

NOVEL

Excerpt from *The Last Days*

William Tham Wai Liang

The following excerpt is from William Tham's novel, 'The Last Days', which among other things, centres on the interpretation of Malaysian history, set in 1981 on the cusp of immense transformations. Its cast of intersecting characters are caught up as their worlds converge and change – in the thick of it is Dain, a young journalist whose ideals are checked by his uncle, a police inspector whose thwarted dreams set the stage for a climactic confrontation as he arrives at the office of a journal in the midst of a police raid, where incriminating evidence tied to The Second Emergency (1968 - 1989) emerges ...

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.”

The Prime Minister's voice came over the radio, surprisingly strong despite his deteriorating health. Over the static he pleaded for tolerance and warned against extremism, reminding his listeners of the need to stay united. Beautiful last words, of course, but everyone was too distracted by his successor's impending arrival. From then on everything would be different.

The traffic remained as chaotic but he finally spotted an empty lot. The Kwong Yip building stood regally across the street despite its flaking paint and the grey grime. Dain picked up his briefcase and hurried past the trapped cars, grateful for the morning rain that began to coat the city.

It was then that he saw the first police cars parked outside the building.

Fuck!

He was sweating. He wanted to turn around and run, but he needed to go into the building to find out what had happened to Krishnan and his colleagues.

Iqbal waited by the elevator door, ramrod straight. Che Yahya stood nearby, puffing on a cigarette, his long arms hanging by his side like an ape.

“*Assalamualaikum*, my dear boy,” Iqbal said mockingly. “Won’t you greet me? Or are you a kafir as well?”

Che Yahya spat his cigarette to the ground and pressed the elevator button. Dain knew what they wanted and tried not to shake as he got inside. The doors creaked shut and they ascended slowly. He felt sick, the smell of cigarettes and sweat nauseating in the cramped quarters.

“Why are you—” Dain tried to begin, but his uncle was already speaking. “We are in the middle of an investigation. We decided to pay a visit today and what do we find? Five thousand copies of the latest *ASEAN Review*, containing scathing critiques of our political system and worrying allegations against our future Prime Minister. And there is a piece that rallies support for a known seditious publisher, a good Chinese friend of yours, it seems. I should not have been surprised to find that it was written by Dain Yusof bin Abdullah Hamid.”

The elevator doors creaked open, and Iqbal prodded him down the corridor, in the direction of the Review’s office. Che Yahya led the way, gripping a truncheon with more menace than necessary. The door was propped open and officers were hurrying in and out. It was painful for Dain to take in the fact that the policemen had already emptied the shelves, collecting anything they could use as evidence. Correspondence, interviews with confidential sources, photographs that showed more than they ought to...

The vanity of his dreams evaporated on the spot.

In a corner, a policeman was sitting at the table playing back the tapes from the answering machine, transcribing the messages left for the office. Dain saw his desk, already stripped bare, including the photograph of Sylvia that he kept under glass. Krishnan’s office was empty, the glass door shattered, while stacks of the *Review* lay pathetically in the corner.

“This is illegal. You have no right...” Dain tried to speak up, but Iqbal was already leading him into Krishnan’s office, offering them a degree of privacy. Che Yahya stood outside, supervising the rest of the officers. Dain hated his uncle more than ever before, his uncle with the perfect teeth and handsome features.

“I interrupted you earlier. My apologies, Dain. Tell me what you meant to say.”

A flurry of emotion welled up, and he was unable to articulate his scattered thoughts. All he could manage were two simple words. “But why?”

Very gently, Iqbal caressed his cheek with a soft hand.

“Don’t ask stupid questions. We both know that this is how anything is done in our country. Any moment now, even your beloved political reformers will jump ship for the best

opportunities that they can find. But that brings me back to you. Constable Latiff heard a message left for you on the answering-machine. A Chinese girl this time, telling you that she wanted you to meet her, because Lin Wei is leaving on tonight's train. Now, will you tell me exactly what that means?"

"You shouldn't have done that," Dain said defiantly, feeling violated, like he was splayed on his back, the workings of his frantic organs on display.

"Do not threaten me. Despite everything, I am still your uncle."

Dain thought of H, standing at her phone, urgently relaying her message, and he wanted to shout but only managed a whimper.

"How dare you..."

Iqbal, without warning, slapped him in the face. Dain recoiled, biting his lip, hoping that tears would not spring to his eyes. He opened them slowly only to see Iqbal quivering, as if also in pain.

"I've had enough humiliations! First it was my father, then my brother. Now you. I refuse to be dragged down by a family of hopeless idealists, digging their graves at every opportunity. Do you know what I was once asked to do? They got me into the station for a midnight raid. I did not know where I was going, but when I got out of the car I realised that they had driven me to the house of a cousin who had betrayed dangerous thoughts on the radio on the eve of the riots. Yet another one of those misguided fools who had spoken too loudly. He recognised me despite my uniform, pleading for me not to arrest him while my nieces and nephews screamed, calling out my name. My superiors just looked on. I hated the terrible feeling of having to snap the handcuffs on, while his wife was being held back by more officers, spitting in my direction. She never let me forget it, even after my cousin was released a few days later. My superiors had never trusted me. My background was too suspect. And now you come here to complete and remind me of that night. No matter. I will still serve this damned country, even if I must trust nobody."

Even Iqbal's voice quivered when he spoke. Dain wondered if the policemen outside were listening intently to his outburst, waiting to learn more gossip.

"This can be easy, Dain. I took your notebook. I read what you had. There is a lot about someone called H, who I assume is the girl on the other end of the phone. And then there's a man called Lin Wei. You have helpfully provided an address..."

Dain cursed himself for being so stupid, for leaving the notebook in the open!

"I have enough information here to hold you in custody. For threatening national security," Iqbal said. "Think of what your mother would say. Three generations of failed idealists. And what does that say about your future?"

“They aren’t important,” Dain said breathlessly. “They are just friends.”

“You liar. Your voice betrays you. Tell the truth.”

Dain stood up, wild and unsure of what he was even doing. Che Yahya hurried in, holding Dain down with surprisingly strong arms. He shouted as his back slammed against hard wood.

“*Tuan!*” came a cry from outside. “Is everything alright?”

“Yes,” Iqbal shouted back. “Keep doing your work!”

Dain tried to formulate a plan, but his brain refused to focus. He was unable to process anything except his uncle’s rage, bubbling under his calm demeanour. Then it became clear. H, he needed to save H before Iqbal tracked her down...

“I have a strong incentive for you, boy. 5,000 copies of the *Review* sit out there, together with their proofs, drafts, and photographs. We have arrested everyone in this office, and we will not hesitate to destroy all of them if you don’t cooperate with us. You’re not flinching? Then we’ll follow up on everything else in this office. Every scrap of paper. We will go after all your contacts and sources. The greatest clean-up in this country’s history. Do you want to be responsible for mass detentions? Hurry up. Make your decision.”

Iqbal was bluffing. He had to be...

“Che Yahya,” Iqbal held out a lighter. “Tell Latiff and the boys to bring the journals to the roof. Burn the bloody papers to ash.”

“I’ll tell you,” Dain shouted, surprised by how weak his voice sounded. “But... you don’t hurt the girl! And let Krishnan go. And the reporters.”

Satisfied, Iqbal composed himself again. Even the neatly-combed hairs on his head were in place. But there was a malevolence that seemed to radiate from his veins down to his hands, which began to tremble.

“Lin Wei’s a Communist. H met him. He came out of hiding. He’s living in those old apartment blocks near the river.”

“A filthy Red? This country is crawling with Communists, not just the Chinese but our own people too. I don’t know what your business with him is, but I forgive you, Dain. Now I must go and take care of this.”

But now Iqbal hesitated. Why? Did he not trust his own men? Was that why he was not summoning them in right away? Was he thinking of the promotions that had been denied to him over all the years? Dain understood. His uncle wanted to single-handedly take credit for the arrest of a dangerous revolutionary. Dain could sense the thoughts racing in his uncle’s mind, the same way destructive, risky ideas had ruined his father and grandfather.

No, Iqbal wouldn't report Lin Wei to higher levels in the bureaucracy and risk the indignity of being passed by again.

And he thought of H, who trusted him so much that she told him everything about Lin Wei, and everything about herself...

Tears in his eyes. The harsh sunlight from outside the windows shimmered.

"Modern boys. You are all so weak," sneered Iqbal. "You couldn't survive what we had to go through. Che Yahya will take you back to the station. You'll wait there until I get everything sorted out."

Dain could sense his uncle's excitement. All those years listening to his uncle speaking fruitlessly of promotion, and now everything was just within grasp. He could sense his uncle's recklessness as Iqbal's fingers stroked the holster by his side, just waiting for the chance to rise from his lowly station. Che Yahya mumbled something and Dain was pushed out of the ransacked office and taken downstairs.

Che Yahya's breathing was magnified in the lift's confined space, and Dain felt giddy. He did not care about Lin Wei, he had no idea who the man was, but he needed to find H, caught between an old terrorist and his desperate uncle.