

JAFENA
BOY

BERNARD SINNIAH

SAILFISH



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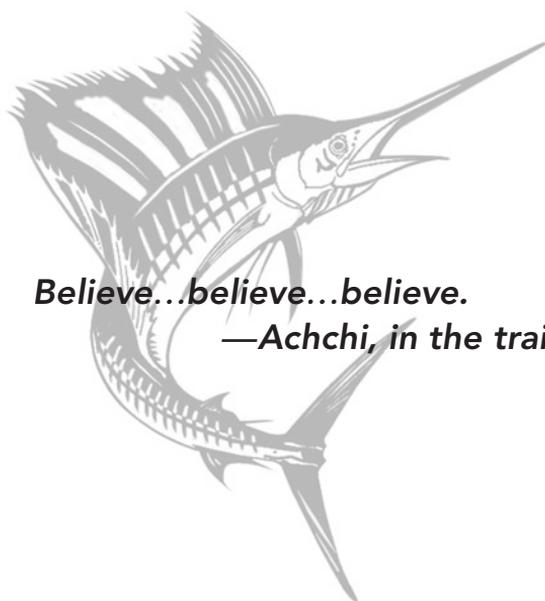
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*This book is dedicated to all those
who tolerated me and
supported me over the years.*

SAILFISH



Believe...believe...believe.
—Achchi, in the train

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PREFACE

"Ha-ha...We had great fun. Anita, have you heard this story before?"

"Of course I have. That is all you talk about when you and Johnians meet."

My very good friend Mohan Thavaratnam was visiting us from Canada in 2001. Every time we met, we just talked about our school days, recalling the wonderful times.

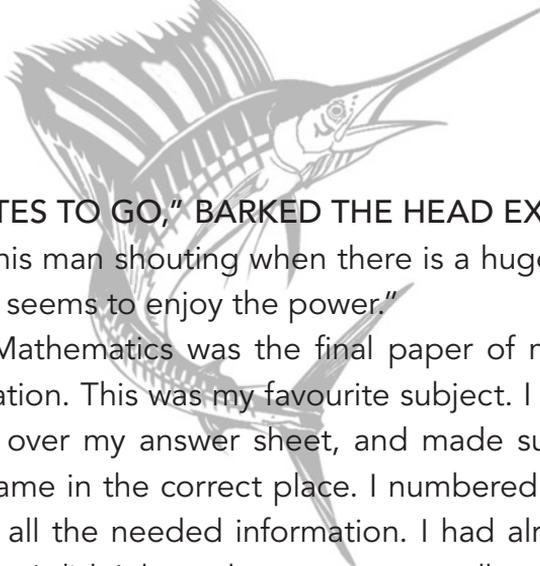
I decided that I must write all these stories and started this project, *Jaffna Boy*. It has taken me thirteen years to complete. As my dear Mahendran master once said, "Nothing is easy."

I am indebted to numerous people who helped me in writing this book. I am not able to recall all the names. Thank you for your support, guidance, and encouragement. I am very grateful to all.

Thank you for my family for putting up with me—then and now. Without them, I couldn't have completed this goal.

Enjoy *Jaffna Boy*!
Bernard Sinniah
Walton-on-Thames
2014

THE MAIL TRAIN



“FIVE MINUTES TO GO,” BARKED THE HEAD EXAMINER.

“Why is this man shouting when there is a huge clock above his head? He seems to enjoy the power.”

Applied Mathematics was the final paper of my advanced-level examination. This was my favourite subject. I stopped writing, glanced over my answer sheet, and made sure that I had written my name in the correct place. I numbered all the pages and inserted all the needed information. I had already finished answering, but I didn't have the courage to walk out of the exam hall. Normally, only those who hadn't done well would leave the exam hall way before the scheduled close. I didn't want to give that impression, especially since this was my last exam.

All throughout my school days, I had hated studying! But one has to do it to pass the year-end exams and move up to the next class. This examination was my last as a schoolboy, and I was determined to make a good impression to my fellow students. I had about forty minutes left on the clock. I read over my answer sheet ten times.

I knew what would happen. I had only about a 50 percent chance of passing, but I had given it my best. I always picked four or five topics and studied them very well. There were always eight questions, and you had to answer only five. I continually took this gamble; it mostly paid off and was always just enough for me to pass.

This time was another gamble. I was very lucky, as all the topics I had studied appeared on the question paper. I was very pleased. I gave a confident look to my fellow students. Here was a great opportunity to really do well in one subject. Not all in my class liked Applied Mathematics, but that didn't mean I could get more marks than them. This was it. The other three subjects were very difficult, and the maximum I could achieve would be a pass.

Now, with only five minutes to go, I was sweating profusely. I was panicking, not because of my potential results but because I knew that this was my last five minutes as a schoolboy. I had no clue what I would be doing after I left school. I would be going to Colombo, where my parents were living, and would have to take it from there.

As a student from this prestigious school, St. John's College, Jaffna, I was, simply put, a massive failure. I was not going to be a doctor or an engineer, or even enter the university with my A-level results. It was all too much for the five minutes, and my thought was to get out of the hall quickly. I walked out as if I had done very well. I gave the impression that I was sure to get an A, but I knew what my classmates thought of me. They knew that I was not a great student. Still, it was an amazing feeling. I didn't have to study anymore.

After the exam, I spoke to a few of my classmates, gave them my address in Colombo, and returned to Fleming Hostel. I had

already packed my suitcases. I had my clothes and a few books in my Ford suitcase. I had very few clothes, though; I always borrowed from others. I packed a lot of sentimental stuff like old movie ticket stubs, old hymn sheets from the college carol services, posters of film stars, and old Tamil movie songbooks. I dumped all into a cardboard box. I had a very small suitcase that I dumped into the box, too, as with everything else around my bed. The box was very heavy.

It was time for good-byes. I had about an hour to go before leaving the college to go to Jaffna Railway Station. I thought I would say good-bye to my principal, Mr. C. E. Anandarajan. I liked him a lot. He was a great man. I had the privilege of being punished by him on numerous occasions, but I still liked him. He was so helpful to all of us and was a very generous man. He wished me well and told me to stay in touch with him. I was sure that he was worried about me. I knew exactly what he thought. He also thought what everyone else thought: *What will this guy do?*

I went to see my favourite teacher, Panchalingham master. His son, Shanthakumar, was my classmate; we had studied together for a long time. Mr. Panchalingham was in charge of the catering of the hostel and was also the vice principal of the college, a very well-respected man. He taught physics, and I had been his student, but definitely not the best.

I returned to Fleming to catch up with my hostel mates. This was very sad. I had been a hostel boy for ten years from the age of eight and a half, and this had been my home—perhaps my first. I loved it. I enjoyed every minute of it. Now, I had thirty minutes to get out of the way. I kept my emotions to myself, cracked a few jokes with my friends, and was ready to go.

One by one, everyone was going home. I was getting very emotional. It was now my turn. My two closest friends, Tharmakumar (Tharmu) and Joshua, who was my first cousin, were to take me to the railway station. Tharmu had an examination the next day, while Joshua lived in Jaffna. They were both there with their bicycles. I had no idea where Tharmu got his bicycle from, but Joshua had a lovely green Raleigh. I had learnt to ride on that bicycle. It was fitting that I left Jaffna on it. It brought back many good memories.

I got on the pillion of Joshua's green bicycle while Tharmu had my suitcase strapped to his. I held that heavy box in my hand as though it contained a lot of valuable things. I had packed it nicely on the outside. I didn't put a ribbon on it, but I wrapped some really nice brown paper on the outside and used a white rope to tie it up. This was impressive—the brown paper and the white rope. No one used white rope. Normally, all the ropes were brown. Mine looked like a very expensive rope. This was the rope that I got when I joined the Boy Scout movement. It had been my great-uncle's. I think he was dead by then.

We left Fleming and passed the dining room. All the cooks and their assistants were outside having a chat and saying good-bye to the students. This was a routine that always happened in front of the college dining room. They must have been relieved that we were going home. The A levels were normally held during the April holidays, and the cooks had to work during that period. It really annoyed them, because they didn't get any time off. They were lovely people.

Chelliah, the head cook, was standing outside with his cigar, a *chooruttu*. Ramu and Nagamuttu had been there since I joined. Ramu rarely wore a shirt, and I used to annoy him a lot by tickling