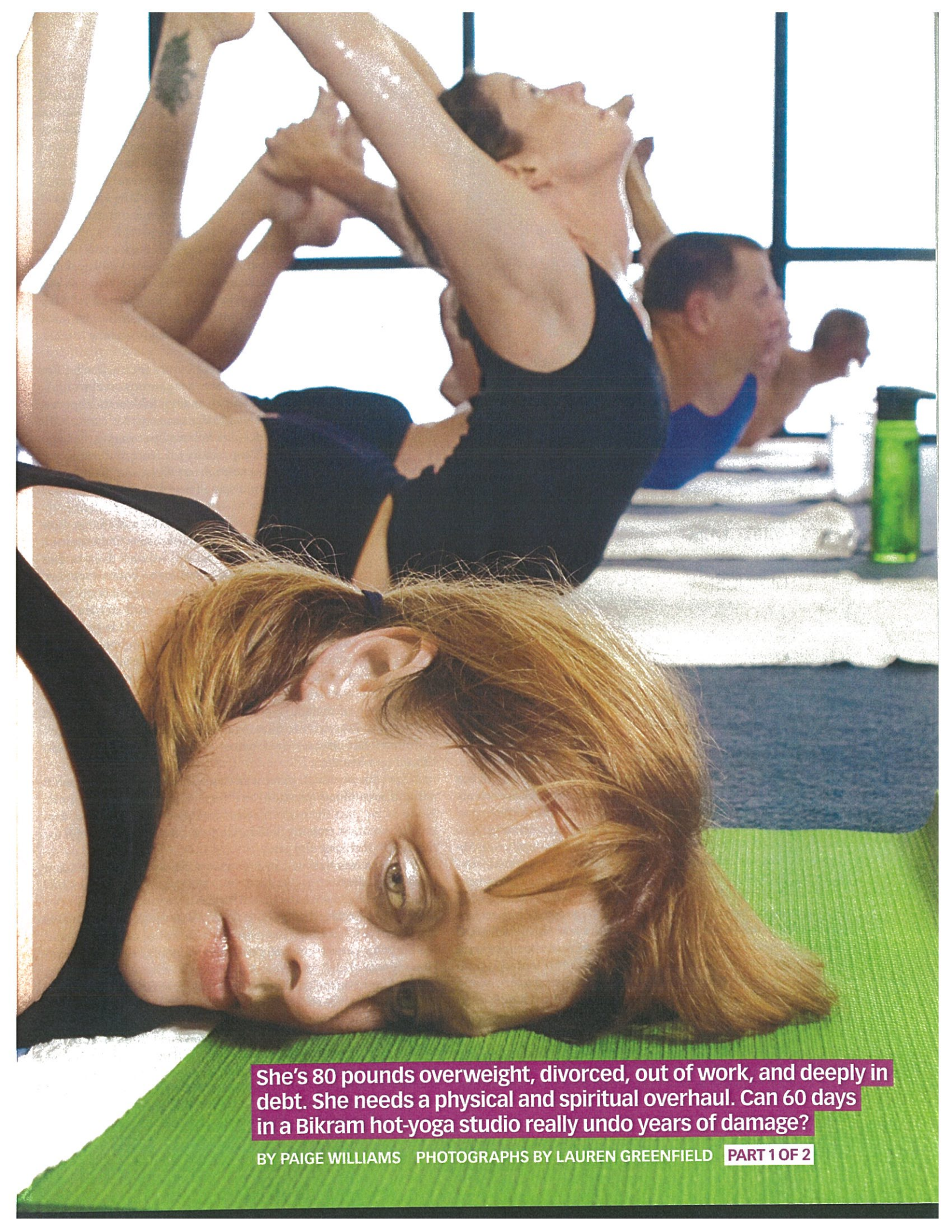
A photograph of a person's arm, showing cellulite on the bicep. The arm is resting on a blue and white striped towel. The background is dark, and there are other people's arms visible in the distance. Overlaid on the image is a quote in large, bold, purple text.

“MY BRA’S TOO TIGHT. IS THAT CELLULITE ON MY BICEPS? I MIGHT BE HAVING A HEART ATTACK. AND WHY DOES EVERYBODY IN HERE HAVE A TATTOO?”



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?

BY PAIGE WILLIAMS PHOTOGRAPHS BY LAUREN GREENFIELD **PART 1 OF 2**



PAIGE WILLIAMS

AT A GLANCE

BORN: Oxford, Mississippi

HEIGHT: 5'5"

WEIGHT: 208

TOTAL CHOLESTEROL: 234

BODY MASS INDEX: 34.6

SLEEP PATTERN: Abysmal

LOVE LIFE: Laughable

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 40 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 teardown. And I'm hoping Bikram is my bulldozer.

Anatomy of a Meltdown

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.

Wherever my slide started, it ended here: Stress + sugar + carbohydrate overload – exercise + insomnia – adequate water + self-loathing – romantic intimacy + regret = meltdown.

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 ▶

FEELING FULL: "Eating vegetables and lean meat doesn't feel like a sacrifice. I was hungrier before on my drive-through diet."



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.

"Get out of your head," the teachers say. This is becoming the most important instruction of all.

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.*

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.

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.

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! 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.*

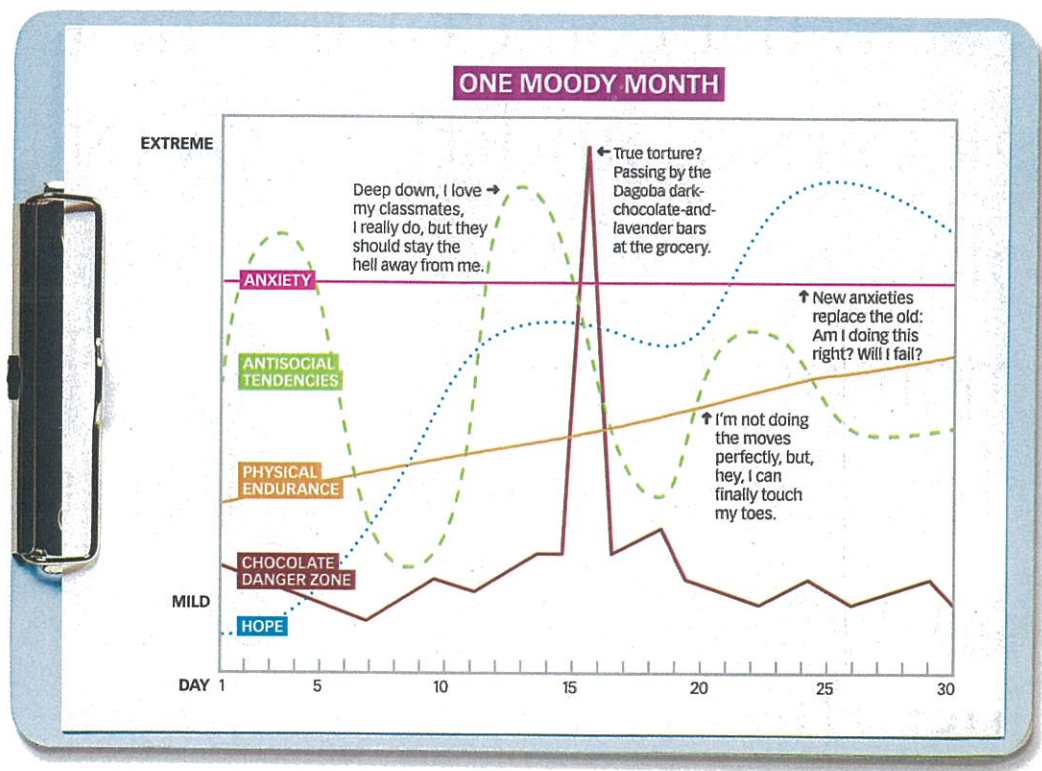
I may as well go on a cupcake crime spree for all the good this is doing...

"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.

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

"Years," I say.



"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, [CONTINUED ON PAGE 166]

"MY BRA'S TOO TIGHT..."

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 129

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.

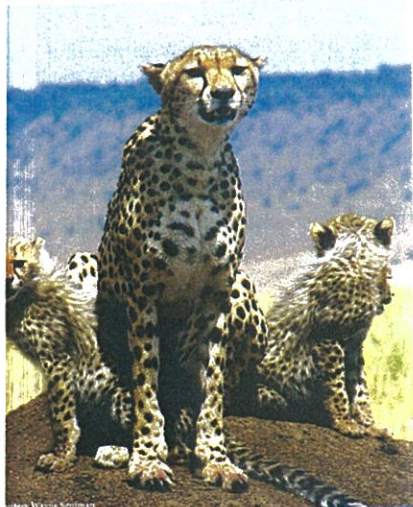
"What's the most important thing in your life?" Choudhury asks me. His rhetoric is well practiced—the question lives in his repertoire, just as the Japanese ham sandwich lives in his lineup of postures.

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

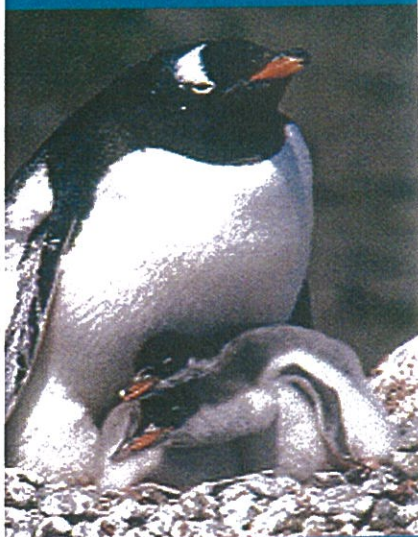
"I ask the same question around the globe," he tells me. "They say the most important thing is God, water, wind, family, children, love—all bull. The most important thing in your life is you."

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

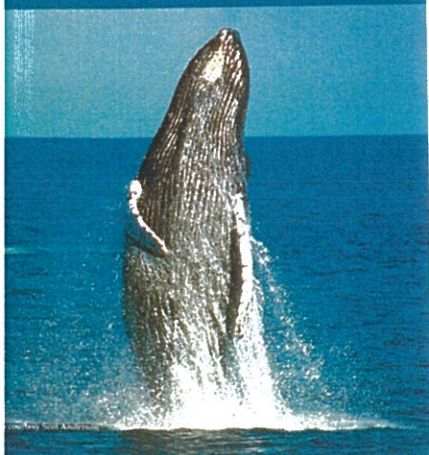
Coming next month: Paige Williams's second 30 days of Bikram and beyond. (Was it worth it?)



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