The Indian said: ‘I take hand of woman and I squeeze and look in eyes, and if she return look and do not take hand away I know I can make intercourse. If also she squeeze my hand back it is most certain I can do it that very day. Only thing is, husband must be elsewhere.’

He smiled and lifted his long brown hands, displaying their emptiness like a conjurer. He went on in his lilting voice: ‘In Asia, namely India, Pakistan, Indochina, Siam, here in Singapore, wherever, it is enough to touch body of woman, even arm or whatnot. If they do not object to that, path is quite open. And what,’ he inquired, ‘is done in States?’

‘In the States?’ Len Rowley thought a moment. ‘I don’t know. I suppose we just come out and ask the girl if she wants to.’

‘Just looking and saying, “Cheerio, let us make intercourse”?’

‘No, probably something like, “Would you care to come up for a drink?”’

‘A drink?’ The Indian threw his head back and gave a dry croaking laugh. His teeth were bony and stained dark red with betel juice.

‘Or to see your pictures. Any excuse, really. The idea is to get her up to your room. If she says yes you know you can do it.’

The Indian nodded and spoke to the empty chair beside him, solemnly rehearsing: ‘You would like to come up to take drink, yes?’ Then he said to Len, ‘I think it is same as touching body. Woman enjoys, but she do not like to name.’

That conversation had taken place in a bar on Serangoon Road, the heart of the Indian district of Singapore. Len had been out walking and had stopped at the bar. He hadn’t intended to drink. But the Indian sitting by the door had given him a welcoming wobble of the head, and had smiled and tapped a chair seat and said, ‘Try some toddy?’ They had talked, first about toddy, then about hot food, then about women. Len did not ask the Indian’s name, nor did he ever see the Indian again.

But Len had replayed the Indian’s voice many times. He found the explanation satisfying and revealing, such a close glimpse into the mind of Asia that he had never divulged it to anyone. It was like a treasure map, described by a casually met pirate

and committed to memory. I take hand of woman and I squeeze … It is enough to touch body. The Indian had a way of saying body –he had pronounced it bho-dhee, speaking it with wet lips and heavy tongue-working – that made it sound the leering name for something vicious.

Len Rowley was a private soul, and marriage had increased his loneliness by violating his reveries. His attachment to Marian was not deep: he had lingered beside her for nearly seven years. She had put him through college, and now as an expatriate lecturer in English literature he was paying the bills. Marian was learning to play the guitar which hung on a hook in their living room. Friends found them an odd couple. Len and Marian talked of divorce, in company; this frightened listeners, but it always seemed to bring them together. Len was sometimes startled to recall that he had been unfaithful only once – with a prostitute in Newark, a year after the marriage. That was like making love to a chair tipped on its back and it cost Len twelve dollars.

The Forbeses and the Novaks were over for drinks. In a room full of people, Len became a recluse: he was still mentally speaking to the Indian.

But Ella Novak was saying, ‘In Midnight Cowboy, yes, that party. Remember? When Ratso faints? It was actually filmed at Andy Warhol’s! That was a real party!’

‘It’s the new thing,’ Tom Forbes said. ‘Of course, your French have been doing it for years – at least Truffaut has.’

Marian said, ‘Interesting, isn’t it? Like Eldridge Cleaver’s wife being in Zabriskie Point.’

‘Which one was she?’ asked Ella in annoyance.

‘At the beginning, when those students – I think they were students – were talking. With the hair. Holding the pencil and sort of … leading the discussion.’

‘Has anyone here seen Easy Rider?’ Joan Forbes put in.

‘That hasn’t come to Singapore yet,’ said Ella.

‘And probably won’t,’ said Tony Novak. ‘Unless the Film Society gets it.’

‘Len still refuses to join,’ said Marian, looking at Len in the corner, slumped in the Malacca chair with a dreamy look in his eyes.

Roused, returned to the living room by Marian’s words and the ensuing silence, Len said, ‘Film Society. Foreigners out of focus. Too much work reading all those subtitles!’

‘I knew he was going to say that,’ said Marian to Tony. ‘He’s really very puritanical.’

Len smiled. He heard: It is enough to touch body. Bho-dhee.

‘Tom and I saw it when we were on leave,’ said Joan, adding, ‘Easy Rider.’

‘I didn’t know you got home leave every year,’ said Marian.

‘Ford Foundation,’ said Joan, and put her hands primly into her lap.

‘We don’t go home until seventy-two,’ said Marian. ‘Seventeen months more.’

Tom Forbes asked Marian about Len’s contract, and he commiserated while Joan Forbes explained to Ella and Tony what happened in Easy Rider.

Len was silent. He heard the Indian’s piratical voice and he watched the kitchen. Ah Meng was at the sideboard flexing a plastic freezer tray and popping the ice cubes into a pewter bucket. She stood in the bright rectangle of the half-open door, a shelf of corn flakes and Quaker Oats behind her head making her unremarkable profile more interesting. Her forehead was long and sloping, her pug nose set just below the rise of her high cheeks; her chin was small but definite, her mouth narrow and almost grim. Len could see her stiff black hair which was wound in a pile on her head, and he knew what her eyes were like: hooded, the sly changeless shape of the skeptic’s; they were amused eyes, but some would say contemptuous. She was all but breastless and only her hands could be called beautiful, but it was the total effect that excited Len, the flower and stalk of face and body, the straightness of her length, her carriage. In a slim woman posture was beauty. She was tall for a Chinese and she moved in nervous strides like a deer.

Len had compared her with others’ servants: the Forbeses’ Ah Eng had muscular legs, bowed as a pair of nutcrackers. The Novaks’ Susan was a pale, pudgy, worried-looking little thing who always wore the same dress and once went bald. Tony was on the verge of firing her but, fortuitously, her hair grew back, porcupiny at first, then to her old bush.

When there was company, as on this evening, Ah Meng wore a loose blouse (raising to show a flat stomach when she reached for clean glasses on the top shelf), and tight, red skier’s slacks. She went about the house swiftly, treading on the ankle loops of her slacks, in bare feet: Len found the feet attractive for the wildness they suggested. She had been with the Rowleys for nearly three months – replacing the bossy old Hakka woman – and for much of that time Len Rowley had been trying to get into bed with her.

Trying was perhaps the wrong word. He had been thinking constantly about it, the way he thought of the Indian's advice. But something a man at the university had said made him hesitate. It was in the Staff Club. A man from Physics left, and Davies from Economics said, 'See that bloke?' Davies told a story which cautioned by horrifying: the man from Physics had pinched his house girl's bottom. That very evening the girl disappeared, and the following day at a stoplight three youths jumped into the man's car, beat him with bearing scrapers, slashed him, and fled. The man still wore bandages. The house girl's boy friend was in a secret society, and the boy friend's final piece of revenge was upon the next girl the man employed. She was threatened; she resigned. This became known, and no one would work for the man. Davies said the man was going to break his contract and go home. That for a bottom-pinching.

This story had to be balanced against the easy explanation of the Indian; it made Len hesitate but he did not put the thought of sleeping with Ah Meng out of his mind. Sometimes he wondered why and decided it was lust's boldness, lechery's curiosity for the new. Unlike the man who feels challenged by the unwilling, Len was aroused by those who were passive, who would say yes instantly. He didn't like the devious ploys of love, and it was Ah Meng's obedience ('Shut the door' 'Yes, mister') that made an affair seem possible.

For his lust he blamed his dog days. In some of the books he lectured on they were mentioned as days of excessive heat, unwholesome influences, practically malignant. The dog days were the hottest time of the year; the days Len passed, replaying the Indian's words and staring into the kitchen at Ah Meng were the hottest in his life. And it was literally true: it was always ninety in Singapore.

But hotter on Thursdays, Marian's Film Society night. These nights Len sat, soaking his shirt with sweat and wondering if he should make a move. Ah Meng would be in the downstairs shower, the one that adjoined her room, sluicing herself noisily with buckets of water and hawking and spitting. Later she would sit on the backstairs, holding her small transistor to her ear.

The story of the man in Physics restrained him; but there was something more. It was shame. It seemed like exploitation to sleep with your house girl. She might be frightened; she might submit out of panic. The shame created fear, and fear was an unusual thing: it made you a simpleton, it unmanned you, it turned you into a zombie. It was as a zombie that he had passed nearly three months.

'… early class tomorrow,' Tom Forbes was saying. He was in the center of Len's living room, stretching and yawning, thanking Marian for a lovely evening.

Len looked up and saw that everyone was standing, the Forbeses, the Novaks, Marian, waiting for him to rise and say good night. He leaped to his feet, and then bent slightly to conceal his tumescence.

‘What’s on?’ asked Len, who was marking essays on the dining-room table. Marian clawed at objects inside her handbag.

‘Knife in the Water,’ she said, still snatching at things inside the bag. She muttered, ‘Where are those car keys?’

‘They usually show that one,’ said Len. ‘Or a Bergman.’

‘And some cartoons,’ said Marian, who hadn’t heard what Len had said. ‘Czech ones,’ she said, looking up, dangling the car key.

‘Enjoy yourself,’ said Len.

‘I’ve told Ah Meng to heat the casserole. Tell her whether you want rice or potatoes.’ Patting her hair, snapping her handbag shut, Marian left the house.

As soon as Marian had gone Len pushed the essays aside and lit a cigarette. He thought about Ah Meng, the man in Physics, what the Indian had said. It occurred to him again – this was not a new perception – that the big mistake the man had made was in pinching the girl’s bottom. That was rash. The Indian would have advised against it. There were subtler ways.

Ah Meng was beside him.

‘Yes?’ He swallowed. She was close enough to touch.

‘Want set table.’

‘Okay, I’ll take these papers upstairs. Make some rice.’ Distracted, he sounded gruff.

And upstairs at his desk, he continued to pursue his reverie. A squeezed hand was ambiguous and had to be blameless, but a pinched bottom signaled only one thing – and was probably offensive to a Chinese. Also: if Ah Meng had a boy friend, where was he? She took a bus home on her day off. A boy friend would have picked her up on his motorbike, a secret society member in his car. The Indian’s way seemed unanswerable: his method was Asian, bottom-pinching was not.

‘Mister?’ Ah Meng was at the study door. ‘Dinner.’

Len got up quickly. Ah Meng was in the kitchen, scraping rice from the pot, by the time he had reached the second landing. He was breathless for a moment, and he realized as he gasped for air that he had hurried in order to catch her on the stairs.

He ate, forking the food in with one hand and with the other retuning the radio each time the overseas station drifted off into static. He stared at the sauce bottles, and forked and fiddled with the radio knobs.

He put down his fork. It made a clank on the plate. Ah Meng was in the room, and now leaning over the table, gathering up silverware, piling plates, rolling up placemats. She said, ‘Coffee, mister?’

Len reached over and put his hand on hers. It was as sudden and unexpected as if his hand belonged to someone else. His hand froze hers. She looked at the wall. I take hand of woman and I squeeze… but the damned girl wouldn’t look him in the eyes! It was getting awkward, so still squeezing he said, with casualness that was pure funk, ‘No, I don’t think I’ll have a coffee tonight. I think I will have –’ He relaxed his grip. Her hand didn’t move. He tapped her wrist lightly with his forefinger and said, ‘A whiskey. I think I’ll have a whiskey upstairs.’

Ah Meng turned and was gone. Len went upstairs to think; but it took no deep reflection for him to know that he had blundered. It had happened too fast: the speed queered it. She hadn’t looked at him. He thought, I shouldn’t have done it then. I shouldn’t have done it at all.

Ah Meng did not bring the whiskey. She was in the shower below Len’s study, hawking loudly. Spitting on me. He took his red ballpoint and, sighing, poised it over an essay. “‘The Canonization” is a poem written in indignation and impatience against those who censored Donne because of what is generally considered to have been his –’

Len pushed the essay (Sonny Poon’s) away, threw down the ball-point and put his head in his hands.

The front door slammed. The house was in silence.

This is the end, he told himself, and immediately he began thinking of where he might find another job. He saw a gang of Chinese boys carrying weapons, mobbing a street. He winced. An interviewer was saying, ‘Why exactly did you leave Singapore, Mr Rowley?’ He was on a plane. He was in a dirty city. He was in an airless subway, catching his cock on a turnstile’s steel picket.

There was a chance (was it too much to hope for?) that she was just outside, on the back steps, holding her little transistor against her ear. He prayed it was so, and in those moments, leaving his study, he felt that strange fear-induced fever that killed all his desire.

He took the banister and prepared to descend the stairs. Ah Meng was halfway up, climbing purposefully, silently, on bare feet. There was a glass in her hand. She wore

pajamas.

‘I heard the door. I –’

‘I lock,’ she said. She touched his hand and then bounded past him, into the spare bedroom. Len heard the bamboo window blind being released and heard it unroll with a flapping rattle and thump.

His first thought the next morning was that she had left during the night. Shame might have come to her, regret, an aftertaste of loathing. There was also the chance that she had gone to the police.

Len dressed hurriedly and went downstairs. Ah Meng was in the kitchen, dropping slices of toast into the toast rack as she had done every morning since the Hakka woman left. Marian took her place at the table across from Len and Ah Meng brought their eggs. Ah Meng did not look at him. But that meant nothing: she never did.

Marian chewed toast, spooned egg and stared fixedly at the corn-flakes box. That was habitual. She wasn’t ignoring him deliberately. Everything seemed all right.

‘How was the film?’

Marian shrugged. She said, ‘Russian film festival next month.’

‘Ivan the Terrible, Part One,’ said Len. He grinned. But he could not relax. That girl in the kitchen. He had made love to her only hours before. Her climax was a forlorn cry of ‘Mister!’ Afterward he had told her his name and helped her pronounce it.

‘I thought you’d say something like that.’ Marian turned the corn-flakes box and read the side panel.

‘Just kidding,’ said Len. ‘I might even go to that festival. I liked the Russian Hamlet.’

‘Members only,’ said Marian. She looked bored for a moment, then her gaze shifted to the tablecloth. ‘Where’s your lunch?’

Every morning it was beside Len’s plate, in a paper bag, two sandwiches with the crusts trimmed off, a banana, a hard-boiled egg, a tiny saltcellar, rambutans or mangosteens if they were available at the stalls. Ah Meng, neat and attentive, made sharp creases in the bag, squaring it. The Staff Club food – maybe it was the monosodium glutamate? – gave him a headache and made him dizzy.

Today there was no lunch bag.

‘Must be in the kitchen,’ said Len. ‘Ah Meng!’

There was no cry of ‘Mister?’ There was no cry.

‘I don’t think she heard me,’ said Len. He gulped his coffee and went into the kitchen.

Ah Meng sat at the sideboard, sipping tea from a heavy mug. Her back was to him, her feet hooked on the rung of her stool.

‘Ah Meng?’

She didn’t turn. She swallowed. Len thought she was going to speak. She sipped again at her mug.

‘My lunch. Where is it?’

She swallowed again, gargling loudly. That was her reply. It was as if she had said, ‘Get stuffed.’

‘Is it in the –’ Len opened the refrigerator. The lunch was not inside. He was going to speak again, but thought better of it. Marian was around the corner, at the table – out of sight but probably listening. Len found a paper bag in a drawer. He put three bananas in it and looked for something more. He saw a slice of bread on the sideboard and reached for it. Ah Meng snatched it up. She bit into it, and sipped at her mug. Her back seemed to wear an expression of triumph. Len left the kitchen creasing the bag.

‘Got it,’ he said. He went behind Marian and kissed her on her ear. She was raising a spoonful of egg to her mouth, which was open. She stopped the spoon in midair, held it, let Len kiss, and then completed the interrupted movement of the spoon to her mouth.

That evening, when Len returned from the department, Marian said, ‘Ah Meng wants a raise.’

‘Really?’ said Len. ‘I thought we just gave her one.’

‘We did. At least you were supposed to. I wouldn’t put it past you to hold back the five dollars and buy something for yourself.’

‘No,’ said Len. He ignored the sarcasm. He had given Ah Meng the raise. He remembered that well: it was one of the times he had been about to seize and press her hand; but he had handed over the money and panicked and run. ‘I did give it to her. When was that? About a month ago?’

‘I told her she gets more than the Novaks’ Susan, and doesn’t have children to mind. She gets her food and we pay her Central Provident Fund. I don’t know what more she wants.’

‘What did she say?’

‘She insisted. “Want five dollar, mem,”’ said Marian, imitating absurdly. Her mimicry was all the more unpleasant for the exaggerated malice of its ineptness. ‘It’s not the five dollars, it’s the principle of the thing. We gave her a raise a month ago. If we give in this time she’ll ask again next month, I know. I told her to wait until you came home. You’re better with her.’

‘Maybe we should give it to her,’ Len said. ‘Five bucks Singapore is only one sixty US.’

‘No, I expect you to be firm with her. No raise this month!’

In the kitchen, Ah Meng faced him – was that a sneer or a smile? Len said, ‘Mem says you want a raise. Is that right?’

She didn’t blink. She continued to sneer, or perhaps smile. There was a red mark, just at the base of her neck, near the bump of her shoulder bone, a slight love scratch. From his own hand.

‘Says you want five dollars more.’

Her expression was that of a person looking at the sun or facing a high wind. It was a look only the Chinese could bring off. It revealed nothing by registering the implausible, severe pain. And this pain had to be discounted, for the face, on closer inspection, bore no expression at all: the eyes were simply a shape, they were not lighted, they gave Len no access.

Marian, out of sight, called from the dining room: ‘Tell her if she does her work properly we’ll give her something around Christmas!’

‘If you do your work properly,’ said Len loudly, taking out his wallet, fishing around and discovering that he had three tens and two ones, and then giving her a ten which she folded small and put in her handkerchief and tucked into the sleeve of her blouse, ‘– if you do your work properly we might give you something around Christmas. But we can’t give you anything now.’

The might came to him on the spur of the moment, and Marian, who overheard, thanked him for it.

Len felt cold and started to shake. He went upstairs and clicked his red ballpoint at

the unmarked essays. His dog days were over. But something new was beginning: intimidation. He didn't like it.

For the next few days he stayed up until Marian went to bed. Then he made his lunch in the kitchen, remembering to crease the paper bag, and this he placed on the dining-room table, which was set for breakfast.

On Tuesday he had an idea. Marian was having her Pernod on the verandah, a touch she learned from a foreign film; she played with the small glass and watched its cloudy color.

'Is Ah Meng around?' Len whispered.

'At the market. We ran out of salt.'

'Then I don't have to whisper.' But this was a whisper. Len had downed five stengahs on the way home. 'Marian, seriously, I think we should fire her.'

'Why?' Marian frowned.

Len expected to be challenged, but not so quickly or (Marian was squinting at him) aggressively.

'Lots of reasons,' said Len, starting.

'I thought you were so pally with her.'

'Me? Pally? That's a laugh.' Len forced a laugh. He heard its cackling falsity as a truly horrible sound, and stopped. 'Here, look what she did to my pants.'

Len stood and showed Marian his leg. On the thigh was a brown mark of an iron, the shape of a rowboat. Between the Conrad lecture and the Donne tutorial Len had borrowed an iron from a Malay woman at the Junior Staff Quarters, and he had scorched his pants in his locked and darkened office. 'Burned the hell out of them.'

'That's a shame,' said Marian.

'Burned the hell out of them,' Len repeated.

Marian said, 'You know, I've never said anything, but she's done that lots of times to my dresses. She scorches the collars.'

'That's it then! Out she goes!'

‘Okay, Len, if you say so. But there’s going to be trouble with the Labor Exchange. It’ll be just like the Novaks.’

‘What about the Novaks?’

‘Investigated,’ said Marian. ‘By the Labor Exchange. After Susan’s hair fell out, Tony said he didn’t want to see her around, couldn’t stand that bald head, or so he said. The Labor Exchange came to investigate – Susan told them of course – and there was a great to-do.’

‘I didn’t know they did things like that.’

‘Went on for weeks,’ said Marian. The Pernod was to her lips.

Ah Meng entered the house and went into the kitchen.

‘I’ll speak to her,’ said Marian.

‘That’s okay. I will – they’re my pants,’ said Len.

He went into the kitchen and closed the door. Ah Meng’s back was to him; she was removing small parcels wrapped in newspaper, bound with rubber bands from her market basket. Len made himself a gin and tonic.

‘I guess we ran out of salt, eh?’

Ah Meng walked past him and closed the refrigerator door hard.

Len went out to the verandah.

‘She says she’s sorry.’

Thursday came. Len asked, barely disguising the desperation in his voice, ‘Say Marian, how about letting me come with you to the Film Society. We can go out to eat afterward. What do you say?’

‘Are you putting me on?’

‘No, honest to God,’ said Len, his voice cracking. ‘Take me. I won’t make any comments. I’d love to come.’

‘Mister is coming with me,’ said Marian to Ah Meng later.

Momentarily, Ah Meng faced a high wind; then she turned away.

The film was L'Avventura. Len watched with interest. He murmured that he was enjoying it, and he meant it. At the end, when Sandro sits abjectly on the bench and wrings his hands and starts to cry, blubbering with a pained look, Len understood, and he snuggled close to Marian in the darkness of the Cultural Center. Marian patted him on the knee. Afterward, as Len promised, they went to the Pavilion and he had cold, silky oysters with chili sauce, and tankards of stout.

Marian said, 'We should do this more often,' and at home, confidentially, 'Keep me awake, Len,' which was the whispered euphemism she used when she wanted to make love. Len was tired, but put the fan on full and made love to Marian with resolve, allowing his vigor to announce his new fidelity. Then he turned the fan down.

He lay on his back, his hands folded across his chest, proceeding feetfirst into sleep; but even much later, in the stillness of deep night, sleep was only to his knees. His eyes were open, his mouth clamped shut, and he was apprehensive, at that stage of fatigue where one's mind is vulnerable enough to suggestion to be prodded and alarmed and finally reawakened by a sequence of worrying images, broken promises, papers not marked, unpaid bills. He shooed his thoughts as they appeared tumbling and circling like moths attracted to the glowing bulb of his half-awake brain. He made an effort to switch off his mind – as one would a lamp in an upper room on a summer night, so as to quiet what had collected and not to attract more. But something in that darkness stung him: it was the thought of his lunch.

He went down to the kitchen. The sleepiness made him look like a granny in rumpled pajamas and electrified hair – like the elderly Hakka woman with the simian face and loose sam foo, her silk trousers with cuffs a yard wide, her narrow shoulders and square, swollen knuckles. He muttered like her and nodded at what he was doing, and just like her, in the curious conserving motion of the very old, fussed nimbly with his hands and at the same time shuffled slowly in broken shoes. He opened and closed cupboards, found a lunch bag, cut tomatoes, and he dealt out bread slices onto the sideboard as if starting a game of solitaire. With his impatient fingernail he pecked the boiling egg into its suds of froth.

A hand brushed the back of his neck. It was a caress, but he reacted as if dodging a dagger swipe.

'You scared the life –'

Ah Meng took his hand and did not let go. 'Ren,' she said, giving his name the rising intonation of a Chinese word.

Len shook his head. He said, 'No.'

Ah Meng pressed his hand. She was unhurried, looking at him without blinking. She tugged. Len tried to pull away. But she was the stronger; with his free hand Len turned the gas off under the cooking egg. She led him to her room. He would have time before dawn to finish making his lunch.