartment. You are not one of those single, black mothers raising babies. Just go on and be happy. You made it.”*

I cried even harder.

Had I made it? Did I want for me what society, Black America, and my mother, wanted for me?

I continued to sit on the floor, and more violent images appeared in my mind’s eye. My body flinched each time I remembered a scream or loud thump from my childhood. But it was the memories of the long periods of silence from childhood that were the scariest. I never knew if the fight for the night was over. So my eyes would shift back and forth in the darkness of my bedroom, waiting.

Even though Pittsburgh was freezing that day, the memories of my past were just beginning to thaw out.



I didn’t realize it then, but the day I sat in my empty apartment on the floor, crying, something significant was starting to happen.

Although the memories seemed like they came out of the blue, certain pivotal events had led up to that day. For three days in late winter 1990, I had made all of my meals from scratch. I didn’t consume any processed food or eat anything with refined sugar. I was only eating whole foods—grains, beans, tofu, seeds, and fresh fruits and vegetables—as instructed by my cooking teacher.

Three months after my first cooking class, I decided to do this three-day test. Taking cooking classes was a symbol of my entering the middle class, I reasoned. I would need to know how to make complete meals.

Growing up, I remember my mother telling me, “Eat as much of the school lunch as you can, so I can save money on the food bill.” Each week, my mom would clip coupons—kids-eat-free, two-for-one, or half-off at the local Ponderosa Steak House—because she was too tired to prepare dinner. She would fill up the freezer with boxes of discounted steaks and French fries. “Fend for yourselves,” she often told my little brother and me. Our house never felt like a home. Instead, it felt more like a refugee camp with each person trying to survive after a twenty-five-year, bloody civil war.

It was different at my friend Barb’s house, in her middle-class neighborhood. Her mom waited for us to get off the school bus. “You girls must be hungry. Take your things off and sit down at the table.” She poured us hot bowls of homemade turkey soup with chunks of fresh carrots and celery. She served us oven-fresh, warm Italian bread. She made us a green salad with fresh tomatoes. That experience etched itself in my mind, making me think that cooking and preparing homemade dishes, daily, was how middle-class people lived. Now, it had become an aspiration.



The morning of my first cooking class was a crisp and clear Saturday. I decided to ride my new \$500 Fuji mountain bike to class. The bike was yet another symbol of being a young urban professional who was not interested in buying a car. And I was killing two birds with one stone by riding my bike to get me where I needed to go while getting exercise at the same time! Efficient. I would just be commuting as I challenged myself to ride the hills of Pittsburgh, from Shadyside to Squirrel Hill. It was a steady two-mile climb. One mile flat, and then a mile downhill. For someone who had never really moved her body much, this was a new way of being.

I got to class ten minutes late, sweatier than I had anticipated. I removed my helmet and biking gloves and quietly took a seat in the back row. There were only ten students in the class. The room was fairly small, but the metal in that kitchen shone brightly, making it

seem bigger. I knew nothing about kitchens, but it seemed state-of-the-art.

“This course is called ‘Food as Medicine,’” said Gia, the instructor. “We’ll learn how simple and common foods can help heal and prevent illness.” Gia stood in front of the class, a thin yet fit woman with dark, wavy hair, brownish eyes, wearing a loose cotton shirt. She owned her own healthy living business, Holistic Wellness, and radiated well-being. I expected a plump instructor wearing chef whites. Gia wore an apron. She talked about the healing powers of a vegetable soup she was about to make. Holding up a root vegetable, she explained, “Daikon is a white radish often used in Japanese cooking.” Gia told us that daikon helps to dissolve fats inside the body, especially the liver. She went down the list, telling us the main properties of each ingredient.

I soon realized that the cooking class I thought I’d signed up for was not at all what I was about to get. Obviously, I hadn’t read the flyer carefully, if at all. My assumption, since it was in a middle-class neighborhood, was that it would be a course in how to cook lamb in wine and other bourgeois standards. I’d imagined a mock Julia Child cooking show. Instead, I learned how to use soft barley porridge to reduce a fever. I learned that an umeboshi plum could help reverse a hangover, and how a broth made from sweet vegetables, carrots, butternut squash, cabbage, and onions could help you manage your pancreas and sugar cravings. Gia’s teachings were about how specific foods can resonate with specific body parts such as organs, glands, and bones, to promote or impair good health.

Even though this was not what I had expected, I was in the right place. I had nothing to lose. My family suffered from all kinds of sicknesses such as heart disease, diabetes, high cholesterol, asthma, eczema, and hypertension, not to mention addiction to drugs, alcohol, and food. The idea of changing my life through clean eating thrilled me. Excited, I left the class knowing I had the power to choose how to contribute positively toward my health. My family history no longer held me captive; it was only one factor, not the whole story.

Eating more whole grains and exercising could lower my high cholesterol. Consuming less refined sugar could hold off diabetes. I could actually strengthen my pancreas by eating foods that are naturally whole and sweet. Choosing not to drink or overindulge in alcohol could block an alcohol addiction. Even if I couldn't choose my gene pool, I could choose my habits.

I jumped on my bike, tackling that first hill with more enthusiasm than I'd had when I left that morning to go to class. Joyfully, I pedaled harder and faster. Reaching the top of the hill, I coasted along the flat road, a cool breeze sweeping across my face.

Six months after graduating from college with a degree in business and management information systems and three months after my first cooking class, I had put most of my middle-class living activities into practice. It was February 1990 and I thought I was home free, just like my mom said I would be. I'd escaped the life patterns that promote addiction and violence. I was all set to do what my college friends and peers did: go on vacation, eat good food, read books and magazines, and only date successful young men.

Instead, I continued to be plagued by memories of my past.

"Yeah, you know he'll have to stop cold turkey," my mom said to her mother about her younger brother, Paul, who suffered from heroin addiction. "He'll have to go down into someone's basement and sweat it out."

"I know. But that's the easy part. The hard part is facin' those demons that made him use the heroin in the first place," my grandmother explained.

"Yeaaaaah. When those drugs wear off, the pain is still there. I can't figure out why people use drugs in the first place," my mom said.

I wasn't using heroin, but not having refined sugar in my system for three days had me sitting on the floor with my back against the wall, hugging my knees. It felt like a drug withdrawal, primarily because it illuminated my demons and my history. It was hard for me to believe that eliminating sugar could make me feel this way. I didn't know it then, but research is proving that sugar destroys the liver in the same way alcohol does, causing it to be fatty and scarred, not to mention the extreme emotional highs and lows it causes.

My new world was very different from that of my family. I wondered:

Can I have a middle-class life and climb upward socially while my siblings are drowning in drugs and alcohol? Can I dodge the statistic that clearly states kids like me can't transcend their environment? I yearned to vanish from that world. But it felt inevitable that the boogiemer would get me.

On that day, when I was crying on the bus, my struggle began. Later that day, on the carpet, I stretched out flat and stared at the white stucco ceiling, exhausted.

I trudged to the kitchen and leaned on the sink. Then I went into the bathroom, dampening my face with warm water and looking in the mirror. "I know what they want from me," I thought. "But what do I want from me? How can I create the life I want from the inside-out?"

I went into the kitchen and started cleaning the dirty pot I'd used to cook the morning's steel-cut oats. I pulled out the food I had prepared for cooking that evening's dinner and thought, for the first time, maybe food can heal and maybe it starts with a bowl of steel-cut oats for breakfast and ends with a dinner plate of black bean stew over short grain brown rice, baked sweet potatoes, steamed kale, and a small side of hijiki caviar. I trembled. If eating basic whole foods for only three days could unearth such a complicated past, what else would be revealed on this path to holistic health?

In addition to periodically adding whole-food dishes to my diet, I was ready to incorporate something called yoga into my routine. I didn't really know what it was, but I had always wanted to try yoga in college. I was curious; it seemed like a path to peace, with stillness as an answer to the chaos I was raised in. But mostly, I had a feeling yoga would strengthen my mind and body, a strength I was sure I had but had not tapped into yet.

The yoga class I signed up for started at 9:00 a.m. on a Sunday. The very first position was a resting pose called Savasana. I lay on my back, legs apart, breathing. We did leg lifts to warm up, followed by a series of standing poses. Quickly, I noticed that I was the only one who could not hold the yoga poses for the instructed length of time.

I stared at my crestfallen face in the large aerobic studio mirror and watched myself struggle, lose my balance, and have to release

a pose before everyone else. I heard the instructor, Abela, say, “And remember, go at your own pace. Do what you can for today, and most importantly, listen to your body.”

Her words soothed me. “Inhale, while lifting your right arm up toward the ceiling. Slowly lean over to the left. Breathe deeply and hold the posture. This is a basic side bend.”

My lungs contracted and I coughed. Once again, I had to come out of the pose. I felt weak, while everyone else seemed fine.

I don’t know why I hadn’t noticed it earlier but, looking around the room, I realized I was the only black student in class, and everyone was either double or triple my age. I was pretty sure I didn’t belong. At that point, I was ready to quit. My mind wandered. Maybe yoga was not for me. I should stick to walking and learn how to use the treadmill and StairMaster. Corporate middle-class people do that, right?

“Watch me first,” the instructor said, interrupting my daydream. She held both arms straight out in front of her, and began to lower her torso, bending her knees. She looked like a human chair. “We will use the Chair Pose to transition into our next *asana*.” We all followed her lead, listening to our knees crack on the way down. With our arms out in front, balancing on our tippy toes, we looked like a row of chairs. The balls of my feet and my toes started to hurt from the pressure. I was happy when she said, “Place your hands on the floor and extend your legs, one at a time, and sit L-shaped.” Again, we followed her lead. I felt my toes tingling.

“Inhale, lifting your arms out to the side and then up. Next, exhale. Extend your arms toward your toes and hold your hands anywhere along your legs. Go to the point of a stretch, not strain. This is the Forward Bend pose.” Wow. I was touching my toes. This stretch felt good. I felt good. Abela continued to instruct us to breathe and relax, to just let go. Finally, a pose I could rest in. I wasn’t coughing or struggling. I kept on breathing and holding. For the first time since I was a kid, I was enjoying myself as my body and breath opened up. But, most of all, folding forward released something that allowed me to relax, and to surrender.

“You’ll be teaching this one day,” I heard a voice say. I lifted my head

slightly and looked around. No one was speaking to me. In fact, no one was talking at all. Then I heard it again. “You’ll be teaching this one day, and get closer to your grandfather.”

I stayed in the pose. My head was down and I didn’t dare move. My breathing was slow, but many thoughts raced across my mind. *Am I going crazy? Do I have schizophrenia? Mental illness might run in my family, too. What’s happening to me?*

My attention snapped back to Abela. “Now, exhale all the air from your lungs and inhale, stretching your arms up toward the ceiling.” I lifted up from my core. From the center of my bellybutton, waves rippled throughout my abdomen. It felt as if a heavy raindrop had splashed onto my navel, causing concentric circles to vibrate and encompass my entire body. I looked around suspiciously, now talking to myself under my breath: “Should I be scared? Am I having a freaky mind-body-spirit experience?”

But I didn’t feel afraid. I simply felt open and curious.

I kept observing my body and mind. Abela kept teaching, and I kept holding the poses, again only half the allotted time.

At the very end of class, we did a longer Savasana, for twenty minutes this time. I wasn’t accustomed to lying down, doing nothing. At first I gazed up at the ceiling, wondering what would happen to me if I closed my eyes. There I lay, flat on my back, legs apart, and arms down by my side with palms facing up. I felt vulnerable, but I finally closed my eyes. With each breath, I surrendered. I drifted off while the soothing music played; I floated to a place that was still and quiet. I wasn’t asleep, and I wasn’t awake. I was suspended in a peaceful place. It was dark and black. It was a place I had never been before. In this place, I didn’t have to be anything or anyone.

I felt safe while my body went through a myriad of sensations. At times, my body felt heavy, then light, then warm, tingly, and then completely still. Some part of me observed a separation between my physical body and, for lack of a better word, my soul. My soul lifted out of my physical self, expanding to the size of the room. It felt like it was being nourished, the opposite of my usual feeling of being chronically depleted.

When class finished, I was overcome with the desire to sustain that nourished feeling. I knew that I couldn't yet hold the poses, but it didn't matter because whatever I could do brought me an incredible experience. I wanted to learn more. When the teacher brought us back from that place, I sat up and wondered, *Where did I just go? Was it real? How do I get there again?*