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PAUL THEROUX

WHITE CHRISTMAS

Ah Chiang, the wife of Alec's Chinese cook, had taped bits of holly to the leaves of the potted palm. The mistletoe sprig had been knocked down by the whirling fans and was blowing across the floor under the nose of the cat, but the cotton snowflakes stuck to the mirror of the drawing room were still there. The snowflakes were Mildred's idea. She thought they made the government bungalow look festive, and there was plenty of surgical cotton in the house: Alec was a doctor at the mission hospital. And yet the decorations had a look of tropical exhaustion, shabby and temporary. The snowflakes had wilted, the holly had crinkled shut in the heat, and the mosquito coils that were burning in water-filled dishes around the room gave off a funereal aroma of incense.

It was my first Christmas in Ayer Hitam, and I was too new to the town to be able to turn down Alec's invitation. There were no cars outside when I arrived, and I thought perhaps I had got the time wrong. But I saw people at the windows and, inside, five chatting guests, three Chinese, an Indian, and a large dark woman who wore a Christmas corsage, a plastic Santa bandaged in cotton wool and red ribbon.

The Chinese – two slim girls and Reggie Woo – were whispering together in a corner. The dark woman was talking loudly to Mr Ratnasingham. I recognized him as the pianist who had given a recital in the club lounge in November, when the Sultan had come over for the gymkhana. He was barrel-chested, a cheery Tamil with pomaded hair and an enormous wristwatch, wearing his black recital suit rather uncomfortably in the heat.

It had just rained. The sky was low, and the trees still dripped. The smell of the rain was the smell of the dampened frangipanis, a hot close perfume of muddy blossoms and a cloud of humidity that weighted the bridge of my nose. It was only after a rain that I could smell the flowers, but the rain had brought an oppressive heat to the town that made Christmas seem absurdly distant.

Mr Ratnasingham said, 'We were just talking about Midnight Mass – they have it every year at the mission.'

'I always go,' said the woman. 'Last year there were some Eurasians there. They laughed the whole time. Disgraceful.'

I guessed she had a tincture herself or she would not have mentioned their race.

'This is our American Consul,' said Mr Ratnasingham.

The woman brightened. ‘I knew Mr Gilstrap very well.’

Sam P. Gilstrap had been consul in Singapore in the fifties. The woman was an old-timer. I said, ‘Sam was half-Indian.’

Mr Ratnasingham smiled. He came close enough for me to hear his watch tick.

‘Cherokee,’ I said.

Mr Ratnasingham said, ‘What was your previous post?’

‘Africa – Uganda,’ I said. ‘One year they deported half a dozen Europeans for singing White Christmas.’

Mr Ratnasingham laughed. ‘They’re just down from the trees. That would never happen in Ayer Hitam.’

‘I mustn’t drink too much,’ said the woman, and I was sure she was Eurasian by her scowl. ‘I lose my voice if I drink too much brandy.’

‘Miss Duckworth is in the choir,’ said Mr Ratnasingham.

‘So you’re not the only musician, Mr Ratnasingham.’

‘Please call me Francis,’ he said. ‘Actually, I’m a solicitor.’

‘I’ve always been in the Christmas choir,’ said Miss Duckworth.

The Chinese girls had drifted over to listen.

‘We’re talking about Midnight Mass,’ said Mr Ratnasingham. ‘Are you going?’

They gave that negative cautioning Chinese bark, and one of the girls said, ‘Meffidist.’

‘Drinks, drinks – who hasn’t got one?’ It was Alec, with a bottle of Tiger. He pumped my hand. ‘I saw that enormous bottle of duty-free whiskey on the table and I knew it must be yours.’

‘Season’s greetings.’

He made a face. ‘I hate Christmas.’

‘It’s going to be quite a party.’

‘We do it for them,’ he said.

More guests had begun to arrive, Dr Estelle Lim, the botanist; Squibb and his Malay wife; Mr Sundrum, who, half-Chinese and half-Indian, looked Malay. Alec greeted them, then went on, ‘We have a Christmas party every year. It’s Mildred’s big day.’ Mildred, rushing drinks to the newcomers, was a Chinese girl who looked twenty but might have been fifty; Alec had married her after settling in Ayer Hitam to supervise the hospital. ‘She keeps it going. They appreciate it.’

I saw who they were. They weren’t in the Club; they weren’t of the town. Anglicized, a little ridiculous, overneat, mostly Christian, they were a small group with no local affiliations – Methodist Chinese, Catholic Indian, undeclared half-caste – the Empire’s orphans. By marriage or inclination they were the misfits of the town for whom the ritual generosity of Christmas was a perfect occasion to declare themselves. From the conversations I heard it sounded as if they had not seen one another since the previous Christmas, here at the Stewarts’.

Alec said, ‘When they kick us out what’ll they do then?’

I didn’t know what to say.

He said, ‘There won’t be any more Christmas parties.’

Dr Lim came over to where we were standing. I noticed she had a glass of beer, which interested me, because the Chinese aren’t drinkers. But the others were drinking beer as well, and Squibb had a large bottle of Tiger and was refilling glasses. Dr Lim was a tall woman with long black hair combed to the small of her back. She had that fine pale Chinese skin that is as tight and unmarked as the membrane on tropical fruit. She handed a small box to Alec and said, ‘Merry Christmas.’

‘What’s this?’

‘Just a present-lah,’ she said.

‘I’m going to open it, my dear,’ said Alec, who looked slightly embarrassed. He tore off the gift-wrapping – reindeers, Santa Clauses, holly, snow – and took out a green and yellow necktie.

‘Batik,’ she said.

‘Just what I need.’ He kissed her on the cheek and she went away smiling. Then he said, ‘I haven’t worn one of these bloody nooses since nineteen fifty-seven.’ He put it on carelessly. He was wearing a blue short-sleeved sports shirt, and the garish colors

of the tie made him look as if he were drunk and toppling forward.

Hovering, the others presented their gifts. Mr Ratnasingham gave him a calendar on a stand with a plastic antique car glued to the base; the Methodists gave Mildred some perfume, Miss Duckworth followed up with fancy handkerchiefs, and Mr Sundrum produced a bunch of white carnations. Everyone took turns sniffing the flowers – they were regarded as quite a prize. In a country where fantastic purple and yellow orchids showed their outlandish ears and whiskers in every garden, the colorless carnation was valued as a great rarity. Dr Lim explained how they grew them up on Fraser's Hill. Not odd, then, that we sweating foreigners should be considered so special by these dainty Malaysians; they were the orchids, we the carnations.

Squibb said, 'Have a little of this,' and poured me a brandy.

'The natives say if you take brandy with durian fruit you die,' said Reggie Woo.

'Codswallop,' said Alec.

'It's what they say,' said Reggie.

'I've never believed that,' said Miss Duckworth.

'Who are the natives?' I asked.

'Malays,' said Reggie.

'We're not natives,' said Hamida Squibb. 'The sakais are – Laruts and what not.'

'There was an old man over in the kampong,' said Mr Sundrum. 'He took two cups of brandy and then ate a durian. He died. His picture was in the Straits Times.'

'Absolute rubbish,' said Alec. Mr Sundrum winced and went to find a vase for the carnations. Alec added in a whisper, 'But mind you, I wouldn't try it myself.'

'Drink up, Hamida,' Squibb was saying. He lurched over to me, perspiring, and snatched at my shoulder. Brandy seemed to be percolating out of his eyes. He said, 'She's a Muslim – she only drinks at Christmas.'

Miss Duckworth said, 'I always cry at Christmas. I can't help it.'

Mildred, in her dark blue cheongsam, raised a sherry glass: 'Merry Christmas to everyone!' This brought mutters of 'The very best,' 'Here's to you,' and 'Cheers.'

Ah Kwok entered from the kitchen carrying a large varnished turkey on a platter, Ah

Chiang behind him with a bowl of potatoes and a gravy boat. Then Mildred flew, got Alec to carve, and set out the rest of the dishes on the long table.

Mr Ratnasingham said, ‘That’s a big bird.’

‘A sixteen-pounder,’ said Alec. ‘Mildred bought it in Singapore – Cold Storage gets them from Australia.’

‘Australia!’ said one of the Methodists, clearly overwhelmed.

‘And I remembered that you Americans like cranberry sauce,’ said Mildred to me.

‘I adore cranberry sauce,’ said the other Methodist. She turned to me. ‘I’ve always wanted to go to America.’

Mildred made a great show of seating us. Alec stood aside and said, ‘I don’t care where I sit as long as it’s near the gin bottle,’ but Mildred pushed and pointed: ‘No – it has to be boy-girl-boy-girl.’

Hamida said, ‘That’s the way it should be. In my kampong the men used to eat in one room while the women served!’

‘Quite right,’ said Squibb. ‘I thought I was marrying a Malay and look what I get. Doris Archer.’

‘You’re the Malay,’ said Hamida.

Mildred directed me to sit between Dr Lim and one of the Methodist girls.

Alec said, ‘For what we are about to receive may we be truly grateful.’

‘Amen’ – it chimed assertively in a dozen different voices.

Miss Duckworth said, ‘This reminds me of last year.’

‘And the year before,’ said Alec.

‘We used to have such lovely Christmases,’ said Miss Duckworth. ‘Of course that was in Singapore. Tang’s had a Santa Claus on their roof – in a sleigh with all the reindeer. And that week your Chinese provisioner would give you a Christmas basket with tins and fruit all tied in red ribbon. Then there were drinks at the Seaview Hotel and a carol service at the Cathedral. There were so many people there then.’

‘There are people there now,’ said Reggie Woo.

‘I mean English people,’ said Miss Duckworth. ‘Now it’s all Japanese.’

Dr Lim said, ‘We used to think white people smelled like cheese.’

‘Like corpses,’ said Mildred. ‘But it was their clothes. After they had been here for a few months they stopped smelling like dead cheese.’

‘I like cheese,’ said Reggie Woo.

‘So do I!’ said one of the Methodists, and everyone nodded: cheese was very good, and one day Malays, Indians, and Chinese would realise that.

‘Santa Claus is still on Tang’s roof, Elsie,’ said Mildred. ‘I saw it when I picked up the turkey.’

‘Cute,’ said Hamida.

‘Cold Storage was decorated, too. They were playing carols on the loudspeaker system.’

‘But there’s no one there to appreciate it,’ said Miss Duckworth. ‘No, they don’t have Christmases like years ago.’

‘Christmas in England,’ said Mr Sundrum. ‘That’s a real white Christmas.’

‘Horrible,’ said Squibb. ‘You have no idea. We had a council house outside Coventry. All I remember is expecting something to happen that never happened. I didn’t know my old man had been laid off.’

‘But the snow,’ said Mr Sundrum.

‘Hate it,’ said Squibb. ‘Freezes the pipes.’

‘I’d like to see snow,’ said Mr Sundrum. ‘Just once. Maybe touch it.’

‘Ah Kwok, show Sundrum to the fridge,’ said Alec. ‘He wants to stick his hand in the freezing compartment.’

Ah Kwok cackled and brought second helpings.

Dr Lim said, ‘Listen – it’s starting to rain.’

It was; I could see the palm fronds nodding at the window, and then it began on the

roof, a light patter on the tiles. It encouraged talk, cheerless and regretful, of other Christmases, of things no one had ever seen, of places they had never visited; phrases heard secondhand and mispronounced. They were like children with old inaccurate memories, preparing themselves for something that would never occur.

In that same mood, Dr Lim said, ‘I had a dream last night about my father.’

‘I like hearing people’s dreams,’ said Mildred.

‘My father is dead,’ said Dr Lim, and she gave her plate a nudge. She lit a cigarette.

‘I don’t think I want to hear,’ said one of the Methodists.

‘Go on, Estelle,’ said Alec. ‘You’ve got us all in suspense.’

‘He came into my room,’ she said. ‘But he was dressed in white pajamas – Chinese ones, with those funny buttons. He was buried in clothes like that. He had something in his hand and I could tell he was very cross. Then I saw what he was holding – an opium pipe. He showed it to me and came so close I could see the tobacco stains on his teeth. I said to him, “What do you want?” He didn’t reply, but I knew what he was thinking. Somehow, he was thinking, You’re not my daughter anymore.’

‘That gives me the shivers,’ said Mildred.

‘Then he lifted up the opium pipe and broke it in half,’ said Dr Lim. ‘He just snapped it in my face. He was angry.’

‘And you woke up,’ said Mr Ratnasingham.

‘Yes, but that was the strange part. When I woke up he was still there in my room. The white pajamas were shining at me. I looked harder and he backed out the door.’

Everyone had stopped eating. Dr Lim puffed her cigarette, and though her face was fixed in a smile I could see no pleasure in it.

‘White is the Chinese color for death,’ said Mr Sundrum.

‘That’s what I mean,’ said Dr Lim.

‘Like black is for us,’ said Reggie Woo.

Mildred said, ‘I think it’s time for the Christmas pudding. Alec, get your brandy butter.’

Hamida said, ‘I don’t believe in ghosts. Do you, Francis?’

‘I’m a Catholic,’ said Mr Ratnasingham.

Miss Duckworth had begun to cry. She cried without a sound, terribly, shaking her shoulders as if she were trying to stand up.

‘Can I get you anything?’ said one of the Methodists.

‘No,’ whispered Miss Duckworth, sobbing hoarsely. ‘I always cry at Christmas.’

The girl said, ‘I wasn’t here last year.’

Squibb said, ‘I used to dress up as Santa Claus. But you’re all getting old now, and besides I’m drunk.’

The Christmas pudding was carried alight from the kitchen by Ah Kwok, and Ah Chiang brought the cheese board. I finished my pudding quickly, and seeing me with an empty bowl, Dr Lim passed me the cheese. She said, ‘You must have some of this.’

‘Just a slice of the Brie,’ I said.

‘That’s not Brie – it’s Camembert,’ said Dr Lim.

‘He doesn’t know the difference!’ cried Reggie Woo.

Mr Ratnasingham said, ‘How about a Christmas song?’ He began to sing ‘White Christmas’ in his harsh Tamil voice. The others joined in, some drunkenly, some sweetly, drowning the sound of the rain on the bungalow roof.

‘You’re not singing,’ muttered Dr Lim to me.

So I did, but it was awkward because only I knew the last verse, and I was obliged to sing it alone like a damned fool while the others hummed.