A road, some gum trees, a row of shop-houses, three parked cars: Ayer Hitam was that small, and even after we parked in front of the coffee shop I was not sure we had arrived. But apparently this was all – this and a kind of low dense foliage that gave, in the way it gripped the town, a hint of strangulation. It was to be months before I made anything of this random settlement. It seemed at times as if I was inventing the place. I could find no explanation for its name, which meant 'Black Water.'

The trip had started gloomy with suppressed argument. Flint, number two in the Embassy in Kuala Lumpur, had offered to drive me down and show me around. With no Malay syce to inhibit conversation I had expected a candid tour – Flint had been recommended to me as an old Malaysian hand. I needed information to give life to the position papers and the files of clippings I'd studied all summer in Washington. The Political Section had briefed me in KL, but the briefing had been too short, and when finally I was alone with the Press Officer he launched into a tedious monologuing – a clinical dithyramb about his bowel movements since arriving in the country.

Flint also had other things on his mind. As soon as the road straightened he said, 'The Foreign Service isn't what it was. I remember when an overseas post meant some excitement. Hard work, drinking, romance, a little bit of the Empire. I never looked for gratitude, but I felt I was doing a real job.'

"'The White Man's Burden,'" I said.

Flint said, 'That's my favorite poem. Someday I'll get plastered and recite it to you. People think it's about the British in India. It isn't. It's about us in the Philippines. It's a heartbreaking poem – it makes me cry.' He smacked his lips in regret. 'God, I envy you. You're on your own here. The telephone will be out of order half the time, there's a decent club, and no one'll bother you. It's just the kind of job I had in Medan in sixty-two, sixty-three.'

'It doesn't have much strategic value.'

'Never mind that,' said Flint. 'It's a bachelor post.'

I've always hated the presumption in that phrase; like dirty weekend it strikes me as only pathetic. I said, 'We'll see.'

'It's no reflection on you,' he said. 'They don't send married men to places like Ayer

Hitam anymore. Sure, I'd be off like a shot, but Lois wouldn't stand for it.' He was silent for a while, then he tightened his grip on the steering wheel and said, 'It's in the air, this dependent wife business.'

I said, 'At that party in KL the other night I met a very attractive girl. I asked her what she did. She said, "I'm a wife."'

'See what I mean? I bet she was eating her heart out. Hates the place, hates her husband, bores the pants off everyone with what it means to be a woman.'

'It was a silly question,' I said. 'She seemed happy enough.'

'She's climbing the walls,' said Flint. 'They hate the designation – dependent wife. Lois is going crazy.'

'I'm sorry to hear it.'

He shrugged, bringing his shoulders almost to his ears. 'I've got a job to do. She's supposed to be involved in it, but she refuses to give dinner parties.'

I said, 'They're a lot of work.'

'The hell they are – she's got three goddamned servants!' Flint glowered at the road. For miles we had been passing rubber estates: regular rows of slender trees scored with cuts, like great wilted orchards crisscrossed by perfectly straight paths, a yellowing symmetry that made the landscape seem hot and violated. I had expected a bit more than this. 'And sometimes – I'm not kidding – sometimes she refuses to go to dinner parties with me. We've got one tonight – I'll have to drag her to it.' He squinted. 'I will drag her, too. She says I'm married to my job.'

'I can sympathize with some of these wives,' I said. 'They get married right out of college, the husband gets an overseas post and everything's fine – the woman becomes a hostess. Then she sees that what she's really doing is boosting her husband in his job. What's in it for her?'

'I'll tell you what's in it for her,' said Flint, turning angry again. 'She's got three square meals, duty-free booze, a beautiful home, and all the servants she wants. No dishes, no laundry, no housework. And for that we get kicked in the teeth.'

'I wouldn't know about that.'

'Then listen,' said Flint. 'Lois is upset, but the younger ones are bent out of shape. Sure, they're pleasant when you first meet them, but later on you find out they're really hostile. They want jobs, they want to read the cables, they write letters to Stars

and Stripes and sign them “Disgusted.” Then they corner the Ambassador’s wife and start bending her ear.’

‘We had a few problems like that in Uganda.’

‘This isn’t a problem, it’s an international incident.’ Now Flint was pounding the steering wheel as he spoke. ‘The wives in Saigon – you know whose side they were on? The Vietcong! I won’t name names but a lot of those gals in Saigon got it into their heads that they were oppressed, and believe me they supported the VC. No, they didn’t give speeches, but they nagged and nagged. They talked about “our struggle” as if there was some connection between the guerillas shelling Nhatrang and a lot of old hens in the Embassy compound refusing to make peanut-butter sandwiches. It’s not funny. I knew lots of officers who were shipped home – their wives were a security risk.’ Then Flint added warily, ‘You probably think I’m making this up. I’m not. They don’t want to give dinner parties, they don’t wear dresses anymore – just these dungarees and sweatshirts. They hate coffee mornings. “What do you do?” “I’m a wife.” Whoever said that to you – I’m not asking – is a very unhappy woman.’

In this way, when he could have been filling me in on Ayer Hitam, Flint ranted for the entire trip from KL. When we arrived at the coffee shop he was a bit breathless and disappointed, as if he wished to continue the journey to continue his rant.

The door of the car was snatched open. Outside was a woman of about thirty, not fat but full-faced, yellow-brown, with thick arms and a tremendous grin. She wore a sarong kebaya, and her feet, which were bare, were so dirty I took them at first for shoes. She saw the two of us and let out a cry of gratitude and joy, a kind of welcoming yelp.

It had started to rain, large widely spaced drops going phut at the roadside and turning to dust.

She said, ‘It’s raining! That means good luck!’ She ran around to Flint’s side of the car, tugged his sleeve and dragged him to a seat on the verandah, repeating her name, which was Fadila.

‘Yes, yes,’ she said. ‘Two coffees and what else? Beer? I got some cold Tiger bottles waiting for you. You want a bowl of Chinese noodles? Nasi goreng? Laksa? Here, have a cigarette.’ She offered us a round can of mentholated cigarettes and muttered for a small Chinese boy to leave us alone. ‘Welcome to Ayer Hitam. Relax, don’t be stuffy.’

We thanked her and she said something that sounded like ‘Hawaii.’ We persuaded her to say it more slowly. She said, ‘Have you a wife?’

‘Not him,’ said Flint, slapping me on the arm in what I am sure he meant as

congratulation.

‘I’m coming,’ she said.

She left. Flint said, ‘I’ve never seen her before.’

‘Seems very friendly.’

‘Typical,’ said Flint, full of approval. ‘The Malays are fantastic. You get people like this all over the Federation – plenty of time for small talk, very hospitable, give you the shirt off their back. I got this theory. You ask a guy directions in Malaysia. If the guy’s Chinese he knows where you want to go but he won’t tell you how to get there. If he’s Indian he knows and he’ll tell you. If he’s Malay he won’t know the place but he’ll talk for ten hours about everything else. It’s the temperament. Friendly. No hangups. Outgoing. All the time in the world.’

Fadila was back with the coffees. ‘Americans, right?’ she said, slopping coffee into the saucers as she set down the cups. ‘I know Americans. Just had some here the other day, three of them, going down to Singapore. “Why go to Singapore?” I said. “Why not stay here?” I gave them a good meal, some free beer. Why not? I don’t care if the manager gets cross. It’s good for business – they’ll be back. That’s how you get customers.’ She grinned at Flint, who had been listening to this with interest. ‘Hey, they invited me to visit them in New York City!’

Flint said, ‘You wouldn’t like New York.’

‘Why not? I like KL. I like Johore Bahru. I like Seremban. Why not New York? What’s your line of work, mister?’

Ordinarily, someone like Flint would have said ‘business’ or ‘teaching’ or made some vague reference to the government service. But Fadila was friendly; Fadila had spooned sugar into his coffee and stirred it; Fadila was snapping her hanky at the flies near the table. So Flint was truthful: ‘I’m with the US Embassy in KL. This is your new consul. Mr Rogers’s replacement.’

Fadila brightened and became even more voluble. ‘Anything you want to know I can tell you.’ She winked at me. ‘There’s something going on here. More than you think. You don’t know, mister. I hear everything. Stay here.’

This time she rushed away.

Flint said, ‘Jesus, I envy you. This is the real Malaysia. Look how friendly they are!’

‘They? You mean her.’

‘They’re all like that in these little towns. And I’m stuck in KL. Maybe Lois is right – I am married to my job – but if it wasn’t for her I could be in a place like this. And tonight I’ve got this dinner, another hassle.’

Fadila hurried toward us along the verandah. She was wearing a pair of sunglasses with one cracked lens and carrying two pint bottles of Tiger beer. She placed them on the table and opened them.

‘It’s rather early for that,’ I said.

‘It’s free,’ she said, snorting. ‘It’s a present. You’re my guests. Drink it up.’

Flint was smiling. He drank. I drank. The beer was sweet and heavy, and on top of the coffee fairly nauseating. Fadila talked as we drank; now she was saying something about the Malays – she didn’t trust them, they stole, they were lazy, they were sneaky, they lied. She knew they lied: they were always lying about her. The British were good people, but she liked Americans best of all. I listened, but she did not require any encouragement. I concentrated on finishing the bottle of beer and when I had drunk it all I felt dazed, sickened, leaden, no longer hungry, and slightly myopic, as if the beer had been squirted in my eyes.

I said, ‘We have to go.’

‘What’s the rush?’ said Flint. ‘I’m enjoying myself.’

Fadila said, ‘Anyway, the Residence isn’t ready.’

Flint looked interested.

‘You have to stay at the Club – they’re still painting the Residence.’

Flint said, ‘They were supposed to have finished that painting last week.’

Fadila shook her head. ‘I know the jaga – they’re not finished. But the Club is nice. I’ll see you there, don’t worry. I know the Head Boy, Stanley Chee. Tell him Fadila sent you. He’ll take good care of you.’

I stood up and thanked her for the beer. Flint said, ‘I was just telling my friend here how lucky he is to have a post like this.’

‘It’s quiet in Ayer Hitam,’ she said. ‘No rat race here, like KL. You can relax.’

And in the car Flint said, ‘Aren’t these people fantastic?’

We went to the Consulate, a three-room bungalow made into offices, flying an American flag. It faced directly onto the road, at the beginning of the long driveway which led to the Residence, where another flag flew on a taller pole. I was introduced to my secretary, Miss Leong, to the driver Abubaker, and to the peon Peeraswami. They looked apprehensive; they were silent, stiff with worry, seeing their new employer for the first time. I felt sorry for them and tried to relieve their anxiety by staying a while to chat, but this only worried them the more, and indeed the longer I chatted the more their terror of me seemed to increase.

Although it was only a hundred yards away, we drove to the Residence, and Flint – perhaps remembering Medan – said, ‘White men don’t walk.’

The Residence was blistered and scorched, the columns blackened, the verandah mottled; it had the appearance of having withstood a siege. But it was the workmen, burning off the old paint with blowtorches. They scurried out of broken bushes and set to work as soon as we drove in. Fadila’s warning had been accurate: there was a great deal more to do. Bamboo scaffolding had been lashed together around the house, and it tottered as the workmen clung with their flames and scrapers. I could see into and through the house: it was empty but for a figure running out at the back, shooing chickens, slamming doors.

Flint said, ‘They should have finished this painting a week ago.’

We turned to go. Fadila was leaning against the car. She was smiling, in her sunglasses, and now I could see how dirty her sarong was, the torn blouse, her grubby feet.

She said, ‘I knew where to find you.’

Flint looked pleased, but when he started to talk to her she shouted something quickly in Malay to the painters. She laughed and said, ‘I told them to mind their own business and get to work. No fooling and what not. The Tuans are watching you. Look, they are afraid.’

‘Why, thanks very much,’ said Flint.

But I said to her, ‘That won’t be necessary.’

Flint glanced at me as if to warn me that I’d been too sharp with her.

‘We’ve got work to do,’ I said.

Fadila said, ‘The Consulate closes for lunch.’ She looked at the sun out of the corner of

her eye. ‘Almost time.’

‘Shall we go over to the Club?’ said Flint.

‘I’ll show you where it is,’ said Fadila.

I said, ‘We’ll find it.’

‘Look,’ she said, pointing at the painters. ‘Look at those stupid men. I tell them to work and they don’t work. Now they are just sitting.’ She screamed at them in Malay and this time they replied, seeming to mock her. It was then that I noticed Fadila’s very dirty hair.

Flint said, ‘Fadila will keep them on their toes, won’t you sweetheart?’

‘They are pigs,’ she said. ‘Malay people are no good.’ She spat in their direction. ‘They are dirty and lazy. They try to do things to me. Yes! But I don’t let them.’

‘What kind of things?’ asked Flint, savoring the risk in his question.

‘With my head.’

I said, ‘Let’s go.’

But Flint was still talking to Fadila. He said, ‘This is a great place. I’d like to be here myself.’

‘You stay here,’ said Fadila coyly; then she motioned to me. ‘He can go back to KL.’

The club dining room was full: men in sports shirts, shorts, and knee socks, women in summer dresses, waiters in stiff jackets and ties carrying trays. It was as if we had stumbled into a lost world, but not an ancient one; here it was eternally 1938. None of the people looked directly at us, and no one had greeted us, but this exaggerated lack of interest made me as uncomfortable as if we were being stared at. A silence had fallen when we entered, then the silence became a rustling of self-consciousness, the clatter of forks, laughter, and loud talking.

Flint said, ‘I think I’ve made a friend.’ After we ordered he said, ‘I need a friend.’

‘I’ll keep an eye on her.’

‘You were acting pretty funny with her,’ he said. ‘They’re all right, these people. We could learn a lot from them. They look after their menfolk, they know how to run a house, they got a good sense of humor. You won’t hear any dependent wife crap from

them.’

I said nothing. I continued to eat, and I felt the attention of everyone in the room on me, the pressure of their glances; I sensed them sniffing.

Flint said, ‘You won’t get anywhere if you take that attitude.’

I looked at him, wishing he’d shut up.

He said, ‘That high and mighty attitude, thinking people like Fadila don’t matter. They do. And I’ll tell you something else – she knows a lot that goes on around here.’ He tapped his head. ‘She’s tuned in.’

‘She could use a bath,’ I said.

‘Uncalled-for,’ he said. ‘You don’t know how lucky we’ve been. We arrive in town and, bingo, we meet the greatest character in the place. I’ll bet everyone knows her.’

He could not have been more right, for five minutes later there was a commotion at the door to the dining room, some shouts, a scuffling, a yell, and the entire room looked up, nodded in recognition, and began muttering. The waiters stiffened at the buffet where a rijstafel was set out, then an old Chinese man in a white jacket marched to the door and hissed something in Malay.

Flint got to his feet; the old Chinese man – whom I took to be Stanley Chee, the Head Boy – looked at Flint. Flint said, ‘Let that woman through.’ The dining room went silent as Fadila walked toward us, adjusting her blouse.

Flint pulled out a chair for her and seated her at our table.

She said, ‘That stupid man told me to go away – because of my feet. I said I had to see you.’

‘Sure you did,’ said Flint.

‘It’s important,’ said Fadila.

Flint looked at me, then frowned at his fingers.

I said, ‘We were just about to leave.’

‘Want to talk somewhere else?’ said Flint.

Fadila said, ‘These people hate me. They are bad people. All Malay people are bad,

and the Chinese are pigs – they eat pigs – and the Indians always cheat you. That is Ayer Hitam. It is a nasty place. I want to go far away.'

Flint said, 'It seems a nice quiet little place.'

'No,' said Fadila. 'The people take you to the hospital. They want to do things to your head. They make you eat poison. If you refuse they slap you. At night they beat you with a rotan. They hide your clothes and make you naked so you cannot run away.' She leaned toward Flint, but instead of whispering she raised her voice. 'I had letters from Mr Battley and Mr Downs. "Fadila is a good amah, Fadila speaks English, Fadila is honest." The hospital people destroyed my letters! They cut off my hair! They beat me! I want to be your amah.'

Flint said, 'We have to go.'

'Let me be your amah. Take me with you.'

Flint's face was fixed in a smile, but his eyes were active. 'Appointments. Business. At the Consulate.'

'The Consulate is closed.'

'Business,' he said, and jumped to his feet.

'Take me,' she said. 'You are a good man. He hates me – he thinks I am sick. But you like me. You'll let me be your amah.' She took his arm and from the expression on Flint's face I could tell that she must be squeezing him hard. 'I want to go with you.'

'Outside,' said Flint and started for the door with Fadila still holding tightly to his arm.

There were stares, mutters, and one clear voice: I know what I'd do with her. Flint hurried from the dining room. I followed, as calmly as I could, and heard, just as I left the room, one word, Americans.

Stanley Chee met me at the door; he bowed and made me pause. He said, 'Is she troubling you? If so, I can send her away.'

'Who is she?'

'Last year she was an amok. She was given medicine. But she will be an amok again soon.'

'Strange,' I said.

‘No, not strange. Her husband took another wife, a young girl from Malacca, because Fadila did not give him any children. He went away and Fadila became an amok. Her husband was a devil.’ He straightened his gold-rimmed glasses and added, ‘Sir, all Malays are devils.’

Flint was inside the car, Fadila outside with her face against the window, crying bitterly. I noticed that Flint had locked all the doors. I walked to the other side of the car, but he didn’t unlock the door. He rolled the window down a crack and said, ‘This is it, old buddy. It’s all yours – I’ve got to run. Lois is expecting me. Dinner party tonight. Keep your fingers crossed. And don’t let our friend here get run over.’

Fadila’s face hardened as Flint drove away. She turned, limped a few feet, then faced me and said, ‘He is a pig and so are you.’