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An excerpt from "Fistful of Colours" by Suchen Christine Lim. Published by EPB Publishers Pte Ltd, 1993, pages 153 –155.

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“What about it? Nothing will change.” Rahman assured his wife that their son would continue attending the religious school. “He will still learn the Holy Book. Going to the school of the orang puteh and learning to speak like them does not mean that our son is going to forget his faith. He’s going to their sekolah so that he will not be a waiter or syce like me!”

Before I met Zul’s father, Haji Hussein (he’s the one who went to Raffles) I had always assumed that only Chinese parents had ambitions for their children. You see how myopic we Chinese can be? Imagine my surprise when Haji Hussein told me that his father, even in those early days, had wanted him to go to Raffles Institution. I felt stupid for being surprised. When I told Zul about it later, he laughed. I think he enjoyed my journey of discovery with his father. Anyway, one day, Zul told me about an early diary entry written by his father. Honestly, I was impressed and surprised. The Malay writings of Haji Hussein must’ve been elegant and poetic. At least it sounded that way when Zul told me about it. I was just thinking the other day that, when we really sit down and think about it, our feelings whatever our colour or faith are essentially the same, aren’t they?

“... In my old age, my thoughts return to my father and his hopes for me. I can imagine them all now, but, oh, how ignorant I was in my youth! May Allah forgive me. That evening after dinner, my father must have smoked his cheroot as usual in the serambi while my mother was putting my sisters and me to bed. I can imagine a warm breeze rustling among the coconut palms and lallang grass. My father must have looked out at the kampong of attap houses on stilts,

crowding along the bank of the stream of malodorous mud, meandering into Geylang River. This was home to him and our family.

As I write this tonight, I can picture the glow of his lone cheroot and its rings of pungent smoke, keeping at bay the swarms of mosquitoes rising from the stagnant pools of foul-smelling water beneath the huts. His neighbours' cooking fires and oil lamps pushed aside the night's flickering shadows, and in their midst, smoking alone, my father must have felt the stirring of feelings he could not name. Perhaps it was a longing for the home he had lost in Pahang or hopes for me, his son. I can only guess at what these feelings were; feelings not of pride but of hope, a fragile hope and a nagging anxiety tugged his heart — the heart of an anxious loving father.

Now that I have children of my own, I have begun to understand my stern father better, by the grace of Allah. There are in our lives moments which our memories cannot recapture in words; only a recollection of fleeting fragile feelings to which we dare not cling, in case, in our eagerness to grasp at permanence and possession, we lose the very thing which keeps alive our hopes and dreams. So we stand absorbed in the contemplation of these luminous hopes, holding our breath, because we know that fulfilment and forever do not belong to this transient world. And so, this evening, as I write I am stabbed by the futility of hope and the impermanence of joy. I do not think I have fulfilled all my father's dreams. At least not his dream of returning to Pahang to reclaim our family lands ..."

When Haji Hussein was a reporter writing for *Utusan Melayu* and campaigning for a better life for his community, he found out that John Campbell's support for his education had created quite a stir in the European community at the time. But what saddened him most was that, eventually, what had started as an altruistic gesture was turned into something self-serving.

"Well, John!" Mr Thomas H Thompson hailed him. "I've heard about your good deed. So how's your little Malay boy doing?"

"Very well, sir. A fine bright-eyed blighter he is! But how did you know about him?"

"Why, old chap, it's all over town. Surely you don't think such an event would escape the colony? My missus heard it from the Bishop's wife herself. His Grace was mightily pleased. But not all of us, you understand?"

"The deuce of it," John Campbell groaned. "My advice was sought by a native, and I rendered what help I could. I reckoned it would be good for our standing among the natives here, sir."

"Well said, old chap, well said. But," Mr Thomas H Thompson, who had lived in the colony far longer than John Campbell, patted his friend's arm, "intention is one thing, public reaction is another. And, as far as I can tell, the twain seldom meet and concur."

The old colonial administrator sighed. Thomas H Thompson could still hear the shrill voice of his wife at breakfast that morning, recounting her version of the story.

"Oh, that puffed-up John! I'd have to write to Mother about him. She knows all about his impoverished relations back home. I can well imagine what Mother would say about his latest scheme. He's taken into his head that we're not doing enough for our natives! And that's not all! He's going to pay for the education of a little Malay boy. Next he'll be saying we're ill-treating them, depriving our ayahs and syces of opportunities to improve themselves! Here's a man, Thomas, it's very obvious to me if not to you, here's a man who has no notion of our hardships. Does he know what skill and ingenuity are required from helpless women like us to get

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"Oh thank you, Miss, thank you, thank you!" Sinseh Lau clasped her hands in both his own.

"Sinseh, no need, no need," May Lan murmured, confused and embarrassed by the old doctor's effusion of gratitude. That bag of rice and pork from the loathed enemy for which she had held her brother in contempt would now be used to save some children from hunger.

Three days later, Ong May Lan changed her mind about her brother again and regretted having felt sorry for holding him in contempt. He deserved it.

"Poo-bor-ah! You moronic sow!" Ong Tay Luck yelled at his sister. "Just what did you do? Nothing left! I could have sold that sack of rice for a tidy sum on the black market! And you! Poo-bor-ah! You gave away my rice!"

He would have hit her had not their mother cried out then. The two of them rushed into Madam Geok Neo's room. A serious attack of coughing was making her retch in pain. She was gasping for breath. Madam Sia Liew and Ah Siew Chay were struggling to help her sit up in bed.

They sent for Sinseh Lau but there was little else that he could do for the patient. The high fever was wasting her body and she was declining rapidly. She had been fretting and pining for her sons. There had been no news and she feared that their bodies could be rotting somewhere in the jungles without a proper burial. Whenever she thought about this, large silent tears would roll down her wasted cheeks, and she simply could not understand why her acts of duty as wife and mother had not brought her the blessings of the gods. In all her years as the daughter of a rich towkay, there had been no spiritual anticipation of suffering; she was not prepared for the hard blows which life had dealt her, and she had none of that Buddhist detachment from material life to prepare

her for this slow and agonizing undermining of her hopes and expectations. All she saw, with the uncanny lucidity of the dying, was the unfairness and injustice inherent in life; only the scum and rats could prosper and thrive. She viewed Ong Tay Luck, her concubine's son, with loathing. "Rat!" she hissed. If he and his mother were expecting her to die soon so that they could divide up her wealth, she would keep them waiting for as long as she bodily could! Let the gods send her to hell! She was past caring. All she wanted was that, one day, her husband's concubine and son would suffer terrible deaths! Rage coupled with malicious thoughts and the grip of a high fever had brought an unnatural brightness into her eyes. It gave her the sudden strength to sit up when Towkay Ong Ah Buck came into the room.

"Ha! He's waiting for me to go too!" Madam Geok Neo cried out in her delirium. "To go and leave him everything! My father's wealth! Don't forget! I will take it, ah, with me!" She cursed and swore at the whole family.

It was unbearable. She went on in this state for several days. Dreadful symptoms of her coming dissolution emerged amidst rumours that the Western forces were winning the war at last, and that the hated Japanese invaders would be forced to surrender. This would have been unthinkable three years ago. The family waited with bated breath. Daily, Madam Geok Neo's coughing fits lasted longer and her shortness of breath grew more frequent as her delirium grew worse. Towkay Ong refused to enter the sick room. He seemed to have shrunk and dreaded being left alone at night; Ong Tay Luck had to sleep in the same room with his father.

Just before her death, Madam Geok Neo asked for Ong Kim Hock, her dark malevolent eyes following his every move when he came into the room. She saw not

the nephew, linked to her by blood and family ties, but the loathed fiend who had lured her eldest son, Ong Tay Ikk, to his death. If not for him, her dark accusing eyes seemed to say, her eldest son would be by her side now. "You, ah! You killed my son!" she gasped, her chest rose and fell with each tortured breath. "I, ah, I will not close my eyes. I, ah, I will take every cent with ..." The dying woman could not finish. She fell back suddenly, her hands clutching at the empty air. Her married daughters were hastily summoned into the room. She was convulsed by an indescribable pain just before her breathing ceased.

The next day, when the rest of the family were busy preparing for Madam Geok Neo's funeral, Ong Tay Luck bounded into his father's room. "Ah Pa! Ah Pa! The Japanese devils have surrendered!"

But Towkay Ong Ah Buck did not live to see the end of the war. He had died in his sleep. The whole family was shakened and, hastily, they summoned the temple's priest. Towkay Ong Ah Buck was buried beside his wife, Madam Geok Neo, in a simple funeral in Peck San Teng Cemetery.

Part 7

*Brown Eye
of History*