HEALTH, WEALTH & HAPPINESS

YOU **CAN** CONTROL YOUR DESTINY!

DAVID SINGH

with Albert E. D'Souza

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CHAPTER ONE

VERY MODEST BEGINNINGS

The Canadian national anthem has a rather problematic first line — one that's rather self-conscious, for a nation of immigrants: "O Canada, our home and native land."

"Home," definitely; "native," rarely. Statistics show that two-thirds of the nearly four million people in the metropolitan Toronto area, for example, were born and raised somewhere else, and that "somewhere else" is often very far away.

This 49-year-old began his life singing a vastly different national anthem, which would probably sound quite alien to the most Canadians (except for the 150,000 plus fellow immigrants from my homeland who have chosen this wonderful country as their new "home and native land.") My real native land was on the major continent to the south of the Caribbean — Guyana. There, black and South Asian citizens made up nearly 95% of its tiny population of just under 700,000.

A GLIMPSE OF GUYANA — WHERE I CAME FROM

Guyana is both a country and a state of mind. Indeed, just as most North Americans would think "Antarctica" when they hear the word "penguin," most of them would think "Guyana" only if they heard the phrase "poisoned Kool-Aid." For until the horrific mass suicide in 1978 of the followers of the American cult leader Jim Jones, Guyana was as unknown to the global consciousness as Herzogovina and Chechnya were, until their own, recent tragedies in the last years of the twentieth century.

But Jim Jones and his pathetic disciples were not native to Guyana any more than snowstorms. Guyana is situated on the northeastern coast of South America, bounded on the north by the Atlantic Ocean, on the east by Suriname, on the south and southwest by Brazil, and on the northwest by Venezuela. If you don't have a map at hand, just imagine the southeast Caribbean as a giant question mark, with the Virgin Islands and Antigua near the top curve, Martinique and St. Lucia as the bottom of the curve, and Trinidad and Tobago as a dual dot at the bottom. Due south of that giant question mark is the only English-speaking country on the continent of South America, and my true "native land," if no longer my home — Guyana.

Like Canada, Guyana is an independent country within the British Commonwealth of Nations and went through periods of violent struggle until Great Britain recognized its independence in 1966. Unlike Canada, Guyana is relatively small; its 214,970 square kilometres making it slightly smaller than the United Kingdom, excluding Northern Ireland.

Natives called the Arawaks once lived in Guyana's humid, swampy territories before being displaced by the Caribs, powerful warriors who would dominate much of the region before moving on to the islands to the north. It is estimated that there were half a million inhabitants of what the indigenous population called "Land of Much Water," before the Europeans arrived on Guyana's shores. Today, there are less than 45,000 Amerindians left, divided among nine ethnic groups. Clearly, South America was no kinder to its aboriginals than Canada, Australia, and other colonized countries.

It was as far back as the 15th century that the Spaniards "discovered" the coast of Guyana — to the surprise of the natives who had lived there for centuries — which they labeled "Costa Brava," or "Wild Coast." These early explorers expressed no interest in settling there, nor did Christopher Colum-

bus himself, who sailed near its coast in 1498, but made no attempt at a landing. The British navigator, Sir Walter Raleigh, visited the area in 1595, this voyage followed by several failed attempts to establish permanent settlements in the country.

Finally, the Dutch showed an interest — inspired by the legend of El Dorado, the dream city of gold. They built the first fort in the country in 1616, followed by a second settlement eight years later.

As with so many countries that were colonized by European powers during the last millennium, Guyana changed hands several times over the years. The British began a massive introduction of slaves in the late eighteenth century to grow and harvest sugarcane. They finally seized the land from the Dutch in 1781 — losing it to the French just six months later. The French held on for only two years themselves, before restoring it to the Dutch, in 1783.

Notwithstanding the agonies of slavery and the grandeur of slave revolts, the shuffleboard of European domination continued; the British seized the colony again in 1796, then handed it back to the Dutch in 1802. But just one year later, the British recaptured it, ruling it until May 26, 1966, when the much-abused country achieved its independence, and British Guiana gave way to a new name — Guyana.

Colonization not only brings with it great turmoil, it also creates strange bedfellows. The countless slaves who managed to escape from their plantations very often ended up in the jungle with the Amerindians. This led to a racial and cultural interaction that resulted in the group referred to today as "bush blacks."

With the emancipation of all slaves within the British Empire in 1834 — it took nearly another three decades and a civil war for the United States to achieve the same act of humanity — the United Kingdom found it necessary to bring over more slave labour for its many planters. (Two-thirds of the ex-slaves had withdrawn their muscle from the plantations.)

And so, unlike the African slaves, all of whom had been spirited from West Africa, immigrants began to pour into Guyana from all over the world — Europe, Africa, the West Indies — and, in my own family's case — from East Asia.

Between 1835 and 1882, over 30,000 Portuguese labourers arrived in Guyana, most of whom died in the brutal conditions of the still-primitive colony. Then, another 42,500 African immigrants arrived between 1835 and

1930, the majority caught by Brazilian and Cuban ships which had continued to smuggle slaves long after abolition.

Eventually, the demand for a massive labour force moved the planters to bring over labour from India, between 1838 and the end of World War One. This group included my own ancestors. The numbers were overwhelming; nearly 240,000 East Indian "contractual immigrants" were recruited to work on the sugarcane plantations of British Guiana. This helps explain why East Asians make up over 50% of Guyana's population, and how they managed to re-elect Cheddi Jagan as prime minister several times since independence. (Indentured immigrants from China also came to the country between 1853 and 1909, but their numbers were only around 14,000, accounting for just two percent of Guyana's current population.)

This so-called indentured system was eventually abolished, due to British resistance to such policies of near-forced immigration — but not before it brought my grandparents to Guyana, and led to a profound impact on the tiny country's culture, heritage, and politics. In fact, a perusal of Guyana's countryside will uncover such originally East Asian place names as Delhi, Lucknow, Madras, Cundalore, Calcutta, Lahore, Gujurat, Malabar — even Bombay!

And that, briefly, is the history of the country where I was born and raised; the place which is my *real* "home and native land," in spite of the Canadian anthem I sing so proudly today. True, the country's average temperature is 26 degrees Celsius — just under 80 degrees Fahrenheit — but the legal system is based on English common law, and its educational system is strongly British — factors which undoubtedly made my eventual migration to my new "home and frozen land" a far easier leap than what many of you readers, your parents, or grandparents went through, when they immigrated to Canada.

However, last year, Guyana had an annual per capita income in the low hundreds of dollars (which is in the bottom ten percent in world ranking), ferocious inflation rates, a dollar worth only about *one-half a U.S. penny*, widespread underemployment, and violent racial politics between blacks and East Asians, all of which had influenced me to seek out the grander opportunities of the "True North" of Canada. And as this book will show, my move paid off very well indeed, despite wild swings between success and failure along the way.

AND SO, I AM BORN

Sometimes, simply the name of a birthplace can inspire confidence, if not visions of glory and romance; Paris! New York! Moscow! Well, not in my case. I was born on October 3, 1953, in a tiny village in Guyana named — believe it or not — Canal #1. (You may be impressed to hear that there is a Canal #2, as well.)

It was called Canal because there was a small river, like a canal, which flowed through the diminutive community, with a bridge connecting it to the other side. Canal #1 had only one street, with people living on both sides, not unlike some of the minuscule towns of the Canadian prairies. I'm not sure how many people lived in my community, perhaps a few hundred. It's even smaller today, since so many have left. (I've already noted that approximately 150,000 Guyanese make their homes in Canada, and when you consider that there are barely 700,000 left in that country — down strikingly from over one million in the 1980s — that's a remarkable number. Imagine if seven million people up and left Canada, or over fifty million migrated from the U.S., in only two decades. It's sad that Guyana's agonizing politics have caused so many to leave their homeland.

Both my mother and father were born in Guyana, in 1924 and 1930 respectively — and both lived in suburban Toronto until my father's death in 1999. My mother and four of my siblings continue to live there. My great-grandparents came over from India, during that unpleasant labour situation which I described earlier. My father's parents were both born in Guyana, but his grandparents were born in the old country. My mother's father was also born in India, making that connection all the closer.

To give you an idea of how little we got around in the old days, my mother, Latchmin Persaud, was born in the same tiny village in which I took my first breath — Canal #1. My father, Sew Singh, was born in Kitty, another little community not far from Georgetown, the capital city of what was then British Guiana. Their families were subsistence farmers, and the two went to the same school in Canal, where they met. They were married in the thriving metropolis of Canal #1 in 1945, in the sacred Hindu ceremony. My father was 20, my mother was 14.

Back then, not only did East Asian Guyanese tend to marry young —

they had children like it was about to be outlawed. My mother had eight brothers and five sisters. She first worked on her father's farm of ten acres, where they raised oranges, pineapples, cassavas, and more. When she married my father, they purchased land, also approximately ten acres, in Canal #1. There, along with the several hundred residents of Canal, they lived in a tiny house with their acreage out back, where they grew bananas, sugarcane, and various other tropical fruits. This was perhaps a dozen miles from the capital city of Guyana, and about ten miles from the Atlantic Ocean.

My parents worked together on their modest farm, slowly building it up until it had some six head of cattle, thirty chickens, thirty ducks, and a half-dozen lambs. Twice a week, they would make the long, arduous journey to Georgetown to sell whatever their rapidly growing family had not devoured. While their only source of income was the farm, and my parents both had only a few years of schooling, my family was still considered "lower middle class" by Guyanese standards, because they had a decent-sized farm and a liveable income.

My mother and father eventually had thirteen children, eight of whom are alive today. Two of my siblings died at birth, one at age 17, and two others at the ages of 50 and 34. The latter brother left two pre-teen sons, and I was able to fly home, and build a place for them to live — a six-bedroom home, with two indoor bathrooms (still a luxury in Guyana) — on the lot of the house I grew up in. How lovely to be able to help my family, thanks to my good fortune in Canada.

All of my siblings attended school, and as the fifth child, I was no different — at least not in that respect. But my father realized early on that I had an uncommon thirst for academics: "David was like all the others, and looked like them all, but he was the only one who 'took' to education. He didn't *like* working on the farm."

How does such a large family cope? It was a lot easier to manage such a family in Guyana than its counterpart would be in Canada, I assure you. We lived in a two-bedroom house, so we never managed to have meals together, because there was simply no room to do so. We slept five in each bedroom, although there were only two beds. My parents slept in the kitchen.

Guyanese homes would look exotic to Canadians. Most are built on stilts because of floods and snakes. (I guess every country in the world has its own drawbacks; Canada could certainly be warmer in the winter.)

To give you an idea of how my family ended up, my oldest sister is a homemaker who lives in South America; the second oldest, a brother, had his own farm in Guyana before recently passing away; the third, a girl, died at birth; the fourth, my immediate older brother, died in his teens of a brain tumour. After me is another brother, also a farmer in Guyana; a sister, who's a homemaker in Guyana; then a sister/homemaker who also moved to Toronto; next was a brother who also recently died — he had been a farmer in Guyana. My two youngest sisters are both homemakers in Toronto. The baby of the family is a brother who recently completed school in Canada, and is working in a factory here.

CHAPTER TWO

A GUYANESE EDUCATION

I started school at age five, but then, everyone in Guyana goes to school, at least for a short time. Indeed, whatever one's attitude toward colonization, it cannot be denied that the British had a positive impact on our educational system; today, Guyana's literacy rate is an impressive 98.6% for men and 97.5% for women. Yet, while more than 90% attend primary schools, only a little over 50% reach the secondary level. And with only around 250 students per 100,000 Guyanese in university, one can easily see why such large numbers have to leave the country for higher learning.

My village was principally East Indian and split between the two major faiths of our ancestral home of India — Islam and Hinduism — so when I finally went to school, there were only two or three blacks in class with me. There have often been considerable tensions between blacks and Indians in Guyana; one need not be white to be racist. Unlike in the old country of my ancestors, there has never been bloodshed between Guyanese Muslims and Hindus — although there has been conflict. Here, too, the diversity of Guyana would serve me well; I had many Muslim friends, growing up. What a fine preparation for a promising future in the multicultural Canada of the last three decades!

In Guyana, none of us were staunch Muslims or Hindus, and although I could well have been a Sikh in India (considering my surname), that heritage was lost over the generations. Indeed, I never saw a man wearing a turban until I came to Canada! The blacks in Guyana were primarily Christian, and the dominant religion — because of our teachers and the British influence — was Anglican. That faith would prove to be important to me over the first two decades of my life.

My memories of growing up go back far earlier than that scary first day in school, of course. Our home was fairly comfortable, although crowded. My four brothers and I slept in a little corner of the bedroom floor, with bedding made of burlap, and sheets made from old dresses. As I recall, going to bed was more a looking forward to getting up.

As anyone who has been raised on a farm knows, it's not an easy life. We would start the day at 5:00 a.m., help around the farm, and only then, go off to school. (The majority of Guyanese farm kids, perhaps understandably, don't continue their education past the age of ten or eleven.)

As I recall, I actually began to do the milking of cows and goats by the age of six. I was fortunate in that my parents tolerated my immediate distaste for farm work; I was the only one of the children who truly despised working there. I got along pretty well with my many brothers and sisters, but we weren't terribly close. We were not the types to sit around and talk much.

Of course, there are advantages to subsistence farming, such as simple, healthy eating! We lived on yams, breadfruit, vegetables, and an endless variety of tropical foods. So we ate extraordinarily wisely, without knowing it; no junk food from North America ever entered our tiny house. We couldn't have afforded it, anyway.

Physical discipline was rigorous in our home, and we were called up short for just about anything you could imagine — cows not tied up properly; chickens not fed the correct amount. There were several other punishments, as well; going to bed without dinner, or having to sleep outside the house. Some believe this is culturally acceptable in many Caribbean, South American, and East Asian communities; I fear that they may be right. Corporal punishment remains acceptable in Guyanese schools; canings are still common. It's simply the way things are done there.

Beatings were a fact of life in our village, and probably throughout the entire country, as well. It was caused by many factors: poverty, cultural ten-

sions, and, to some extent, alcoholism. There wasn't a specific age at which one was beaten, unlike voting or the age at which one can legally purchase cigarettes; toddlers as young as one or two were often slapped around.

THE LIFESAVER — SCHOOL

And so, after feeding the cows and enduring whatever punishment I was in for, I headed off to the local school. Perhaps comically — when one considers the student body — it was called McGillvery Government School, a name which had something to do with the British army or earlier landmasters — two of my least concerns. (There are many such place names, right across Guyana, attached to most towns in which the British set foot.) McGillvery Government School served all of Canal #1, and it held approximately 300 students.

The school seemed quite huge then. It was a half-mile walk from our house, which might seem far to today's youth, but it was nothing to us. The school had two floors, and one giant, open hall, so groups of students would sit in their classes in various areas, with some 30 to 40 kids in a class. (Recent studies claim that there is one primary teacher for every 46 students in Guyana, which is probably close to double the student/teacher ratio in Canada today, and obviously not very conducive to learning.)

Our teachers were Hindu, Muslim, Catholic, and Anglican, both East Asian and black. And in spite of the "One land of six peoples, united and free," which we sang daily in our national anthem, it was immediately clear where the power lay; every single one of us — regardless of religious or cultural backgrounds — *had* to study Christianity. To be honest, that was just fine with me, and it made it easier for me later, when I taught in an Anglican school in the jungle.

We had to recite the Lord's Prayer four times a day — and this was taken very seriously. We also sang "God Save the Queen," and we meant it, too. As children, we saw no irony in this, any more than Jewish children growing up in the Canadian prairies during the same period would have found the Christian prayers insulting; it was simply something you were expected to do. After all, we had absolutely zero outside influence in our lives — no movies, no television, no newspapers. The closest ones were in Georgetown, which was more than an hour away by ferry. (In the 1990s, a floating bridge

was erected, so that the journey from Canal #1 is shorter today.)

Since the country became independent of England in 1966 — eight years before I left for Canada — there has been a growing awareness of Guyana's past. There have been dozens of books published about the country's history, and its heroes; altogether, far more information is now available. (What Guyana needed was its own Pierre Berton, Canada's most prominent popular historian.) By the time I left in 1974, a new cultural sensitivity was beginning to emerge in my homeland.

But growing up in the 1950s and 1960s, there *were* no Guyanese heroes. England was still viewed as the "New Jerusalem" when I was a child, but when Guyana finally gained its independence, England rapidly lost its hold on our collective imaginations and lives, and Canada and the United States quickly replaced the United Kingdom as the promised land. Every one of my childhood friends eventually went north — and I would, too.

In school, it was typical for children to be caned, on a daily basis, for actions as slight as talking out of turn. One had to read aloud to the teacher, and if the student didn't recognize a word, or couldn't spell it properly, that unfortunate soul was caned. Girls were caned only on the hands, but boys were punished on the buttocks, as well. These canings were given out far more liberally than our education. You could get one or two canings for not spelling properly, or perhaps six or seven for fighting with other kids.

I am embarrassed to admit that when I started teaching, in my mid-teens, I would inflict the same corporal punishment on my students. In retrospect, I can't believe that I did such things. Indeed, when I taught school in the jungles of Guyana, the female teachers often admitted that they lacked the energy to do the dirty deed, and they would send their students to *me* to be punished! Sadly, I would agree to administer the punishments, as requested.

Sitting in my home in suburban Toronto in the first years of the 21st century, I shudder every time I think about what Guyana's educational system allowed, but I cannot deny it; that was the way it was. I was not a "nerd," as my beautiful and intelligent daughters might have taunted a fellow student in their high school days; I was simply the "good kid." And, I'm pleased to report, I was not mocked or punished for being so keen at my studies.

I was also involved in track and field, and was intensely athletic. Not surprisingly, in our racially conscious society, it was "expected" that the blacks