

### CHAPTER 3

# Sivananda Yoga Ashram, Grass Valley

**THE PHONE RANG** while I was lying across my bed reading the Sivananda Yoga Ashram pamphlet. It was my friend George, asking about my plans for Memorial Day weekend.

George smoked and drank more when he was either out clubbing late at night or when he was under lots of stress from his financial banking job. I could tell he needed a break by the tone of his scratchy deep voice. George was another African American graduate of INROADS who worked for Mellon Bank. He looked the part—thick, tall, and wearing rimmed glasses and a Brooks Brothers suit.

“I’m going to California for a yoga vacation. This place sounds awesome.” I read him the brochure. While he listened, I explained the schedule to him. At the ashram, we’re expected to wake up at 5:30 a.m. to the sound of a gong. Then meditation starts at 6:00 a.m., followed by a two-hour morning yoga class. After the class we are offered a full-service buffet vegetarian brunch. Then we’re assigned a community service project. When our chores are done, we have four hours of free time. We could choose such activities as swimming in the pond or hiking a trail. At the end of the day, there’s another two-hour yoga class, buffet dinner, and, last, a two-hour session of meditation and chanting. Then, lights out by 10:00 p.m.”

“Eewww,” he groaned. “You’re fuckin’ weird. Who would go on vacation to get up earlier than they do for work? That doesn’t sound like vacation; that sounds like prison.”

I was disappointed by George’s reaction. I wanted to be supported by my friend, not criticized. I hadn’t processed that he might not understand. This schedule excited me so much that I didn’t stop to think about how he might react. It was a different kind of vacation. There wasn’t a beach, an alcoholic drink, or club scene in sight. My family didn’t vacation much while I was growing up, but I always thought vacation was doing what you wanted to do when you had the money and time to do it. I didn’t think I had to conform to a vacation stereotype.

But because of George’s reaction I was too shy to fully share with others what I was planning to do for Memorial Day. Instead, I was vague and told people that I was going to California to just chill and see what trouble I could get into. Friends seemed to nod affirmatively at that explanation, and then we would easily move on to the next topic. I did my own thing, but I didn’t like that I couldn’t be fully myself with my friends for fear of their criticism.

In college, my peers had spent lots of money and time going to spring break parties, but I was never interested in traveling just to drink and party. I decided that if I ever got enough money to go on a trip, I would make it a life-changing experience. So while my peers were going on spring break during sophomore year, I saved money to do a summer trip. I booked a ticket to Taiwan to live with a Chinese family for two weeks. My language tutor had arranged for me to visit her family. I knew I didn’t have the same advantages as other college kids, who had grown up taking vacations abroad, and I was starting to see how valuable it was to build relationships with people different from me, especially from overseas. I could become a citizen of the world, not just a poor kid from Braddock, Pennsylvania.

Boarding the plane to California for my ashram weekend brought up the same feeling I’d had when I went on that trip to Taiwan. I went halfway around the world to see how other people lived. This was true of my yoga vacation, except this time I wanted to explore deeper parts of myself and meet others who were doing the same. I was

twenty-four years old and realized that I was once again making very different choices from those of my peers.

Four days before Memorial Day, using frequent flyer miles from my business travel, I flew from Pittsburgh to San Francisco on a non-stop flight. The terminal was crowded. I had been told to wait in a specific area for the Sivananda Ashram station wagon to pick me up. The San Francisco air had a unique smell to it; I didn't know how to recognize sea air or ocean spray then. Still, my nose knew that I was not in Pittsburgh anymore, maybe in the same way Dorothy knew she was not Kansas anymore.

I spotted the ashram station wagon and got in.

West Coast spiritual types had an unfamiliar way of talking about things. They reminded me of the people from Gia's classes, reinforcing that everything is energy, but the West Coast discourse sounded informal, almost like a different language.

"This your first time to the Bay Area?" the driver asked. I said it was. "Where you coming in from?" he asked.

"Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania," I replied.

"What's the vibe like in Pittsburgh?"

"Vibe," I repeated in my head. *What does he mean?* Not knowing, I said, "It's an old steel mill city. US Steel Corporation is now called USX. The X has to do with the company now developing more chemical products, or something like that, than steel. It used to be the third leading corporate city in the United States. Pittsburgh is also known for its hospitals and colleges." That was about as much as I could say. People didn't often ask me what the vibe was like in Pittsburgh.

"Far out," he answered, slightly dragging out "far" and raising then lowering in pitch when he said "out." It was almost as if he were singing it. I was taken aback. Wasn't "far out" a 1960s expression? I looked around the station wagon. There were photos of two brown men, one bald and one graying, a tiny elephant statue on the dashboard, chanting music coming out of the speakers, and the driver smelled like incense. I felt relaxed, yet nervous.

We arrived in the dark to an open plot of land. The stars were bright. The place was quiet and had a strange kind of peacefulness to

it. I arrived close to bedtime, so I was led to my room, which I was to share with five other women who were already tucked in. The night was very cold—not how I expected California to be, although I had been told to bring warm clothes for sleeping. I bundled up, got into bed, and fell asleep.

The next day we began following the schedule that I had described to George. The gong woke me up at 5:30 a.m., and by 6:00 I was wrapped in a blanket, meditating, or, more accurately, just sitting there cross-legged with my eyes closed. At 6:30 I poorly chanted strange Sanskrit words from a songbook. At 7:30, I was listening to a spiritual lecture on Hindu mythology. And by 8:00, I was practicing Hatha yoga on a beautiful hardwood floor. This place felt weird, but also like an honest place for me to be. I could live like this.

The smell of incense swirled through the air, the saffron color radiated through the ashram like the sun, and the vibe, my new word, was that of everyone actively practicing to become their spiritual best. I felt like I was doing something good for myself, even though it seemed much like a cult—at least according to the pop cultural definition of one. There were guru pictures on the walls, we chanted words like “Hare Krishna,” and at 10:00 a.m., we ate vegetarian food communal style. More than a few times I thought, if George could see me now, he would definitely think, “You’re fuckin’ weird.”

From 11:00 to noon I was doing assigned chores in the kitchen, chopping vegetables and washing dishes. We all did whatever needed to be done.

From noon to 4:00 I had free time in the sun by the pond and talked to my fellow yogis and spiritual enthusiasts.

From 4:00 to 6:00 p.m., I was in my second Hatha yoga class of the day. To my amazement, I had actually, for the first time, done a headstand. I felt terrific. In truth, I felt I was better than those around me who were struggling to get it right. Holding my headstand, I felt like saying, “Hey, look at me. Watch me hold the posture that is considered the king of postures.”

In this upside-down pose, I thought, “George probably can’t do this.” Then I started to wobble and had to come down to rest in child’s

pose. In child's pose, my mind drifted into thinking that I had come a long way from my childhood. I was in sunny Grass Valley, California, in the foothills of the Sierra Nevada mountains on a yoga vacation, and not in my old neighborhood, agonizing over which boy from Project Tower A should love me.

As I transitioned from headstand to child's pose and back into headstand several times, a whole host of memories were triggered. I went back and forth, comparing my present-day life to that collection of past experiences.

During the summer of 1985, one day in particular stood out. I had received a phone call from one of my friends from the old neighborhood. Paula and I were catching up, talking about our college experiences and summer plans. As we were talking, her brother Paul, also my friend, entered the room she was in. He asked who she was talking to, and when she answered, I heard him yell out to her, "Sy thinks she's better than us!" When I heard him say that, I wondered if I actually did think that. The word "better" meant quite a few things to me. Was I inherently better than my neighborhood friends? Or did I just want to do better and not be troubled by the chaos of lower-income life?

Since going away to Temple University and spending my summers at Carnegie Mellon University, I was spending less and less time with the old gang in McKeesport, Pennsylvania, and more and more time with my new friends from INROADS and CMU.

I was home from college, and about to start my second summer internship at the bank. I found cheap housing through a friend at CMU—the Spirit House on the CMU campus. This house was primarily filled with African American students. I did meet new people from all over the world; in fact my summer posse was made up of four Chinese guys who were also CMU students, one each from Malaysia, Hong Kong, Indonesia, and Singapore. But this was my first time being introduced to all different kinds of African Americans from other areas of the country. David was an electrical engineering major linked to Reserve Officer Training Corps (ROTC). Donald was a chemical engineering major who had an independent way of achieving his goals, while Gail, in mechanical engineering, had a

tutor in every subject and carried a 4.0 GPA. My friends from high school were not like these people and neither was I, but I wanted to be like those CMU students. They had a confidence about living life. No one seemed to conform. In fact, they seemed to encourage each other's uniqueness. No one said, "You think you're better than us," like my old friends did. My old friends didn't seem as focused. My new friends were doing better. I knew that both groups were intelligent, but my new friends were making smarter choices.

I fell out of the headstand and started resting in child's pose again.

My mind and body were fully back in the ashram, in the yoga room.

I felt stronger, so I went into another headstand and while holding it, I drifted into another space and time.

*I am eight years old, in our off-white Ford Mustang with my parents, and they are yelling at each other while my dad is driving. Their voices become louder and louder. The bass in my father's voice increases, and the treble in my mother's voice vibrates, but it is not music that I am hearing. It is a cacophony of chaotic sounds making the air in the car suffocating. The atmosphere in the car is so smothering. My father pulls over to the side of the road and the two of them get out of the car and continue screaming.*

*Looking out of the car window, watching arms wave and mouths move, I have had it with these two. I open the car door and scream, "Get back in the car! Stop fighting!" They stop. They look at me. My face is wet. I'm panting, an exhausted eight-year-old. They get back into the car and we all drive off in silence.*

That was the very first time I consciously felt a sense of being better than someone else. I was better than my parents. At eight years old, I knew that domestic violence was not the way, and I felt like my parents were not smart enough to figure that out. It was in that Ford Mustang, riding in silence, that I knew I was better, and maybe the deeper truth was that I had to do better, but I probably didn't know exactly what that meant then.

Upside down in that headstand, I was gaining a new perspective. I had to do better. Maybe the practice of standing on my head periodically could help me walk firmly on the ground and in the world.

Over that summer, the more I talked to the old gang the more it

seemed that no one was progressing, and some were regressing. I was determined to be better and do better, even if that meant leaving my friends and family behind. I realized that having an attitude of superiority was how I'd survived many pitfalls because there had been lots of opportunities tempting me to crawl way down into a seductive hole of escape in drugs, alcohol, and sex.

I came out of the last headstand, feeling exhausted and invigorated at the same time. I rested in child's pose one more time, and then I sat up, resting on my heels. I remembered the time that I had refused to drink alcohol at a friend's sleepover.

*I was in the ninth grade. My explanation to my friends for not drinking was that my grandmother was an alcoholic and she had died from cancer of the larynx. I explained that every day for years my grandmother drank straight whiskey from bottles covered in brown paper bags that she kept hidden in her bedroom. She drank so much it seemed to burn a hole in her throat.*

*My friends didn't care; they still tried to pressure me, but I stood my ground. I told them I had grown up in a bar (this was true) and had tasted plenty of alcohol and had even smoked cigarettes from age five. My smoking buddy, Tee, who was two years older than I was, had even singed her ponytails one day when the wind was blowing and the matches we were using set her locks on fire. I explained to my friends that I was not going to drink and smoke, and I realized two things. One, not drinking made me feel superior. And two, not drinking kept me from perhaps becoming a high school drunk.*

I continued to move through this yoga class one posture at a time, new memories surfacing with each posture. While this was happening, the teacher-training students were busy preparing the evening meal. It surprised me that the sound of running water and clanging pots seemed like music to me. Sounds from another room usually caused me to jump, but in this case the commotion and aromas from the kitchen adjacent to the yoga studio settled and focused my mind.

The unknown bodies around me were colorful silhouettes, balls of energy moving right, left, up, and down. We all responded to the melodious accent of the teacher, who was South African. He was the first

big-bellied yoga teacher I ever had. I thought all yogis were skinny, especially those living in an ashram. He challenged me. His big body stood in front of the class between the pictures of Swami Sivananda and Swami Vishnudevananda, the men I had seen in the car from the airport, demonstrating so many graceful yet strong yoga postures. I realized that I could simply be with these yoga experiences and my memories more and more and not be retraumatized like I was when I was detoxing from sugar. I could now easily watch the memories float by.



*I peed in a cup for my friend Maggie, who was seventeen years old. She had gotten herself pregnant, again, by her twenty-five-year-old boyfriend Jerry. Jerry already had a son and a wife. This was Maggie's third or fourth abortion. She had been dating Jerry for three years.*

*Maggie's relationship to Jerry needed to be a secret for two obvious reasons, his wife and her own mother. Maggie's mom didn't really know about Jerry, but suspected some kind of trouble. So her mom started keeping track of her daughter's period cycles. Maggie was pregnant and had already made an appointment for another abortion. She didn't want her mother to find out that she was already pregnant. Her mother, on the other hand, made a different kind of appointment. Her mother was taking Maggie in for a pregnancy test. Here's where I came in. Maggie asked me to pee in a cup for her because everyone knew that I had never had sex. In fact, she used to tease me about being a virgin.*

*Maggie teased me relentlessly about being a virgin, but I never teased her about the abortions.*



*I watched my fourteen-year-old cousin with a 4.0 GPA have one abortion after another, even though she was taking the pill. But the pill didn't really work for her. This was also a very sad situation, and one that I didn't really understand. My cousin, now eighteen years old and pregnant again, decided*



*to keep the baby. I will never forget her words when she told me that she was going to have a baby. She said, "Well, I just got tired of killing them." She sighed and then our gazes locked, and our eyes filled with tears.*



*When I was sixteen, there was a boy I really did desire. He was one of the smartest boys I knew, and he seemed to like me, too. We tried to have protected sex, but he couldn't get hard.*

*"Whew. Lucky me," I thought afterward. For some peculiar reason, I felt protected, powerful, beautiful, and relieved. I felt maybe someone out there or up there was trying to protect me. After that, I decided to wait to have sex, maybe in college, or maybe after college.*



*At the end of yoga class, we all set ourselves up for the twenty-minute relaxation pose of Savasana. During this time, the alchemy of my intimate relationship with each person who had appeared as a memory during the class no longer seemed to scare me, unlike in my very first yoga class. In contrast, it seemed to bring up questions: *What were we all trying to accomplish in middle school and then in high school? We were all sent to school for an education, but no one taught us how to socially interact with one another, how to give and get love safely and honestly.* I lay there in Savasana feeling as vulnerable as I had in high school, but Savasana was safer than high school. I sank further down into that mysterious space of relaxation and realized that we all struggled for love and acceptance. No one was exempt; the pretty ones, the unattractive ones, the rich ones, the poor ones, the smart ones, the slow ones, the skinny ones, and the fat ones—all casualties at one point or another—but we all tried to get what was essential for our own individual growth, basic affection and affirmation. Strangely enough, it usually ended up in one big mess. We all deserved better.*



During my four-day yoga retreat, I had lots of time to think about the events of my life.

The first day, I followed the schedule and kept to myself. I was surprised that I didn't really talk too much to the other guests or teacher-training students, which was odd because I can yap on with the best of them.

During brunch time on my second day, I became acquainted with one guy that I thought was an anomaly. He was twenty-one years old and had just graduated from college with a degree in engineering. He was dressed in traditional swami orange. I was a bit confused.

"Let me get this straight. You're going to be a swami, not a yoga teacher?" I asked.

"That's right," he responded.

I tilted my head like a dog that had just heard a high-pitched sound, and before I could ask another question he continued with, "I went to the Sivananda center in Chicago and realized that I was being called to live this life. My family, basic Midwesterners, thought that I was being possessed by the devil."

I laughed.

"Now they see that I am okay. But they still think this is weird," he added.

As we talked some more, I wondered, but didn't ask him, if he'd also heard a voice like I had in my first yoga class.

Later that afternoon, during the last hour of a four-hour break, I asked him to teach me what some of the chants and prayers meant. I also wanted to learn how to break down the pronunciations so I could sing them better. The chants soothed me. The young swami's conversation comforted me.

That night, I went to bed bundled up and glad that I had come to this incense burning Hare Krishna-like place.

On the third day I sat by the pond, feeling the heat on my face and arms, and remembering the most joyous day of my life. It was when my parents finally separated. I was ten years old. When the news came to me that the separation was true, the song "Optimistic Voices" from *The Wizard of Oz* played in my head.

I felt like I was finally out of the woods and into the light. I felt like there was hope in my heart. No more unpredictable fighting would happen in the middle of the night.

When my parents separated, there weren't any set rules about how often my dad could or could not see us. However, I do remember always waiting for him to show up. Most of the time he never came. When he did finally come to spend time with us, I always hoped to get fatherly affection, knowledge, and maybe even some cash. I wanted to love him, and my psyche needed his love even more. But I loathed him because I knew he had the potential to be an amazing dad and man, yet chose his hedonistic lifestyle—which didn't include me—every time. *It was a warm summer day and I hadn't seen my dad in a while—two, three, or four months. I got out of my mother's car in front of the bar my father owned, which used to be our home, a smile on my face, and happily gave my dad a hug. I must have been twelve at the most. He and I started to have a conversation, probably about school, and after a few exchanges he said, "You sound like a little white girl." I was crestfallen. I don't remember what the rest of the visit was like. I just remember not being acceptable to my dad.*

*After the visit, my mom picked my brother and me up from my dad's house.*

*Later I told my mother and my aunt Clair about this incident. They both saw red. "Don't ever feel bad about speaking English properly." Then the two of them launched into a rant about their ex-husbands.*

*"He tried to pull that kind of shit with me, too," my mom said.*

*"Casey tried some mind control bullshit, too," Aunt Clair added, referring to her own ex.*

*"Those motherfuckers are crazy," my mom said somewhere in the middle of the rant to Aunt Clair. I started to tune them out.*

*Caught in the tug-of-war between my new world and my father's world, I decided that I was better than his world, where folks talk slick, drink lots of alcohol, and abuse women. I was mad; I needed and wanted a father. If my dad wanted me to sound more like him, why didn't he spend more time with me? I was available. Why didn't he have more conversations with me?*

On my last day at the ashram, there was a yoga teacher-training graduation. The yoga vacationers were invited to watch the students graduate. Each student was anointed with traditional marks on his or her forehead, and then they bowed down to the various teachers and the photos of the Indian men I had seen in the station wagon: one bald man called Sivananda and one graying man called Vishnudevananda. There were a lot of *anandas* around this place. It did seem like some kind of cult. But somewhat surprisingly, I'd bought into the spiritual nature of yoga and loved that it came from a culture of brown people. I did find it strange that so many white folks accepted it.

Each teacher-training student was called to the front. They, too, had been given some Hindu god's name. I stared at the only black girl there getting her certificate. The name she was given by the swami was "Kali."

Kali was a dark-skinned Hindu goddess. I guess that was fitting, since she was the only black girl in the teacher-training class. I watched her go up to get her certificate. Her Afro was short like mine, and I said to myself, "That's going to be me in a few years."



The next morning, I boarded the plane back to Pittsburgh, unsure how I was going to continue my life at the bank after experiencing this alternative way of living. I felt like a different kind of life was calling for me, but I didn't know what it looked like.

Wednesday morning came and I went to work. I finished out the week as usual, but often thought about my time at the ashram.

On Saturday night I got another call from George, asking me to go out to a bar. I said no.

On Sunday I got up early to go to yoga and was very excited to show my teacher my headstand achievement. Arriving very early to practice, I was the only one in the room. I moved slowly into the headstand. I stood on my head upside down, staring in the mirror. No one

could see me. No one was watching. I closed my eyes and started to see my headstand differently.

The headstand is known as the king of yoga poses, and on that day at the ashram, I had learned that it is a humble and fragile king. Accomplishing this posture can make you feel superior to others, and the longer you hold it, the bigger the opportunity there is for the ego to grow. But there is a deeper meaning to being able to hold a headstand: the posture will ask you to look at the world from an upside-down point of view. I learned that day that the headstand was not asking the world to look at me, and it was not asking others to see me as better, but it was asking that I see the world around me from different angles. I practiced with the intention of seeing life from a kaleidoscopic lens.

Yoga was starting to shine more light on my strengths as well as my weaknesses. I left class feeling that I still had so much to learn. I challenged myself to learn more about my friends, my family, my life, and who it was that I wanted to be in the midst of it all.