





PART II

**“IT’S NEVER TOO LATE,
YOU’RE NEVER TOO OLD,
NEVER TOO SICK TO
START OVER AGAIN.’ THIS
THOUGHT DRIVES ME
BACK INTO THE 105-DEGREE
ROOM DAY AFTER DAY”**

PAIGE WILLIAMS hoped the 60-day yoga challenge would change her body, her mind, and her life. It did—in ways she never expected.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY LAUREN GREENFIELD



AFTER

CHANGE FOR THE GOOD: After two months of hot yoga, I feel more limber, focused, cleansed, and relaxed. And I've lost 14 pounds.



BEFORE

Last month Paige Williams—overweight, divorced, out of work, and in debt—embarked on the 60-day Bikram challenge in hopes of turning her life around (to read that article, go to oprah.com/omagextras). This month 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 Olive

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,

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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. ♦



VITAL SIGNS: Within an hour of my last class, I get my new medical diagnostics. All good news—almost.

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

Some days I'd rather stroll through Times Square in a bikini than spend another 90 minutes in that steam box. Yet the best of Bikram redeems those days.

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. **Q**