

THE HEALING

One Woman's Journey from Poverty to Inner Riches

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*To my family as an inspiration and an acknowledgment
of our struggles and how important it is to heal; to my
nieces and nephews and their children who might wish to
understand some of the details behind our family story*

She lives at the edge of life as a creative act,
continuous and evolving, not infrequently
terrified of her own godliness; not infrequently
enraptured by the joy and fun of it all; always
grappling with her own humanity.

—THEODORE ROETHKE

Friendship is the most underrated relationship
in our lives.... It remains the one relation not
bound by law, blood, or money—
but an unspoken agreement of love.

—HANYA YANAGIHARA

Peace in yourself
Peace in the world.

—THICH NHAT HANH

Contents

- Introduction *xv*
- 1 Pittsburgh, Winter 1990 1
- 2 Cooking with Gia 11
- 3 Sivananda Yoga Ashram, Grass Valley 25
- 4 Ben and Frederick and the Shadow Side 38
- 5 Rahima 52
- 6 Ted and The Bank 58
- 7 Grandfather 65
- 8 Yoga, Upstate New York 72
- 9 Hot-lanta 82
- 10 Abundance and Its Opposite 100
- 11 Istanbul, Budapest, Cyprus 119
- 12 Mother 130
- 13 Friendship 147
- 14 Daniel and Aaliyah 160
- 15 Expanding the Circle 168
- 16 Samir 178
- 17 Pittsburgh, Late Summer 1999 192
- 18 I Love You 208
- 19 Oakland and San Francisco 231
- 20 Sahyadri Mountain, Kerala, India 242
- Epilogue 250
- Yin & Yang Charts 252
- Healing Recipes 255
- References 265
- Acknowledgments 267
- About the Author 270

Introduction

I SIT IN THE KITCHEN of one of my yoga students, looking at the “before” pictures of her newly renovated house. Nancy, a petite, determined woman, is an art gallery assistant making hardly any money. When I ask her what made her think that she could buy and renovate a dilapidated house on a salary of only \$15,000 a year, she replies, “One paycheck at a time, and I can do most of the work myself.”

Nancy was the first person to show me, in a really concrete way, the successful outcome of setting one big goal, breaking it down into weekly goals based on what her paycheck would allow, and then breaking those down into daily steps. Those tasks that she could do each day would ultimately lead to the main goal, her vision of a fully renovated home. In my childhood, I had never observed anyone living like this. Contrary to whatever the American Dream is supposed to look like, I was surrounded by people who pretty much stayed where they were when it came to building wealth or to moving up the social scale. Some of the youth I went to college with did climb the ladder of education toward a materially comfortable life as professionals or executives, often under conditions of tremendous stress and effort. But few people I knew, no matter their class or color, could stick to a one-step-at-a-time approach like Nancy did and build something beautiful within their means—and on their own.

This concept of slowly and realistically moving toward goals helps me with my yoga instruction, because once every few days, a student asks me something like: “What can I do to improve my yoga practice?” or “How can I decrease my anxiety?” and I find myself giving yoga and nutrition advice that fits with Nancy’s one-at-a-time approach and traditional Asian concepts of natural healing.

But the overarching challenge for me has been to apply Nancy’s method to renovating my own dilapidated life. Nancy’s vision and commitment to live a rich life outside the framework of corporate America inspired me to write this book. It’s an illustration of how healthy food and yoga, two very fundamental tools, became the guideposts for my journey out of poverty and the trauma that goes with it. That’s why I call it *The Healing*.

This book that you hold in your hands (or perhaps are reading as an eBook or hearing as an audiobook) is my offering to you, with my story of how I came to discover simple recipes and yoga practices that have helped to keep me grounded and stopped me from falling into drug and alcohol abuse or situations of domestic violence. At the back of the book I’ve shared whole-foods, macrobiotic recipes that I found helpful on my path to healing. I’ve written them down to encourage you to participate fully in your own self-care, though I know my remedies might not be for everyone.

It wasn’t an easy story to tell, but in my mother’s words, “Well, it all happened.” And once I acknowledged that “it all happened,” I was free to choose how to share how it has affected me. I’ve been able to see how all of my experiences, even the most agonizing ones, have created a wealth of inner riches that sustain me. I, like my mother, hope this book will help others in similar situations to find their way to their own healing.

This book is not meant to treat, diagnose, or prescribe any healing remedies for any specific ailments. It only outlines my journey toward health and healing and how I chose food and yoga as mindfulness bells to help me listen to my own internal wisdom. It details how I became more aware of my mind, body, and spirit and is meant to inspire you to be wholly involved in your own life and well-being. Please

consult your medical professionals for any conditions or symptoms that need attention. My own team included, but was not limited to, a medical doctor, a holistic health practitioner, a homeopathic doctor, a massage therapist, and a licensed psychologist. Having a *sangha* of people to help me understand the process of healing empowered me to become an active agent in creating my own good health from the inside out.

Even though I've kept a journal since September 1981, recalling all of the exact information regarding dates, places, people, and conversations was a challenge. That being said, I still render each story as truthfully and compassionately as I've been able to remember it. I've changed names and identities in order to respect the privacy of those involved. I apologize in advance to anyone I might have inadvertently misrepresented, offended, or hurt. My story is interconnected with your story; it is always my intention to follow the guiding principle of the Sanskrit word *ahimsa*, to cause no harm. Ahimsa! May you find your own healing.

Saeeda Hafiz
San Francisco, January 2018

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 boogiemanager 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?*

CHAPTER 2

Cooking with Gia

TASTING THE SWEETNESS of Savasana, hearing that voice during the Forward Bend pose, and revisiting my childhood trauma were just the start of my holistic journey.

When I signed up for my first cooking class, I was simply doing something that I'd perceived would move me more into the middle class. I didn't realize that I would be challenged to bring together all my different flavors into a healthier and more self-caring version of myself.

I wanted to learn more about this holistic health lifestyle. Holistic Wellness regularly sent newsletters to my home. One day I received a personalized letter from Gia that seemed to speak directly to my need to rebuild my shaky foundation, and I immediately called her to schedule an in-home consultation. She came to my house in the way I imagined doctors made house calls in the 1950s. But she didn't look like a physician; she wore loose-fitting natural fabrics with a kind of comfortable, elegant, chic. She moved in her clothes as if in an easy flow with nature.

After our initial greetings, she examined my whole life and my surroundings. I had never received this kind of attention from anyone. She made me feel like everything in my life mattered, and that all the events in my life, good and bad, had contributed to who I was. I felt like I mattered. I must admit, it was a new feeling.

Gia pulled out her client notebook and glanced at the intake form. I fixed on her fingernails. They were short and manicured, but not polished. They were not like the nails I saw on the professional women in the corporate world, which were lengthened with gel, silk, or acrylic, and polished flawlessly. Gia's hands looked strong, natural, and yet beautiful. As she talked, I listened raptly.

"Saeeda, the basis of holistic health is to have our internal world be at peace with our external world." She went on to ask me about my sleep, my menstrual cycle, my significant other, family, and friends. Yes, Gia was like a doctor who made house calls. But she also went a little deeper, like a psychologist, a clergyman, and a friend. Nothing was off limits.

She explained that outside things affect how we express peace and harmony, or dis-ease and dis-harmony. Holistic health looks at the whole picture, physically, mentally, emotionally, and spiritually—not to mention financially. She talked about being at peace with it all.

After Gia took inventory regarding how I viewed my life, we visited my kitchen. Opening up the cupboard door revealed two boxes of Cracklin' Oat Bran and some tomato sauce (the other four boxes and extra jars of these items were in the freezer, since I stockpiled two-for-one coupons just like my mother.) I had bowtie pasta noodles, herbal teas, orange juice, milk, bread, ketchup, and very few fresh fruits and vegetables—one onion, several stalks of celery, a carrot, and a few apples. I also had the remains of my bulk cooking ingredients from the class—brown rice, lentils, steel cut oats, barley, and shiitake mushrooms.

I handed the Cracklin' Oat Bran box to Gia and she showed me how the cereal contained multiple forms of sugar products, all of them refined. We examined most of the food items in my cabinets, refrigerator, and freezer. I was amazed that so many items were loaded with sugar: my dry cereal, tomato sauce, ketchup, and even my bread. Not only did sugar appear in everything, it was listed under different aliases such as cane sugar, brown sugar, corn syrup, sucrose, maltodextrose, and high fructose corn syrup.

Gia departed, leaving me with lots of information and recipes to

make. I thought long and hard about what she had suggested. I could slowly phase out these old food items or give them all away and start fresh with better quality foods. She encouraged me to cook more and share meals with others. I was committed to following her instructions, even if I didn't like to cook that much. I didn't realize it at the time, but I was about to embark upon was a radical detox, long before the word was fashionable: no processed food, no sugar, and only whole-food meals.

I learned later that my regular consumption of refined sugar (both the known and unknown) affected my pancreas, my insulin levels, and my liver, which stored excess sugar as fat. Sugar made me feel tired and grumpy, especially during my premenstrual time. But mostly I felt spaced out and numb.

When I stopped consuming sugar, I experienced a chemical withdrawal similar to my Uncle Paul's heroin withdrawal. I became depressed, yet I was no longer fuzzy. I was less irritable and fatigued. I was in the process of sobering up. Even though it was challenging, I knew it was the right thing for my body and my mind.

The detox reminded me of the time when I went through the entire fourth grade without knowing something was wrong with my eyesight. By fifth grade, I'd had my eyes tested and, lo and behold, I needed glasses! With glasses, I could see much better. I didn't like everything I saw at school or in my neighborhood or at home, but at least everything was clearer. The three-day detox had a similar effect. I didn't like what I saw, but the picture was clear.

At Gia's advising, I made a broth called Sweet Veggie Drink. It nourishes the pancreas and helps eliminate processed sugar cravings. I wanted to add a kind of sweetness to my body, not in a quick or processed way, but rather in a way that lingered. This was how I was starting to feel about life. Since I was no longer numbed by the wrong kind of sweetness, I sensed that I wanted to taste a richer and fuller life. I didn't want instant gratification anymore. I wanted a delicious life, where my inside environment was at peace with my outside environment.

So I took inventory of my life, from what was in my cupboards to

what was in my heart, and I found flavors that were sour, pungent, and bitter.

I stood in the kitchen, chopping vegetables for the next day's soup while my dinner for the night was heating up.

Dinners at my house felt more elaborate than I had been used to. This was ironic since I didn't really like cooking that much, but I wanted the effects of good eating and couldn't get this quality in restaurants. During the week, I used at least fifteen different kinds of vegetables, three to four different kinds of whole grains, two to three different kinds of beans, fruits, and seeds. I am allergic to most nuts and fish; otherwise, I would have used them, too.

I often started dinner with a raw veggie salad, and then moved on to a soup. The main entrée was a combination of whole grains, beans, tofu or tempeh, and steamed greens like collards, kale, or chard. Desserts were wholesome too: gourmet baked apples, pear tart, or carob cake with a raspberry jam sauce.

Compared to what I used to eat, dinners were packed with lots of nutrients and lower in calories, even though I was eating more in terms of quantity and variety. After a meal, I often felt lighter, calmer, and clearer—like I was ready to take flight somewhere.

One day, months after my public bus meltdown, I was enjoying my dinner, reading my *Yoga Journal* magazine, and relaxing into the evening while a new soup was cooking. When the soup was done, I started to clean up the kitchen. Without warning, another memory surfaced.

I'm twelve and babysitting a neighborhood girl named Kelly. She is seven and sleeping over at my house. We are eating popcorn and watching TV movies. She and I lie across the living room sofa bed, laughing and joking around. I'm proud of myself, earning my own money and doing a good job at it. Money—one less thing I have to ask my parents for.

Kelly and I become sleepy and decide to go to bed. I tuck her in first and then I slip under the covers, too. We talk softly for a while and start to doze off. Suddenly, a thunderous rumble shakes the ceiling. My dad is beating my mom up, again. I feel Kelly wince, and I start to sweat, not knowing what damage would appear: broken lamps, dislodged furniture, or bruises and broken spirits.

Unable to do anything, my babysitting confidence crumbles. I think, “I’m the sitter. I’m supposed to protect her from danger. I studied for two summers to get my childcare certificates. I passed all the drills. I’ve proven that I’m responsible, and now, in my care, I expose her to violence.”

We lay there frozen and, just like a bad thunderstorm, the rumbling, screaming and crying magically stops. I feel insecure. I shake with anger. I’m furious at my parents, particularly my dad.

I’m embarrassed, ashamed, and tired, so tired. This happens all too often and I don’t understand why my parents fight. Why can’t they just grow up and act like adults?

I was totally blindsided by yet another memory resurfacing. I had tried so hard to move on. I believed my mom and mentors who said that once I had earned my college degree, got a “good” job, and started making more money, I would only go forward and never look back. I foolishly believed there was a pot of gold waiting for me at the end of the rainbow.

Instead, I found myself in the kitchen, feeling suppressed anger surfacing. It literally made my skin itch. I was itching to talk with my mom about my new insight into experiencing what she might have been feeling all these years and how she had seen her way through. I needed to call my mom and tell her what was happening to me. Surely *she* would understand, having been the victim. Besides, I wasn’t necessarily angry with her and I felt that having a frank conversation would bring us closer to each other. Perhaps we could become allies because now, as an adult, I understood so much better the brutality my mother lived through. And now I could help her see how the past was starting to affect me, too.

I didn’t know this at the time, but my flashbacks—being right back in a situation without warning all over again, feeling every sensation, hearing every sound, remembering every odor—were signs of PTSD, post-traumatic stress disorder.

I exhaled and dialed the number, thinking, “Whew, I don’t have to hold on to this anymore. I don’t have to keep these shameful secrets.” Surely my mom would guide me through it with her healing words of wisdom.

She picked up on the third ring.

“Ma, I called to talk to you about a few things going on with me. I started to remember some of the fights that happened in our family.”

“Why are you tryin’ to drive a wedge between us?” I looked at the phone, confused.

“Ma, I’m only bringing this up because I thought it would bring us closer together.”

“Why can’t we just continue with the way things are? Girl, leave well enough alone.”

“I can’t just continue.” I tell her. “I feel too much pain and anger. I want to heal from all the fighting.”

“Nothing is wrong with us. You’re the one that needs help.”

“Fine. Let’s go to therapy together.”

“I’m not goin’. *You* need the help.”

We exchanged a few closing remarks and then hung up. I looked at the phone with steely eyes and my heart hardened. I felt unseen, and then I felt an invisible protective shield go up around me, like Wonder Woman getting into her invisible jet. Like a powerless kid, I told myself, I need superpowers to protect myself from rejection and vulnerability.

The soup had cooled; now just slightly warm, it was ready to go into the fridge. I opened the refrigerator door, and the cool air refreshed me and the blink of the light snapped me back into my newer self. It was clear. I wasn’t going to pretend or hide from my past anymore. This new me didn’t want to numb myself again, just so I could pretend that my old life didn’t happen while trying to live in this new one.

Besides, I had been there all those years for my mother, playing the role of the one-dimensional “good” girl. I knew that if I continued to play this role for her I would be rejecting dimensions of myself. My new holistic health lifestyle demanded that I become more of who I really am: not just good, but *authentic*.

In my new way of being, I wanted my mom to acknowledge my newfound ways, ways that were putting me on the path to healing my past and creating my future wellness. As corny as it sounds, eating a

whole-foods, plant-based diet in a holistic health fashion made me feel more whole. It gave me fortitude to confront my past and the people in it. I didn't really know how or why it was working, but it was. So I set out to discover more, a life beyond just aspiring to be middle class. Instead, I looked toward a way of living that asked me to trust myself and to trust life.



There was only one place where I could fully trust life. It was in the last twenty minutes of a ninety-minute Hatha yoga class, when we practiced the relaxation pose lying on our backs. In Savasana, I didn't have to be anything to anyone. I just was.

At the same time, I was both everything and nothing at all. I expanded outside of myself while simultaneously disappearing altogether. I was free.

As I lay in Savasana each week, I felt like I was going through an intense purification process. My mind and body were the badly stained garments. Savasana was the pre-soak. My clean eating diet was a powerful eco-friendly detergent. My active Hatha yoga poses were a state-of-the-art washing machine. Each of these worked in partnership to lift the past, which had left long-lasting stains on my soul. The garments felt too valuable to throw away, yet too damaged to be worn in public. But perhaps with the right care and effort, these articles of clothing could be fully functional again. Eating wholesome foods during the week felt purifying to my internal organs. For instance, eating whole grains daily naturally cleansed my colon, as if the fibers were literally getting rid of old shit. Then on Sundays, yoga started the cycle again, lifting a few encrusted stains, physically and emotionally.

Within the first fifteen minutes, I always could feel the yoga class working. My clenched jaws would relax and my eyebrows would unfurrow. Savasana centered my mind. The single-leg raises lengthened my muscles and my perspective. The knee-to-chest poses and gentle spinal twists stretched my hamstrings and back, opened my

hips, and massaged my small and large intestines, stomach, pancreas, liver, and spleen.

I was being stretched, pulled, twisted, and compressed from the inside out. These movements were mining into crevices of my body-mind complex that were otherwise hard to reach. My daily troubles evaporated, and life's wrinkles straightened themselves out.

This happened every week. I entered class drenched from life, past and present. I left class feeling less stained, less damaged. Savasana was a space I could trust—a place where the truth of who I was could live without shame.

Soon I started to see the subtle ways that my new lifestyle affected each day. Having had such powerful experiences with whole-foods nutrition and Hatha yoga so far, I was hungry for more healing. So I signed up for more study. It was the fall of 1990. I had been practicing yoga for eight months and was soaking up the basic teachings of Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) and macrobiotic philosophy in Gia's eight-week-course "Creating Holistic Well-Being."

I felt the evening breeze as I walked from my house to the first class meeting along Squirrel Hill's tree-lined streets and gazed at the big houses. The sun was setting. The leaves were turning yellow, orange, rust, and brown. My gait lengthened with excitement; I was about to learn something new, something important. I felt like my life was just about to begin anew.

I got to class to find eight chairs set up in a semicircle with hand-outs on them. Sitting in this room, listening to the words of the instructor and chatting with my new classmates, all white and older than me, I began to learn things that confirmed that my life would be different from the lives of my friends and siblings. Gia would say, "Everything in the universe is a vibration," and I would lean in closer and think, *I have always believed that*. It felt thrilling to hear someone articulate and validate my intuition.

Everything in the universe is constantly changing. One of the main tenets of macrobiotics is that when you understand the changing conditions that govern our lives, you are in a better position to achieve harmony in your body and mind. These ideas seemed simple.

Don't go against nature. Eat in harmony with nature. Our body and environment always seek to be in balance. In my mind, I heard myself say, *Everything you eat has the potential to nourish every single cell in your body.* That whispered idea held power over me.

One of the most powerful concepts I learned in this course was that of yin and yang, the idea of expansive and contractive energies. Yin is considered to be expansive energy associated with woman, the moon, softness, and passivity; and yang is its opposite, a contractive energy associated with man, the sun, hardness, and activity. They are opposites, but they need each other to exist.

As Gia continued going through the course material, I began thinking about where yin and yang appeared in my family life. We kids—Rahima, Samir, myself, and Omar—grew up with one big, contractive yang headache. My parents' relationship made us all feel uptight, tense, and defensive. We cringed each time my dad walked through the door. We recoiled as their voices increased in volume. Over the years, I watched our parents' random acts of violence wind the four of us up so tight that we were always looking for release from the pain. Applying this yin/yang principle, I understood my family and myself better. (See my charts on page 252.)

We were all reacting to the yang environment we were immersed in. Right then, I knew that one way to get ourselves back to center was to find and nurture the yin element in our lives: everything that was deeply nourishing and sustaining. And food was a starting point.

The principles helped me put my past experiences into a digestible context. I could look at the events more objectively and without shame. I could see that my siblings and I were only reacting adaptively to our trauma. I learned that most drugs and alcohol are yin-based energy. Logically and energetically speaking, drugs and alcohol are understandable choices when you are scared or anxious or want to be pulled out of a tight situation. Drugs, alcohol, and sugar will help you feel centered for a little while, but then they pull you to the other side, where you feel spaced out, or even numb.

I, on the other hand, was learning to choose healthy foods that increased yin, instead of choosing drugs. Practicing yoga and eating

whole foods was boosting my much-needed yin energy. My new lifestyle was affecting me just like my siblings' drug and alcohol experience affected them, except my approach was healthier than smoking crack and drinking 40-ouncers. I started to see how changing my diet could also move me to a more harmonizing center, especially because I was not burying my past. Instead, I was integrating it. I was eating foods mostly made up from leafy greens, root vegetables, and whole grains, which balanced yin and yang energies in my body, pulling me away from my tight experiences, but not too far up or out.



About ten months into following this new lifestyle, I found myself mildly worried about not fitting in with my friends, who socialized in clubs and bars. We always had a good time when we went out. I still wanted to be part of that group, but I didn't want to drink. One day my friend Sage picked me up from my house to go to a local bar, Chiefs, a watering hole for recent college graduates and the neighborhood blue-collar workers. We parked the car, went inside, and found a couple of stools. I put money in the jukebox and played the Thompson Twins' "Into the Gap," Terence Trent D'Arby's "Sign Your Name," and Marvin Gaye's "I Want You." I was in a groove. For the next few hours, we laughed, joked, and debated with other customers. Later, Sage told me a friend of his had said, "Oh, my God, that girl you're with is so drunk. She can barely stay on the stool."

"Who? Her?" Sage pointed toward me.

"Yeah, she's tore up."

"Hmmm." Sage chuckled, "She doesn't drink. She's been having water and lemon all night."

It validated my intuition about myself that I could be more fun without alcohol. I could choose a healthy lifestyle and still be in bars, listen to good music, meet friends, and drink water with lemon served in a martini glass. This revelation was good news to me because I wanted to keep some of my old social ways of unwinding. I worked hard at my corporate job, which was another very yang

experience that I wanted to balance with a healthier yin. I didn't want to use drugs or alcohol, like some of my relatives.

By the end of my eight-week course, I had learned that holistic health encourages each person to work within her environment as best she can. I wanted this system to be easy, but it wasn't. It was simple to understand, but not easy to practice. I was living in a world where there was a pill for anything that ailed. I was in a middle-class community where self-help meant: "Just live this way and you will be rich." Taoism and the macrobiotic holistic health model said: "There is no right or wrong, just an opportunity for you to improve upon your current situation."



I started taking more and more classes at Holistic Wellness, getting Shiatsu massages regularly, and having private one-on-one sessions. I felt like Gia was taking me under her wing, especially when I assisted with other classes or helped out at events. I took advantage of this time to nourish my mind, body, and soul.

Gia introduced me to her macrobiotic and spiritual teachers and wide circle of friends. On Gia's recommendation, I reached out to another student of hers who was also just beginning her holistic health journey. Her name was Red. Gia emphasized that forming a community or having a friend during this lifestyle change can help an individual achieve his/her personal goals, and Gia thought that Red and I should cook and share meals with one another. So one evening, I invited both Red and a friend from college, Buddy, over for dinner.

I was nervous about including Buddy because when I first told him that I was cooking and eating macrobiotically, he said, "Urrrgghh.... Why are you eating this way? You'll never be able to go out to restaurants. You'll be in the kitchen all the time. Why go through all that? You can afford to eat out."

Buddy's comments meant a lot because he was my best friend.

I'd met Buddy in college at Temple University through a game

I made up. My dorm was on the way to the dining hall, so in the morning when random students would pass by my window, I would yell out from the second floor, “Hey! You!” Someone would inevitably look up, and I’d continue, “If you were on a game show and had to guess the correct temperature for \$10,000, how many degrees would you say it is right now?” I did this silly thing almost every day as a way to find out what kind of coat I should wear, if any at all. Buddy was one of those students who engaged me a few times. Then one day, I was in the dining hall eating with members of the men’s tennis team and rowing club when Buddy sat down next to me and said, “Hey, you’re the girl from the window asking about the weather.”

“Yep, that’s me.”

The college year passed along and Buddy and I found ourselves becoming friends, talking and exchanging ideas. Mostly, he really listened to me. He listened to me so much that I thought, *This guy is truly a friend, my best friend.* I don’t necessarily think that I was his best friend, but he was mine. So, his comments about my new eating habits confirmed a fear I had: this lifestyle would separate me from others. I wondered if someday I would need to make a choice.

The evening meal started with Mushroom Barley Soup. I watched carefully as their spoons reached their mouths. “Mmmm. Good.” Buddy said. And when they both raved about it, I felt perhaps this kind of cooking could actually appeal to my friends, instead of alienating them. Many other shared meals after that confirmed my suspicions that this kind of eating could be a way of connecting.

One such meal took place on a business trip when I sat down for lunch with a group of colleagues at the Philadelphia hotel where we were staying. The maître d’ showed us to our seats at a typical round banquet table with a plastic flower centerpiece and burgundy cloth napkins. Looking at the menu, I saw beef dishes, pork entrées, and an ocean of seafood plates. There weren’t any whole grain dishes, and very little in the way of vegetables, except salad made with iceberg lettuce, steamed broccoli, and a baked potato. I thoroughly scanned the menu and couldn’t find a suitable entrée.

I sat up straight in my blue corporate dress suit, teeth clenched,

tapping my French-manicured nails on the table. My mind was chanting, *What to eat? What to eat?*

Deciding what to eat should not be a big deal. But for me, at this time in my life, it was huge. The reason I was sitting at that table in the first place was because of an organization called INROADS. The organization's mission was to prepare talented college-bound "minority youth" for positions of leadership in corporate America and in the community. I had never belonged to an organization that was really invested in my worth and cared about my success. INROADS intern program had helped me get my job at the bank. It was important that I didn't embarrass them or myself.

My INROADS training had taught me ways to navigate a sticky work situation, but this one was a bit out of my element. How could I have predicted that I would one day be eating a whole-foods, plant-based diet, and that people might react strangely to it? What to do? I didn't want to seem weird or difficult. I had also learned to not make too many waves, especially on a business trip.

For young corporate youth of color, INROADS was like Motown. Motown taught its young black musicians and singers how to walk, talk, and sit properly in white America. INROADS did the same for youth of color in the business world. This organization taught us to blend in with corporate culture as much as possible, down to what fork to use when. I was taught to be a positive example, a productive, professional African American career woman. I was given insights on how to tiptoe my way up the corporate ladder without too much fanfare and unfavorable attention, so that upward mobility could happen for me and other talented minority youth.

INROADS put us through a rigorous training course covering all professional situations from how to run a corporate meeting to which eating utensil to use when dining out. INROADS wanted to make sure that the thirty students who had been selected from the 150 black students who had interviewed were prepared for this new corporate world. But it didn't cover how to make holistic lifestyle food choices when a menu had none.

My face began to feel hot, for fear that I might order the wrong way.

The waiter came to me, and I cleared my throat and scratched out the question, “Sir, I know this is not on the menu, but is it possible to order pasta with sautéed mixed vegetables in olive oil and crushed garlic, with a wedge of lemon on the side?”

He sighed. “Ummm, I’ll go ask the chef.” I was sure that I had annoyed him, but in a few minutes, he returned and said, “No problem.” He turned next to my colleague. “And you, ma’am?”

I heard a voice come from the other side of the table. “What she ordered sounds good.” My eyes widened. “I’ll have that, too.” The waiter wrote it down.

“Sir,” another one of my coworkers called out, “Can I change my order to that veggie pasta dish?”

“Me, too,” someone else said.

I was amazed at what had just happened. Five out of the six of us ordered the same customized, healthy dish. When the waiter brought out our covered dishes of bowtie pasta, we did not know what to expect. He lifted the silver cover and visible steam carried the pungent aroma of garlic. “Ooooh,” a few of us said. The sight of fresh julienne carrots, round yellow squash, and bright-green broccoli was a rainbow of color. Some sprinkled freshly grated Parmesan cheese on top or a squeeze of juice from the wedge of lemon. My mouth watered.

That day proved to me that a plant-based diet didn’t have to be strange in the corporate world. Not only that, but others had followed my lead. I was the minority, in more ways than one, on a business trip with all whites. But this time my being different did not isolate me. Instead, it gave everyone a new option to try.

However, I was soon to learn the hard way that this sign of acceptance would not prove to be the norm.

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 Vish-nudevananda. 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.

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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