‘I’m downstairs.’ It was a dead man’s voice, like my father talking from his grave. ‘They say they can’t let me see you without an appointment.’ It had a slight stammer of fear or anger in it. ‘I want to talk to you about my wife.’

‘I didn’t catch your name,’ I said.

‘Whiting.’

‘Anthony?’

‘James Whiting, from Hong Kong,’ he said. ‘Anthony’s my cousin. He said he’d met you. But Mei-lan –’

‘Yes! You’re married to Mei-lan! Now I remember.’

He said, ‘It’s in that connection that I want to talk to you. It’s very important.’

‘I see. I wonder if we could make it tomorrow. Lunch, say – somewhere pleasant.’

‘I’ll be on my way back to Hong Kong tomorrow.’ He spoke with a finality in which there was no emotion.

I said, ‘I’m terribly tied up at the moment.’

‘I can’t wait.’ He sounded as if, already, he had been waiting a long time for me.

‘Perhaps we could meet the next time you’re here?’

‘I’ll never be in London again.’ His voice was stone.

‘I might be in Hong Kong one of these days,’ I said.

‘You won’t find me. I’m leaving the bank for good. What time do you finish work?’

‘I’ll be here forever, I’m afraid.’ His silence demanded that I explain. ‘The Vice-President’s flying in next week from Washington. We’re all working overtime. It might be eleven before I can get away.’

‘Midnight, then,’ he said, and I saw blackness.

‘Impossible,’ I said.

‘I must see you.’ The words rapped against my ear.

‘Is Mei-lan with you?’ I asked.

‘Mei-lan is dead.’

‘Oh, God, I’m sorry,’ I said. ‘I’ll be right down.’

He was older than I had guessed he would be, but his frailty was partly grief. The strain was on his face, in his sideways glance, and his odd, bereaved smile. He was a tough man who had been stricken with sorrow. His hair, raked into gray and white strands, was as dull as metal. His face was shadowy; there was no light behind the skin. It is that light which can make a person seem old or young.

Now that I was with him I was less anxious. He was just over sixty – I knew him to be sixty-one – not elderly, but rather old to be the husband of a Chinese girl in her mid-twenties. He had the shaky gaze of a widower. I could not match him to Mei-lan. He looked a little wild.

I had greeted him. I was still talking, commiserating, and walking much too fast. He replied in a breathless way. He followed me outside and down the Embassy steps. He seemed to be chasing me. I stayed just ahead of the flap of his footsoles, one stride away from him.

He said, ‘I’m at the Connaught. Shall we go there?’

That was a bad moment. I said, ‘The Connaught,’ and made it an idiot’s echo.

‘I’m sorry to have interrupted your work.’

Was this irony? Mei-lan was dead! We were heading across the square for Carlos Place.

‘It’s perfectly all right. I hadn’t understood. I should have asked.’

‘I didn’t want to tell you on the phone. I find it hard to talk about. It’s only been a month. The odor of her scent is still in the house. Flammette. It’s very upsetting.’

He said no more until we reached the Connaught Hotel. The doorman saluted us. James Whiting raised his head and showed the man his bereaved smile, and we went

inside. In the little lobby of armchairs and engravings, he said, ‘Wouldn’t we be more comfortable upstairs?’

He scratched the air with his hands, pointing the way.

‘Right here is perfect,’ I said. I sat down to show him I was satisfied and would not go farther. I hoped he would sit down.

I felt very young then, and sad and swindled, not just visited but haunted. This man had seemed to materialize in London with terrible news, and he looked terrible – the menace was a shadow on his face. I did not want to go upstairs. I did not want a white door to close behind me, in a room smelling of burning lavender, with a blue ceiling and the purifying light from tall windows.

He frowned at the chair across from mine. He blew out his cheeks in anger – but it may have been only impatience. He sat down in that chair, he sighed, he blinked at me, he tried to start.

‘She stayed here, you know,’ he said.

‘They say it’s a lovely hotel.’

‘This is where she said she was happiest in London, when she came in October for her tests. That’s why I’m staying here.’

‘Those tests. I thought she was taking exams. She mentioned she was studying law.’

‘To take her mind off it. She was trying to overcome it by means of will power. She had so many tests! She didn’t believe them. The best hospitals. The findings were always the same, even the same words – “the Black Spot,” she said, when she got the reports. When she was too weak to travel – bedridden – she seemed to accept it. They gave her heroin injections. “Heroin for the heroine” – that was her joke. It was wonderful stuff. It made her death almost peaceful.’

I said, ‘Please don’t feel you have to talk about it.’

‘I think it does me good.’ He wore a look of wonderment for a few seconds. It lighted his face briefly; it made him look selfish and a little wild once more. Then it was gone, and with a kind of grumpy deference he said, ‘Unless you’d rather I didn’t.’

‘It’s painful,’ I said. ‘I find it painful.’

‘You young people.’ He raised his head at me. ‘When you get cancer it goes right through you. You burn up very fast. It’s usually a matter of weeks, not months. Days,

sometimes. You just burn.'

'Please.'

He said, 'She was very fond of you.'

'I knew her father. I was the US Consul in Ayer Hitam. What a home town for someone like Mei-lan!'

'You don't have to tell me anything. I know about you. She spoke about you a great deal. What are you looking at?'

The waiter had slipped behind Whiting to inquire whether there was anything we wanted.

'Nothing for me,' I said.

Whiting exercised his right as a guest of the hotel and ordered a whiskey – it was after three-thirty. He did not speak again until it arrived, and then he merely held the glass, sometimes lifting and inhaling its fumes, but not drinking. It seemed to allow him to hide his glance in an innocent gesture. His eyes seldom left me and they scorched me with aching heat wherever they rested. They were deceptively dangerous, like dull metal that looks the same hot or cold.

'She greatly enjoyed her time in London.'

'The old man's customers were British – always talking about London. It was home for those colonials. Sentiment can be catching. People had so little to be sentimental about in Malaysia. I mean the Chinese. He wanted Mei-lan to come to London.'

'It wasn't London – it was you.'

Whiting, a banker, did not have the heavy-faced and chair-bound look of a banker. No paunch, no watch chain, no money-moralizing, nor any apologies that were in reality sneers. He had a lawyer's alertness showing through his bony face of grief. He had watchful eyes, the pretense of repose, the pounce ('It wasn't London –'). Bankers are bullfrogs; lawyers are lizards. And his tongue was quick for a grieving man.

He said, 'We were in London together when we first got married. It seems like yesterday. It was yesterday. Two years ago. Funny' – he didn't smile – 'she didn't mention you then.'

'The old man liked me to keep an eye on her. He was my first friend out there. He worried about her.'

‘You call him the old man,’ Whiting said, and raised his glass and looked at me over its rim. ‘He and I are the same age.’

I said, ‘We did some business with him. We were winding up the Consulate. I needed office equipment. It would have been expensive for me to buy things outright and sell them two years later. He leased everything to me, at a fair rate. He was one of the first in that part of Malaysia to go in for leasing in a big way. He was progressive. So were his children. Very modern-thinking. They were stifled there.’

Whiting pushed at his face with his fingertips as he listened to me.

‘I left my wife for Mei-lan.’ He looked at me through spread fingers. ‘I have grown-up children.’

‘Her father was a bit upset about that. Strife in a Chinese family can be violent. Threats, fights, suicides. It’s all or nothing. The old man was worried.’

‘My eldest son was Mei-lan’s age,’ he said.

‘How did he take it? Some kids never come to terms with their parents’ divorce.’

‘Didn’t bother him.’

‘He’s unusual.’

‘He’s divorced,’ Whiting said. ‘Three years ago. But he loved Mei-lan. Everyone did.’

I said, ‘She was the sort of woman who inspired men to make sacrifices for her. They’d do anything.’

He merely looked at his whiskey and at me. He drew his lips up in a mock smile, like a man with a bad pain hiding his distress, and after I’d said They’d do anything, one of his eyes widened on me.

I said, ‘Her father gave her everything. It made him a little uneasy – he knew he was in danger of spoiling her. I’m proud to say he trusted me. I liked him.’

Whiting gave me his sideways look. I noticed that his gray-white hair was yellowing in places, as it does in certain aging men. It gave his head a strange heated appearance.

He said, ‘Frankly, I found the old man a bit slippery.’

‘He was a businessman.’

‘I don’t mean that. I’m a businessman myself. He seemed sly.’

‘A lot of people respected him for being careful.’

‘A double-entry man. Hong Kong’s full of them. Twisters.’

‘I found him truthful. I knew the whole family.’ As I said this, Whiting raised his head, lifting his chin at me, seeming to reject what I said. I paused, then said, ‘The family must have been very sad about Mei-lan.’

‘Shattered. You see, Mei-lan wasn’t very truthful. All along she had denied that she was seriously ill. She claimed it was hepatitis.’

‘That takes courage.’

‘No.’ His bright eyes challenged me to deny this. ‘She found it easy to lie.’

I said, ‘Perhaps in unimportant matters.’

‘Unimportant? I am talking about her death. But not only that.’ He now sat like a man on a wagon traveling over a bumpy road. He worked his shoulders as he spoke. ‘She told lies because truth bored her. She didn’t know that a good liar needs a good memory. She was always contradicting herself. It could be rather touching sometimes – like my daughter, who used to swear she hadn’t touched the sweets and then would show me her purple tongue. God, I loved her.’

‘You’re saying she was deceitful.’

‘No. She was virtuous. She didn’t really know what the truth was. Lying was just a bad habit with her.’

‘So she was innocent,’ I said. ‘She looked innocent.’

‘She looked like a child,’ he said. ‘She was tiny. She had such a simple clean face. Some Chinese women never grow old. They have skin like silk. It grows finer, more beautiful with the years. Mei-lan was like that. A person ages and dies – the aging is a kind of preparation. But if there is no decline, no aging process – if the person looks ageless and beautiful – they seem immortal.’ He glanced behind me as if a new thought had come into his head. ‘Then they die and it is like the end of the world.’

‘Didn’t you know she was ill?’

‘Having cancer isn’t being ill,’ he said. His head was turned toward me, but his eyes

were glazed with memory. ‘This is going to sound horribly naive to you, but I thought she was pregnant. It took my first wife that way. In bed all the time, that sort of ravishing pallor, the tears. I thought she was below par. It made her more beautiful.’

‘She seemed fine when she was here,’ I said. ‘It must have been London.’

‘Perhaps it was your company.’

‘I saw very little of her, I’m sorry to say.’

‘Somehow, she was satisfied.’ He drank half his whiskey in a sudden gulp and breathed hard. He said, ‘She wanted to be well.’

‘Mei-lan wasn’t desperate,’ I said.

‘It’s not desperation I’m talking about – it’s urgency. Do you know anything about death?’

‘A certain amount. My parents were killed in an air crash when I was five. I was old enough to miss them.’

He said, ‘With all respect, I’m talking about a different kind of intimacy with death. I mean, a dying woman will do anything to save herself.’

‘So will a dying man.’

‘For a man, death is a door. Everyone dies ugly, but that ugliness makes it terrible for a woman. You can’t imagine. And there are worse things. A woman will do anything to get well, but she’ll also do anything if she knows she’s not going to get well. What are your restraints if you know you’re doomed?’

‘Mei-lan was a rational person. She was studying law,’ I said. ‘She had sense.’

‘Law was only one distraction. She became obsessed about her appearance. She had beauty treatments. Injections. She did all the hospitals, she was tested again and again. She traveled, she needed old friends, she saw you.’

Whiting still sat solidly across from me with a patient intensity. He was large, his gaze was steady, and yet it was not a stare. He glanced from my eyes to my lips when I spoke, and at my hands when I moved them. We were not alone in that little Connaught parlor. It seemed to bother him. Whenever someone entered, Whiting flicked his eyes at them and dropped his voice.

I said, ‘I hadn’t really expected to hear from her.’

‘She liked to startle people, show up without warning, catch them off-guard.’

‘That can be charming,’ I said.

‘It gave her the upper hand. She could get anyone to do anything. I had never met anyone like her. Do you know, I lost most of my friends when I married her. I was glad. I didn’t want them. She was everything. And such greed! I wanted someone who was greedy, who wanted me in a fiery way. That is passion. To me she was a friend, an enemy, a mother, a child.’

I must have looked puzzled.

‘Wife, too,’ he said slowly. ‘I felt like an old man before I met her. After we married, I felt younger – she gave me youth. I had never had a real childhood. Some of us don’t, you know. An English childhood can seem as serious and gray as middle age – all that silence, all those exams, we’re always indoors. Mei-lan set my spirit free. My only regret was that she would outlive me – she would be on her own. I knew she had to be provided for. She gambled, you know.’

‘I wasn’t aware of that.’

‘No?’ He sat straighter. He seemed glad that I didn’t know. I wondered how he got such a close shave – his skin was pink, not a hint of whiskers. It made me think of razors.

‘She’d bet on anything,’ he was saying. ‘On an ant crossing a carpet. Very Chinese, that. I didn’t mind the expense. It gave me something to spend my money on. It made her happy. Past a certain figure it’s impossible to know what to do with your money. I had everything when I had her. I don’t mean it was all good – it was diluted, that was the best of it. She kept my feet on the ground. You look blank.’

‘I’m not sure what you’re talking about.’

He shrugged. He didn’t smile, yet he looked pleased – confident. In the past half-hour he had grown larger but less menacing. He said, ‘When she died, nothing mattered. I came close to death myself then. What was the point in carrying on? I wanted to turn to wood. I spent a week in a chair with my mouth open. I suppose that sounds a bit crazy to you.’

I denied that it did. His eyes never left me and there was watchfulness even in his two hands, poised like crabs on his knees.

‘When I finally got out of the chair, I wrote my letter of resignation. Now I want to find

a smaller flat. I don’t want anything more if I can’t have Mei-lan.’

He turned away but glanced back at me quickly, as if he expected to catch my expression changed.

He said, ‘Sometimes I can’t bear to think of her.’

‘That’s only natural.’

‘You don’t understand.’ He flung that sudden gaze on me again. Was he sinking, was he drowning? He said, ‘But I had to trust her. I came here yesterday and realized that I was looking for her. That’s not good. Don’t you agree?’

‘You’ll never find her,’ I said.

I had hesitated, and now he gave me his lizard look of scrutiny.

He said, ‘No, no. That’s not the point. I could find her – I could know her better. But it might be very upsetting.’

He wanted me to agree with him. But I said, ‘People should be allowed to have secrets.’

‘People’s secrets are the most interesting thing about them,’ he said. ‘How could you love anyone who didn’t have a secret?’

I said, ‘How is it possible to go on loving someone after you know the secret?’

He was watching me very closely now. He seemed to want to trap me, lowering his judge’s face on me and exerting pressure with his eyes.

He said, ‘I want to think of her as I knew her – like a little flame, burning, burning, slightly malicious, tempting, loving, doing harmless damage. The coquette is a tormentor in a good cause. I want to think that she would always have been mine.’ His face moved closer to mine. ‘What color was her dress?’

I made a memory-prodding gesture, showing my effort by masking my eyes with my hand. I experienced a slow moment of grief, and it seemed to pinch a bruise onto my soul.

In this darkness, Whiting spoke to me. ‘You don’t remember,’ he said. ‘She wouldn’t have liked that. She went to a lot of trouble to buy her London clothes.’

I said, ‘She was here only a few days.’

‘A week,’ he said.

‘I only saw her one day.’

‘A day has twenty-four hours in it,’ he said.

‘We had tea,’ I said. ‘One hour. I didn’t see her dress. She never took her coat off.’

Whiting frowned at me in pleasure, and lapsed into a comfortable silence. He said, ‘In a hurry, that was Mei-lan. Hello, good-bye. What a life. It’s perfect when you think about it. She was a little flame. She –’

At first I thought he was about to cry, but then I saw the flicker of a smile on his mouth. He had not smiled at all.

He said, ‘The chaps at the bank think I’m stupid. “You’re wrecking your career – throwing it all away, everything you worked for.” But they didn’t know Mei-lan. A woman’s secret is the essence of her character, isn’t it? She is what she tries to hide. They didn’t know her.’

His eyes changed in focus, leaving me and peering into a greater distance.

He said, ‘If I thought for a minute that she had betrayed me, I wouldn’t have left the bank. I’d carry on as normal. And I don’t think I’d ever trust a living soul again.’

He invited my attention with a beckoning of his head, lifting it at me and saying, ‘What would you do if you were in my shoes?’

‘Just what you did,’ I said. He was surprised into a short silence by my prompt reply.

‘She was rather special,’ he said. ‘What?’

‘Yes,’ I said.

And then he smiled. He said, ‘And you hardly knew her!’