

CHAPTER 6

Ted and the Bank

TED WAS MY UNOFFICIAL MENTOR at the bank in Pittsburgh. I'd often frequent his office for feedback. Ted stood six feet five inches, with honey-colored skin and wavy black hair. His hair resembled that of mixed-race people, with loose curls that were neither tight nor kinky. He had a medium build and huge hands that were the color and structure of baseball mitts. Ted was in his mid-forties. He was in charge of the International Division, and he spoke fluent French. He might have been the only African American man in Pittsburgh filling an executive vice president position who ran an entire division. He looked Moroccan to me, but he said he was a black guy from Philly.

In January 1992 I was a quarter of a century old, and for two years I had been practicing an alternative lifestyle. But even though I worked in corporate America, I no longer wore dark business suits; instead my wardrobe had evolved into nicely fitted, colorful dresses. I was hoping to communicate that I was an independent-thinking professional. Back then, the term "personal branding" was not yet a thing, but I understood that style and appearance were ways of transmitting messages and I also wanted to be comfortable. I didn't want to think too much about clothes or how to put them together. I wanted to think more about my goals and who I could become.

The New Year was always a time for me to establish my goals, and I

was excited to share my work plan with my mentor. I designed a strategy for how I was going to prove myself in the Corporate Marketing department. I showed Ted how I established an important morning goal and then an afternoon goal that fit into my department's long-term goals. I was applying all my *Seven Habits of Highly Effective People* strategies to my real-life corporate job. I also shared with him my new lifestyle of going to the gym and eating in a holistic way.

"What's holistic eating?" he asked.

"You know, eating grains, beans, greens, tofu, nuts, seeds and fresh fruit, and vegetables," I said.

"Grains, humph," he said. "What do you mean, grains?"

"You know things like brown rice, buckwheat, millet, and quinoa," I stated proudly, a bit perplexed that he did not know what I meant.

"Quin-What?"

"Quinoa." I said as he looked over his black-framed reading glasses. "It's a South American grain, high in protein."

"Girl, you want protein, eat steak. And millet, that's what poor Africans eat." He schooled me. "Your problem is that you're eating too low on the food chain." His voice was so matter-of-fact.

I, on the other hand, naively thought that I was doing what corporate bankers and other businessmen and women did in this world, working out and eating well.

I felt the corners of my brow furrow. I thought he would be proud of me. My old feelings of superiority rescued me. If he didn't understand that eating grains was a great way to get some protein, fiber, minerals, and vitamins (especially the B vitamins), then I was not the one to explain it to him. My face relaxed somewhat. Then I simply explained it all to him in terms that I thought he might relate to—African American history. African Americans have a long history of high cholesterol, diabetes, and hypertension, and mostly because we eat foods that derive from the American slave table. I felt like a Marcus Garvey inside. I wanted to give an evidenced-based sermon about how we and other oppressed people were often given the worst of everything to just barely survive, along with the exploitation of our disadvantages and pain. Almost no area of life was untouched by

a marketing scheme that would exploit the food we would buy, the neighborhoods we would live in, and the schools we would attend. I wanted to preach about how making self-care changes can liberate us in so many ways. But instead I indicated that if we eat more foods from our rich African heritage, it can help us connect to our history, our biology, and ultimately our spiritual heritage. My teacher, Gia, emphasized that eating grains like millet and teff could better connect us to our African ancestry. This was my way of consciously choosing foods that promoted a sense of freedom, and besides, grain protein is absorbed and digested more easily than steak. I wanted Ted to understand this. So I held my ground.

“I lowered my cholesterol 100 points,” I said, thinking about how spending so much time in the kitchen was paying off, especially since cooking was not my favorite thing to do.

“You had high cholesterol? But you are so skinny.”

I explained to him that my high cholesterol came partly from heredity and partly from inheriting my family’s same dietary habits. We ate plenty of fast food, burgers, french fries, milkshakes, donuts, and egg sandwiches.

As a new member of the Black Urban Professionals (Buppies), I had to show that I could hold my own and yet still be respectful to my mentor. This was another tactic that INROADS had taught to us, how to get ahead in the corporate world, and Ted was pretty clear about how I was going to get ahead at The Bank. He always painted a simple picture of what was suitable for me in banking, Pittsburgh, and the African American world, with statements like, “Save your money. Work your ass off. Find a good black man to marry, and he is not going to want to eat that kind of cooking you do.” He implied that I better learn how to keep my black man happy. I didn’t always agree with Ted’s point of view, but I did listen to him.

He seemed to take a genuine interest in me.

“What’d ya do this weekend?” he would ask regularly.

“I saw *What’s Love Got to Do with It*. The movie based on Tina Turner’s life.” I told him. “In fact, I saw it twice.”

“Ugh.” He said. “You went to see that negative portrayal of African

Americans? Hollywood loves to demonize the black man.” Pregnant pause. “And don’t get me started on *The Color Purple*.”

I paused and took inventory myself, and then said, “Well, a lot of the men in my own family have hit or beaten their wives or girlfriends.” He gave me an even more disgusted look. He started shaking his head back and forth, slowly, alternating his looks between one of anger and one of disdain. He looked like he smelled rotten eggs.

I understood where he was coming from, but I still let him know why I liked the movie.

“I enjoyed the film. It illustrated how Tina mustered up the strength to deal with Ike’s bullshit. She chanted her way to clarity. I loved that spirituality was the answer for her.”

He sat in the chair, shaking his head. Then he told me a story about an abusive white woman.

“A French woman in Paris pulled a knife on me once. She disagreed with something I said about our relationship.” He went into more details. I don’t remember what they were, but I believed his story was his attempt at leveling the abuse between men and women. He wanted to let me know that each of us was capable of committing stupid acts of violence. “That woman was crazy,” he concluded.

I looked at him and said, “I still liked the movie. You should go see it.” I left Ted’s office puzzled; I had thought that making money would alleviate my burdens, but it was in his office that I felt the heaviness resting on my shoulders the most. What is this new world? One thing was clear: I needed to represent so much for so many; I needed to be a credit to my race—meaning that when others looked at me, they needed to see that I was properly assimilated into the white world. People did not need to see that I came from poverty, domestic violence, a deadbeat dad, and substance abuse. Subliminally, the message I received was, “Portray that you are not really that different from them, just black.”

Throughout my life, I got lots of advice from authority figures on how to fit in: “Take up golf because that is where the deals are made.” “Go on beach island vacations like to Aruba. Learn to snorkel and take up hiking.” “Take international trips to show your worldly

sophistication.” “Skiing in Tahoe or Aspen doesn’t hurt either.”

At the bank, Ted was clear that I didn’t need to eat so low on the food chain, especially when I could afford to buy meat and live a better life. Eating meat was the American way, and to prove it, business dinners were often held at expensive steakhouses like Ruth’s Chris.

Ted and I didn’t see eye-to-eye. I didn’t eat steak but still continued to visit Ted’s office. It was brightly lit, all in gray, with a big window facing the Point. The Point is the place in Pittsburgh where all three rivers—the Allegheny, the Monongahela, and the Ohio—meet, symbolizing the success of the steel mills during America’s Industrial Revolution. Ted’s office was like the Point, a place where everything came together for many of the blacks working at the bank.

It was in Ted’s office where I was reminded of my duty to become an example for young black college-bound girls. I was to be the role model for the girl to get herself out of poverty and assimilate into a respectable nine to five—or more like 8:00 a.m. to 8:00 p.m.—career. I was expected to be a role model for the kind of bourgeois lifestyle a young black girl could see herself having.



I saw my future as mysterious and unknown. Although I was approaching an almost ten-year anniversary in banking, Pittsburgh never felt like my destiny. I constantly had a nagging feeling—as that voice said to me during my very first yoga class—“You’ll be teaching this one day.” So over the summer months of 1993 I sketched a different plan for my life. I was ready to become a yoga teacher.

One day, I woke up and just knew that it was time to move on. This surprised me. I was learning that by being more in tune with my mind and body, listening to my gut became easier, more certain. My gut on this day just made an announcement, “It’s time to quit your corporate job and become a yoga instructor.” It was that clear.

So in August 1993, I walked into Ted’s office, where he sat with his feet propped up on the corner of his desk. With a nod, he looked over his bifocals to greet me. I felt confident, yet scared to tell him my new

plan. I stood in the office doorway and blurted out that I was quitting my job. I told him that I'd be living for a month at a yoga ashram to pursue a yoga teaching certification. He looked stunned. I then added that I planned to move to Atlanta to be a macrobiotic live-in chef. Last, I explained that I still planned to work another corporate job, but I wanted to do all three somewhere away from Pittsburgh.

His glare penetrated my soul, and he said, "You're crazy. How long have you been with the bank?"

"Almost ten years, including my internship time in college." I stood tall, in my hot-pink dress from Saks Fifth Avenue with six gold military buttons on the chest. I looked down at him, scared yet confident in the knowledge that my life was my own.

"You've put in good time here, and you just gon' walk away from it." Pause. "You have received some nice raises and promotions here. You are one of the youngest banking officers, not to mention not many African Americans get this title." He paused again, his silence expressing what we both knew: staff who earned the banking officer title were on their way to becoming assistant vice presidents, then VPs, then into the executive leadership. "Who's gon' eat that food? *It's too low on the food chain.* You're gonna find yourself livin' with some psycho. He'll murder you." He paused again. "And why would you want to do a domestic servant job anyway? You have a college degree. You're messin' up the plan and your life."

I sighed. My heart was ready to take the plunge into my new scheme. I took a seat in his guest chair in front of his desk.

But I was torn. I didn't want to let my race down. I wanted to be a role model for the young girls who would come after me.

Maybe Ted was right. I was asking myself to do domestic work and teach yoga in a gym. What is the value in that? I wondered. It didn't really require a college degree.

Ted got up and walked to the window. His back was toward me. He put his hands on his hips, or more like his lower back.

"Martin Luther King, Malcolm X, Rosa Parks, and Lena Horne didn't sacrifice so that you could do the same job as your grandmother." His head dropped, looking down toward the street. "W. E. B.

Du Bois, Frederick Douglass, Fannie Lou Hamer, and Paul Robeson did not risk their lives so you could go to the Black Mecca (Atlanta) and do manual labor.” He turned toward me while keeping his eyes on the city, as if to say, “This could be yours.” He continued his monologue, mentioning names like Jackie Robinson, Eartha Kitt, and Madame C. J. Walker. He addressed Pittsburgh, the nation, and me from that view window, like Moses on the mountaintop. His speeches were always long, which was why it was hard to argue with him about what my role should be. It was like an unspoken code among the black intelligentsia. The post-slavery plight of black Americans was a marathon-relay race. It was a race in which I was expected to pick up the baton from here, at the bank, and carry it to the next rising African American stars. Ted emphasized that the track was already laid out for me, and all I had to do to win the race was save money, work my ass off, and fit in.

“You should get those crazy ideas out of your head,” he said firmly.

I walked out of Ted’s office that day feeling betrayed by him, but also feeling like I was betraying my entire race.

I, too, was familiar with Dr. King’s words and actions. Except I understood them to mean that I could become anything I wanted to, and the only charge was to be the best person I could be, baton or no baton.

Even though I wavered, in my heart I knew that I was making the right choice. What I didn’t know was the price I would pay for following my inner voice. At this time, I didn’t want to represent my entire race, especially before actually becoming my most authentic self.

I left Ted’s office reminded of the fact that I had a bigger duty: to find out who I really wanted to be, and then to let *that* person be a role model to others.

CHAPTER 7

Grandfather

BEFORE PACKING UP MY LIFE in Pittsburgh, I thought back to my first yoga class and the voice telling me, “You’ll be teaching this one day, and you’ll get closer to your grandfather.” It was a bit confusing because I had every reason to want to keep a casual distance between my grandfather and myself.

I must admit, the directive never appeared harmful, so I guess that’s why I decided to heed its call.

My first step in developing a relationship with my grandfather was to visit him every few weeks, if not every weekend. My habit was to bike there from my apartment. It was a 20-mile trek to his house. This was a huge success for me because I was never really physically active in my youth. As I opened up the unlocked door to his house, shouting “Granddad!” he would sometimes respond with, “You on that bike.” “Yep. It was a sunny day, so I decided to ride.”

“That’s a far ride.” Then he’d pause and say, “You think you’re a bird anyway.” He said that almost every time I visited, referring to the fact that I had gone on a skydiving trip one summer. His funny, nonjudgmental comments were always welcome. He never said, *Don’t do that!* or *Why would you do that?* He just called it like he saw it: *You must think you’re a bird.* And I understood that to mean, keep on flying.

“Did you bring your own lunch?” he’d ask.

“I did,” I’d say, showing him my stir-fry tofu and rice dish. “You can have some.” I’d always offer.

Then he’d say, “I got some green beans and potatoes, if you want it. I know you don’t want no oxtails to go with it.” He smiled and laughed. Then I’d scoop some green beans and potatoes onto my plate. “No need to reach for the salt shaker. I’d seasoned d’ose beans purr-fekt-ly.” He always said, implying that a good cook knows how to do the seasoning while cooking so the guest doesn’t need to do anything but eat it.

He was right. His food was very delicious. Now and again he would reminisce about the time he was a young man of fourteen, looking for a job at a sawmill. The manager told him he was too young, but then asked if he knew how to cook. “Our cook is sick and the men need to have lunch,” the man said.

“I can cook,” Granddad replied.

“Rose....” That was what they called my grandfather. It was short for Roosevelt. “You’re the new cook.” Then the manager just walked away, saying “See you tomorrow.”

My grandfather cooked lunch, which was a huge success among the mill workers.

My grandfather never judged me for eating the way I ate. He’d always confirmed that my visits were the most important thing, not what we ate together. He’d always say, “I have food if you want it, but if you don’t that’s fine, too. I’m just glad you’re here.” And when I think about it, the way he ate had lots of wholesome elements. He ate straight from his garden. My grandparents grew enough food to can for the winter meals. He had always wished that his kids would value gardening, and the size of his land felt like a small farm to me. And when I think about it, in today’s environment, the ability to feed yourself from the land is a skill we all may need to rely on for future survival.

During this time, I would catch myself thinking, *What am I supposed to learn by getting closer to my grandfather?* This is still the man who beat Grandma, isn’t it? I was convinced that she was an alcoholic because of him. What could I learn here?

When visiting him, I couldn't help but think back to the day he evicted us from our home.

I am thirteen, and I hear this conversation over and over for months.

"You will get your money right off the top, once you sign the liquor license over to me, and we sell the bar," said my grandfather to my mother.

"I want my money at the same time I sign the paper," she responded.

For more than a year, my grandfather and my mother had been fighting back and forth about the license. He wanted to sell the bar and make a profit, since my dad—his son—wasn't managing it properly. Secretly, I laughed at this situation. It all seemed silly to me. I felt that for as much hell as my dad had put us through over the years, I would have taken my chances with signing the paper early and seeing if my grandfather was going to be an asshole about it.

I listened to various conversations, disagreements, and fights between my grandfather and my mother. I also overheard various debriefs my mother had with Aunt Clair on the telephone. All I could think about was, "Just free yourself from these motherfuckers. It's not worth it. Fighting them only destroys you. No one wins."

Inside my adolescent mind, I kept thinking it's not only about five thousand dollars, it's about power and seeing if one person can make the other person submit. Quite frankly, I didn't understand why my mother didn't just surrender and risk it. Maybe my grandfather would have screwed her out of the money or maybe not, but I knew on some intuitive level that it wasn't worth fighting my dad or my grandfather. Again, I felt wiser than my family members, and I was smart enough not to take sides. I decided to just watch the situation, and watching it was draining enough.

Whether I liked it or not, I was in the middle. Both sides were right and both sides were wrong. Even though I didn't blame my grandfather, I felt his final blow when he told us to get out of the house that he was renting to us, a property that he had bought for my dad. What kind of man evicts his grandkids from their home?

This was always on my mind when I visited Granddad, but it didn't stop me from creating a new relationship with him.

His house was like a time capsule. We sat in his 10' by 10' living room and listened to the Pirates playing the Dodgers on his transistor radio. Then he would tell me the story about why he supported the Dodgers over the Pirates. I never grew tired of my Black History moments with him. The house still had a Dodgers' Jackie Robinson souvenir button hanging from a poster of Martin Luther King Jr., John F. Kennedy, and Bobby Kennedy.

Sometimes we'd just watch TV—*The Price is Right* or *Family Feud*. Other times we'd sit and talk, and when his black rotary telephone rang, he'd pick it up and say, "Yell-low."

Without fail, I'd ask him about his day or his life and then update him about mine. On some visits he'd tell me about his summer crops while we walked down to see the bounty in his quarter-acre garden. There were collards, green beans, potatoes, carrots, peas, and squash. I was amazed that a man in his late eighties could still farm land that size all by himself. He said it kept him young. He always boasted that his collard greens kept his skin nice and smooth.

"Sy, I need to work the garden in the summer. It keeps me nice and slim. Over the winter I always gain ten or fifteen pounds, but I never mind because it comes right off in the summer months."

"That sounds good, Granddad." I said while looking at his smooth black olive skin. He aged well. He was trim and fit. These walks to and through his garden made it easy to talk with him.

One day I told him I was having trouble with my job. "Do you have a union on your job?" he asked.

"No, I'm management. It's banking. We don't have unions," I told him.

"Hmmm."

"I just don't like it anymore," I explained.

"Like?" he paused, puzzled. "Like a job? Jobs aren't to be liked. What you like is that you have a job. What you like is not getting a pink slip. I've never been fired from a job," he stated with pride.

I thought long and hard about what he said, and realized that even that kind of statement was another slice of black history. I was living in a different time and place.



One weekend, I asked him more questions about his childhood. He explained to me how he had moved from McCormick, South Carolina, to Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. He and his older brother George jumped onto different boxcars to make their way north. But what he said next sounded as if it was out of a Mark Twain novel: *George had been accused of murdering a white man, but he didn't do it, so we had to leave.* He explained how they were going to kill George if they didn't get out of town fast. His voice faded as he mumbled, "We were only teenagers." I paused here and just took some long deep breaths. His statement still haunts me today as I think of all the teens murdered, Tamir Rice, Trayvon Martin, and Michael Brown and those who are trapped in the criminal justice system. Where was their boxcar for them to escape to something better?

My grandfather was staring off into the distance. I wasn't sure if I should ask another question. I was so curious, yet I didn't want to cause him any unnecessary pain. Then I blurted out, "Tell me more about your brothers and sisters." Granddad started a story about his younger sister, then stopped. I saw that his eyes were beginning to well up. Then again in that mumbling voice he said, "My sister was killed by a horse."

The way he said it, it didn't sound like an accident. Sure, it was more common for people in the early 1920s to have accidents while riding a horse, but his voice was in pain. His face looked confused. Then he said, "Why you asking me all this?" He was on the verge of manly tears. "Why you bringing up the past like this?"

"I just want to get to know you better," I said.

"Well, my dad built houses. He was respected. They didn't call him *boy*. They called him *uncle*. That was the highest respect a black man could get. And your dad wanted to go and change his name from Quarles to Hafiz. Why?" Again, his eyes showed hurt. "If I would have treated your dad the way he has treated y'all. Oh, my. He just ducked from all of his responsibilities."

When I listened to my grandfather, I was part his granddaughter

and part historian understanding the bigger plight of black people in the United States. When we sat and just talked about his life, I was not mad, but understanding. I understood that we were all victims of victims.



My grandfather watched my independent spirit move about the world, traveling, getting a college education, biking up and down hills, choosing vegetarianism. One day he blurted out, “Too bad you’re not a boy.”

I smiled. I should have been mad, but I think that was the highest compliment my grandfather could give me. Then he described the kind of life he imagined for us: “If you were a boy, we could have really done some things. Your dad didn’t want to do the real estate plan I had in mind, so...” he paused and then continued, “you and I could have built a nice little business together.” I just listened to him, smiling internally. Perhaps he was right, but we will never know because I am not a boy, and I am following my own path anyway.

Later, my granddad must have known his end was nearing. He asked me to be the executor of his will. I wanted to help out, but being in the middle of a discussion between my dad and my aunts would feel like a person being in a head-on collision between two Mack trucks. I politely declined and I secretly realized that he didn’t care that I wasn’t a boy. I felt extraordinary because he saw all of me.

Each visit was a little more precious. He called me and said, “Come visit when you want. Remember, you don’t need an invitation.”

I could sense the words between the lines saying, *I might not have that long to live.*

My grandfather died in the spring of 1993. Visiting him every few weeks was strangely reassuring. It allowed me to forgive him, understand my dad better, and connect even more to my cultural heritage.

At his funeral, I watched his body lying still and prideful. He was physically dead, but I was connected to him spiritually. I sat in the back pew, but I knew that I was the closest person to him. And in that

moment I understood why that voice had told me to get closer to my grandfather—it was so that we could fully see each other. I was a girl who was fully capable of jumping out of airplanes. He was a black man who wanted to farm his own land. He was a young man who'd left town when danger appeared, and I was a young woman who needed to leave town to explore my destiny.

It was a significant year. With my grandfather gone and my siblings strung out on drugs, I was ready to leave Pittsburgh and end my nine-year climb up the ladder of a banking career.

The voice and the path were clear: "You'll be teaching this one day." So I enrolled into Sivananda's month-long yoga teacher-training course in rustic upstate New York.

Epilogue

BEFORE COMPLETING THE FIRST DRAFT of this book, I sent relevant chapters to my family members as a courtesy, starting with my mom and dad. When I told my friends of this, they were surprised. But I felt that I could not finish this work unless they knew what I was about to do. I prepared myself for their anger, denial, and accusations.

Instead they validated me. My dad got on the phone and stated, “Well, ever since I got into that bar business I became a man that I didn’t want to be.” I was shocked and could feel my heart mending. I didn’t have high expectations of creating a close father/daughter relationship, but to have my father say that with such rooted sorrow meant the world to me.

My mother, clearing her throat so as not to stutter, said, “Well, it all happened. I see this book helping other women who find themselves in similar situations.... I did my best and I am sorry.” Her words soothed my soul and fueled my desire to get this book out to others who might benefit from hearing my story. It was comforting to have my mom this time not call me crazy or say that I was the one who needed the help.

My older brother’s response was incredibly supportive. I didn’t expect that, since he often goes in and out of addiction. I thought he might be mad and jealous. But instead he said, “Sy, be as raw as you can be. Tell the story from a real place. Readers want you to be real. Don’t hold back.” Then he said in a kind and encouraging way, “How did

you become the writer? I was supposed to be the writer.” He paused. “Do it. Tell the story.”

I will never forget my younger brother’s response: “Sy, mom and dad need to know what happened to us. What they put us through.” Then he went into reminding me of things that I had forgotten. He told me things that had happened to him that I hadn’t known about at all. I listened intently. Then, he asked me, “Do you think a damaged soul like mine can heal?”

I told him, “Of course; keep showing up and doing the work. We can all heal.” Then I reminded him of a quote that we both liked from Spike Lee’s movie *Malcolm X*: “If you take one step towards Allah, He will take two steps towards you.”

My niece could not get past the first few chapters. She cried, saying, “Aunt Sy, it is just too depressing.” I understood that she might not be ready to absorb the past just yet, but in time, she and her daughter might want to know our family history when they are ready.

My auntie said that she was happy that I found a way to heal from the past. She was right. I have healed from the past and I have found a vibration of happiness that pulsates through my mind, body, and spirit like no other feeling I have known before. I know that healing is organic, dynamic; each injury has its own healing path.

Rahima, my sister, seems to be protecting herself from our family pain by keeping a healthy distance from us all. I don’t blame her. We are here for her when she wants to reconnect. I admire and respect her for all that she has endured and hope that her heart is beginning to know some peace.

My mentor and I recently saw each other after not having been in contact for many years. Gia and I spoke and she said that when she saw me after all these years that she just wanted to give me a big hug. I told her that I had been visualizing this moment for years. We got teary-eyed as we hugged.

As I continue to interact fully with this world, I will always consider myself in a stage of bringing healing to something or someone or just myself in the present and in the future, and hopefully without causing additional harm. *Ahimsa!*

About the Author

SAEEDA HAFIZ is a graduate of Temple University in Philadelphia. She spent her twenties working in management, believing mainstream success was her key out of a childhood of poverty. After discovering the power of yoga to transform, she took a leap of faith to train to become a yoga teacher and wellness expert. She studied yoga at the Sivananda Yoga Vedanta Centers and Ashrams, and holistic nutrition at Natural Gourmet Institute in New York City and Whole Health Resources, and keeps a busy schedule as a yoga teacher and speaker. For the past twenty years she has held leadership positions in the San Francisco Unified School District, the YWCA, the YMCA, and other organizations to bring a more holistic understanding of physical and mental wellness to a diverse population.



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