

If you have doubts about the challenge,  
PLEASE READ THE ATTACHED ARTICLE

Can You Transform Your Whole Life in 60 Days?

By Paige Williams

From the January 2010 issue of O, The Oprah Magazine

## Can You Transform Your Whole Life in 60 Days?

By Paige Williams

Oprah.com | From the January 2010 issue of O, The Oprah Magazine



*She's 80 pounds overweight, divorced, out of work, and deeply in debt. She needs a physical and spiritual overhaul. Can 60 days in a Bikram hot-yoga studio really undo years of damage?*

The teacher wants me to make a **Japanese ham sandwich**. To my knowledge, I've never seen a Japanese ham sandwich, but as I understand it, I'm to stand bent with my face to my shins and chest to my thighs in perfect vertical union—I *am* the sandwich.

I would say I look more like a jelly roll. My flabby abdomen won't let my forehead anywhere near my knees, and my legs tremble as I try contorting myself into a position my body neither recognizes nor endorses. The goal is to concentrate on stretching and breathing, but I'm fixating on my unpedicured toenails. And the neon paleness of my legs. And the fact that I probably should have shaved.

The students around me are tanned and toned and very nearly nude. Every body glistens. We're in a Bikram yoga studio, after all, where the heat is set to 105 degrees and the humidity to 45 percent, to facilitate flexibility. The men wear nothing but shorts; the women rock hot pants and halters. Because I'd rather lick the sweat-soaked carpet than bare my wretched flesh, I have on the hot-yoga equivalent of a snowsuit: calf-length sweatpants, a jog bra, and a T-shirt. I'm huffing harder than a serial killer. And we're only on posture number one.

Posture number one of class one of day one. Assuming I survive, I'll make the ham sandwich and about two dozen other postures every single day for the next two months, for the notorious 60-day Bikram challenge. I'm subjecting myself to "**Bikram's torture chamber**," as founder Bikram Choudhury himself calls this insanely intense regimen, because the program promises renewal from the inside out—because suffering inside this hot room may be my surest path to survival out in the world.

I need to change so many things about my life, it's hard to know where to start. I need physical and spiritual transformation, from the mental to the muscular to the molecular. I need to stop treating my body like a landfill. I need stability, which I haven't seen in so long, I've forgotten how it feels. I need a reset button.

This won't be easy. As I start the challenge, I'm divorced, in debt, and 80 pounds overweight. Wellbutrin and Lexapro, in their little amber bottles, rattle around in my life like maracas. My career? Mr. Toad's Wild Ride. One minute I'm winning the magazine industry's top honor for feature writing, the next I'm taking a new job out West, and the next I'm losing that job, moving all my stuff into storage, and living back home with my mother, in Mississippi.

**"Do this yoga for 60 days and it will change your body, your mind, and your life,"** says Choudhury, a former Indian yoga champion who lives in Los Angeles and who is, depending

on your viewpoint, either a beloved lifesaving guru or just a really flexible guy who got lucky, and rich, with an idea and a persona.

Bikram students believe, and I hope they're right, that Choudhury's heat-centric, copyrighted sequence of ancient hatha yoga postures is a transformative agent like no other; testimonials the world over suggest this yoga eases the symptoms of a range of maladies—depression, diabetes, carpal tunnel syndrome, fibromyalgia, migraines, arthritis, back pain, and heart disease, for instance—while relaxing the mind and slimming the body.

"Can't you just do all that by, like, *running* every day for 60 days?" a friend asks. Good question, but the answer doesn't interest me. None of my past fitness activities—racquet sports, cycling, jogging, gym circuit training, kickboxing—seem catalytic enough for the depth of change I'm after.

**I'm not a renovation; I'm a tear down. And I'm hoping Bikram is my bulldozer.**

## Anatomy of a Meltdown



### My life, at a glance:

**Born:** Oxford, Mississippi

**Height:** 5 feet, 5 inches

**Weight:** 208 pounds

**Total cholesterol:** 234

**Body mass index:** 34.6

**Sleep pattern:** Abysmal

**Love Life:** Laughable

Is it possible to pinpoint the moment a life swings out of balance? For me it happened "gradually and then suddenly," to borrow from Hemingway.

The slope started getting slippery when my father died in 1995. After my marriage failed a few years later, I left the beauty and comfort of Charlotte, North Carolina, and began my peripatetic period, living and working in ten cities (and one European country) within ten years. Along the way, I stockpiled debt by following divorce with graduate school (expensive) in New York (superexpensive) and by self-medicating my depression with stuff—I overpaid for rent, I indulged, I shopped. I have always believed quality of life can turn on a pretty, new set of cotton sheets.

The debt left me anxious and mentally exhausted. Then my body began throwing me strange new curves: Fibroid tumors grew in my uterus and surgeons had to cut them out. My eggs and estrogen bailed on me, making chaos of my hormones. As I worked harder and longer to get out of debt, I convinced myself that I was too busy and too tired to tend to my own wellness. Raised an athlete, I now exercised less often than Thomas Pynchon appeared in public. By the time I left New York for Atlanta, in the spring of 2006, a pattern had set in: anxiety, work, self-isolation, medication, and protracted sobbing mixed with flurries of rage.

You know what helps in painful situations? Pie. Also Big Macs. Publicly, I ate properly if at all, but nighttime triggered a junk food free-for-all. Because I ate poorly and didn't exercise, I slept badly. Because I slept badly, I woke up harried and late, so I never had time for breakfast. By noon, as I

caffeinated instead of hydrated and often skipped lunch, I was already thinking about what I'd eat that night. I wasn't a snacker; I was a volume eater. Food was all I looked forward to.

For a while, my career was the one thing I managed to hold together. In the fall of 2008, I assumed the editorship of a small magazine out West. I treated magazine editing like neurosurgery—we didn't just have to be good, we had to be perfect, even as the economy imploded, even as the publishing industry took a particularly big hit. For a bajillion reasons, the situation didn't work out. I'd say the center couldn't hold, but I'm not sure there ever was a center. Wherever my slide started, it ended here: Stress + sugar + carbohydrate overload – exercise + insomnia – adequate water + self-loathing – romantic intimacy + regret = meltdown. One particularly fraught Friday morning I reached my limit with the magazine's publisher and failed, completely, to hold my tongue. By Monday morning, I was in the unemployment office.

The depression that had held me down for so long now dropped me into a well. My whole body ached. My hair fell out in the shower. For three months, I had a headache every day, often so painful that I'd lie with a cold cloth on my forehead, just trying not to throw up. Most nights, I went to bed with a heated terry-cloth beanbag around my neck like a boa, like I was 80. If I managed to sleep, I'd reflexively grind my teeth worse than ever. (It was an old problem: Years ago, when I was married, my then-husband woke me one night and said: "Are you eating *candy* ?")

While looking for a new job, I had time to start exercising again, and to eat right, and to drink plenty of water, but I didn't. It was easier to relocate permanently to the land of dim rooms, dark chocolate, and all-day television, to outfit my wardrobe entirely in caftans. To paraphrase novelist Richard Ford, I was learning what's at the end of my rope and what it felt like to be there.

But there are problems and there are Problems. I wasn't dealing with a debilitating condition or an abusive husband or unremitting poverty or the death of a child or a male population that wanted me dead just because I wear lipstick; the only war zone I've ever lived in is the one in my head. My situation was self-imposed. I had choices. It was time to start making some good ones.

While lying fully clothed in my childhood bed in the middle of a beautiful and utterly wasted Mississippi summer day, I realized it was either get up—I mean really get up—or die. I don't know why, but I thought of Bikram yoga. I had tried Bikram a few times. I remembered appreciating most of all the permission to be quiet. I recalled the yoga room as a place where I could breathe.

## Hard Numbers



As I start the 60-day challenge, I need to know the depth of the damage. I can't just keep saying I feel lousy; I need raw, supporting data on why I feel lousy.

My sister, Tracey, tells me about Lifesigns, a Memphis-based clinic that performs extensive physicals. In the days before my workup, I hit one last gastro-nostalgic round of Burger King, Wendy's, and Taco Bell, and if there were a Dairy Queen within 25 miles, buddy, I'd hit that, too. I'm eating leftover Papa John's breadsticks even as I ring up Lifesigns to *make the appointment*—and I don't even like breadsticks.

Although I've experienced clean-eating periods in my life, good nutrition

doesn't come naturally to me. In my home state of Mississippi, the fattest state in the nation, 32.5 percent of adults are obese and a vegetable isn't considered edible unless you've cooked it in a half-pound of bacon grease.

All this history shows up on the Lifesigns scale, of course. Before checking me for heart disease (clear), a thyroid condition (clear), cancer (clear), and diabetes (see below), the nurse weighs me in at an astonishing 208 pounds—83 pounds more than I'd like to weigh (I'm 5' 5"). "Your physical exam," the detailed report from Felix Caldwell, MD, will say, "reveals...evidence of obesity."

## Obesity?

I probably should have known this, but federal guidelines say you are clinically obese and therefore in danger of liver and heart disease, diabetes, sleep problems, osteoarthritis, and cancer if your body mass index (BMI) is 30 or higher. Your risk for chronic disease increases significantly when your BMI surpasses even 25; mine comes back as 34.6. For a woman my age, overall body fat should be between 23 and 33.9 percent; mine is 42.1. I am basically a gel. Your health risks increase even further if your waist circumference measures more than 35 inches (40 for men); mine measures 37.

I ring up [Mehmet Oz, MD](#), the cardiothoracic surgeon, author, and *O* magazine contributing editor, for help understanding the nine-page report. "The obesity is gonna cost you some life expectancy," he tells me flatly as he looks over my test results. "Your blood pressure is almost perfect, but your fasting blood sugar is 99 [milligrams per deciliter]—if it were over 100, I'd start calling you a prediabetic. So, you're close. I can almost guarantee that if you maintained this lifestyle another five years, the sugar would slowly rise."

My LDL cholesterol, the bad one, should be 100 or less but measures 149—"high enough that we actually would start to treat that, normally," Oz goes on to say. High cholesterol, he explains, is an early indicator of metabolic syndrome: belly fat leading to a series of negative health changes. "The belly fat squeezes the kidneys, which can lead to high blood pressure; the fat can also poison your liver. The fact that your kidneys are a little abnormal reflects changes to kidney function from the inflammatory effects of the obesity. And you're developing foie gras of your liver."

Oz makes it clear that I need to improve my diet immediately and exercise at least 30 minutes a day—for the rest of my life. He singles out breathing and stretching as particularly beneficial—which, as it happens, are central to Bikram yoga.

## Stretch, Sweat, Repeat x 60

Bikram Yoga Memphis, the studio closest to my mother's home in Tupelo, Mississippi, is cruelly located a few doors down from Muddy's Bake Shop, which some consider the best cupcake pusher in the city. For the first seven of the 60 days, my goal is twofold: Stay out of Muddy's and do not throw up in class.

On day one, BYM founder Lori Givens stands up front, on a carpeted podium. The goal for beginners, she says, is just to stay in the room, to learn to breathe. "Feet together, heels and toes touching, let's begin," she says. In a Bikram studio, only the teacher speaks, delivering Choudhury's almost incessant and incantatory instructions. Class takes place in a large, rectangular studio with thin carpeting and a floor-to-ceiling mirror on one long wall. The lights— *so bright*. They are, in fact,

fluorescent. In the mirror, I look not only gargantuan but also slightly green.

This essential setup can be found in every Bikram yoga studio from Memphis to Jakarta, on the theory that the more minimalist and standardized the practice, the deeper the potential for focused hard work. "If you want a dark room and incense, go find another yoga—we don't do that," teacher and BYM co-owner and codirector Gregg Williams tells us one day. "Bikram wants the room bright so you can see yourself." The idea is to meet your own eyes as you move through the postures—to develop a relationship with your mirrored self and start being kind to her.

Although Lori and her instructors continually refer to Bikram as basic, nothing about it feels basic to me as day after day I blunder through 26 postures and two breathing exercises, including physical impersonations of a rabbit, a camel, a perfect human bridge, a flower petal blooming, an eagle, a cobra, a corpse, a triangle, a pearl necklace, and more. My body simply won't bend. My breath is so loud, I'm attracting attention, and I truly worry that I'll pass out. Even lying in savasana—flat on my back with my arms by my side—feels strenuous, because my heels won't touch and the junk in my trunk puts a pinching arch in my back. Obviously, this is going to be a little more complicated than sweating some, stretching some, and—voilà!—solace and skinny jeans.

But it's not only the extra weight that interferes; my brain never shuts up: "My bra's too tight. My ponytail's too high. This carpet stinks. Is that cellulite on my biceps? I'm thirsty. Maybe it'll rain today. Why does everybody in here have a tattoo? Do I need a tattoo? If I got a tattoo, what would it look like and where would I put it? I might be having a heart attack. I'm exhausted—I'm done with this posture. I'm gonna bake me some chicken tonight."

## The most important instruction of all

It's amazing how many irritants you can find even in such a controlled environment. If I weren't so desperate to change my life, the sweat alone would keep me far, far away from this room. Other people's sweat freaks me out, as does any breach of my personal space. I need a two-foot circumference in all situations, especially those involving the potential slinging and mingling of human effluvia. The sweat dripping on towels and mats looks to me like biotoxic rain. Day after day, I try distancing my mat from others or holing up in a back corner, until Lori sighs and diagnoses me with control issues. "This is something we'll need to work on," she says.

One day Gregg is leading us through the standing series—the first 50 minutes of class, where the heart rate rises—when all of a sudden I'm pretty sure I'm going to projectile-vomit my lunch onto the bare heels of the woman in front of me. This is not unusual—the heat and exertion can come down on you quickly, especially if you're new or not drinking enough water. The feeling is so overpowering, I attempt to flee the room.

Fleeing the room, like talking or whispering in class, is not allowed.

"Sit back down! Sit back down!" Gregg says.

"You'd rather I throw up on the carpet?" I say.

"You're not going to throw up," he says. "Lie down. Just breathe."

This panicked feeling is what they call the "yoga truck." When the yoga truck hits, all you want to do is get out, or lie in savasana and count ceiling tiles.

After 15 days, I am sore and discouraged and sick of being wringing wet, and I feel utterly overwhelmed by everything I'm supposed to remember, sometimes all of it at once: Lock your knee, contract your abdominal muscles, chin down, chest up, focus only on yourself in the mirror, quiet your breath, pulling is the object of stretching, if you're falling out of the posture you're not kicking hard enough, chin up, eyes open, let it go, just be here, have compassion for yourself, kick harder—kick, kick, kick, kick, kick, kick, kick! I can't even get through the full 90 minutes without standing or sitting out certain postures.

Flat on my back, I silently rant at myself. "I hate you. I hate this class. I hate this stupid stomach and these enormous boobs. I hate Ben and Jerry and KFC and the Lay's potato chip company. My car smells like a yoga studio, and for what? After nearly three weeks, my clothes aren't any looser. I may as well go on a cupcake crime spree for all the good this is doing...."

"Get out of your head," the teachers say.

This, for me, is becoming the most important instruction of all, far more important than "Suck in your stomach." I'm stuck in self-flagellating old thought patterns and focusing on what's not happening rather than on what is. All I can think—and talk—about is my weight, which is a little like worrying about a leaky roof when the foundation is cracked.

Perfectionism gets no points, either. Just having expectations is a mistake. Though every posture of every class is the same, I realize over time that it's also potentially different, a hard concept to grasp for someone who tends to see the world as either yin or yang, who has always measured success in terms of ground gained. To execute a decent balancing stick on Monday and completely flub it on Tuesday unsettles me, and my classroom emotions start to veer like mountain switchbacks: confidence panic euphoria despair.

"How long did it take you to get yourself into this mess?" Gregg asks me one day.

"Years," I say.

## Is it all worth it?



Well, Then," He Says, "It'll Take a While to Fix It"

Gregg should know. He weighed 435 pounds and was at the point of suicide when he started Bikram four years ago. He has lost more than 200 pounds and is now engaged to Lori. Bikram is Lori and Gregg's business but also their lifestyle. The same is true of all the teachers—they are my leaders as well as my classmates. They learned, as I am learning, that the body begins to crave Bikram—the heat, the moves, the comfort of healthy discomfort. When I started the 60 days, I wanted to kill the already-dead yogi who came up with standing bow-pulling posture, but I'm actually starting to look forward to it—not much, mind you, but some.

"Elbow hurt? Arms hurt? Back hurt? Hair hurt? Hands hurt? Good for you," Choudhury has been known to say to his students during particularly challenging moments in class. "All the pain in the

world is not going to take happiness, peace away from you. If anybody can make you angry, you are the loser. If anyone can steal your happiness, peace, away from you, you are the loser."

You'd have to be in the studio to understand the power of words like these. The teachers' instructions and insights become like a mantra, and the teachers themselves like coaches, or beloved shrinks. As I lie in savasana, half-dead with exhaustion, just listening to Lori, Gregg, Kerri, Shannon, Jyo, or Kristy talk about strength and determination—about the integrity of the *attempt*—propels me through the remaining postures. I may not do the moves perfectly or even well, but by week four I'm doing them. I've stayed in the room, which calls upon reserves of calm I didn't even know I had. The blood flows, and whether the Bikram claims about health benefits are true or not, I do start to feel different, and to cultivate better thoughts. Instead of thinking, "I can't do this," an alternative occurs to me: "I am doing this."

**"Emotions first," Lori keeps telling me. "Then the body will follow."**

The first demon to go is the stiffness. The second is the headaches. As I reach the halfway mark of 30 days, I feel more relaxed. I stand straighter. I can touch my toes. People tell me my skin looks great, my eyes brighter. One day in the parking lot, a woman driving a Mercedes cuts me off, and instead of fuming, I simply let it go—lady wants to be a jerk, let her be a jerk; it's got nothing to do with me.

I'm drinking water now—not enough but more than before. I've completely changed my diet to lean meats and vegetables and have set myself back only once—with a pair of chewy Chips Ahoy cookies (120 calories) one particularly rough night alone at a cousin's house. The food changes don't feel like sacrifice. In fact, I was hungrier on the drive-through diet of probably 3,000 calories a day than I am now on half that amount.

On day 60, I'm scheduled to return to Lifesigns for a back-end battery of tests, but on day 30 I do a few measurements of my own. My weight has dropped to 198—a long way from my personal goal of 125, but I'll take it. Wii Fit tells me my BMI has fallen from 34.6 to 32.7. I've lost 2.5 inches in my hips, 2.5 in my bust, and one inch in the all-important waistline.

Also, I got a job—a terrific one. Another city, another magazine. I'll start work after I finish the Bikram challenge, assuming I finish the Bikram challenge.

At one point, Choudhury himself swings through Memphis to promote his book *Bikram Yoga: The Guru Behind Hot Yoga Shows the Way to Radiant Health and Personal Fulfillment*. Lori and Gregg arrange for me to talk with him before a crowded Borders book signing, a conversation that encompasses the fifth dimension, Jupiter, and a parable about a wooden bird. Choudhury, who routinely mentions having trained and befriended public figures like Shirley MacLaine, Richard Nixon, Madonna, and Kareem Abdul-Jabbar, has just taken an emotional tour of Graceland and keeps talking about Elvis. "He was my best friend. I could have saved Elvis's life."

Choudhury is 63 and looks 50. He is petite and compact (I've seen his abs—I know). For the book signing, he dresses in a salmon-colored, formfitting V-neck sweater and creased white pants that look like something a cruise director might wear. His Rolex is as blingy as anything Elvis wore circa 1975.

"What's the most important thing in your life?" Choudhury asks me. His rhetoric is well practiced—the question lives in his repertoire, just as the Japanese ham sandwich lives in his lineup of postures.

"Is it bad that I can't answer that question?" I say.

"I ask the same question around the globe," he tells me. "They say the most important thing is God, water, wind, family, children, love—all bull. The most important thing in your life is you."

By day 60, I hope to understand what he means...

## The 60 Day Makeover: Part II



*In January, 2010, Paige Williams—overweight, divorced, out of work, and in debt—embarked on the 60-day Bikram challenge in hopes of turning her life around. Here she writes about the final 30 days of her journey.*

### **I Am Such a Cheater**

In a couple of hours, I'm supposed to unfurl my yoga mat at Bikram Yoga Memphis, yet here I am at Karen Wilder Fitness, considering a fling with the exercise machines. The Bikram studio still seems a little alien to me, but being in Karen's gym feels like being among old friends: There's Elliptical Trainer and Free Weights and Smith—and I'm so happy to see Kettlebell I want to pick him up and swing him like a favorite child. I haven't exactly hung out with these guys lately, but I'm pretty sure we could pick up where we left off, maybe even bump our relationship up a notch, get into some real commitment.

For more than four weeks, as I've settled into the 60-day Bikram challenge, my teachers have been telling me that this yoga is all my body needs, that a class per day for two months will renew me "from the inside out." According to them, and to founder Bikram Choudhury, I'm getting all the weight resistance and cardio (yes, cardio) I need, plus the active meditation of hatha, a centuries-old style of yoga. The deeper I get into the challenge, the more limber, focused, cleansed, and relaxed I feel, but I've started worrying to the point of obsession that I'm not losing weight fast enough, and that others agree.

I sense that they're looking me up and down in a certain way, judging. I started out 80 pounds overweight, and I'm losing one to two pounds per week—the healthiest and most maintainable kind of weight loss, doctors say—but nobody wants to hear this. All people seem to care about is what they see, not the process behind it. Reading doubt on their faces, I'm hurt, angry, ashamed. And now panicked.

A little weepily, I explain all this to calm, lovely Karen, who listens and nods, as if she understands perfectly the maniac sitting in front of her. As I babble on, I'm pawing through my absurdly enormous Timbuk2 messenger bag for a tissue and yanking out lipsticks and ponytail holders and free-floating receipts and a tattered *Runner's World* that I borrowed days ago from my brother-in-law and still haven't read. Later, when I listen to a tape of the conversation, I hear myself speaking in breathless bursts, barely letting Karen talk.

**"Hold on," I say at one point, "I need to breathe."**

"It's amazing you just recognized that," Karen says. "So you're already good at catching yourself in your breathing patterns. Now, every day, I want you to look at yourself in the mirror with kind eyes and with thankfulness and patience. Just allow yourself to do that."

Sentimentality usually triggers my gag reflex, but in this moment I make a decision not to go cynical. If I need to trade in my critical eyes for some kind ones, I may as well start today. While I'm at it, I'll stop what a psychologist would refer to as my "all-or-nothing thinking": If I'm still wearing gigantic jeans, Bikram must not work; if my most recent job was a disaster, I must be terrible at what I do; if my



marriage didn't take, I'll never love or be loved again. "Your first prescription is, renew your mind every day," Karen says. "That sets the template. That will create harmony in your body." Good. But what will create a *waistline* in my body? That's what I still want to know.

## You'd better not scream for ice cream



This body can't be rebuilt by Bikram alone. Living well also involves eating well, and I'm not talking about bibbing up for lobster every night. I changed my diet on day one of the challenge and have stuck to it. I'm in this to refresh and de-stress, and half of that transformation involves eating like a sane person, not like a lumberjack with one hour left to live.

Yet there's so much information out there about how to eat right, it's hard to know which stuff to pay attention to and which will just fog your life with cabbage odor. I've never been a fad freak, but I have, at various points, tried Atkins, the Zone, Slim-Fast, Weight Watchers, and Herbalife. And I'm still not immune. My cousin Jill and I have spent the last few weeks melting "virgin coconut oil" and drizzling it on salads and oatmeal because we've heard it shrinks belly fat.

I'm also well versed in all the clever diet strategies: Make a week's worth of meals in advance, freeze them, and "when you get home just pop one in the microwave!" Or organize ingredients into carefully Sharpied Tupperware and Ziplocs so all you have to do is combine and bake, or combine and stir-fry. Etc. The problem is, when you lack the energy even to care what you put in your mouth, it's easiest just to call Domino's, no matter what's in the pantry.

Now that my energy level is changing and I'm more active, I do care. At this point, I want a credible source to make me a nutrition map, and I want that person to be Lori Givens, who owns Bikram Yoga Memphis with her fiancé, Gregg Williams.

Lori is a nutrition freak without the annoying behavior of a nutrition freak. She is long and lean and gorgeous and strong, but she doesn't walk around boring everyone to death with talk about bee pollen or vanadium or wild yam. I've asked her to show me what to buy and to tell me why. I already know that trans fats are poison and that I should stay away from all things white (white pasta, white bread, potatoes = pudge), but the knowledge that baby greens trump tortellini has done me zero good. I've spent most of my postdivorce adulthood filling my fridge with freshness, only to watch (and smell) it all go to waste. Broccoli morphs into sordid soup. Kale shrinks and pales to the point that I can't even remember what it used to be. Rancid meats, moldy fruits...in my culinary history, perishables just perish.

With Lori as my guide, I might make choices that stick. To that end, Jill and I hit Whole Foods with her one afternoon early on in the Bikram regimen. First, Lori schools us on the benefits of salsa and Wasa crackers, kale and salmon and spelt, but as we head toward Dairy she starts gunning for outlaws. Women pull their children out of the way; a tumbleweed rolls through; somewhere, a horse whinnies. When Lori reaches the case of beautifully wrapped Cheddar wedges and Boursin and Brie, she looks me hard in the eye.

"No more cheese," she says.

Which is not even funny. The words *cheese shop* thrill me the way *bubble bath* and *touchdown* thrill other people. I'm a goat girl all the way. Or was. So long, chèvre.

"Cheese has a happiness protein in it," Lori says, explaining that, like refined sugar, cheese comforts with an immediate (and ultimately false) chemical lift. For similar reasons, she also shoots down my other favorite thing: cereal. I have at times lived on raisin bran, Honey Nut Cheerios, and granola, but Lori says, "Never eat cereal after noon. You know what? Just don't eat cereal at all."

The salad bar seems like safe enough territory until Lori lays waste to the wasabi peas ("They're fried"), to too much egg, and to chickpeas—too many chickpeas will equal too much Paige. "If you gotta have beans, go for kidney over garbanzo," she says. "Less fat, more fiber."

Gloppy dressings: like, never. You'll want red wine or balsamic vinegar, Lori says, and very little or no oil. You'll want the baby greens or the romaine lettuce, not the iceberg, because the darker and leafier the vegetable, the healthier it is. Sunflower seeds—okay, a few. Croutons? Dream on. Cheese topping? Nice try; see above.

We eventually build a day's menu that uses all the food groups without blowing more than 1,500 calories. We have organic chicken, organic sliced turkey breast, and mahimahi, which Lori likes to bake on aluminum foil spritzed with olive oil-flavored cooking spray. We have Kashi GoLean hot cereal and Mr. Krispers, which are chips baked in sea salt and pepper—you can eat, like, five million of them for 120 calories. We've got Amy's organic frozen lasagna and frozen palak paneer and a cart full of kombucha—fermented tea @ \$3.99 per.

We've also got a price tag of about \$100. And I am not an heiress.

"How long will this last us?" I ask.

"The perishable stuff, about a week," Lori says. The Olave first-cold-pressed extra-virgin olive oil, the Bragg apple cider vinegar, the Nasoya fat-free faux mayonnaise, the mineral-rich Redmond sea salt ("Don't be afraid to use it!")—all that will last a bit longer. I have a feeling my cost-to-cart ratio is far different from a cost-to-cart ratio at Costco. Then again, a lot of these items aren't available at places like that. If they were, a lot more people would be healthy, right?

Not until they can make Wasa taste like dark chocolate, at which point the answer is: Maybe, but probably not even then.

## **This is your brain on Bikram**

Anyway, I've got other worries. For five weeks, I've behaved like a yoga mouse in class—hugging the baseboards, sticking to the back wall—but one day, Gregg's in a mood. He yanks me out of my comfort zone, sticks me up in front of everybody, and says, "You're not gonna hide in the corner anymore."

I'd been thinking he might go easier on me as the weeks pass, but the opposite has happened. He seems to wake up in the morning with me on his mind—and not in the good way. The more progress I make, the harder he pushes. "Some teachers come from a place of sympathy. I don't," Gregg says when I ask why he's gotta hate on me constantly. "I come from a place of 'You need to work hard all the time, every time.'"

In the first month, as I learned the 26 postures and two breathing exercises, my goal was not to become some golden goddess of yoga; my goal was to stay in the room and learn to breathe.

This second month, I'm working on more than the poses. I'm working on committing, which is hard for

an inveterate leaver. I've left cities and jobs and dear friends and good men. I've left my family over and over again. I've been in such a hurry to flee some situations and get on to the next, I've left clothes in the closet, food in the fridge. In Bikram class, I've already tried to leave once, but that didn't work. So knowing that I can't leave, I quietly protest my captivity by pretending.

The yogis call this the games stage. I'll do anything to buy myself a break. One day, I could do triangle posture if I wanted to, but I don't want to, so I breathe dramatically and pretend to be near collapse. (Result: I kind of really *do* feel near collapse.)

The teachers recognize the tricks because they've tried them all themselves. If I say I don't feel well, Gregg shakes his head and says, "Do yoga like a champion." If I admit (or claim) that I'm exhausted, he says, "No mercy." I've heard an urban myth about an instructor in California who was in the middle of teaching a class when a rat showed up in the back of the room. "Rat! Rat!" the students yelled, and the teacher said, "That's not a rat. That's the manifestation of your fears."

When Choudhury passed through town recently, he told me, "Your mind is supposed to be your best friend, but it's the number one enemy. Mind can make you Hitler or Mother Teresa." He has repeated this line all over the world, to students like John McEnroe and Madonna and to students like me. "It's never too late, you're never too bad, never too old, never too sick to start from scratch and begin again," he said. This is the thought that drives me back into that 105-degree room day after day.

One afternoon in the middle of ustrasana, or camel pose—a killer backbend that some consider the toughest posture in the whole practice—it occurs to me that if I can remain calm and focused while in such a physically stressful state, I can get through anything. The studio around me is full of people who know just what I mean. They practice not because a Bikram studio is a particularly lovely place to spend 90 minutes a day but because without it, they would be angry, inflexible, immobilized, fatigued, intolerant, petty, pained, and maybe even dead. The type-A personalities feel calmer. Every student has a story.

At the beginning of the challenge, a 60-day goal felt daunting. Around day 20, it felt impossible. Around day 50, I started getting that giddy, generous feeling that comes when the bad date (or vacation or visit) is almost over and you can sense freedom. Only I don't want freedom.

On day 60, as the final class ends, I would like to say the clouds part and the angels weep. When Gregg utters his final words and we as a class take our last measured breath, I expect a rush of emotion, but Bikram is not about the big display. It's about powerfully careful moves. What I feel in that last moment is calm, and satisfied, and certain that I now have a refuge, a resource—a blueprint.

## Hard numbers, part II

I'm so eager to see what the diagnostics will show, I hardly even notice the needle sucking blood out of my arm.

My last Bikram class ended just an hour ago and I'm already back at Lifesigns. Before I started the challenge, the clinic tested everything from my lung capacity to my body fat to my cholesterol, with some alarming results. My LDL, or "bad" cholesterol, was 149 when it should have been less than 100. My triglycerides suggested an abysmal diet. My body-fat test showed I was nearly half made up of fat, and my body mass index (BMI) was 34.6 when it should've been 25 or less. My blood glucose level was 99, one point away from prediabetes. On the treadmill stress test, I barely got to a workout intensity level of eight METS, when I should've been able to do ten.

For depression, I was taking (and had been taking for years) the highest possible combination dosage of Wellbutrin and Lexapro. I slept miserably if at all. I had headaches every day. I had plenty of reasons to be happy, but I couldn't see any of them.

The 60-day challenge got me out of bed and out of my own head and showed me the futility of self-flagellation and regret. I've stopped taking the Wellbutrin and Lexapro, and, while the depression is still with me, it feels manageable. I've still been turning like a rotisserie chicken at night when I sleep, but I must not be grinding my teeth anymore, because I no longer wake up with a headache. Now I'm ready to see what Bikram has done for my body. The results:

**Weight:** I've lost 14 pounds.

**Waist:** five inches, gone.

**LDL cholesterol:** 108.

**BMI:** 32.3—down 7 percent.

**Treadmill stress test:** I get to 11.5 METS this time.

**Fasting blood glucose:** It's dropped to 73.

"**Everything changed**," says Felix Caldwell, MD, "and in the right direction."

All except for one thing.

For the second round of blood tests, I ask Caldwell to check my hormones. A few years ago, another doctor checked them. I'd recently had surgery to remove fibroid tumors, and I wanted to make sure I could still have children. I hadn't been feeling well for a while, though, and my symptoms—hot flashes, mood swings—sounded like the dreaded menopause. And sure enough, the blood work even back then suggested I was headed in that direction more quickly than usual; the fertility specialist told me she could probably still help me, but I'd have to hurry.

Instead of hurrying to have children, I hurried off to work. And now my Lifesigns numbers show not perimenopause, but full-blown menopause. At age 42.

Menopause means that my body is making much less estrogen and progesterone, hormones that are critical to bone density and reproductive health, among other things. Onset depends on life circumstances and genes; women generally can expect menopause to occur at the age their mothers went through it, which in my case would have been around age 52. Until now, I'd thought I had at least a decade before onset; and because friends of mine had given birth in their early 40s, I thought I had a few seconds left on the kid clock.

"So definitely no children," I say to Dr. Mehmet Oz when I get him on the phone. Oz is director of the Cardiovascular Institute at Columbia University and a regular *O* magazine contributor. He's looking at my diagnostics as we talk, just as he did with the pre-Bikram set.

"You're not having kids," he says. "But maybe that's a good thing."

"Maybe for them," I say.

We laugh. It isn't funny.

"Well, at least this explains a lot," I say. The miserably sleepless nights. The exhaustion. The face flushes so severe I'm powder-dry one minute and glistening the next. The suddenly thick waist after a lifetime with a flat stomach. The irritability. The fatigue. The overbearing stress. "Progesterone is like Valium," Oz explains, "so when you lower your progesterone levels—this hormone that keeps you calm and collected, that helps you deal with the slights that occur to women in our society—you're a lot more stressed out."

"Did I do something wrong?" I ask. "Did I do something to cause this?"

"We're not sure how weight affects menopause," he says. "It certainly throws off your hormones. Stress could affect menopause. Physical activity slows down menopause; if you're inactive, you'll get menopause earlier. **I think stress and inactivity are the big things driving this.**"

It's stunningly painful to hear once again that I may have been the chief architect of my own decline, and that even as I claw my way out of my self-made mess there'll be something new to worry about: an earlier risk of cardiovascular disease, thinning bones, a premature invitation to AARP.

I ask: What now? Oz recommends bioidentical hormone therapy and refers me to his friend Erika Schwartz, MD, a New York specialist in the treatment.

"The life that you happen to be in has thrown you a lot of curveballs," Schwartz tells me by phone a few days later. "Because you didn't have the tools you needed to fend off these curveballs, you absorbed them. We need to replenish your hormones and then see what your body does with the information. The body has a beautiful way of healing itself."

She prescribes an FDA-approved cream called EstroGel (bioidentical estrogen); her own Pro-Cream, a low-dose, nonprescription bioidentical progesterone topical; and a low-dose thyroid medication. (My thyroid level, as it turned out, fell on the low end of the normal range.) She suggests that I add supplements, including vitamin D, which I've actually been taking since the pre-Bikram round of diagnostics.

"By the way, none of this is because you are menopausal—I hate that term," Schwartz says. "You feel this way because you're hormonally out of balance. That's it. When people say 'menopause' it's like, 'Whoa, I'm old; it's over.' But you're not. You're not. You're not."

Which is what I most want, and need, to hear. This attitude feels absolutely necessary to my ability to move forward. Now I'm armed with a trio of defenses: hormone replacements, a new way of thinking about what's happening to my body, and, of course, Bikram. At first, this yoga felt exploratory, optional, but now that I know what's really going on, it feels essential to managing my day-to-day happiness and improving my overall well-being.

I've found a great yoga studio in my new city. I recognize none of the other students, of course, but everything about the postures is now familiar—as familiar, in fact, as Kettlebell and all my other old gym friends, which I ultimately never touched throughout the two months of Bikram.

I do not, and will never, love every class. Some days I'd rather stroll through Times Square in a string

bikini than spend another 90 minutes in that steam box. Yet the best of Bikram redeems those days. The best of Bikram is like being in love. It's like taking in that first breath of springtime air, seeing green tips on the stems of dogwoods.

One Saturday in Memphis, I walked out of class and into a golden morning. Everything I saw seemed urgent and worthy and beautiful. I passed two old men hauling four small horses. I saw a field of yellow wildflowers. I swear to you, at a traffic light I pulled up behind a LOVE WINS bumper sticker. At the grocery, as I wheeled my empty cart back to the corral, an old man said, "Baby, let me push that over there for you. It'll be my good turn for the day." When I got in the car, Lloyd Cole was singing—again, not even kidding—that song about Eva Marie Saint in *On the Waterfront*: "*All you need is love is all you need.*"

The whole 60-day experience was worth one euphoric morning. Because I'd forgotten I could even feel that way.

<http://www.oprah.com/health/Paige-Williams-60-Day-Makeover/print/1>

<http://www.oprah.com/health/Paige-Williams-60-Day-Bikram-Yoga-Makeover/print/1>