

## **The First news of and the First Day at Guru**

Jim Connor

Well done son, you passed the entrance exam, you're going to S Thomas.'s Gurutalawa from the beginning of next year. That was the first time I had heard of College. To be honest I did not even know where Gurutalawa was, I thought it was an outer suburb of Colombo and I could not even remember doing an exam.

Where's that mum?

Its up in the hills, it's a boarding school in a beautiful setting and one of the best schools in the country

But why mum?

You will get a great education and you will just love it.

In those days one did not argue with one's parents and one was very careful about the views that one voiced. I was perplexed by the statement "you will get a better education and you will just love it" I thought I was getting a pretty good education where I was at Greenlands College (subsequently rename Isapathana Maha Vidiyalaya). I was a reasonably good student, a reasonably good sportsman, I had great teachers like Mr and Mrs H T De Silva, Mr Welagedera, Mr Subasinghe, Mr Arumugam, Mr Ponniah, Mr Peris, Mr C P DeSilva and the two Miss Dias Perdita and Philomina, furthermore I had a great group of friends, some of whom were Brian Ingram, Ray Vanderwall, Randy Pietersz, Ana Saranapala, Vijay Yapa, Dayalu Perera, Ismail Lye, Samahon, Vishvanathan and Chad Koelmeyer. We had gone past the usual name calling, recognized that our various different ethnicities and skin colours were lesser differences than what we had in common and become firm friends. Friendships by the way that last to this day. We had even got to the stage where we got "tick" with the kadalay man, the ice cream man and the achcharu woman. **What was mum thinking, and how could she know that I would love it?** I was devastated.

Mum I don't know anyone there!

Oh don't worry I spoke with (I forget the first name) and her son Rohan Wijewardena, is there and he loves it, and Sheilas son John Goodacre is there and loves it and another friend of mine, her son John Hunter is there and loves it, you will have lots of friends.

But mum! Who are these people I don't know any of them,

They are friends of mine from Bishops, they are all very nice and their sons will be nice.

Yeah right! How could mum know this, these guys might turn out to be not my type and what was this big deal about friends from Bishops? What sort of qualification was that for my being friends with mums friends sons?

The next 2 months were a frenzy of activity for mum and a period of extreme depression for me. Mum bought, as specified (not the colour) by the College a Big Brown trunk. On the inside of the lid she glued a list of items. The list included various items of clothing, such as shirts, trousers, socks, underwear, jumpers, instrument box, books and the one item I clearly remember, a hockey stick. Mum proceeded with enthusiasm to pack this trunk as each item came in from the Tailors or wherever and I got more and more resentful. Finally all the required items were in the trunk and a big Stainless Steel (I think) padlock was used to secure the lid of the trunk to the

main body of the trunk and that was my new life all neatly packed away. Packed and ready I was sure to accompany me on what would be the most miserable journey of my life.

By the time the big day arrived I was a bundle of nerves, I was resentful, I was anxious, I was engulfed by feelings that all tended towards the negative. I was not looking forward to this one little bit. As I type this it occurs to me that many Guru guy's must have experienced much the same feelings as me and as they read this would be nodding their heads in agreement and taking a little trip down memory lane. Sorry guys.

Ebert Silva bus station and there they all were, an unhappy looking bunch or so I thought. Check in for myself and the brown trunk, no one I know, and there opposite is the Regal theatre, a place I had visited many times and where I had been transformed in my imagination into the Lone Ranger or Roy Rogers or some other hero, bye! bye! Regal----- Time to say goodbye to mum, get on the bus and start the trip to isolation and purgatory

Now be a good boy, study hard, don't feel homesick, the term will fly, I love you!

Feeling really emotional now, things I am going to miss racing through my mind, but I cant let myself down, these other guys are all looking at me or so I imagine and will think I am a sissy.

Yeah ok mum will do my best see you

Aren't you going to give your mum a kiss goodbye?

Jeez mum you want to embarrass me in front of all these guys?

Oh don't be silly, big hug and kiss on the cheek

I can feel my ears going red; the top of my head is flushed and hot with embarrassment. I want to crawl into the baggage compartment of the Ebert Silva bus and hide myself.

Poor mum she was only doing what every mother does, reassuring her child and showing her love.

Final furtive wave and off we go. The longer term students, the veterans of boarding school life, share stories of their exploits during the holidays, speculate about the new head prefect, who would be appointed and who would the new prefects be. Freshers like myself, feeling miserable and not talking to anyone. I am very quiet, thinking, eyes focused on the passing countryside but nothing really registering. Then after what seemed like an eternity we stopped at Ratnapura and were told to have lunch and be back in an hour (I think) to complete the journey.

Hmmmm! A dose of welcome freedom at last, and the first tentative attempts at friendships. David Field the first contact, Anthony Keller, Farook Ameer, and John Hunter in quick succession. Had lunch at some Kadai, and asked the first tentative questions. Name, age, place of residence, class, hobbies, sports played etc.

A headcount and back on the bus, the novices are being acknowledged, albeit tentatively. The combination, of lunch and the limited freedom has had the effect of raising spirits. There is the tacit understanding that the seemingly endless journey is half completed. Everyone settles in and it is not long before rice coma sets in and many fall asleep. The buses plow on, straining with the effort of a steep climb, compounded by the many twists and turns in the road. The temperature drops the higher we climb, more of the passengers curl up for warmth and fall asleep. By the time we reach Welimada it is quite cold and a thick foreboding mist has blanketed the countryside. Gloomy thoughts have filtered into my brain and descriptions of scenes from the

“hound of the Baskervilles” have become vivid in my imagination, I can almost hear the hounds howl, hooooowleeee! hoooooowwleeee! Mum!!!! Where have you sent me to? What have you done?

We arrive late afternoon, early evening. The sun has gone to light up the other side of the world. I am tired and nothing much registers, except the cold. Some of the other novices and myself have been allocated to Reid House and are led to the location by Sunil Watawela and Maas Ahmed (I think) the senior dorm prefects. The “veterans” know where their bunks and cupboards are and are ready for the next stage very quickly. Myself and a couple of others, the “novices” take a bit longer, but are ready in time for the next stage, which is congregation in the main hall and then dinner, before “lights out at 8.30 or was it 9.00PM”.

The Prefects are models of efficiency as they herd us to our seats and will us to silence. This is all very new to me. Three Europeans come in, 2 large (tall) gentlemen and one tiny lady. These I assumed, correctly as it turns out, were Dr and Mrs Hayman and Fr Foster. Dr Hayman welcomes us. Even in my tired state, I am impressed by and can feel the genuine respect and what is it? Love??? The students feel for these people. They instill confidence there is something very kindly, something reassuring about these people. Maybe, just maybe, mum is not completely wrong.

Dinner was uninspiring, but, as the saying goes “hunger is the best sauce” and I wolfed down the offering. By the time we started back to the dorms after dinner, darkness and the cold had set in and the way was lit by a few sad lights and identification of any defining features relating to the layout of the place was all but impossible. The dimness of the lighting and the cold, coupled with my tiredness, helped to dissipate any positive feelings I had experienced after listening to Dr Hayman and when I inspected my bottom bunk and bedding, my conviction that mum had made a big mistake surfaced once again.

The blanket was a grey threadbare rectangle of woolen cloth, tissue thin (to me anyway) and looking like it had been peeled off the back of some mangy cur. The pillow appeared to be suffering from anorexia and had to be rolled up to get any fullness for support. The mattress also looked anorexic having possibly caught the illness from the pillow or vice versa and had over many years attempted to conform in shape to the many previous occupants and had obviously given up in total frustration. What was left was a misshapen indentation in the middle of the mattress that only vaguely resembled the human form. I contorted myself into this shape, making myself as comfortable as was possible, covered myself with the threadbare blanket and fell into an uncomfortable sleep.

Dong! Dong! Dong! A is for Aardvark, what the? This is what I heard almost simultaneously. One was the sound of the college bell rung by “bell Simon” to wake us up and the second was Terrance Rajapakse (I found out later in the day) striding purposefully up and down the length of the dorm, having set himself the monumental task, to memorize the spelling and meanings of the entire selection of words recorded in the Oxford dictionary.

Getting out of bed was a struggle, it was freezing, outside the dorm, any scenery was obscured by the cold mist. Off to the ablutions block for relief and a shower as was my normal habit in

Colombo. That was when I think I had my first near death experience. On with the water and the breath wooshed out of me, and every part of my body and I mean every part of my body, seemed like it was in a competition to contract on itself, I felt frozen in place, and then thankfully my heart started pumping furiously and the warm lifeblood began coursing through and my head began to thump painfully but by the time the shower was over I was warm and feeling totally invigorated. Back to the dorm and into uniform for my first real day at Guru.

By now the sun was nearly back from its overnight journey. I could see things and what I saw was beautiful. The flowerbeds with flowers in vibrant bloom, the sweeping view of the hills in the distance, the foreground view of the pool and junior dorms, the walk past the quaint chapel, the imposing arched and towering granite entrance and alcove with the notice board, the walk down the solid granite steps past the big storm drain with the little bridge that took one to the laboratory, past the library with the bay windows, past the administration office and into the dining hall with the area separated for the staff meals, with more big bay windows looking out over the extensive vegetable gardens and those hills in the distance, just fantastic. Then after breakfast collecting books from the dorm and walking to class, past the rifle range set in the postage stamp sized gully, past the garage, past the stable and farm, past the squash courts and then Dr and Mrs Hayman's house on the right, set on a tiny rise, quaint looking with more bay windows, surrounded by flowers beds with flowers in bloom and looking like one of those picture postcards. Then on through the avenue of gums/pines to the classrooms set on the hillside and after school that run to the play grounds, past the tennis courts, past Hameeds? boutique over the stream with the wooden bridge with no hand rails and up onto this little plateau that was the playing field and the little pavilion built a third of the way up a hillock looking down on the playing field and the steps terraced into the same hillock leading down to the playing field.

The previous month's anxiety evaporated, the long trip was already becoming an unpleasant memory. The cold, the anorexic looking pillow and mattress and the threadbare blanket I would have to cope with.

**I was pretty close to being hooked, and maybe mum had made the correct choice, and maybe the way I was feeling now and the way I was thinking now, was that, maybe I could grow to love this place.**