

# NOVEL

## Excerpt from *When Yesterday Calls*

*Arthur Foo*

Darren Lee was a hard-up sexagenarian who lived alone in a small dilapidated house on the shores of the Strait of Malacca. His life was not always like this, though. Forty years ago, as a member of one of the most popular rock bands in Malaysia that had released several best-selling albums and performed to sold-out concerts, he was quite well-off, spending money like water. Then one day, his whole world came crashing down around him when the front man of his group died of a heroin overdose. Soon after, the group disbanded and he went solo. But success never found him again. Disillusioned with his own career, he left the music scene and became something of a recluse. The only two persons whom he felt comfortable with were his childhood friend, John Chang, and his 30-year-old daughter, Rose.

It was almost midday and the sexagenarian was at the seafront promenade sitting on a bench under a big, shady *Casuarina* tree. He was tall and gaunt, his suntanned face heavily lined, and his long grey hair thinning at the front. He was keeping his rendezvous with John – it had become almost a daily routine for the two friends.

A couple of minutes later, a white Toyota sedan drew up by the curb near him. When a tubby man with close-cropped hair alighted from the vehicle, the old boy smiled. John was here. They were both sixty-eight. Everything about John was old, except for his brown eyes. They glowed like shades of gold in the sunlight. Cheerful, full of vitality. But today, they seemed to have lost their sparkle. The old boy knew at once that John had a bad day at the hospital.

“Hi there, Uncle Darren,” Rose, who was the driver, greeted him through the open car window. “How are you today?”

“On top of the world, Rose,” the old boy replied with a smile. His voice was loud and clear. “How’s business at your eatery?”

“So far so good,” she said, smiling back. “And I suppose you have got another happy quote for us today?”

Noticing John’s dejected expression, Darren quickly thought of a suitable one to cheer him up.

“Yes, I’ve got a great quote for you: *Don’t lose hope. You never know what tomorrow will bring,*” he recited.

“Your optimism toward life knows no bounds, Uncle,” she said in admiration, “I like that. How I wish some of your inclination would rub off on my father.”

John, who was now sitting next to Darren, demurred at her statement. Feigning annoyance, he stood up and defended himself.

“Come now, Rose, you know that is not true,” he said. “I’m just as optimistic as Uncle Darren, if not more.” He then sucked in his potbelly. “Apart from that, I’ve a distinct advantage over him: I am fitter and stronger.”

“Suck in any deeper and your pants will fall off, you insufferable braggart of a fatso!” Darren teased.

John deflated himself and started laughing. Rose laughed, too. Both of them were fond of Darren. He had an unsurpassable sense of humour. Zany, and somewhat more juvenile than one would expect from an elderly man. But for all his alluring behaviour, he was sharp-witted. He knew it, too, yet he was unassuming about his aptitude, taking it as though it was nothing special. This made him a very likeable guy, and they felt lucky to be acquainted with him.

“I know my father is in safe hands with you around,” Rose said, wiping her tears of laughter from her eyes with a facial tissue.

“Of course, your old man can’t live without me,” Darren said.

“Ha!” John scoffed. “At last, we learn the true identity of the braggart here.”

Rose chuckled.

“Okay you two, enjoy yourself. I’ll see you later.”

Following that, she let out the clutch and pulled away toward the road.

Darren waited until she was out of sight. Then, he turned to John (who had sat down again) and asked, “So, what did the doctor say?”

“Nothing good, I’m afraid,” he replied sadly. “My recent memory issues are cognitive symptoms of dementia, an incurable disease. They only have drugs to delay its progress. But sooner or later, I would become a vegetable.” He paused. “Me, a vegetable... what a horrible thought!”

“Take it easy, bro,” Darren said, patting his friend’s shoulder. He felt sorry for him. “You’re just not going to recall things so well, that’s all. Another thing: the disease is moving at a snail’s pace, so it would take a long, long while before you can feel its full impact. Perhaps by then, a cure could have been discovered. Just take a look at AIDS. Ten years ago, the doctors had considered it incurable, too. But that diagnosis no longer holds true today. So, you’ve got to think positive. When you do that, nothing is impossible. In the meantime, live your life to the fullest. You are not born to merely exist.”

“Is that another one of your quotes?” John asked. “You know, all your quotes today are rather philosophical... and dull. How about an entertaining one for a change?”

There was a short silence. Eventually, Darren, a mischievous glint in his eyes, said, “Your wish is my command. This quote beats them all: At this very moment, ten thousand couples in KL are having sex, another twenty thousand are kissing like there’s no tomorrow, yet another thirty thousand are stripping each other naked, and you ... well ... you are listening to my crap.”

Darren’s deadpan humour had John in stitches. The long-haired old boy couldn’t help laughing as well. Not at his own joke but at John – his hard laughter sounded like a pig’s snort.

When their guffawing subsided, John, recalling a past event with relish, blurted out, “Your joke reminds me of our upper secondary school days when we brought our girlfriends to this very same spot for some heavy petting sessions.”

“We were so cool then, weren’t we?” Darren said, upon reflecting.

“Yeah, now we are old crocks.”

The two friends looked at each other and sighed deeply. Silence prevailed once more, intruded only by the rhythmic sound of the waves rippling out from the bobber and gently lapping at the sandy shores.

“You remember Agatha Christie?” John asked at last.

“The famous English detective novelist?” Darren said. “Who doesn’t? She is my all-time favourite author. If my memory serves me right, she’s one of your favourites, too.”

“Yeah, and of all her novels, I love *Murder on the Orient Express* the best. The plot is simply delicious: a murder on the train. Multiple suspects. Every one of them has both a motive and an alibi. A seemingly perfect crime. Only one man is able to solve this mystery: Hercule Poirot, the world’s greatest detective. One can’t find another pure good storytelling such as this.”

“I agree. And it was even made into a film. Two actually. The first one was in 1974 and the second in 2017. If you ask me which version was better, I’d say the 1974 one. Albert Finney’s portrayal of Poirot was closer to what Christie had described of the character – clever but vain and egotistical.”

John smiled and nodded. They were of the same mind on the actor’s performance.

“I had fantasized about riding the Orient Express ever since I read the book,” he said, his eyes glittering once more. “The name has become synonymous with intrigue and luxury train travel.”

“Oh wow, you’ve just rekindled a passion of mine when you mentioned the Orient Express,” Darren said excitedly. “It was the train of my dreams. Just to be on it would give me a spirit of adventure. Minus the murder bit, of course.”

“Then let’s do it. Let’s get on to the Orient Express. I’ll contact my travel agent to make the necessary arrangements.”

Darren cast him a doubtful glance.

“Are you serious?” he asked.

“My dear Darren, I’ve never been more serious in my life than right now. It’s time we stop dreaming about it and start living it. We are not born to merely exist, wasn’t that what you said?”

“But the Orient Express ceased to operate a long time ago.”

“I know that. But a replica of the iconic train, the *Venice Simplon-Orient Express*, is journeying from Paris to Venice as we speak. Well, how about it? Are you in or out?”

Darren hesitated.

“Hey, don’t you worry about the fares and other expenses,” John said. He seemed to know what his friend was thinking. “I’ll take care of them. You just have to bring yourself. And before you start feeling like a hanger-on, let me stop you there. You are not. You are my best friend, and I love you like a brother.”

Darren got all choked up upon hearing John’s words and gave him a brotherly hug. When he finally found his voice, he croaked a thank you.

“You are most welcome,” John replied. “I really want you to join me on this trip; you’ve been cooped up in your house for too long. It’s not good for your well-being. You need to integrate into society again.”

“And as for you, apart from the adventure factor, the trip also acts like a sort of therapeutic treat,” Darren chipped in. “Am I right?”

“Bro, you took the words right out of my mouth!”

They laughed and high-fived each other.