

Excerpts from *912 Batu Road*

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These two extracts from '912 Batu Road' are set in two different timelines. Kah Sing is in present day Malaysia while Tochi is from 1942 Malaya. Very different landscapes and circumstances have ruptured their peace of mind. The reader finds these two men sitting with their personal demons, dissecting, and picking at their frailties.

They tussle with and are even tortured with the choices they made or omitted to make, as they seek answers to hush the voices in their heads. Tormented by the fragility of the self.

CHAPTER 11

DARK CLOUDS

KUALA LUMPUR, 2008

Dusk was starting to fall. Day was surreptitiously turning into night, discarding her bright colours and donning a dark blue cloak. His office was modern and sparsely furnished with contemporary furniture. He wasn't sure if that was what he wanted it to look like, but Ken had convinced him otherwise. The only piece of furniture that he had insisted upon was his old Moran armchair, arms a little worn but as comfortable as the Pagoda t-shirts he wore to bed. He watched the sky shed her daywear, preparing herself for a night of dark secrets and deceit. Kah Sing swirled his favourite drink, a 16-year-old Lagavulin. The only sound was the single ice cube tinkling against the crystal tumbler providing background sound as the street lights flickered to life outside.

He swirled a mouthful of the peaty amber in his mouth, teasing his palate before allowing it to flow down his throat. It was always at this time of day, that the little voices scrambled out of the many compartments in his head to wreak havoc. The voices of Guilt, Remorse, Bitterness and Sadness nudged each other fighting for attention. Sadness was always the loudest.

He turned on the radio, light-headed despite his first sober night in months. He could deal without whiskey now that everything had changed. He drove past the gates of Macadams College, closed for the mid-year term, soon to reopen as the Yohan Eng College. The Chancellor had bidden him a fond farewell when he submitted his resignation letter.

"Old men like me should resign too," the Chancellor said wryly. "The world is for the young now."

It was only this golden liquid that was able to quiet the voices, hushing them into a temporary silence. Fate had played her trump card five years ago with the death of his beloved, Mui Leng. Living alone in their home that had her personality stamped across each piece of furniture was physically painful. So he had packed up, given away most of their belongings and moved, leaving all signs of her handiwork behind. The pain was still raw. The longing and the loneliness were so painful that on some days, he still struggled to get out of bed. He had mastered the art of keeping his pain suppressed allowing it to stack up, layer upon layer like *kuib lapis*.

Now he was frightened of self-introspection. He was afraid of peeling back the layers for, like an onion, these would sting his eyes and cause him to cry. He was no longer entirely comfortable in this corporate environment. It hung on him like a badly cut suit. There were days when he thought the seams would give away and expose him for what he really was: a sad, old, lonely man. He had been playing charades with his personality for so long that he had forgotten who was behind the mask.

Chin Nam Berhad had humble beginnings. In its toddler years, it was still Chin Nam & Co. From a ground level shop on Holland Road, Chin Nam & Co had expanded and bought the entire building. Like a bird that had flown the proverbial nest and spread its wings, under Kah Sing, the company had proceeded to invest in a range of businesses, including housing and retail developments, hotels and restaurants. It was still a wonder to Kah Sing, how he had found the energy and stamina to nurture and grow a tiny seedling like his father's business into this giant conglomerate, like a banyan tree stretching its branches far and wide.

Kah Sing's thoughts turned to Ken, his only child and the heir to the family fortune. His hands made sweeping movements through the air. *How much of this does Ken want?* he wondered.

He needed to ask him questions, the answers to which he was afraid to hear. The truth was always more difficult to swallow.

Lies, half-truths and untruths always had a softer, gentler side. His head told him that Ken would have no choice but to come on board soon and join him on this journey. At 75, it was time he took a backseat. His heart though, whispered otherwise. *Don't do it. Don't force him into something he has no interest in. Look at you,* it said mockingly. *Don't crush his dreams.*

The words came tumbling out of Kah Sing's mouth as soon as Ken walked in. Like dirty pebbles falling to the ground. He wanted to pick them up, wash and give them to Ken on a platter. But there they lay in a heap by Ken's feet, waiting to be trampled on. A look of pain spread across Ken's face.

“What are you asking of me, Dad?” he asked incredulously. “How can I stay on now? I am in the midst of the biggest break I will ever get in my career and you are asking me to throw it away? I am due back in London in just over a week and it’s going to be hard work for the next year. You know how much I wanted to be on the Limehouse project. Listen Dad, I’m not saying I’m never coming home. I just need a few years, that’s all. I need to finish what I have started. Just give me a little time,” he softly negotiated with his father. “I will take over from you, but not just yet. I need to resolve several issues Dad, personal and otherwise.”

Kah Sing looked sadly at his only son. *What am I doing?* he thought. He opened his mouth to speak when he heard a gentle knock at the door. Rizal had no idea there was a wounded lion licking his wounds behind the closed door. He had with him his ubiquitous black folder tucked under his arm, held tight as he often worried that someone might snatch it and, with it, all his hard work. Kah Sing barked a curt, “Enter!” Rizal eagerly stepped in and was too excited and distracted to notice the dark look on the Chairman’s face. Without hesitation, he released the folder from its safe place and pulled out a sheaf of papers.

“I have some good news, boss.” he started. “The biotechnology company in Japan that I have been in preliminary discussions with are open to further negotiations with us. Their figures look good and I think we should seriously consider invest...” Rizal was not prepared for the tirade that came hurtling his way.

“ARE YOU MAD!!!” screamed Kah Sing. “Don’t you know I have never done and will never do business with the Japanese? Don’t you people know that I hate the fucking Japs. Take that proposal and chuck it in the bin, where it belongs!” he yelled.

“What’s got into you?” Ken demanded, after Rizal had silently slunk out. “All the man did was come in with a proposal and you bit his head off. The staff are starting to talk about your erratic behaviour and I must agree with them.”

Kah Sing swirled around and pointed an accusing finger at Ken.

“Don’t you dare ask me to do business with the fucking Japanese. You haven’t lived in fear and terror the way I have. When they invaded Malaya, they brought with them nothing but torture, death and rape. All we experienced for years was fear and hardship. Don’t you forget that I saw my father - your grandfather - dragged away like a criminal. I saw fear in a proud man’s eyes. Those bastards destroyed our family, so don’t bloody tell me to do business with those dogs!”

Kah Sing’s pain poured out of him and this time even whisky couldn’t plug the leak. Grief upon grief, sorrow upon sorrow. Ken knew there was nothing left to be said and he left silently, closing the door on a man hunched over under a gathering of dark, angry clouds.

Geeta knew immediately when she heard his voice that something was wrong.

“Meet me, please. I need to see you. My father and I had kind of a heated exchange.”

“I’ve just got home. I’ll leave in 10 minutes. Shall I come to your home?”

“Yes,” he replied.

Wrapped up in each other’s arms, watching the twinkling city lights from the penthouse’s vast balcony, Ken spoke to Geeta of the evening’s earlier events and his father’s immense hurt. She could feel the rapid beating of his heart against her shoulder blade and made no attempt to speak until she was sure he was done.

Silence finally settled over the pensive couple, a spell Geeta was reluctant to break.

“Ken, your father has obviously been through a very difficult time. It wasn’t that long ago that your mother passed away either,” Geeta gently spoke. “I think deep down, he just wants you to be happy but has trouble expressing his feelings.”

“I don’t want to think of him anymore, G. I’ll be back in London in a week’s time, let’s just enjoy this time together.” He hugged her closer to him. Now more than ever he needed the balm of her soothing words.

Leaving a disconsolate Ken was difficult for Geeta and for a brief moment, she entertained the idea of not returning home that night. *What a pair we are*, she thought on the quiet drive home. *At least Ken has the guts to tell his father what his heart desires, unlike me. Destined to play the role of a faux Brahmin daughter for an eternity.*

Padding quietly up the stairs to her bedroom, she softly ‘clicked’ the door shut and looked for her favourite salve for a sad heart, her grandfather’s letters.

8th March 1924

Dearest Appa,

I am so very sorry to have read about Sita athai’s untimely demise. It tore at my heart to read about it. She was my favourite athai and I still remember all her lovely ways. The way she used to put me on her feet and lift me. The song she used to sing to me while she held my little hands keep playing on my mind.

“Tennamarathalai yeradbai Thengaiye pirikhadhai Mamarathelai yeradbai Manggayei pirikhadai

Aathele virzharaiya

Shethalai virzharaiya

Amman aathe kutaile virzharaiya”

*Don't climb up the coconut tree
Don't pick the coconuts Don't climb the mango tree Don't pluck the mangoes
Do you want to fall in a pond? Do you want to fall in a mudpit?
Or do you want to fall in your uncle's pond?*

I remember how she used to worry about my poor eating habits, feeding me from her hand, mouthful after mouthful. She was a woman with nothing but love for us. It breaks my heart to think that I won't see her anymore. All I have of her are the letters she wrote to me and the memorable times I had with her which will forever be etched in my memory.

My work here is going well, by the grace of Ambal. In fact, you will be happy to note that I have been recently given a junior teaching position! It is only temporary but the headmaster of the school noticed that I had made some corrections to a letter he had written and was duly impressed. All your insistence on my learning English well has paid off! I will tell you this, Appa, I really enjoy the little bit of teaching that I do. It is a wonderful feeling to teach young eager minds, to fill their heads with words that can grow to become big ideas. What a gift it is to be a teacher!

I have made a new friend in my workplace, a Sikh gentleman named Devar Singh. He is a clerk and we have found that we have quite a bit in common. He has very kindly taken me under his wing (as he is a little older than I) and has taken me on his Sunday visits to the Gurdwara on Brick Kiln Road. We both enjoy the vegetarian food. I have never eaten so many chapattis! He has taken me to his home, I have met his wife, a gentle, soft-spoken woman who comes from a village near Chandigarh. They have three lovely children. The one I connect well with is their 7-year-old son, a precocious and handsome boy named Terlochan.

I need to go now, Appa, as I have some English papers to correct.

My namaskarams to Amma.

Your loving son, Rangaswamy

CHAPTER 15

PENANG

30TH JUNE 1942

Sleep had stopped visiting Tochi in the last two weeks. It happened suddenly and insidiously, first one night and then the next and the next. He would lie awake from dusk until the first light broke through the sky and he heard the distant sound of the muezzin, calling the faithful to prayer. He tried many different tactics – he read till 1 am, had a stiff nightcap, then warm milk with turmeric. He tried each remedy individually and when that didn't work, he combined them. When that didn't help, he resigned himself to his fate: to lie awake rationalising with his demons to leave him be. This morning at 4 am, he made his way to the prayer room and pleaded with God to clear his head of the confusion that had settled there.

Tochi sat facing the Granth Sahib, the 11th Guru and Living God, cross-legged on the floor in total deference to the Almighty. The events of the last year played before him like a movie in slow motion. Scene by scene, his mind replayed the tumultuous period in not just Malaya's history, but his own too. He remembered how the British had scurried like vermin escaping in the night and how he had been disheartened, no... disappointed and disgusted. So much so that he had even rejoiced at the arrival of the Japanese, singing their praises to his friends who were wary of them.

Tochi was learning to speak 'Nippon-Go'. So earnest was he in this new endeavour that he even joined the Speak Nippon-Go Association. He listened to Japanese music at home and could even sing the Japanese national anthem, Kimigayo. The change for Tochi was drastic but he welcomed it with hopeful, open arms. His usual salutation of, "Good Morning, Mr. Yap," had become, "Ohayo, Yap-san." He learnt the Japanese tradition of bowing, the more superior the status of the Japanese, the deeper the bow. Every morning, when Tochi went to the clinic, he took part in the mass exercise drills with great gusto, hoping to get his day off to a good start. The drills were conducted in tune to music on Radio Taisho.

Tochi had embraced the Japanese way of life, much to the irritation of his wife. Even at home, he insisted on listening to the news in Japanese and encouraged Dalip to speak in Japanese when possible. There had been many a fight in their household when Dalip had refused to speak the language. She had come to see a big change in her husband. It was not just the Japanese who had enchanted Tochi. He had also joined the Indian Independence League, which was committed to wresting power from the British and declaring India's independence with Japanese support.

Things eventually came to a head one evening when Tochi returned from a rally by Rash Behari Bose that was organised to support India's independence movement and to increase donations to the League. An intoxicated Tochi had stumbled home with a few of his League friends. He knew Dalip wouldn't be happy to see him in his current state and figured that a few extra allies in tow would help soften the blow. He was so far from the truth. Dalip was already seething when she opened the door but worked hard to keep her anger in check. She managed a cold "Hello" and a forced smile for his friends.

As she busied herself in the kitchen making the guests a pot of tea, she heard one of them ask Tochi how much he had pledged to the League. "\$30," he whispered loudly enough for Dalip to catch.

Storming out of the kitchen empty-handed she exploded, "\$30! That's nearly a whole month's salary!"

The men looked at her in horror but knew better than to offer an excuse.

"People are going without food, children are starving and you go and give \$30 to a bloody useless group of men preaching and ranting about independence in India! Why do you care about a country so far away! You will just replace the British with the Japanese. Do you honestly think we will get self-rule? Have you lost your mind? Do you know what I could do with that money? How could you be so stupid and irresponsible?" she yelled. "If it's not the Indian cause you are campaigning, you're sucking up to the wretched Japs! Everything in this house now is bloody Japanese. I hate it! You want me to speak the damn language and you have the gall to ask me to cook their tasteless food! Go to hell - you, the Japanese and all your friends here," she yelled.

"Ay, where do you think all those tins of sardines, butter, condensed milk and soap come from, ah? What, you think you look up to the sky and it drops from the heavens, huh?" Tochi drunkenly looked at his friends, winking for support. They had been stunned into silence by Dalip's outburst and made their hasty excuses to leave. It wouldn't be wise to be caught associating with an anti-Japanese protestor as they all knew the consequences that could follow. They mumbled their "good-byes" and slunk off like reprimanded school boys. Dalip threw the kitchen towel on the floor and stormed off.

Tochi wasn't blind to the brutality of the Japanese. He knew of the cruelty inflicted by them in Singapore where they murdered thousands of Chinese. He didn't have to look that far. At home in Penang, the Japanese had stormed Chung Ling High School, one of the island's top educational institutions that drew its students from as far away as Indonesia and Thailand. Soldiers had marched into the school and accused the teachers and students of collaborating with the enemy. They rounded up over 100 teachers and students and executed them. One morning outside

the clinic, Tochi had witnessed the Japanese roughly shove a group of Chinese men at rifle-point into a corner. Two spies, their faces covered by ominous black hoods, collaborators with the Japanese, pointed out several men, claiming them to be anti-Japanese. They were then loaded like cattle onto a waiting truck, probably never to be seen again.

Tochi had come to hate the walk to the market. In the past it was one of his favourite errands, stopping to talk to old friends along the way. Now, he kept his head bent low and tried not to look up at the beaten and decapitated heads of men looking down at him from the poles they were staked on. He always said his prayers for the departed souls as he hurried past. *If I just keep my mouth shut, work hard and learn Japanese, they cannot touch my family*, Tochi constantly told himself. *The British abandoned us, the Japanese have liberated us, I have to think of my family's future*. He repeated this over and over again to himself and each time, his heart ached a little more and his sleep became more restless.

On a quiet afternoon when work at the clinic was slow, Tochi was enjoying a cup of thick black coffee with his old school friend, Kim Seng. The genial chatter in the coffeeshop suddenly turned to silence when a Japanese officer strode in. Cups clattered on saucers and chairs scraped on the floor as patrons immediately shot to their feet, ready to bow. This was an automatic action for Tochi who was already staring at the tiled floor. Kim Seng defiantly sat still, watching the soldiers intently.

Immediately the officer yanked Kim Seng off his stool and hit him hard in the gut. Tochi watched as his friend fell to the floor but didn't move a muscle. The officer barked an order to his entourage and smelling blood and an easy prey, they leapt on Kim Seng, two holding him up while another punched him over and over again in the head and stomach. Tochi immediately drew himself up to his full height and pleaded with the officer in Nippon-Go.

"Shut your fucking mouth, you black monkey. You think you can speak a few words of our language and you can tell me what to do?" the officer sneered. He then slapped Tochi hard across the face and spat straight into his eyes. "Show this black monkey how we discipline those who do not bow." The minutes that followed were the longest in Tochi's life as he watched his dear friend Kim Seng viciously punched and kicked senseless. Second by second, time crept by and blow upon blow fell upon a now unconscious and badly bleeding Kim Seng. A kaleidoscope of violence multiplied hundreds of times through the tears in Tochi's eyes.

Tears were still running down his face when the soldiers finally tired themselves out. The officer turned to the motionless patrons, barked an order and left. Tochi feared for the life of his friend and prayed very hard that he would make it to the hospital alive. And with help from the now not-so-motionless patrons, they managed to get Kim Seng to hospital quickly.

Kim Seng had suffered critical internal injuries including broken ribs and a punctured lung. He was lucky to be alive, the doctors declared. All night long, Tochi sat by Kim Seng's bed waiting for his friend to open his swollen eyes. *I'm so sorry Kim Seng, I shouldn't have opened my stupid mouth,* Tochi hung his head in shame at the recollection. *Dear God, let this man live, dear God, let this man live,* he prayed on repeat.

This was one of the unfortunate string of events that had brought on Tochi's insomnia and plagued his conscience. He tried rationalising with himself that things were still looking good for his family. They had access to little luxuries and they weren't harassed like some of his other friends. Yet something was changing inside. The brutality that Kim Seng had suffered had nearly ended his life. It tortured him to see the constant carnage at the clinic and he wrangled with his conscience every single night. Watching his innocent, beautiful Chinese baby fast asleep in his cot, oblivious to the killing, the blood and the constant brutality, the truth dawned on him - his new overlords were a cruel, cruel people who were neither interested in bringing freedom nor self-rule to Malaya.

He repeated the words that would always give him comfort, that would wrap him up in their meaning and from which he drew strength. It was his first breath and he knew it would also be his last....

Ik o'nkaar

Sat – naam

“God is One

Truth is His Name”

Tochi heard the cockerel proudly announce daylight, a new day was just beginning.