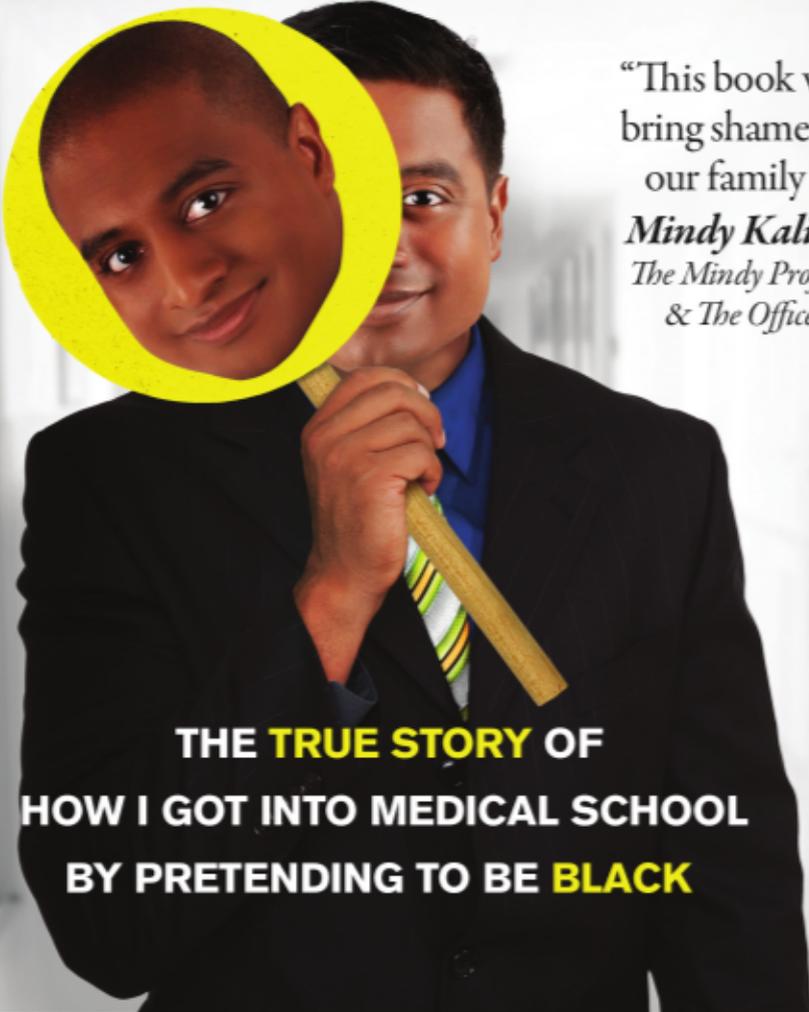


Sample Chapter 1

ALMOST BLACK



“This book will
bring shame on
our family!”

Mindy Kaling
The Mindy Project
& *The Office*

AlmostBlack.com

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THE **TRUE STORY** OF
HOW I GOT INTO MEDICAL SCHOOL
BY PRETENDING TO BE **BLACK**

VIJAY JOJO CHOKAL-INGAM
with **MATTHEW SCOTT HANSEN**

Almost Black is available on Amazon, Barnes & Nobles, and other booksellers

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I got into medical school by saying I was black. I lied.

Honestly, I am about as black as Gandhi.

Once upon a time, I was an ethically challenged, hard-partying Indian American frat boy enjoying my third year of college. That is until I realized I didn't have the grades or test scores to get into medical school.

Legitimately.

Having discovered a loophole in admissions standards, I shaved my head, trimmed my Indian eyelashes...and BSed my way into med school as Jojo the African American affirmative action applicant.

It worked, but not everything went as planned. Not by a long shot.

THE CRITICS RESPOND TO ALMOST BLACK

"Mindy Kaling's brother is a cool prankster upsetting the status quo."

Brendan O'Connor, *Gawker*

"This sounds like it's straight out of a sitcom!"

Perez Hilton

"Chokalingam's story is only surprising because of how shameless he is."

Max Ehrenfreund, *Washington Post*

"Mindy Kaling's older brother took the phrase 'fake it til you make it' to a whole other level."

Jackie Willis, *Entertainment Tonight / CBS News*

"Unsurprisingly, Chokal-Ingam has been at the end of a huge backlash following his contentious claims."

Kelly McLaughlin, *Dailymail.com*

"This book will bring shame on our family."

Mindy Kaling (*The Mindy Project / The Office / Why Not Me?* (Crown Archetype) / *Is Everyone Hanging Out Without Me?* (Three Rivers Press))

"Seems a sibling spat is sizzling between TV's Mindy Kaling

(*The Office, The Mindy Project*) and her brother."

Joe Holleman, *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*

FROM THE AUTHOR

"Instead of drinking and partying hard in college, I should have studied hard, like my friend and classmate future 'dick lit' author Tucker Max (*I Hope They Serve Beer in Hell*). Then I might have been able to apply to med school without the big lie."

Vijay Jojo Chokal-Ingam (Chokalingam) @vijayingam

#AlmostBlack

@vijayingam

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CHAPTER 1

THE RULE OF TOUGH SHIT

**“If you’re not failing now and again,
it’s a sign you’re not doing anything very innovative.”**

Woody Allen

The eleven-year old Indian-American boy cooled his heels outside the office of the headmaster of Boston’s chichi Roxbury Latin School. Proudly wearing a new suit, his first, he waited for his mother, who was speaking to the headmaster. The place reeked of money, but that comforted the boy who was from a well-to-do family and was used to nice things. His young eyes restlessly wandered the room. He fidgeted in his chair, but with the disapproving glare of the headmaster’s secretary occasionally directed his way, he couldn’t squirm too much.

He focused on the nearby étagère and the knickknacks on the skinny shelves. He guessed them to be from various dynasties like Thebes and Ming. He was a sharp kid.

Which was why he was waiting.

He desperately wanted to attend Roxbury Latin School. Founded in 1645, Roxbury Latin, the oldest school in North America, took exclusive to a new level. This was the *ne plus ultra* of Boston’s all boys prep offerings. To accurately put in a nutshell the otherworldly Roxbury Latin’s student’s average SATs of 2230 out of 2400, two words are required:

In. Human.

Entry to Roxbury Latin handed you an all-access backstage pass to life. It gave you a leg up on Ivy League success factories like Harvard and

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Yale, and greased the skids for a career in whatever field you pleased, from laser zapping human brains to siphoning the cash out of working class sucker's pension funds through mischievous arbitrage. Whatever your fancy, Roxbury was the orchestra seat for that long running Broadway hit, *The World Is My Fucking Oyster*. The little boy did not know that specifically, but was aware it would be enormously positive for his future.

The boy looked out the window and saw some children about his age playing soccer. He wanted to be part of that group. He was near enough that he could see their faces and just knew that if they met him they'd all be friends. He wanted to play soccer with them. He just wanted to go to Roxbury Latin and show them what he could do.

The headmaster's office was swaddled floor to tray ceiling in Circassian walnut, such that it resembled a luxuriously polished coffin or a humidior. Swati Chokalingam, M.D., mid-forties, and an Indian woman wearing a conservative blue dress, sat across from Headmaster F. Washington "Tony" Jarvis, a trim man in his fifties, in a slightly smarter charcoal three-piece. But there was one major difference, aside from retail price, in their ensembles: Headmaster Jarvis's included a tidy little clerical collar. Headmaster Jarvis was also Father Jarvis, an Episcopal priest.

The massive, immovable oak desk between them a metaphor for the discussion at hand.

Dr. Chokalingam, an obstetrician and gynecologist of some reputation, was not practiced at kissing ass but would do anything for her son, up to and including obsequiousness if it would help. But Dr. Chokalingam walked in the door suspecting the playing field wasn't quite even and was looking for answers.

"But Headmaster Jarvis, my son got a perfect score on the entrance exam," implored Dr. Chokalingam in her mild Indian accent. "Please tell me, on what grounds can you reject him from your school?"

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Jarvis was unmoved, as if tolerating one of his janitors whining about chewing gum under the desks.

“Test scores are not the only thing we consider for admission. It is not our policy to discuss admissions decisions or the myriad of factors under which we come to determine them.”

“How could perfect scores not entitle him to admission? How could everyone else have a superior position to his?”

Jarvis sat back in his Italian leather chair and steepled his fingers.

“It’s not all about scores, missus, er, Doctor Chokalingam. There are other parameters.”

“What parameters...*sir*?”

“I’m not at liberty to discuss them. Suffice it to say they take into account all factors.”

Dr. Chokalingam was smelling a rat and the rat smelled like Cristal champagne and Osetra caviar on little crackers, the snooty stuff rich *white* folks snacked on. She felt that she was getting her chain yanked. She thought of her son waiting outside the door.

She couldn’t let little Vijay down.

Out of sheer frustration, my mother would take another tack. A riskier one.

Although it was my parents who first casually suggested Roxbury Latin, it quickly became my obsession. I wasn’t just another good little Indian boy. I had ambition. Usually with Indians, it’s the parent’s ambitions the children strive to achieve, but in my family it was different. Our parents had set aside that traditional cultural axiom and blessed me and my sister, Mindy, with something practically unheard of among Indians: free will.

To support my dream they offered their experiences in helping me scale the wall. Understanding the value of public relations, my mother

explained how volunteering at her hospital might improve the weight of my application.

“Hey! Look at me give! I give ‘til it bleeds! See!”

I did so, eschewing sports and playing with my friends for slogging in a hospital to please people I’d never met. I worked hard and soon got a letter of reference from the hospital’s volunteer coordinator. My parents also suggested I enroll in famous test prepper Kaplan Inc.’s classes to get me up to speed for the Secondary School Admission Test (SSAT), the tough entrance exam. While they expected me to study hard, they could not have predicted their success manic son would spend the next three months locked in the Kaplan Center in Newton, Mass. studying his ass off.

I rocked it. When I got the results, my parents took me and Mindy out to my favorite restaurant to celebrate.

A few weeks later I interviewed at Roxbury, meeting with two admissions officers. The first was a junior admissions officer who really seemed to like me and was duly impressed with my academic record.

“I see you got a perfect score on the math section of your SSAT and did really well on the verbal. Very impressive.”

I humbly acknowledged the compliment with an ever so slight nod. Indian kids are taught humility from the get-go.

Inside I was beaming. I was in. All my hard work had paid off.

Unfortunately, the second, more senior admissions officer was not so warm. He seemed strangely skeptical about my candidacy, conjuring storm clouds over my parade. After a short, uncomfortable interview, I was left jarred by his barely concealed hostility. Then I overheard him make a comment to my mother.

“We see a lot of your people around here.”

His sour emphasis on the words “your people” told me I was seen as a second class person, someone somehow less than others. This was new

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and ugly to me. It confused me even further because my grades were exemplary, my test scores were in the top percentile, and...I was a good kid.

A few weeks later I got the rejection letter from Roxbury Latin School. That's when my mother contacted a lawyer, got advice, and decided to confront the headmaster directly, first with diplomacy...then with the Fire of Shiva.

After Headmaster Jarvis stonewalled her reasoned approach, my mother knew her only remaining option was to pull a weapon and aim it right at Roxbury Latin's reputation.

"Did you know your Director of Admissions made a terribly inappropriate comment to me, in front of my son, about the number of Indian applicants? It seemed to characterize us almost as a horde of pests, attempting to storm your doors through our relentless work ethic and top grades."

Jarvis shrugged off my mother's sarcasm and focused on the other issue: what he saw as my mother mistaking a casual undertone of racism for something of substance.

"Dr. Chokerlingman," he said, deciding to mangle our name now that the threats had surfaced. "I admit that the Director's comments might have been construed as a little out of line..."

"A little out of line? That's outrageous, Headmaster Jarvis. His remark was an unveiled slight on my entire culture, on all Indians, more than a billion of us, I might add."

Jarvis sniffed. "We don't discriminate if that's what you're implying. Especially against, as you characterize it, one billion of you. Regardless, the admission's decision stands. It's the system we must work within. Regrettably, my hands are tied. Your son will not be attending Roxbury Latin and that is that."

Jarvis started to rise, indicating the exercise in futility was at an end, but my proud and now angry mother, Dr. Swati Chokalingam sunk her

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teeth in and held firm. “I may be an immigrant, but I know my rights. It’s illegal to discriminate against Indians, or anyone for that matter.”

Headmaster Jarvis’s smile was toothy and condescending. “That’s not entirely true. The law gives us the right to set our own admission’s policies and consider race as a factor. We can reject applicants if we feel that their ethnic background does not help us to, shall we say, create a more diverse class.”

That got my mom’s ire up even more. “More diverse? *Shall we say* I think you meant less diverse. Let us at least be honest here.”

“Honesty has nothing to do with it Dr. Chokerlingman. It’s called affirmative action and it’s the law of the land. In this country. And by the way, our diversity profile is growing every year. We admit a large number of students of color.”

“Perhaps to the exclusion of my son, Headmaster Jarvis, who, I might add, is *of color*.”

Jarvis paused, weighing his words. “Perhaps. But many of our admissions decisions are made under the color, if you will, of affirmative action. Furthermore, as I’ve mentioned, it’s entirely legal.”

“Fine, characterize it however you want. It’s still discrimination, as plain as the hair on my head. If this is your position, I will see you in court.”

Jarvis shook his head out of pity. “I don’t blame you for trying to fight for your son, but suing us is not going to help. The law is on our side. Justice, perhaps, is not, but the law and justice don’t always intersect. But that’s the way the world works.”

He paused, then disdainfully added, “At least here in the United States of America.”

“I will sue you. I am not bluffing.”

The man of the cloth leveled his gaze at my mom and pulled out the aces he’d been hiding up his sleeve. “I’m sure you’re not bluffing. However, I know your son has also applied to BB&N (Buckingham, Brown & Nichols,

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another top Boston prep school). As you might imagine, educational institutions aren't so sanguine about applicants second guessing admissions decisions, even those of other institutions. Suing us will merely jeopardize Vijay's chances of admission to other prep schools, not to mention any colleges of substance down the road."

Now Jarvis rose and extended his hand, his glib I-smoked-this-Indian-chump grin as wide as the Charles River Basin.

"And on top of that, you'll lose. Good day, doctor."

My mom felt betrayed. It's true, this was America, but *her* bastion of freedom and democracy, not Headmaster Jarvis's cynical *United States of America*, the rigged game of intolerance and injustice. How could they treat her little boy like this? What would this teach her son? Ganesh, the Hindu elephant-headed god of education and wisdom would not have blessed such a place. Where, for Ganesh's sake, was the fairness? Her father had marched with Gandhi. She was hurt, outraged, and steaming.

She took my hand and headed to the door.

"I'm sorry, son, but I don't think you will be going to Roxbury."

"But I worked so hard."

I cast a last look at the boys playing soccer. My friends who would never be.

"I really wanted to go here," my voice small, defeated.

My mother looked back at Jarvis standing in the doorway to his office, his arms triumphantly akimbo, and managed a withering glance. Had she not been the sweet, irrevocably composed, conservative Indian woman that she was, she might have slapped him.

Instead, we quietly shuffled down the hall. She contained her emotions and searched for words to make an embarrassment a teachable moment.

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“I know this is a disappointment, Vijay, but sometimes politics and the club you belong to is more important than hard work and talent. India has its caste system and I always thought America was different. Perhaps I was wrong.”

This was my first encounter with The Rule of Tough Shit. I was beginning to learn that life wasn't always fair and sometimes hard work and brains took a backseat to politics, bureaucracy, and discrimination. The Old Boy Network was inviolate.

This would be a lesson that would take years to finally gel for me. I would have to go through the fire to have it burned home. I couldn't know it then, but ten years later I would master their game by becoming someone else.

And, in return, I would find out who I really was.