

NOVEL

Excerpt from *Kings of Chinatown* (2022)

William Tham

A solitary train ran through the monsoon storm and past the prison. The driver slowed cautiously as the train neared Chinatown, the stack of cars being shunted in front of the engine obscuring the rails, barely able to hear the shrill cries and whistles from the platform. Then came a sudden series of jolts, distant screams, and the driver belatedly brought the engine to a halt. *The body that had been run over, reported the railwaymen who ran over, was crushed beneath –*

Constable Ramalingam stopped taking notes. The mangled corpse still lay on the tracks, blood washed between the crushed ballast. Inspector Kassim and the Station Master turned towards him and he picked up his pencil again. Punctually punching in on High Street, there was little to look forward to besides his own weekend journey back to Port Swettenham. It would be the same as it usually was, with the neighbourhood children camped in the waiting room, where they watched the silent television from inside its cage, a Boria troupe performing on a stage, when a frantic phone call came in. *A man is dead*, the Station Master reported hoarsely over the receiver. Kassim Khan was duly alerted and ordered Ramalingam to follow him. The order came as a surprise to Ramalingam, who expected a more senior officer to accompany the boss to the nearby tracks.

They repaired to the platform, watching as the workers struggled to lift the body off the tracks. Accidents on the railways were not uncommon, the Station Master continued breathlessly, trains were always ramming into cows or monitor lizards or cars that somehow failed to clear level-crossings in time, odd cases of suicides, yes, but a murder was anomalous –

“And you are sure this was not an accident?” Kassim cut him short.

“There were two men, I swear to God. One was waiting for the passenger train, even though we told him he would have a long time to wait. Then there was another man – no, just a boy. I didn’t think nothing of it, see. And the signalman shouted, I came running out, too late the man was lying there on the tracks and you know how it is with the trains. You think of the driver, he cannot stop immediately. We did what we had to – locked the gates, backed up enough –”

“So you are sure it was a murder?”

“Why else would that boy have disappeared? He must have run off, and the signalman thinks he saw a figure disappearing through the hole in the fence.”

The details noted, Ramalingam excused himself as the ambulance men arrived to take the body to the morgue. The pebbles on the platform crunching wetly beneath his boots, he looked up at the gleaming signboards behind the station, a city returning to life after the stillness following the riots. Normalcy, it seemed, had been in the process of returning, but the accident – no, the murder – reminded him that there never truly was such a thing. Eventually Kassim looked away from the efforts on the rails and offered him a Marlboro. There was no sign of fatigue on the Inspector’s face. Ramalingam shook his head and the older man smoked quietly beside him for some time.

“You’re not too disturbed, are you?” “No, sir.”

“Bluff. I was watching you the whole time.” “I am sorry, sir. I didn’t mean it –”

“You need to be tougher. How old are you now? Eighteen, aren’t you? Fresh out of training too. You have not seen the world yet. I don’t mean to be one of those old boys, but I had to kill a man when I was your age. He had a gun in hand, it was either him or me. Like it or not, boys like you need to see what the other side is capable of. Most importantly, remember that you don’t always get to choose how you will die.”

Kassim took one last drag, tossed the butt to the rails and looked on with an expression that might have been pity. “Let’s go. Whatever evidence there is has been washed away. I’ll talk to some of my friends.”

Lucky Yew – he would meet his own grisly end some years later – ran the Fung Lim Restaurant on Sultan Street, a second career for the old Home Guard who traded in his uniform for a threadbare houndstooth suit. Now, his cabaret provided some entertainment steps away from the guilds and offices, Kassim’s usual rendezvous in the evenings. Both men were connected somehow – Ramalingam did not ask how – and he suspected that it had been forged in those legendary days when Kassim served as a police spy, compiling secret dossiers, providing information on the initiation rites and occult ceremonies of the secret societies, the features inherited from his Chinese mother allowing him to pass convincingly as a Baba. Lucky Yew spoke urgently on the phone, the crooning of Shanghai jazz numbers warbling fuzzily outside his office. A new strongman was muscling in, displacing the neighbourhood toughs and the delinquent school dropouts. Lucky Yew

was not sure if they were Triads or a mere criminal gang, but one of his business rivals from a floor down was thrown out of a window (“Definitely not a suicide, Pontian Chew is too proud!”) and the train station murder was a natural escalation. Some of the gangsters had been at the restaurant and alluded to the accident inside the private room that Yew often eavesdropped on. A familiar name cropped up: Kah Lok.

“Some teenager, apparently he used to wash dishes for Yew some time back,” Kassim said the next morning, interrupting Ramalingam from his task of filing the statements of the porters, signalmen and drivers. “But Yew suspects that he has been involved with gang activity since then. He may be a person of interest.”

Mid-morning: a phone call arrived from the morgue. The dead man was identified based on the tattered identity papers found in his mangled trouser pockets. He was called Hong, but what mattered more was his fanciful alias: the Phoenix. Supposed extortions, beatings and threats were linked to the man originally from Johor, although he only had one conviction for starting a drunken brawl at a nightclub. A constable had been dispatched to inform his next-of-kin, a nephew who lived in Salak South.

Afternoon: The watchman at a nearby mill came in unannounced after hearing the rumours which started to circulate along the length of the Ampang line, claiming to have been patrolling the area beside the tracks, despite his boss’s explicit orders to keep quiet. “One of those neighbourhood teens was trespassing. They all work for the Hakka, Chang Yup Hoong,” the watchman insisted. From the watchman’s description, he was a sawmill owner who set up shop relatively recently. It would not be difficult for an officer to pay a visit to Chang’s mill, just to verify if someone matching the youth’s description worked there. Evening: after the last witness’s words had been recorded, the full weight of the bureaucracy turned up a lead. A phone call came in from the office of the sawmill in Setapak, where a lance corporal arrested a labourer named Wong Kah Lok. Now the boy in question was escorted in through the front doors, in front of Ramalingam stationed at the front desk. Less like a wayward teenager and more like a man, younger than Ramalingam but already feral and somehow looking older than his years. Once Wong had been bundled into the questioning room, Kassim was informed about the new arrival.

“Don’t say anything Rama. You are there just to take notes. No telling if this is indeed the killer, but we must make sure.” But this time, there was an edge to Kassim’s voice.

Under the harsh fluorescent lights, with no windows and nowhere to turn, the boy sat unmoved. The ceiling fan circulated stale air. No clocks. The door clicked shut.