

## Crutches

Kee Thuan Chye<sup>1</sup>  
Malaysia

*The action takes place in the DATUK's inner office (which could be UL) and the outer area (which would then be DR) where his secretary, SITI, sits and which also serves as a waiting area. To signify that there is a wall between the two areas, access between them is through a door. Lighting can play a crucial role in focusing on action in either area. The play is best mounted on a revolving stage.*

*BRIAN, an Australian, and LEE, who is Malaysian, are in the waiting area. BRIAN is casually flipping through a magazine while LEE is pacing up and down restlessly, looking at his watch and looking in the direction of the DATUK's inner office.*

*After a while, BRIAN turns to speak to the audience.*

BRIAN: In all my years as an engineer, I'd never experienced anything like this. It came as a culture shock. I've worked in Singapore, the UK, Holland and back home in Australia, but coming to Malaysia as a consultant showed me something I'll never get over. That guy's Lee. He heads a very successful construction company and I was consulting for it. We were waiting to see the Datuk.

LEE: Brian, he's kept us waiting half an hour, you know. Bastard.

BRIAN: He might hear you.

LEE: (*looking around frantically*) Huh? Really ah?

BRIAN: If he's got a CC camera.

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<sup>1</sup> Kee Thuan Chye is a noted Malaysian playwright, director, and actor. He is the author of several plays, poems, and two collections of prose. He obtained his master's degree in drama from England's Essex University in 1988.

LEE: Shit. You got me worried.

BRIAN: Relax, Lee.

LEE: How to relax? I got everything invested in this. That bastard is too much la.

BRIAN: You need to expand your vocabulary.

LEE: Ya what, he's a bastard, I tell you.

*SITI, a sweet young woman, comes through the door from the DATUK's inner office.*

SITI: Mr Lee.

*LEE is startled.*

SITI: Datuk will see you now.

LEE: Oh. Oh, OK. Let's go, Brian.

*LEE and BRIAN go through the door.*

*Lights up in DATUK's inner office to reveal a well-dressed, sophisticated-looking DATUK at his desk. He stands up when they enter and gestures to them to sit.*

DATUK: Sorry to keep you waiting. Something urgent came up.

LEE: It's okay, Datuk. *(More a statement than a question)* You've met Brian?

DATUK: Oh yes. *(chuckles)* Eight tequilas in a row.

BRIAN: *(laughs)* I was out after the fifth. Next day was hell. Don't know how you do it.

DATUK: Secret's in the ginseng.

BRIAN: Ooogh, can't stand the stuff.

DATUK: Get the high grade stuff. Guaranteed you'll like it. Let me know if you want some.

BRIAN: Thanks.

DATUK: Lee, how's the family?

LEE: Fine.

DATUK: Your son's graduating from Princeton, is it? Or Harvard?

LEE: Princeton.

DATUK: Architect, huh? Sure joining the firm lah? Or not coming back?

LEE: *(hesitantly)* Maybe Singapore.

DATUK: You know what my daughter told me? She's going to stay on in London after LSE. Might not come back.

BRIAN: Is she finishing yet?

DATUK: Only second year. I said OK lah, see if she can make it there. *(chuckles)* Gives me an excuse to visit London more often. I love the West End comedies. *(Beat.)* How's your golf, Lee?

LEE: *(getting more and more edgy but tries not to show it)* OK lah.

DATUK: *(to BRIAN)* You play?

BRIAN: Nah.

DATUK: Too bad or we could have a few rounds.

BRIAN: Maybe after I've had five tequilas.

*DATUK laughs.*

DATUK: So, Lee, you got my message?

LEE: Ya, Datuk.

DATUK: No problem?

LEE: Actually, yes.

DATUK: What's the problem?

LEE: Uh... you know, Datuk, we're not really making much from this project, you know. It's – I mean, can lah *cari makan*. But the cost of materials already taking a big chunk. And then we got to source more labour from Indonesia.

DATUK: Sure lah, building a college is a big project.

LEE: Brian, you tell Datuk the logistics.

DATUK: That doesn't concern me, right?

BRIAN: I don't know, it's –

DATUK: Lee, let me ask you – Can you do the project or not?

LEE: Yes, Datuk.

DATUK: Then come to the point.

LEE: Datuk... the extra you are asking for ah... it's... very hard for us to work out how. We already agreed on 5 million, Datuk. I got a shock when your man came and said, not enough.

DATUK: Sorry la, Lee. This request came from the big people. You know what I mean? I can't tell them no. Then next time no more contract from them. If that happens, I also can't give you any more jobs.

LEE: Datuk, it's not easy to work around another 2 million.

BRIAN: Uh... you want me to step outside?

LEE: No, Brian, stay.

DATUK: It's very simple, Lee. If you can't do it, I'll give it to someone else. Your tender was not as good as some other companies, you know.

LEE: I can do it, Datuk, but it's just that the terms suddenly changed.

DATUK: Lee, you've been in business long enough to know these things are fluid.

LEE: We had a deal. I already spent a lot of money on the groundwork.

DATUK: Ya, that's your part. That's what you have to do.

LEE: Then how can you ask for more?

DATUK: How many times must I explain?

LEE: We already agreed on a figure. Now, suddenly, you're asking for more. This is unethical.

*BRIAN starts coughing. He is in truth trying to stifle a laugh.*

BRIAN: Excuse me.

DATUK: You find this funny, Brian?

BRIAN: Uh... no.

DATUK: Actually, it is. It's a comedy. *(to Lee)* Unethical, huh? Haven't I given you jobs before?

LEE: Datuk, it's not –

DATUK: Tell me, haven't I given you jobs before?

LEE: Yes.

DATUK: How many?

LEE: I don't remember.

DATUK: How many? Seven, eight, nine?

LEE: About that.

DATUK: And it's made you rich, right? It's helped to send your son to Princeton. It's helped to pay for your daughter's big-time wedding. It's helped to build your new house at Tropicana, right? *(Beat.)* Well, am I right?

*LEE does not answer.*

DATUK: Am I right or not?

LEE: Yes.

DATUK: And I'm about to help you again, right?

LEE: Yes.

DATUK: So why is it suddenly unethical?

LEE: Like I said, Datuk, it's not –

DATUK: Why should I help you? Whoever said I should help you? The Prime Minister? The King? Where is it written that I must help you? Is it written in the Constitution that I must help you? Huh? Is it?

LEE: Datuk –

DATUK: Why do I help you? I ask you, why do I help you? Tell me.

LEE: Because we have a good relationship.

DATUK: Because I have to help myself. Is that unethical? This is a world where we have to struggle on our own to survive. This is a world where we have to compete. I have bigger hands to shake too. If you can't give what I need, you better give up.

LEE: Datuk, Datuk, I really appreciate your help.

DATUK: Why do I have to help you some more? What makes you think I owe you a living? I've helped you so much, you've come to depend on me. But that doesn't mean I have to keep supporting you. Maybe you should now stand on your own feet, stop coming to me. That's it, no more jobs.

LEE: Datuk, please, I don't mean to upset you. Maybe we can negotiate.

DATUK: What's there to negotiate? This is not *pasar malam*. You want to bargain? Cheap, cheap?

LEE: Not to say cheap, but... can be less ah, Datuk? Maybe we split half half. You give them one million from your five.

DATUK: You're wasting my time la, Lee. I think you better forget about the whole thing.

LEE: No, please, Datuk, I'm already committed.

DATUK: I can't help you la.

LEE: Don't do this, please, Datuk.

DATUK: I'm not doing anything.

LEE: OK, Datuk, give me one more chance. I'll try and work out something.

DATUK: You mean you agree to the new terms?

LEE: I have to lah.

DATUK: Are you sincere?

LEE: Huh?

DATUK: Are you sincere?

LEE: Of course, Datuk, I've always been sincere. I've always delivered.

DATUK: You want another chance?

LEE: Yes.

DATUK: You want another chance badly enough?

LEE: Yes.

BRIAN: (*to audience*) I must admit, I couldn't have guessed what was coming. The Datuk took his time. Lee was breathing hard. Or maybe he was praying.

*Beat.*

DATUK: OK, up the extra.

LEE: Up the extra?

DATUK: To 4 million.

*Silence. LEE is too stunned to say anything. BRIAN gets up.*

BRIAN: Excuse me, I really have to go to the gents'.

*He goes out.*

*Lights go up in outer office and off in DATUK's office.*

*SITI is at her desk outside. She smiles as she sees BRIAN emerge from within. He is too distracted to reciprocate.*

SITI: You'd like some tea, sir?

BRIAN: What?

SITI: Tea, sir? Or coffee?

BRIAN: Uh... no, thanks. *(Beat.)* How long have you been working for Datuk?

SITI: Eight years.

BRIAN: You must like working for him?

SITI: He's a very nice man. Not only to me but also other people.

BRIAN: You're his confidential secretary?

SITI: Yes.

BRIAN: So you know everything around here?

*LEE suddenly darts out from the inner office. He's desperate, almost crazed.*

LEE: I might as well jump out a window! I'm screwed. I put everything into the project. He's pushing me. He's f...ing with me.

BRIAN: Hang on, Lee, calm down.

LEE: He's pushing me to jump. Where's the window?



BRIAN: (*restraining him*) Lee, get a hold of yourself.

LEE: (*struggling to free himself*) He wants to kill me, is it? Huh? Huh? Then kill me lah! I got nothing left! Kill me lah!

*The intercom buzzes.*

DATUK'S VOICE: Siti, ask Mr Lee to come in.

SITI: Mr Lee –

LEE: Go in for what? Kill me some more, is it? (*A thought comes to him.*) Or maybe better I kill him. Yes! We both die together!

*He pushes BRIAN aside and makes towards the door.*

BRIAN: Don't do anything stupid, Lee!

LEE: What for let the bastard kill me? We kill each other!

*BRIAN and SITI hasten after LEE.*

*Suddenly, the lights go out. Power cut. Total darkness.*

BRIAN: What the hell?

SITI: Blackout.

BRIAN: Shit!

*Sounds of commotion in the dark. Something gets knocked down. Then a heavy thump, followed by a loud, painful cry from LEE.*

BRIAN: Lee, what happened?

SITI: Datuk, are you okay?

*Silence.*

*A single spot gradually comes on at C.*

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*BRLAN steps into it.*

*BRLAN: (to audience)* Power cuts are a real nuisance. They shouldn't be happening in a place like Malaysia. *(Beat.)* Talk went around that the two men swung at each other in the dark. I couldn't be sure what happened. Lights came back only a few minutes later.

*BRLAN steps out of the spot. DATUK steps into it.*

*DATUK:* All the rumours on the Internet were untrue. Also the speculation about kickbacks. All malicious. All trying to discredit my company. We got the government contract on our track record. Lee got the project in a fair open tender.

*DATUK steps out. LEE steps in. He is on crutches. He also has a black eye.*

*LEE:* The rumours were false. There was a sudden power cut. I tripped on something and fell.

*LEE bobbles off. BRLAN steps back in.*

*BRLAN:* I'm not sure how the rumours started. Lee wouldn't tell me what he and the Datuk agreed on finally. That got tongues wagging about them coming to blows. But seriously, I doubt that would've got Lee the project. I should clarify, though, the rumours didn't come from me.

*BRLAN steps out. SITI steps in.*

*SITI:* I didn't see anything.

*BLACKOUT*