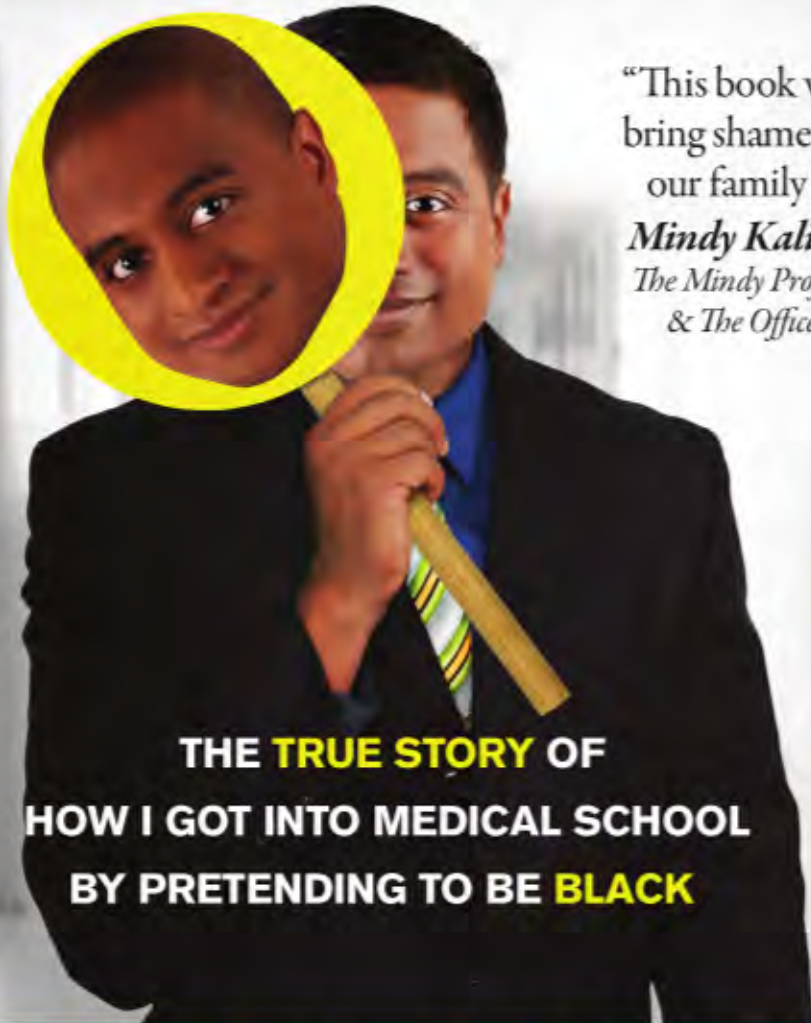


# ALMOST BLACK



“This book will  
bring shame on  
our family!”

*Mindy Kaling*  
*The Mindy Project*  
& *The Office*

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

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

# 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.

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## 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*

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## 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

# WHICH ONE GOT INTO MEDICAL SCHOOL?

 <b>The Indian American Applicant</b>	 <b>The African American Affirmative Action Applicant</b>
<b>Vijay</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• 3.1 College GPA</li><li>• 31 MCAT Score</li><li>• Member of the South Asian Student Association</li></ul>	<b>Jojo</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• 3.1 College GPA</li><li>• 31 MCAT Score</li><li>• Member of the Organization of Black Students</li></ul>

Cool factor. You be the judge. Who's the man? Vijay versus Jojo.

Find Almost Black in paperback, eBook, and audiobook on Amazon, Barnes & Noble, iTunes Store, etc.

CHAPTER 2

# DR. STONEFACE, THE MAN FROM EASTER ISLAND

“Warfare is the art of deception”

*Sun Tzu*

**J**ump ahead ten years from *The Smackdown At Roxbury Latin*. A young African- American man enters the reception area of an office and announces himself to the secretary. Jojo, an aspiring medical student, was there for an interview with the Chief of Admissions of Minority Students at the prestigious Case Western Reserve University (CWRU) School of Medicine in Cleveland, Ohio. He was a little nervous, as any young man would be when so much was at stake. He was also nervous for reasons not so obvious.

Jojo, the young African American, was actually Vijay Jojo Chokalingam.

Me.

I am, in all honesty, about as African American as Gandhi. My appearance that day in that office was part of my ongoing effort to offset the deleterious effects of my scholastic misdeeds by pretending to be Jojo, the African American, to game the system and get into med school through affirmative action.

In other words, I'd spent the first two years of my college career majoring in Budweiser and, in a panic to set me back on course, I'd discovered

my salvation, a loophole called affirmative action. This was my devious/crazy scheme to save my sorry/lazy ass and make my folks happy while minting yet another Indian American doctor.

Yeah, I was desperate as hell.

The secretary, a pretty, heavy-set middle-aged African American woman, knew none of this. All she could see was my shiny bald “power” dome and perfectly fitting suit, both conspiring to emanate a confident black GQ vibe.

Perhaps Chocolate Cougar wanted a taste of Jojo’s ebony essence. But I wasn’t as confident as I tried to appear. Not one time did I go to an interview and not worry I’d be found out, even though I’d begun to think of myself as sort of black.

Despite my nerves, I managed to fake a pleasant, flirtatious tone. Keeping my eyes on the prize I set about mining the ebullient Chocolate Cougar for information about the lion’s den I’d just entered, CWRU’s School of Medicine and the Office of Minority Affairs. She boasted that, “Case Western Reserve University’s School of Medicine was ranked sixteenth in the country according to *US News and World Report*.”

I smiled, already knowing that *US News* was *the* source of school rankings that every student, administrator, and recruiter consulted like an imam does his Quran.

A moment of guilt mean-spiritedly reminded me of my anemic 3.1 GPA. For a split second I wondered why they were even interviewing me. I was pretty sure there were dark complexioned store mannequins more academically qualified. Then Chocolate Cougar uttered some magically reassuring words, “...and of course, since you’re one of our affirmative action candidates you’re being treated differently than other applicants,” and I remembered that all was well with the Cosmos.

Now that I was again paying attention to the words of Chocolate Cougar, I learned that the Case Western Reserve University School of Medicine epitomized affirmative action.

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Gimme some sugah, baby.

CWRU's affirmative action programs had achieved national prominence when *The Journal of Blacks In Higher Education* credited Case Western with having one of the highest enrollments of African American students among the top medical schools. This school had an aggressive program to recruit underrepresented minority students.

Like, uh, me.

They even went as far as setting aside a special day--Fridays--for minority applicants. I guess Case Western figured that separating their applicants into pools based on race was just hunky-dory because they called it "affirmative action" and not the less popular "racial segregation." I thought it was pretty blatant, but so far it was sure working for me. Those chosen students would be specially interviewed by Rubens Pamies, M.D., the Director of the Office of Minority Affairs. He was the final word on who did or didn't get in.

I had to land that fish.

Eventually, Chocolate Cougar got the high sign over the intercom that it was time for Jojo Chokalingam, the African American affirmative action medical school candidate, to head to the main stage. As I stepped to the door, the formidable Dr. Rubens Pamies opened it. He was stout, early forties, obviously African American, and dressed in a jaunty, white lab coat. I wondered if he'd actually just been in the bio chem lab doing something brilliant like gene splicing, or if it was simply an affectation. He had a tight little beard, like one of those Ahab jobs, only with the moustache. He looked like he meant business.

I voted: brilliant, not affectation.

I went to shake his hand but he retreated to his desk so fast I missed the opportunity. I'd press flesh once we settled. My plan of attack was simple. I had drilled myself over and over just like any deep cover operative.

I would appear friendly, open and conversational, while treating racial issues with a Titanic-to-icebergs avoidance. As I had done in so many other interviews, I would emphasize how my background in economics at U of Chicago would help me become a more effective physician in the age of managed care. It was perfectly oiled and rehearsed horseshit, presenting me as the exuberant, well-rounded African American applicant.

Unfortunately, Dr. Pamies had his own agenda.

The good doctor quickly made it clear he was a standup comic's worst nightmare--a hostile room. He was not only *not* smiling, he looked a tad angry. My nerves jumped in voltage, like the dizzying feeling at the top of a sixty-story building with no guard rail. Now that we had stopped moving I thrust out my hand again but got no skin, only a cold stare back. Okay, so that first miss on the handshake was no accident. After a way-too-long beat, I dropped my hand and sat, a little shaken.

*What's the deal, my man? No love for a homey?*

Dr. Pamies bored a hole through me. I needed something to break the ice.

"Dr. Pamies, I must say I'm really excited to have the opportunity to interview here at Case Western, a school I have the highest regard for."

Well, fuck. I couldn't even fake my way through one stupid line without sounding insincere.

Didn't matter. Pamies swam around my chum and chomped down on my ankle.

"I'm originally from Haiti. Where are you from?"

Fuckin' Haiti? Seriously? Now my paranoia went into overdrive. The warmed-over-turd greeting was ominous enough, but now this? Did he ask me that question because he cared, or was it...*to get some kind of edge?* Don't Haitians know about juju and voodoo and shit like that? I felt naked knowing so little about either. Fuck med school, I feared for my soul. I

reminded myself that fear causes mistakes. Fatal mistakes. I had to get my act together. Now.

“I’m from Boston,” I stuttered.

There wasn’t a flicker of interest in his eyes.

*Yeah, fuckin’ juju, baby.*

My ass puckered. I tried to be casual as I scanned for voodoo dolls or pins or anything. Nothing.

Then I realized he probably kept all that shit in his desk.

“No,” he continued, “I mean originally. Where is your family from?”

I resolved beforehand that any time I could mention Africa...

“We, uh, lived in, uh, Africa.”

We just sat there, my eyes frozen in the headlights of his stare. Jesus save me...and I’m Hindu.

“Let’s take your parents. Where were they born?”

I wondered for one yoctosecond if “*in a hospital*” would fly and moved on. *India* was not an option. I smiled stupidly as my brain spun like a slot machine that never pays out. Checkmate. Goddamn it! Two moves into the game and I had lost. Tip your king over and resign.

Okay, I still had two lines of defense. Misdirection and misunderstanding.

“My parents were immigrants and are very proud to call America home. They saw nothing but opportunity here, just as so many have...uh, since the founding of the republic.”

Misunderstanding. Check. Cue *America The Beautiful*. Check.

Pamies licked his lips then used his tongue to dislodge something in his teeth. Perhaps it was a speck of the feces I was hurling in his face. He took a deep breath and looked down at my application. A slight chill passed through me when I saw Jojo’s bald picture and for half a second-- I’m not kidding--wondered whose file it was.



Oh...yeah...geez.

“You *are* Jojo Chokalingam, aren’t you?”

Damn. I never expected in a million years to feel trapped by my own name.

“Yes, sir. That’s me.”

“I’ve read your application. It says you’re *black*.”

*Holy fuckballs.* The subject was officially on the table. Worse, his statement was more of a menacing question dripping with derision. I instantly felt vulnerable, like Al Jolson opening for Public Enemy.

I racked my brain for a rejoinder. Okay, misdirection.

“Yes, I’ve been a member of the Organization of Black Students at the University of Chicago for the past year. It’s a terrific organization and I’m very proud of our community service efforts, especially our outreach to local residents on the South Side of Chicago and...”

As he interrupted me, he sneered as if whiffing something acrid. “Excuse me, but being a member of the Organization of Black Students doesn’t mean you are black. Hardly. Again, where are you from? You didn’t answer my question earlier. I asked where your parents were from.”

“My parents emigrated to this country from Nigeria. I lived in Calabar when I was very young. I loved Africa.”

Nigeria! Africa! Misunderstanding! Check, check and check.

“Once again, that does not mean you are black. Why are you giving me such evasive answers?”

Shit. Okay, obfuscate. Buy time. Throw it back at him.

“I’m not sure what you’re insinuating, doctor.”

“You have not given me one straight answer yet. You’ve managed to bob and weave around everything I’ve asked. What are you hiding?”

Hiding? Other than not being black? Not a fucking thing, Dr. Noseypants.

“Nothing. I’m sorry Dr. Pamies, but I’m not being evasive. I’m just here to express my extreme interest in matriculating to Case Western. I’ve heard nothing but great praise for your program. I look forward to being a part of it. By the way, I’m curious about how many minority students are in the program?”

After that mouthful of dung, I considered ladling it on with a Dr. King quote but felt that might have motivated him to come over the desk and I wasn’t sure I could take him.

Ignoring my two dimensional sophistry, he attacked with a phalanx of questions like a courtroom prosecutor hellbent on forcing a weeping confession that Jojo is Faux-jo. I stayed chill under his assault.

*“Where are you from?”*

*“Where are your parents from?”*

*“What is their nationality?”*

*“What is your ethnic background?”*

*“What is the airspeed velocity of an unladen swallow? Blah, blah, blah.”*

Finally, Rubens Pamies, M.D., a member in good standing of the Afro-centric gene pool, had enough bullshit cat and mouse and just up and said it.

“I don’t think you’re black. I think you’re lying about your race to use affirmative action to get into medical school. What do you say to that?”

To this point his approach had been a sort of a passive/aggressive dance, but with this, he laid his cards on the table and demanded I show my hand. In light of being confronted with the truth I did a weird thing: I relaxed.

*Bingo, Dr. P, you just hit the nail on the head. Give the man a prize! I’m not black. So blow me.*

In all my interviews at all the schools during this ongoing and uniquely absurd process, I knew this moment was bound to come so I'd practiced. My defense was swift and forceful: fake outrage.

"That's outrageous, Doctor Pamies. I'm shocked. I would *never* do such a thing!"

I protested...doth too much, methinks.

Sure, it sounded hollow, but it served O.J. well. He got away with murder. I just needed to get through the next five minutes until I could get outta there 'cause this bitch was one-eighty-seven, straight up, dawg.

Dr. Meblackyounot narrowed his eyes. "I don't believe you. You're not credible. You really think you can pull this off? Perpetrate such fraud? Admit it, you are not black."

I wasn't going to admit shit. Who did this guy think he was? *Black*? I channeled my inner badass and pushed back. *Fuck you, Jack, yo ain't throwin' no shade on me.*

I sat up straight and fixed my eyes on his. Then, in my best discreetly threatening tone I warned him, "Dr. Pamies, your attitude toward me is concerning and disquieting. I resent your implications that I'm not who I say I am. I don't want to talk about my ethnic background. I want to talk about my qualifications to be a physician. I'm concerned your questions are taking an off-track and very inappropriate direction. Please stop."

Whew.

It was an unpleasant little mantra our UC pre-med student advisor, Dr. David Owen, had drilled into us if we were getting the third degree during our medical school interviews. It was intended to have a vaguely legalistic tone, as if I was establishing a foundation for future legal action. While it was never intended to deflect someone who was absolutely correct, like the good doctor, I co-opted it for my purposes.

This seemed to pucker Pamies' sphincter and he shut the hell up about my background and heritage and sparrow airspeed velocities.

## Sample Chapter 2

17 • Vijay Jojo Chokal-Ingam

My eyes fixed on the large institutional clock on the wall behind him as Einsteinian time dilation slowed each second to an eternity. Our conversation spiraled in awkward circles for one minute and twenty-three seconds more, him tepidly lunging, me parrying. Then he stood to indicate the interview was over, his face even stonier than those bigass heads on Easter Island. And, as in the beginning of the interrogation...um, interview...there was no handshake.

I mentally screamed to the crowd, “*Peace out, muthafuckahs! Keepin’ it real,*” threw down the microphone, and walked out hands high, fingers flashing the double Vs. I figured this was my last concert at Case Western, no doubt, cuz. The chances of me getting any kind of offer from Case Western and their Black Power gatekeeper, Dr. Affirmative Action, were slightly less than the sun fizzling out the next day.

And, to my utter astonishment, I would have been wrong about that.

The offer, not the sun.