

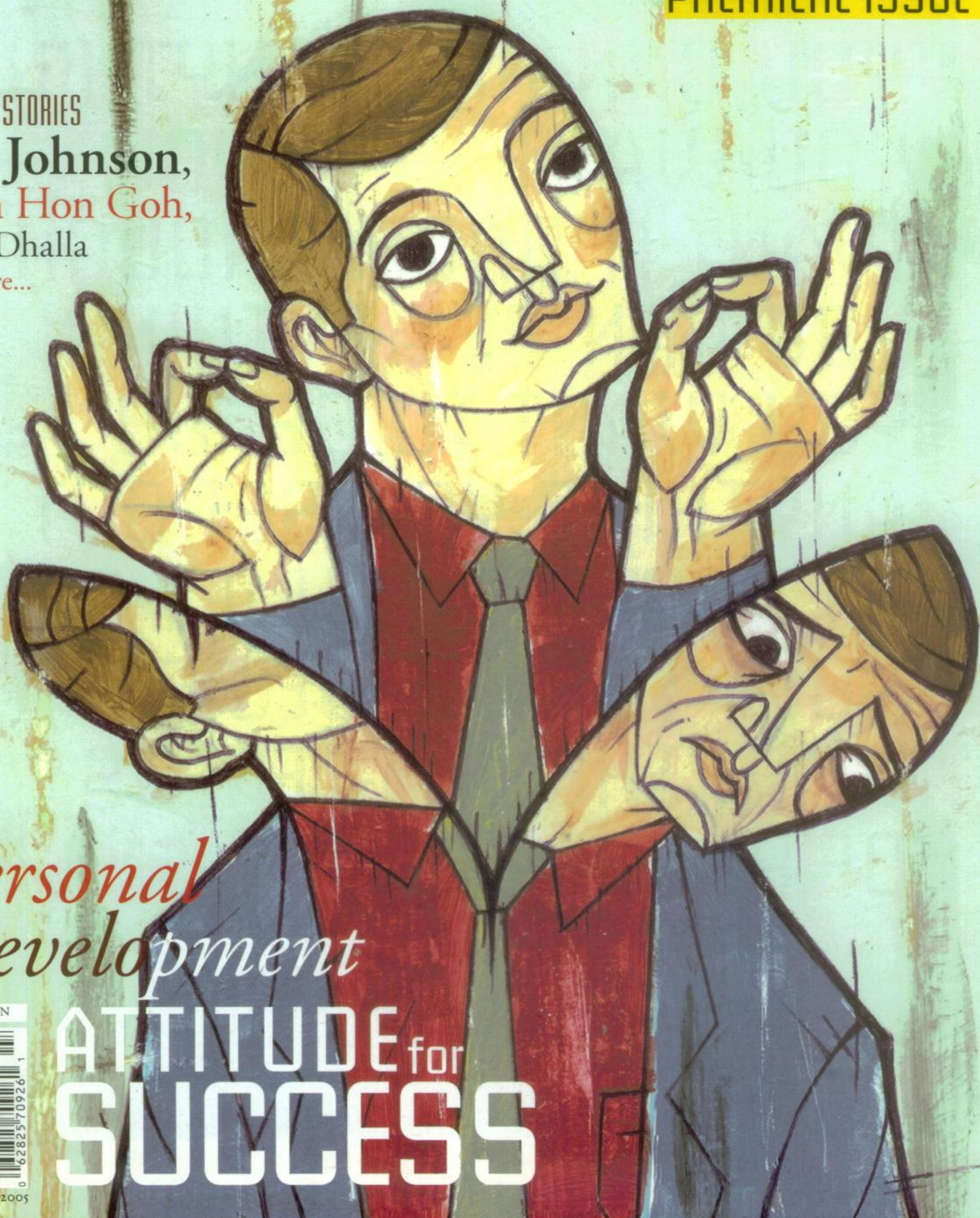
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JUNE & JULY 2005

NEVER SAY 'WHAT IF' JUST SAY 'YES'

by
Sheila
Reesor



"IT WAS SATURDAY,

May 8, 2004, at 5:29 pm, and I think at 5:30 that day, life changed."

Dr. Ruby Dhalla remembers this moment clearly. It was the moment she made the decision to run as Member of Parliament for Brampton-Springdale. After struggling with the decision for over 24 hours, she accepted her fate to become part of Canadian political history. Now she is the youngest Indo-Canadian ever to be elected to the House of Commons.

It all played out like a Bollywood movie script from earlier in her eclectic career. The preceding afternoon, at around 4:00, Prime Minister Paul Martin's office called to say that they were interested in having a woman run in the election. As she manoeuvred through heavy downtown traffic, Dhalla earnestly put forward several names until the Prime Minister's voice suddenly came on the line.

"Hold on," he said. "We were actually thinking of you." Dumbfounded, she asked for some time to think about it. She was given 12 hours.

Dhalla remembers rushing home to share the news with her greatest confidantes; her mother and younger brother, Neil. "It just didn't seem real," she says. "I eventually went to bed, tossed and turned all night, really didn't sleep much at all."

At 10:00 the next morning, the Prime Minister's office called again to ask if they could send out the release. "What release?" she asked. "The release that says you're going to run," they said. "But I haven't even decided yet!" she responded. With the pressure on, Dhalla hung up the phone and further debated the pros and cons with her family, oscillating back and forth for hours.

"It was not that I didn't want to do it," she says. "I did. It was more a question of timing. Was this the right time in life?" At the young age of 30, she could already see past the glamour. She knew the sorts of sacrifices she and her family would have to make if she were to be elected to public office. She knew because she had already been involved in the front lines of the political process for 20 years.

It all started when Dhalla was 10. Although born and raised in Winnipeg, she was aware of the intense violence going on between Sikhs and Hindus in India. Compelled to action, she took it upon herself to write a letter to then Prime Minister, Indira Gandhi. In it, she expressed how she felt about the fighting and supported any attempts to resolve it through peaceful discussions.

Upon receiving the letter, Prime Minister Gandhi read it at a press conference in India. She then sent Dhalla a response, thanking her and inviting her to visit with her mother. While the two were en route to India, Prime Minister Gandhi was assassinated.

This was Dhalla's first excursion into politics. It impressed upon her how it felt to be a small person, doing a little thing like writing a letter, and truly being heard.

Two years later, this courageous young girl climbed onto a bus with her mother and marched into her local Member of Parliament's office. She had applied through her school to participate in a program called Forum for Young Canadians, an opportunity for young students to go to the National Capital to see how Government functioned. Dhalla had been accepted, but required a donation of \$100 from her local MP, David Walker, in order to

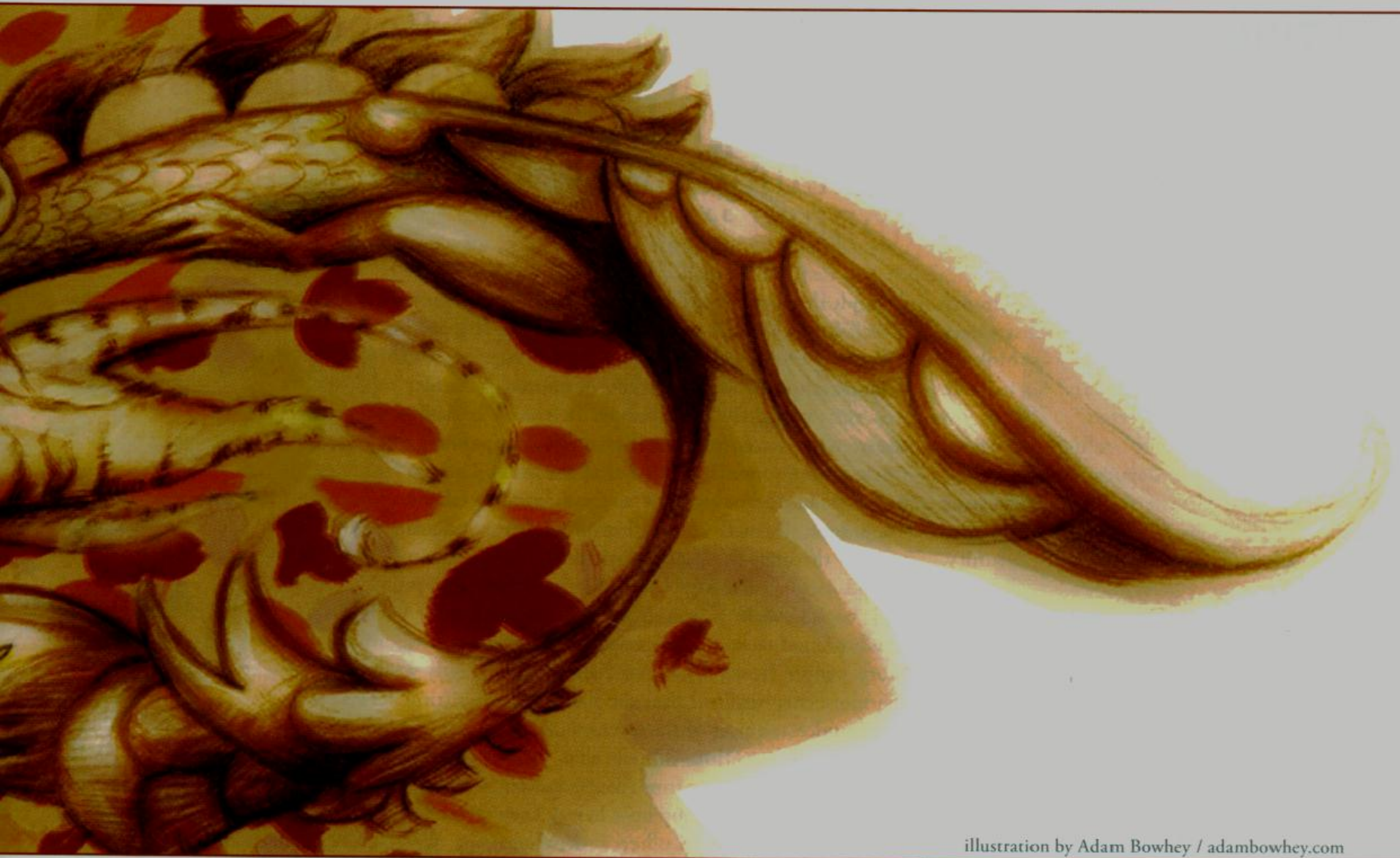


illustration by Adam Bowhey / adambowhey.com

attend. Walker was happy to support her, but with a catch—she'd have to volunteer. Only after she accepted did she realize he meant every Saturday for an entire year.

Dhalla began her term cutting out newspaper articles and tracking coverage in the riding, before moving on to answering phones. Gradually, she absorbed how things operated in this exciting, busy world. She met a number of people in the course of her duties, only to realize later just who they were. What had begun as a simple commitment in exchange for a \$100 donation had, by the end of the year, become a passion for Dhalla.

With the onset of Leadership 1990, Dhalla naturally chose to support the Prime Minister. She remembers the exhilaration of competing with 39 others for 12 positions to go to Calgary. This was her first election, her first campaign, and her first speech at the ripe old age of 15. With great pride she recalls her election paraphernalia. It consisted of bright yellow and pink papers, with little stars. She stayed up well past her bedtime, until 2:00 AM, for the results and, to her utter amazement, finished with the highest count of votes.

Dhalla went on to support the Prime Minister in Manitoba.

**“NEVER, EVER SAY ‘WHAT IF’
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Along the way, many party members went out of their way to keep her involved at a variety of different levels. She kept her hand in, but always viewed politics as more of a hobby than a full-time occupation. She still had many other interests, and wanted to explore them all.

One of those interests was medicine. After graduating from the University of Winnipeg with a B.S. in Mathematics, Dhalla went on to become a Doctor of Chiropractic. She also spent several years studying as a model and actor, finishing as first runner up in the Miss India Canada Pageant and starring in a Hindu film entitled *“Kyon? Kis Liye?”* (translation: *“Why? And for Whom?”*).

For Dhalla, it was always about stretching herself and taking risks. She always pursued her passions and dreams with a vengeance. “Never, ever say ‘what if’ in life,” she says. “Don’t be afraid to dream and live your dream. Do whatever it takes.”

This wisdom came from Dhalla’s own mother, who never discouraged any of her daughter’s dreams or ambitions. Reflecting on the past, Dhalla feels that the tremendous support and encouragement she received from her mother, as well as from other family members, friends and teachers, helped shape the person she is today.

All of the support, dreams and experiences Dhalla experienced through the years, had also now brought her to where she stood on May 8, 2004, painfully grappling with the Prime Minister’s request to run for office. Considering the zeal with which she had jumped at the other opportunities in her life, the choice should have been an easy one. Nevertheless, she called back to say, ‘no’.

"I THINK WOMEN HAVE TO WORK 10 TIMES HARDER TO PROVE THEMSELVES. AND WHEN YOU'RE YOUNGER, YOU HAVE TO WORK ANOTHER 10 TIMES HARDER. AND THEN, BEING FROM AN ETHNIC COMMUNITY, YOU HAVE TO WORK ANOTHER 10 TIMES HARDER."

"To be honest, I knew that one day in my life I wanted to run," she says. "I just wasn't planning it that soon in life. I was thinking probably in another 10 years. So it came much sooner than expected."

Minutes after her refusal, Michelle Cadario, a young deputy Chief of Staff to the Prime Minister, called Dhalla back and asked, "How can you turn this down? People would die to have this opportunity. What are your concerns?"

Dhalla proceeded to explain how, one day, she would like to be married and have a family. She felt that being in public office would impede this goal. Cadario assured her that it wouldn't, but Dhalla was still not convinced.

Before long, Christie Clark, then Deputy Premiere for BC, joined in the debate. After a brief exchange, she encouragingly said, "You know, you've always talked the talk about women getting involved and about young people. Now you've got to walk the walk."

Cadario then gave Dhalla five more minutes and hung up.

Five minutes later, with renewed resolve, Dhalla once again replied, "I thank you for the opportunity. Unfortunately, I'm not going to be doing it right now." Undeterred, the PM's office proffered yet another five-minute extension.

Finding herself alone now, Dhalla turned inward this time. Describing herself to be quite spiritual, she remembers spending those final five minutes quietly praying. With a grin, she reflects on how she simply explained to God that she wasn't going to do it, but thanks anyway for providing her with such a tremendous opportunity... "At that moment, something came inside of me to say that I was making the wrong choice," she says. Grabbing the phone, she immediately called Cadario back and accepted the offer. The rest is history. "It was Saturday, May 8th at 5:29 PM," she says, now laughing, "and I think at 5:30 that day, life changed."

It was a triumphant moment and a

difficult decision, but Dhalla is now very grateful that she did ultimately step up to the plate. Doing so was not easy at first. Anyone who already knew her, of course, was very supportive and happy. In time, those who were not familiar with her track record soon discovered that she was not just another overnight success story. They soon learned she had worked her way up through the political ranks over a period of 18 years. Her campaign, which had begun with just a few volunteers, mushroomed to 800 by Election Day. The more people heard what she had to say, the more they realized that she had a very good understanding of the issues.

Since the election, Dhalla has been flooded with messages from young people across the country, saying how happy they are to have someone in office with whom they can relate. Typical is a recent e-mail from a young girl in Newfoundland, who wrote, "I see you on TV and nothing seems too difficult anymore. You've broken down so many of the barriers. Nothing seems out of reach now."

This Member of Parliament not only breaks down barriers for young people, but also for women and ethnic communities across the country. She sees her victory as their victory, and vows to continue to speak out on their behalf. With *Young Liberal Multiculturalism* and the *National Women's Commission*, she has already had some powerful channels through which she will continue to voice her convictions.

She is also determined to help champion the cause for first-generation Canadians through the *Foreign Credential Recognition* program. This is an initiative where individuals who have been trained in their own countries as Engineers, Pharmacists, Doctors, or Lawyers, for example, can come to Canada and continue to work in their respective fields. If they need additional training, this program will help them to gain the necessary skills and pre-requisites that will enable them to eventually work in

their own profession here in Canada, rather than working as caretakers or cab drivers.

"I think women have to work 10 times harder to prove themselves," Dhalla says. "And when you're younger, you have to work another 10 times harder. And then, being from an ethnic community, you have to work another 10 times harder." She understands their plight firsthand. Having spent much of her earlier career on political committees, boards, and other community groups and initiatives, she was often the only young person, the only woman, and the only ethnic minority sitting at the table.

"Know that you have something to contribute, then put it out there. One thing will lead to another and the opportunities will open up."

Every chance she gets, Dhalla tells people how she grew up with a single mother and began her career as a volunteer working with David Walker in one of the poorest ridings in the country. "Who would have thought, growing up in the North end, that I would be a Member of Parliament now in Brampton of all places," she says. Today there is a continuous queue of young people outside her office door, eagerly waiting to ask for her support and advice.

With the wisdom of someone twice her age, Dhalla steadfastly encourages everyone to believe in themselves and carry themselves with confidence. "Know that you have something to contribute," she says. "Then put it out there. One thing will lead to another and the opportunities will open up."

Of course, success doesn't come without hard work, focus, motivation and passion, she reminds us. Still, you never know where life will take you. No dream is too big. "People are given opportunities in life," Dhalla says, "especially young people. Don't be afraid to take them. And if you don't have an opportunity, create one!"

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