

ELLE *excerpt*

# WORKING GIRL

*The achievement of a goal isn't always what it's made out to be. In her bestselling non-fiction book, SUITS: A WOMAN ON WALL STREET, this author tells the searing, honest and REDEMPTIVE story of how her time on Wall Street actually helped her find a DREAM she didn't know she cherished*

By NINA GODIWALLA

**M**y path from Wall Street executive to author was not intentional. It was a slow journey of letting go of the expectations

I believed my parents and the Parsi community had of me, and, finally, following my heart. After working for several years in New York City's financial world, I chose to get an MA in Liberal Arts before getting my Wharton MBA. It's not a path many Wall Street executives choose, but it led me to writing a book that I didn't even realise I had in me.

My thesis for my MA was the first draft of *Suits: A Woman on Wall Street*. The book started with just two short stories I wrote for fun. One about growing up as a second-generation Parsi American and feeling I'd be a failure if I wasn't a doctor or an engineer, and another was about my journey from small town Texas suburbs to Wall Street.

An *Austin American Statesman* review of my book reads: "Imagine your world is controlled by powerful people who call you in the middle of the night to do their

bidding. Discouraged from spending time with family or friends outside the cause, you spend virtually all of your time pecking away at an endless to-do list, punctuated by boorish conversations you're expected to accept and even pretend to find amusing. This is a cult — one that worships money and power.... But Nina soon realised that fitting in at Morgan Stanley had a steep price.... Strip clubs, porn on computers, not-so-subtle ridiculing of minorities, and vitriolic outbursts at everyone from Starbucks employees to electronics-store clerks were all part of day-to-day life at the firm."

I wrote *Suits* because I saw so many Asian- and Indian-Americans like me feeling so pressured by their parents and community to go into fields that were financially lucrative but weren't necessarily personally rewarding to them. I also saw so many women who found the fraternity-like Wall Street culture incredibly isolating and would regretfully leave the financial industry after only a few years. While on Wall Street, so many people around me appeared to have the American Dream: Money, power and prestige. Initially, it seemed perfect. Isn't that

what my parents immigrated to America for?

But after realising Wall Street wasn't personally rewarding to me, I desperately tried to understand myself better and found myself turning to my Indian roots. I remembered my visits to Mumbai as a child and being overwhelmed by my uncles and aunts who seemed to pour with love and gratitude for others. It was so unlike my individualistic life in the US. I also remembered walking from my grandfather's house in Gamdevi to my *maasi's* in Gowalia Tank and seeing warm smiles from even the most impoverished beggars near Kemp's Corner. Turning to the East for lessons in happiness, I stumbled upon meditation and immediately became a practitioner, and then a teacher.

Through MindWorks, I now bring leadership courses focused on self-awareness and stress management into major US institutions including Dow Chemical, NASA and University of Texas MBA program. Meditation is one of the critical tools used in our courses. Much of my life has been spent struggling with how I can successfully marry my Indian and American roots. I feel I've finally found that peaceful place where I know what I'm doing is my destiny.

**FROM SUITS: A WOMAN ON WALL STREET, BY NINA GODIWALLA**

By the time I started my second summer internship at Morgan Stanley, my junior summer, I was much more polished. It was easier to impress this Wall Street crowd once I had a better idea of what to hide. I could have returned to JP Morgan, but Morgan Stanley had started a minority program a few years earlier that provided a scholarship in addition to my salary. Plus, Morgan Stanley's

investment banking division was considered stronger than JP Morgan's. After an intensive application process and many long grueling interviews, I was accepted into the Morgan Stanley Scholars Program.

Like JP Morgan, Morgan Stanley spent an extraordinary amount of time wooing their interns. While JP Morgan focused on treating us to Broadway shows, Yankees games, and elaborate meals in order to seduce us with a certain lifestyle, Morgan Stanley matched these fringe benefits and then took it to another level. As corporate events, we took field trips to our executives' summer and fall mansions. Their vast homes were outfitted with golf courses, tennis courts, vineyards, and nearly Olympic-size pools. There, we met their families, who seemed to dwell on all their other homes around the globe that they tried so desperately to visit. They would explain how little time they spent at this mansion while showing us pictures of their Italy and Fiji homes, "which are much bigger than this one." Like skilled game-show hosts, they played to our hunger.

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I was in awe. Everything I was experiencing was foreign to me. It was as if someone had flung me into one of my grandmother's soap operas, but unlike her, I didn't believe Americans really lived like this. I found myself looking at their children, wondering what it was like to eat fresh-baked chocolate-filled croissants for breakfast instead of Pop-Tarts; have your own nanny to treat like a servant; and spend weekends ordering banana splits with chocolate, vanilla, and strawberry ice cream at country clubs that didn't allow you to wear shorts. With every new place we went, I knew I was out of my element, but my curiosity and excitement for the extravagance I wouldn't see otherwise kept me hungry. At the time, most of us didn't realise we were being sold something. We believed what they chanted: "You're here because you are the best of the best." Who wouldn't want to believe that? In some way or another, most of us had worked hard to get there, and, finally, we were hearing what we had been trying to prove to ourselves and others for years. Even many of ➤



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the interns who had grown up wealthy hadn't experienced such extravagant childhoods. They, too, were taken in by this opulence.

It was irrelevant to my teammates or officers that I was a Morgan Stanley Scholar, since most of them weren't familiar with the program. To them, I was just another intern. Through an extremely competitive process, the Scholars Program chose about twenty minorities in the country and provided us with a two-year scholarship as long as we interned with them. As Scholars, we got to meet senior officers for lunches over the summer, most notably the chairman of Morgan Stanley. There weren't many University of Texas alumni available for networking, so Morgan Stanley became my alumni register.

The few senior-level minorities had been at Morgan Stanley for most of their careers and had learned to conform to the rigid corporate culture. Their years spent fighting to succeed left many of them hardened, yet they realised the need to offer a hand to those who would follow them. At the beginning of the summer they collected us for a meeting in conference room 32A. "As a minority you will be scrutinised. And if you are a woman, expect ten times the challenge. If they drink, you should drink less. Don't think you can do whatever they do. They look at you differently than they do themselves. You will be required to prove yourself. You DO NOT get the benefit of the doubt. One slipup can cost you years of hard work." Their faces were fixed with stern grimaces, but you could see in their eyes that they were speaking from painful experience. We interns looked at one another with fearful brown eyes: Are they sure they want us here?

During one of our lunches, one intern made the mistake of complaining to a senior officer about the cafeteria food. This prompted another collective meeting so we could all witness his public humiliation by one of the senior minority officers. "These are not the people you whine to about mundane things. Use every minute you have wisely. And remember, if one of us looks bad, we all look bad!" she announced, furious that she had to spend more time stressing something that she'd already made evident. It was lesson enough for me to carefully script what I said. Before we had lunch with the chairman, there was another meeting where we were groomed with rehearsed conversations.

As I looked around the room I noticed that a good number of the minority Scholars could pass as white. I'd heard officers say, "We get so many bright people during interviews that it's less about their résumé and more about a good corporate fit." Did lighter skin help with the good corporate fit? I wasn't dark-skinned enough to be asked, "Did you grow up in America?" like other Indians were.

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And officers seemed to be comfortable saying many unflattering things about minorities in front of me, as if I were one of them. This voyeurism was new to me: In Texas it was clear I was a minority and wouldn't be privy to such comments.

I still remember the chairman's charismatic smile as he welcomed us into the formal dining room. "Tell me all about your experience here at Morgan Stanley," he said. "I'm dying to hear about you all. Please, just relax and be yourself!" But we were all too scared to ask the questions we really wanted to ask: Why do we have to be like everyone else to fit in? Why are you so much friendlier than everyone else? Were you once like them? Though the chairman was genuine, his casual demeanour read like a trick. We minorities weren't naïve enough to slip up and ask embargoed questions. Instead, the half-white, half-Spanish guy started off in a shaky voice asking one of our scripted, approved questions: "Given talk of a potential merger, what is your vision for retail banking?" ■

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