

THE BEST I COULD

Subhas Anandan (1947–2015) was undoubtedly Singapore's best-known criminal lawyer. From taking on Singapore's most infamous cases, such as those of Anthony Ler, Took Leng How and Ah Long San, to espousing his views on the mandatory death sentence and police entrapment, Subhas Anandan became the face of criminal defence in Singapore. But why did he choose to represent clients who were to all intents and purposes guilty? And were the criminals he represented the monsters they were made out to be?

Part (auto) biography and part log of Singapore's criminal history, *The Best I Could* is a candid, at times brutally honest rendition of the boy, the man, the lawyer and the mentor who would ultimately become the voice of Singapore's underdogs and unwanted. The book is a journey through dusty jail cells, dramatic courtrooms and the minds of some of the most high-profile criminals to date. At the end of a sometimes emotional ride, underneath his signature public scowl is a heart that is truly made of gold. We are privileged to have him as a colleague and a mentor to our younger colleagues.

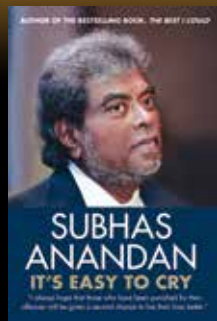
— Tan Chong Huat, *Managing Partner, KhattarWong* (2009)

The Best I Could provides a good insight into the criminal mind. Subhas narrates some of the island's most heinous crimes and the criminals behind them. Some of the characters are as fascinating as the author himself, and Subhas shows there is some good in the worst of them. He has not only dealt with them as clients and outside prison walls, but has also lived with many of them during his 10 months of incarceration without trial after being wrongfully accused of being the leader of a notorious criminal gang. His insights into prison life also make for an absorbing read.

— Conrad Raj, *Editor-At-Large, Today* (2009)

Subhas has always been straightforward and pulls no punches with his comments so expect nothing less from his book. What is most fascinating about the book is that through Subhas' eyes, the readers get to see for themselves what some of the most notorious criminals in Singapore are like. A must-read for all Singaporeans.

— Ben Nadarajan, *Assistant News Editor, The Straits Times* (2009)



"In this book, I am sharing with you all my feelings very candidly about what I have gone through and practically baring my soul."

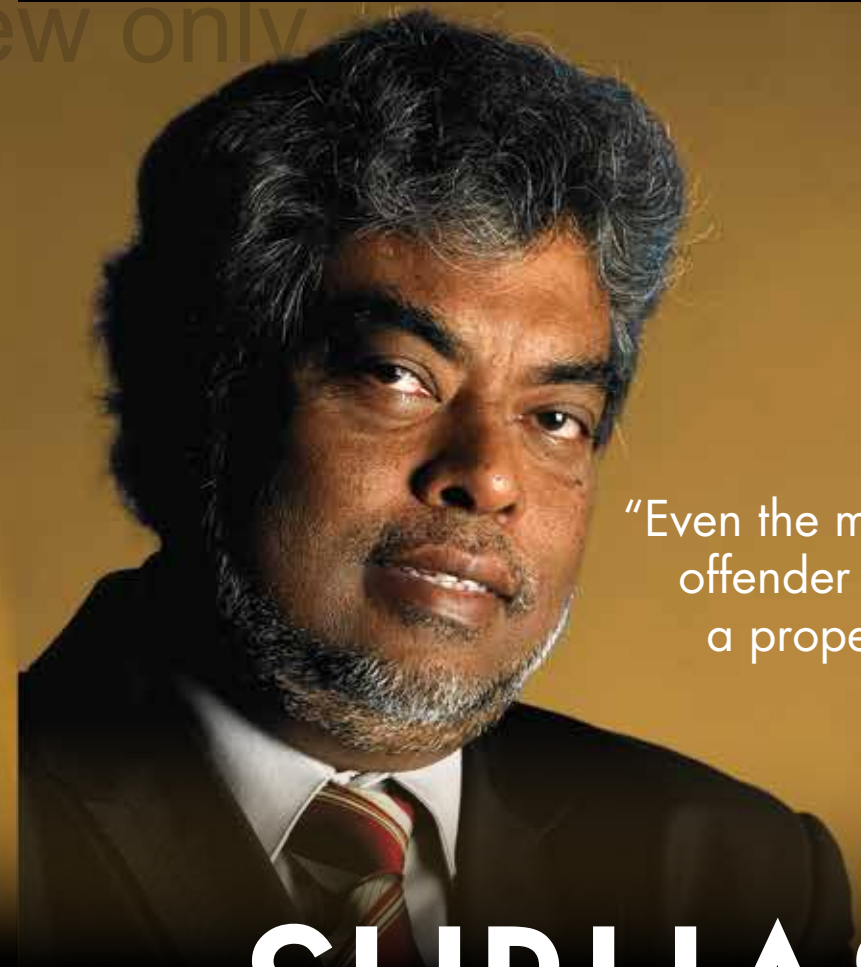
SUBHAS ANANDAN

THE BEST I COULD

Marshall Cavendish Editions



NATIONAL BESTSELLER



"Even the most heinous offender deserves a proper trial."

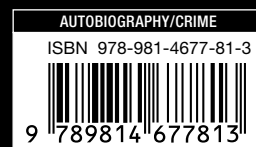
SUBHAS ANANDAN

THE BEST I COULD

With excerpts from the author's second book,
It's Easy to Cry

visit our website at:
www.marshallcavendish.com/genref

mc Marshall Cavendish
Editions



For Review only

SUBHAS ANANDAN

THE BEST I COULD

For Review only

SUBHAS ANANDAN

THE BEST I COULD

For Review only

© 2009 Subhas Anandan and Marshall Cavendish International (Asia) Private Limited

First published 2009

Reprinted 2009 (three times), 2010, 2011, 2012, 2014

This edition published 2015

Reprinted 2016, 2017, 2020

Editor: Lee Mei Lin

Designer: Benson Tan

Published by Marshall Cavendish Editions

An imprint of Marshall Cavendish International



All rights reserved.

No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior permission of the copyright owner. Requests for permission should be addressed to the Publisher, Marshall Cavendish International (Asia) Private Limited, 1 New Industrial Road, Singapore 536196. Tel: (65) 6213 9300. E-mail: genref@sg.marshallcavendish.com. Website: www.marshallcavendish.com/genref

Other Marshall Cavendish Offices:

Marshall Cavendish Corporation, 99 White Plains Road, Tarrytown NY 10591-9001, USA
• Marshall Cavendish International (Thailand) Co Ltd, 253 Asoke, 12th Flr, Sukhumvit 21 Road, Klongtoey Nua, Wattana, Bangkok 10110, Thailand • Marshall Cavendish (Malaysia) Sdn Bhd, Times Subang, Lot 46, Subang Hi-Tech Industrial Park, Batu Tiga, 40000 Shah Alam, Selangor Darul Ehsan, Malaysia.

Marshall Cavendish is a registered trademark of Times Publishing Limited

National Library Board Singapore Cataloguing in Publication Data

Anandan, Subhas, 1947-2015.

Subhas Anandan : the best I could. – Singapore : Marshall Cavendish Editions, c2009.

p. cm.

ISBN : 978-981-4677-81-3 (pbk.)

1. Anandan, Subhas, 1947-2015. 2. Lawyers – Singapore – Biography. 3. Trials (Murder) – Singapore. I. Title.

KPP11

340.092 -- dc22

OCN262489315

Printed in Singapore

*To my son, Sujesh,
who indirectly gave me the idea of writing this book,
and to my wife, Vimi,
who made it possible by typing out my rambling thoughts,
crystallising my ideas and clarifying my writing.
I thank them both for always allowing me to focus
on doing the best I can in my profession.*

*To my late brother, Surash,
who left me without saying goodbye
on October 31, 2000.*

For Review only

CONTENTS

| | | | |
|---|-----|--|-----|
| Acknowledgements | 8 | Nadasan Chandra Secharan | 175 |
| Foreword | 12 | • Escaping the death sentence | |
| Preface | 15 | Leong Siew Chor | 184 |
| | | • The body parts murder | |
| THE MOULDING YEARS | | Abdul Nasir | 192 |
| The Base | 28 | • A landmark case | |
| Prefect | 36 | Muhammad Nasir | 200 |
| Raffles Institution | 43 | • The 16-year-old lover | |
| University Days | 54 | Anthony Ler | 210 |
| First Murder Trial | 82 | • That certain smile | |
| Becoming a Criminal Lawyer | 87 | Tan Chor Jin | 214 |
| Temple | 92 | • The one-eyed dragon | |
| Prison | 99 | Chua Tiong Tiong | 221 |
| Prison Intermediary | 113 | • Ah Long San | |
| | | Pal (Milk), the Bookie | 227 |
| THE CASES | | Johnny Tan | 232 |
| Magnet | 132 | • The impersonator | |
| Drugs, Stupidity and Abuse | 138 | University Martin | 240 |
| Constance Chee | 153 | • The public prosecutor vs the bomoh | |
| • The air stewardess who fell from grace | | Public Prosecutor vs Heng Boon Chai | 247 |
| Took Leng How | 158 | | |
| • The man who should not have been hanged | | REFLECTIONS | |
| Ramu Annadavascan | 169 | J B Jeyaretnam and the Queen's Counsel | 254 |
| • A rake and the burning man | | Francis Seow and the Presidents of the Law Society | 273 |
| | | David Marshall and the Jury System | 279 |
| | | Keeping a Promise | 284 |
| | | Excerpts from <i>It's Easy To Cry</i> | 297 |

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I started my law firm, Subhas Anandan, Advocate & Solicitor, with \$500 given to me by my elder sister, Subhashini, who was then working as a medical officer. When I told her that I needed \$500 to start it, she was surprised I could start a law firm with just that amount. I told her that the money was to open a current account so I could issue cheques. My sister, who is a very generous person, offered me more money. But I refused with a caveat—I told her that if I needed more funds, I would call on her. True to form, I did call on her generosity many times and she did not turn me down once. I don't think that I have repaid all the money I borrowed from her yet.

On my first day of practice, my younger sister, Sugadha, who was then a relief teacher (she is now a reading specialist in the Ministry of Education with a Master's degree in English), gave me a poster which read something like: Aim High, Aim Far, Aim for the Sky, Aim for the Stars. I stared at the poster and wondered at the audacity of my sister to think I could reach the stars. I was just hoping to make ends meet. Today, when I hit the headlines, I think of that poster and my younger sister. She had the courage to dream for me.

My younger brother, Sudheesan, who was then working in the Ministry of Defence did not say anything. He is the sort who will not interfere but you can be sure he will be there for you through thick and

thin. I owe him my undying gratitude for all he did for me when I was in prison in 1976. He played football for Singapore and was the captain of the National Youth Team but this fact is not known to many.

My late younger brother, Surash, was then a well-known footballer in the early 1970s. He played for Singapore and made a name for himself. His only goal against West Germany in Tokyo was, at that time, the talking point in many a sporting function. He was one of my biggest fans as I was his. During my days in prison, I was known as his brother and I was so proud of him when prisoners came to talk to me about him.

My father was more a friend than a father. I recall when my own son was three years old, he was asked by some friends how he related to me and his answer was: "My father is, firstly, my best friend. Secondly he is my partner, and thirdly, he is my father, and sometimes he is my enemy." I am glad I passed on my relationship with my father to my son.

To my mother, I was everything. She openly showed her bias and to the credit of my siblings, they took this without any grudges. To some extent, they were all quietly spoiling me as well when I was growing up. In fact, they are still spoiling me even at this age. In many ways, my mother was also everything to me. She did say that I made her cry the most but I also made her laugh the most. She was the only person who could make me do what I didn't want to do.

When I was studying for my 'A' level and university exams, she used to sit with me to keep me company. Quite often when my friends felt I needed a break, they would come by around midnight with fried chicken and all sorts of other goodies. They would provide entertainment for half an hour before they left me with my studies again. My mother did not know at the time that the chicken was

probably stolen from some neighbour. She used to say that part of my law degree belonged to her while my friends said that they were entitled to part of my earnings for the sacrifices they made.

The death of my father was a blow to me. I was not able to deal with it for some time. I had started to earn good money and I wanted to share my good fortune with him. I could only do it for a short time. I remember the pride and joy on his face when he got into my first Mercedes 280S. When I switched on the air-conditioner, he told me to switch it off. I asked him if he was feeling cold. He said that he was not but using the air-conditioner would increase the usage of petrol. I laughed and told him that I could afford it.

At the slightest excuse, he would ask me to give him a lift to meet his friends and sometimes he even requested me to drive one friend to visit another. I realised he just wanted to show off his son's car.

My mother's demise was more acceptable. She witnessed my marriage and had a few years with my son. When my wife Vimi confirmed her pregnancy, she rang my mother up to give her the good news. As usual my mother was lamenting about her ill health and wondering why she was still alive. She was in one of her depressive moods. On hearing the good news, she was delighted and even today, everybody feels that the birth of my son extended her life by another five years.

When she died, in some ways, we were glad because she was suffering a lot of pain and it was terrible to see her controlling her pain to make us feel better. She is the bravest lady I know. She took many a blow and came back stronger. I attribute this to her great faith in her God.

Apart from my family, there are many people who shaped my life and my character. It is practically impossible to name all of them and if I have inadvertently left out some names, please forgive me.

I grew up in the British Naval Base. My childhood friends were many and they had a good influence on me. Friends like Ah Teng, Ah Tee, Chee San, Poh Leong, Ah Soo, Chee Kok, Ramli, Ismail, Mohd Noor, Narainasamy, Ah Sai, Sai Chee, the late Lai Beng, Sivalingam (otherwise known as Mark, who first taught me how to drive) and many others. With these friends, I learnt the meaning of loyalty and realised that true friendship knows no boundaries.

In Naval Base School, I had other friends like Yusof (the last I heard he was in trouble and had run away from Singapore), Resman, Teck Boo, Hin Kiew (whose football wizardry was remarkable) and many others. Teachers like Mr Ngoh Cheong Hock, Mr Gabriel Pillai, Mr Oliver Seet, Mr Haridas and many other teachers also helped to shape me.

I would also like to acknowledge my brother-in-law, Bhas, and my wife's brother-in-law, Nala, for all the medical care they gave me unflinchingly and, of course, for free. My sister-in-law, Nan, for being one of the first to be at my bedside whenever I was in hospital, my sisters-in-law, Syon and Justina, and my niece Sunita for always being there.

To Philip Ong, who ignored his busy work schedule in Shanghai to be at my bedside on the eve of my heart by-pass operation. He was, and always has been, a pillar of strength to me and my family.

My secretary, Sandra Cheng, for assisting my wife in liaising with the publishers. Thusita de Silva for his help to me in writing this book.

Last, but not least, to the late Justice M Karthigesu and Mrs Rathi Karthigesu I owe a debt for all that they have done for me.

Subhas Anandan

October 2008

FOREWORD

Strong friendships have been a very integral part in my brother's life. Growing up in the British Naval Base workers' quarters, he had the good fortune of having good friends in the different phases of his life. In his Naval Base school days, in Raffles Institution and the University of Singapore, Subhas had good friends that stood by him when he needed them. The friendships one makes growing up tend to mould the person one becomes. His growing up experiences with his friends, together with the love, support and guidance of our parents, have crystallised the adult Subhas. In his practise of the law, he had many successes and disappointments, but there were two very distinct phases in his life, and the law he loves passionately, that reveal the character of the man.

In the early years of his law practice, Subhas was framed by rogue police officers and incarcerated in Queenstown Remand Prison under the Criminal Law (Temporary Provisions) Act. Many people then deemed that his life was over. However, that was the period when special friends stood by him and worked tirelessly to get him released. Friends and neighbours, although frightened that they would also become targets of the rogue police conspiracy, still came out in large numbers to support the mass signature campaign to the Home Minister for his release. More than 5,000 signatories joined us in his release petition. Many others gave affidavits to support the contention that Subhas was

framed and declared that they would go to court to testify if needed. Indefinite detention is a cruel sentence.

In the darkest hour of our misery, Subhas realised many things. Friendship is a crucible—friends are tested in crises. Most of his friends remained friends. Some, beyond our expectations, eased away, the fear of collateral damage haunting them. A few, to our despair, anguish and pain, gloated. But most of his tested and trusted friends stood by him and his family. They warmed our hearts and gave us courage and hope.

When Subhas was released early, he focused on his law practice. He and his partner, Mr M P D Nair, restructured their firm and took on many cases. In his practise of the law, Subhas showed compassion and empathy for the underdog. Many of the cases in this book testify to this. He has been there for people accused of heinous crimes who pleaded for help to clear their names. For many of them, Subhas the defence lawyer became their only friend. His practice blossomed and reputation as an excellent criminal lawyer grew.

The second milestone that shaped his life and his practise of the law was the death of our younger brother Surash, a chief steward in SIA. Surash died tragically in the infamous SQ006 flight that failed to take off from Taipei airport and crashed and burned on the runway on October 31, 2000. His colleagues who survived told us that Surash remained in the burning aircraft helping the passengers under his care to escape. Many survived, but Surash and others were caught in a blinding flash fire and perished. They found Surash close to his friend and colleague, Alfred, who also stayed back to help and made the ultimate sacrifice as well.

In many ways, Subhas reminds me of Surash. Both have the same fierce determination to complete their professional responsibilities.

“Not on my watch. The best I could.” These were beacons to them. Like Surash, Subhas also cares for his friends and the people who come to him for help. Both of them had many friends but Surash was the more realistic one. He reminded us that all you need at the end are six friends to be your pallbearers in the Mount Vernon crematorium. Surash had more than a thousand friends in his final send-off.

Subhas is very different now. Many of his life experiences have tempered him, and the criminal cases he shares with us in this book reveal the tough, aggressive, brash, gentle, generous and kind nature of the man. He has always loved being a court-room lawyer, enjoying the cut and thrust of logic, evidence, and setting precedents. He now shares his vast expertise with many young lawyers, teaching and mentoring them. My son, Sunil, his legal assistant, is grateful to his uncle for the guidance and training. Both of them share a deep love of the law.

Friends there were many and many more will come into my brother's life. He knows those who will stick by him regardless of the slings and arrows of misfortune. He is patient, listens well, and has become more compassionate and tolerant. His dry sense of humour and that rare smile that can light up a room is still there.

Our parents taught us well. They always reiterated, “Never forget the good that people have done for you and do your best to help them whenever you can.” The practise of law enables Subhas to continue doing this. All of us, his family and his friends in Sembawang and other parts of Singapore, wish him well and pray for his good health, happiness and prosperity.

Sudheesan Anandan

October 2008, Singapore

PREFACE

I have been asked many times why my son is not studying law as though it's a given that he must read law. Some blame me for not encouraging him to be a lawyer while others accuse me of being indifferent. To me, it doesn't really matter if he is a lawyer, a doctor or a salesman. He should grow up to be a good human being. A person who will have time and compassion for those who are less fortunate than him. I want him to have a life where he has time to stop and smell the flowers. I want his life to be a journey of surprises and discovery, and not one where he is in a constant rush. Let him be anything he wants to be as long as he is happy. He should lead his life according to standards he sets for himself and he should not live to please others. He should have the discipline to resist evil and the same discipline not to overindulge. He knows my weaknesses and my strengths, and with that knowledge, he should be able to build his own strengths and discard what is not good for him. I have, to the best of my ability, taught him to differentiate between good from bad. You don't need to be a lawyer to know that.

There is a long-standing TV programme in Singapore called 'Crimewatch'. I remember watching it 10 years ago with my son who was then eight years old. Many of the cases shown in the programme were cases for which I was the defence counsel. Often, I would tell him, “Hey, that was papa's case.”

One day, during the showing of a particular case, I got very angry because the police had taken credit for something they did not do. It was such an exaggeration and the police overplayed their importance. I told my wife Vimi: “You know, this is nonsense. Actually it’s quite shameful. What they are showing in this programme is nothing like what really happened. I think I should write to the papers to say that they are pulling wool over the public’s eyes.” The police did a good job in many cases but sometimes their exaggerations were a bit too much.

Vimi didn’t think I should send a letter. “Why don’t you leave it as it is?” she said. “Don’t go and antagonise these police people. Don’t you remember why you went to Queenstown Prison? It’s because you antagonised some of these people that you got into trouble. So, just leave them alone, please.”

My son had been quiet during my rant but he suddenly interrupted us. “Papa, all these people in these cases are your clients?” he asked earnestly.

“Yes, my son, most of them are,” I replied with pride in my voice, hoping my young son would be proud of his father and that I could inspire him into a legal career.

“Papa, don’t you have any good clients?” he exclaimed and walked away in disgust. I just looked at Vimi and we both burst out laughing.

But his innocent question lingered in my mind for many days after that. How do you tell a boy that everyone charged with an offence is not necessarily guilty? How do you tell him that the defence counsel has an important role to play? How do you tell him that people who are charged with crimes are not necessarily bad people? Some of them commit their crimes on impulse, or perhaps when they are in a state of utter despair, drowning in their own disappointments and frustrations.

How could I tell my son that, sometimes, people hit out at society because they have lost all hope? I couldn’t explain these thoughts to my son but I shared them with my wife.

She said, “Yes, I understand that you have to do what you have to do.”

“You know, Vimi, in my years of practice, I’ve seen all sorts of people. I’ve seen the best in men and the worst in men.”

When I was young, my father told me that he wanted all his children to receive a university education. That was his target for all of us, which we met. I personally argued with him about it because I was sick of studying by the time I reached the age when I could go to university. But I did and forged this career for myself. It made him very proud. A few years ago, my son indicated to me that he didn’t want to read law and, naturally, I had to ask him for his reasons.

“I don’t have an interest in that subject, papa. I hope you don’t mind,” he replied.

“Of course I don’t mind. I’ve never insisted that you must read law and I will encourage and support you in whatever you choose to do.”

When I asked him what he wanted to do, he replied, “Banking and finance.”

I said, “Okay, that’s fine.” My wife listened to our conversation but didn’t say anything. She asked me later if I was disappointed and I told her that I honestly wasn’t. As I have stated, my son has to make his own choices in life. I will support him in whatever he does.

It wasn’t like that for me initially. In 1963, I was sent to India to study medicine because my mother wanted me to be a doctor. I lost one whole year of my life trying to please my mother. I knew from the first few classes I attended that I wasn’t suited to study medicine. I was very homesick too. I came back after only three months in Loyola

College, Madras, and enrolled in Raffles Institution. I had to wait a long time to start school because the school year was already in full swing. I wouldn't want my son to be in a position where he is doing something he doesn't want to do just to please me or my wife.

Right now, he's chasing his own dream, studying banking and financial services at Ngee Ann Polytechnic. He chose to go to the polytechnic despite qualifying for a place in a junior college because he wanted to start doing the subjects that he liked straight away. He said there was no point in doing history or geography or physics or chemistry when he could embark on banking and finance at Ngee Ann. It made sense to me. But lately, he has shown some interest in the law which I'm secretly pleased about. He will read the case files that I bring home from the office and sometimes even discuss aspects of those cases with me. I find his input valuable also because he provides me with an insight into how his generation thinks about crime and punishment. In fact, he has enlightened me on many issues. I must say that, even after almost four decades of working as a lawyer, crime and punishment is something which I find very hard to define. Many books and papers have been written, but to me it's a subject that bears different definitions for different people. Like my career as a lawyer, crime and punishment has evolved since I first started. It's like a living being I have walked side by side with all these years, our respective paths sometimes crossing but never for too long.

Not long ago, as I was addressing the Court of Appeal in a case of the prosecution's appeal against the sentence of three years given to a person who had killed his pregnant wife, I was trying very hard to argue why the sentence was not manifestly inadequate. I was throwing arguments about how there must be rehabilitation. The Court of Appeal, comprising Justice of Appeal Andrew Pang, Justice of Appeal

V K Rajah and Justice Tay Yong Kwang listened very attentively. I was stopped at one stage by the presiding judge, Andrew Pang. He said: "You know, Mr Anandan, we agree with you on rehabilitation and the need to rehabilitate offenders, especially those who suffer from mental disorders, but don't you think that this court also has the responsibility to look after the interest of the community?"

I agreed. "Of course, you have the responsibility to look after the community."

"Don't you think we should balance the rights of the accused person and the rights of the community and society in general, and make sure that the rights of the accused person do not supersede the rights of the community?" Justice Pang asked.

Again, I agreed. "Yes, Your Honour, it's a very fine balancing act and I am glad that I don't have to do it. The responsibility is yours." It was the first time I saw Justice Pang showing one of his rare smiles. Justice Rajah was smiling too. Naturally, they reserved judgment on the appeal and subsequently raised the prison sentence from three to five years. I thought it was fair, especially as the prosecution was asking for 10 years.

One of the questions that people often ask me is how I deal with my cases and the accused persons. I always tell them that preparation for a case is not an easy task, especially when it is a capital case. In capital cases, you are burdened with a very heavy responsibility because the life of the accused is at stake. You simply cannot afford to make mistakes. If you do, there is a possibility that your client will hang. The situation puts you under a lot of stress and the pressure is unrelenting. You have to do the best you can to keep your client away from the gallows.

In the last few years, I have been lucky in the sense that I have

my nephew, Sunil, to help me. He does most of the ground work of running around and most of the preparation. He has a passion for criminal law and does his research very well. We also have our own interns and other legal associates who will do research and prepare documents and briefs, which I read and correct if necessary. Whatever others do for you on a case, you still have to countercheck and amend. Sometimes, you have to rehash the whole thing because if something goes wrong in your case, ultimately only you will be held responsible.

Interviewing and taking instructions from the accused person is a very difficult task. In all capital cases, the accused persons are in prison and instructions can only be taken from them there. Practically every Saturday morning, Sunil and I spend our time in one prison or another because that's just about the only time we have to interview clients who are being held there. We are both in court virtually non-stop from Mondays to Fridays, but we do make trips to prison during weekdays when we don't have to appear in court. For accused persons who are out on bail, instructions can be taken in our office at Raffles Place, which is definitely a more conducive environment. We can even do it over a cup of coffee. I can tell you that it's certainly more relaxing as you know that the punishment will not be as harsh as in capital cases. No one's life is in your hands.

When you are seeing the accused for the first time, there are always difficulties. They don't know you and they have no reason yet to trust you. It's very difficult to build trust and confidence in a prison. In the early days of my practice, it was especially difficult because no one knew me. But as I became a little more popular, prisoners started to know about me and it was easier to talk to them. Still, it is no cakewalk. As a lawyer you have to ensure that the accused person is telling you the truth and, to do that, sometimes you have to cross-examine him, just

as you would do a witness in court. When you think that the accused is not telling you the whole story, you have to scream and shout at him, or threaten to discharge yourself, or tell him that you know he is a liar. It saps a lot of energy out of you because you have to make judgement calls on people you don't know at all. Only after two or three sessions with the accused person will you get the truth, or at least very close to the truth. Without these sessions, it is very difficult to defend an accused person because you can be caught by surprise by what the prosecution presents in court. In our system where ambush tactics are still allowed, the prosecution sometimes takes full advantage and catches you flat-footed in court. It's definitely not a pleasant feeling for any lawyer when that happens.

As you go through the facts of a case with the accused person, you warn him of the dangerous minefields he could face under cross-examination but you should not coach him on what to say. You can tell him what kind of questions to expect and to reply truthfully. You cannot ask him to lie because that is unethical. It is also a dangerous tactic. You can be caught out because if a client is pressured under cross-examination, he can always turn around and say, "My lawyer instructed me to say this, so why are you shouting at me?" That would be the end for you as it could land you in a lot of trouble. In your mind, you must always remember that your client can be your worst enemy.

As I will bring up later in the book, another source of problems you have in most cases is the relatives and friends of the accused person. They can be a real pain in the neck. Often, they feel that since they have paid you some money, all of them can call you at half hourly intervals to find out what's happening with the case. Uncle will call, aunty will call, cousin will call. I have to say, too, that this is more of

a problem with my Indian clients. Of course some of these calls are out of genuine concern for the accused person, but in many instances, you get the feeling that they are doing it because they think it's their right. So, what we do is that when we visit the accused person, we tell him to inform his relatives and friends to stop bothering us because it interrupts our work. When they hear that we are not able to do our jobs properly defending the accused person, they usually back off. That's how we deal with this particular type of problem. But having said that, we must always remember that as practising lawyers, relatives and friends are part and parcel of the deal. We try hard to be diplomatic in our dealings with them.

In fact, some of these relatives and friends can be very helpful. They can give us information which the accused person has forgotten or not given because he thinks it casts him in an unfavourable light. Yes, relatives and friends can be a nuisance at times, but they are always available to help you out. For example, they will personally bring a witness to the office to allow us to record a statement. We can understand the agony and the stress that parents and siblings go through especially when their son or brother faces a capital case. So, you have to give them some leeway, you have to empathise. However much you feel like screaming at them or telling them to get out of the office when they get so irritating that it affects your work, you have to choose to control that feeling, smile at them and offer them a cup of coffee instead. You have to take deep breaths, remain calm and assure them that you are doing your best for their loved one. In capital cases, everyone wants you to give a kind of guarantee that the accused person will not hang or, in other cases, that they will not go to jail. But when the accused person goes to jail or gets sentenced to death, the family and friends will pounce on you because they think you have reneged

on your promise. They will scream at you and abuse you in public. In their frustration, they will even report you to the Law Society.

Lawyers should never make promises or give guarantees. I will usually give an assurance that I will do my best for the accused person. I'll tell the family that we have a whole team who will be involved in the accused person's defence and who will do their best. But the outcome of a trial cannot be guaranteed because that's the nature of the law. And I will go on record here to say that any lawyer who gives you a guarantee is a snake-oil merchant and only interested in your money. How can anyone make such a commitment when the system is so unpredictable? Anything can happen in a trial. Usually, when we give the family our assurance that we will do our best, that is enough. If they insist on a guarantee, I will always tell them that I would like to discharge myself from the case.

For the most part of my years as a lawyer, my wife has been by my side. She worked with me when I was running a small firm in the 1970s—we weren't married then. She was in charge of conveyancing. She knows what happens in a legal firm, and is well aware of all the trials and tribulations I go through with the courts, accused persons, their families and friends. When I get frustrated, she's the calming influence. Vimi stopped work when she was pregnant with my son and never went back to work after that. She devoted herself to being a good mother and a good wife. She not only drives me around but also takes care of all issues pertaining to our household. This includes the task of dispensing the 15 types of medication I require on a daily basis because of my health. Her dedication to my health gives me the peace of mind to attend strictly to my passion—my work. At the end of each day, I will tell her almost everything I did that day. I often tap on her for opinions to give a new perspective to handling a case in question. Vimi

is my multi-tasking princess—she’s my nurse, my driver, my financial controller, my best friend, my partner.

When she married me, she knew about my health condition. I suffered my first heart attack in December 1978. I collapsed on a field while playing football for graduates of the University of Singapore against undergraduates. I was rushed to Toa Payoh Hospital by my good friend, Choo Ker Yong. The ECG showed that I was having a massive heart attack and I was immediately warded in the ICU. I spent my 31st birthday in the ICU, struggling for my life. Partly because it was my birthday, everyone came to see me. There were too many visitors. Towards the end of the visiting hour, my elder sister, who was a doctor there, noticed a visible slur in my speech and she quickly got rid of the visitors, but the harm had already been done. All that excitement had triggered a stroke. I was paralysed on the right side and lost my ability to speak. I was diagnosed with a blood clot on the left side of my brain. With the stroke, my heart weakened and the graph showed that my heartbeat was coming dangerously close to a flat line. I believe many of my relatives and friends had given up hope. Some of my friends later confessed to me that they were praying for me to die. They didn’t want me to survive half paralysed and dumb. Most of them prayed for me to recover fully. Vimi was outside the ward, praying along with the rest.

While I was fighting for my life in the hospital, my elder sister took leave and stayed with me every day. My other family members were also always there and whenever I opened my eyes, I would see one of them sitting beside me. It gave me a great sense of comfort and confidence that I would recover. My late brother, Surash, would sit outside the ward, reading a book and waiting for me to summon him. When I recovered and could walk to the corridor, I used to stand

and stare at him as he concentrated on his book. After some time he would realise that I was standing beside him and he would put his book down and ask me, with a smile, “How Joe? How are you today?” We sometimes played Scrabble and only later did I realise that he had sat outside the ward throughout the night. We also shared the specially brewed soup made by my then future mother-in-law to speed up my recovery.

The doctors considered my full recovery nothing less than a miracle. I went back to work a few months later. Vimi and the other girls, especially Jacqueline Chow and Lina Lim, looked after me.

Many people thought I would give up my practice after that heart attack. I never even contemplated it. Some of my rivals in the profession started spreading rumours, telling people that I had lost my legal mojo after my heart attack and that I didn’t have the stamina to continue. The more I heard those vicious rumours (some even spread by my own friends), the more disillusioned I became. I went back to smoking, a habit which I had given up for a few months after my heart attack. But I continued to practise with a vengeance to show everybody I was still capable of good work.

Many readers will wonder why I chose to feature the cases that appear in this book. They were selected for various reasons: some because of their high profile nature, some for their complexity and some because of their simplicity. But most of all, they were chosen because they somehow brought out the best in me. All these cases also had a profound effect on me and even now I have flashbacks of good and bad memories of them. I hope readers will enjoy my simple narration of the facts and my feelings. I have written for the man in the street, not for law students and lawyers to analyse.