The insects warbled at the windows, and on the wall a pale gecko chattered and flicked its tail. It was one of those intimate late-night pauses – we had been drinking for two hours and had passed the point of drunken chitchat. Then, to break the silence, I said, ‘I’ve lost my spare pair of glasses.’

‘I hadn’t noticed,’ said Strang. A surveyor, he had the abrupt manner of one who works alone. He was mapping this part of the state and he had made Ayer Hitam his base. His wife, Milly, was devoted to him, people said; it seemed an unusual piece of praise. Strang picked up his drink. ‘You won’t find them.’

‘It’s an excuse to go down to Singapore for a new pair.’

Strang looked thoughtful. I expected him to say something about Singapore. We were alone. Stanley Chee had slammed the door for the last time and had left a tray of drinks on the bar that we could sign for on the chit-pad.

Still Strang didn’t reply. The ensuing silence made my sentence about Singapore a frivolous echo. He walked over and poured himself a large gin, emptied a bottle of tonic into the tall glass and pinched a new slice of lemon into it.

‘I ever tell you about the Parrishes?’

A rhetorical question: he was still talking.

‘Married couple I met up in Kota Bharu. Jungle bashers. Milly and I lived there our first year – looked like paradise to us, if you could stand the sand flies. Didn’t see much of the Parrishes. They quarreled an awful lot, so we stayed as far away as possible from their arguments. Seemed unlucky. We’d only been married a few months.’ He smiled. ‘Old Parrish took quite a shine to Milly.’

‘What did the Parrishes argue about?’ Was this what he wanted me to ask? I hoped he was not expecting me to drag the story out of him. I wanted him to keep talking and let it flow over me. But even at the best of times Strang was no spellbinder; tonight he seemed agitated.

‘See, that shows you’ve never been spliced,’ he said. ‘Married people argue about everything – anything. A tone of voice, saying please, the color of the wallpaper, something you forgot, the speed of the fan, food, friends, the weather. That tie of yours

– if you had a wife she'd hate you for it. A bone of contention,' said Strang slowly, 'is just a bone.'

'Perhaps I have that in store for me.' I filled my own drink and signed for that and Strang's.

'Take my advice,' he said. 'No – it was something you said a minute ago. Oh, you lost your specs. That's what I was going to say. The Parrishes argued about everything, but most of all they argued about things they lost. I mean, things she lost. She was incredible. At first he barely noticed it. She lost small things, lipstick, her cigarettes, her comb. She didn't bother to look for them. She was very county – her parents had money, and she had a kind of contempt for it. Usually she didn't even try to replace the things she lost. The funny thing is, she seemed to do it on purpose – to lose things she hated.

'He was the local magistrate. An Outward Bound type. After a week in court he was dead keen to go camping. Old Parrish – he looked like a goat, little pointed beard and those sort of hairy ears. They went on these camping trips and invariably she lost something en route – the house keys, her watch, the matches, you name it. But she was a terrific map-reader and he was appalling, so he really depended on her. I think he had some love for her. He was a lot older than she was – he'd married her on a long leave.

'Once, he showed how much he loved her. She lost fifty dollars. Not a hard thing to do – it was a fifty-dollar note, the one with the mosque on it. I would have cried, myself, but she just shrugged, and knowing how she was continually losing things he was sympathetic. "Poor thing," he says, "you must feel a right charlie." But not a bit of it. She had always had money. She didn't take a blind bit of notice, and she was annoyed that he pitied her for losing the fifty sheets. Hated him for noticing it.

'They went off on their camping trips – expeditions was more like it – and always to the same general area. Old Parrish had told me one or two things about it. There was one of these up-country lakes, with a strange island in the middle of it. They couldn't find it on the map, but they knew roughly where it was supposed to be – there's never been a detailed survey done of the Malaysian interior. But that's where the Parrishes were headed every weekend during that dry season. The attraction was the monkeys. Apparently, the local sakais – they might have been Laruts – had deported some wild monkeys there. The monkeys got too stroppy around the village, so being peace-loving buggers the sakais just caught them and tied them up and brought them to the island where they wouldn't bother anyone. There were about a dozen of these beasts, surrounded by water. An island of wild monkeys – imagine landing there on a dark night!

'In the meantime, we saw the Parrishes occasionally in the compound during the week

and that's where I kept up to date with the story. As I say, his first reaction when she lost things was to be sympathetic. But afterward, it irritated him. She lost her handbag and he shouted at her. She lost her watch – it was one he had given her – and he wouldn't speak to her for days. She mislaid the bathplug, lost some jewelry, his passport disappeared. And that's the way it went – bloody annoying. I don't know what effect this had on her. I suppose she thought she deserved his anger. People who lose things get all knotted up about it, and the fear of losing things makes them do it all the more. That's what I thought then.

'And the things she lost were never found. It was uncanny, as if she just wished them away. He said she didn't miss them.

'Then, on one of these expeditions she lost the paraffin. Doesn't seem like much, but the place was full of leeches and a splash of paraffin was the only thing that'd shake them loose from your arms or legs. They both suffered that weekend and didn't find the island either. Then, the next weekend, she lost the compass, and that's when the real trouble started. Instead of pitying her, or getting angry, or ignoring it, old Parrish laughed. He saw how losing the compass inconvenienced her in her map-reading, and she was so shaken by that horrible laugh of his she was all the more determined to do without it. She succeeded, too. She used a topographical map and somehow found the right landmarks and led them back the way they'd come.

'But Parrish still laughed. I remember the day she lost the car keys – his car keys, mind you, because she'd lost practically everything she owned and now it was his stuff up the spout. You could hear old Parrish halfway to Malacca. Then it was the malaria tablets. Parrish laughed even harder – he said he'd been in the Federation so long he was immune to it, but being young and new to the place she'd get a fever, and he found that screamingly funny. This was too much for her, and when his wedding ring went missing – God only knows how that happened – and Parrish just laughed, that was the last straw. I suppose it didn't help matters when Parrish set off for the courthouse in the morning saying, "What are you going to lose today, my darling?"

'Oh, there was much more. He talked about it at parties, laughing his head off, while she sulked in a corner, and we expected to find him dead the next morning with a knitting-needle jammed through his wig.

'But, to make a long story short, they went off on one of their usual expeditions. No compass, no Paludrine, no torch – she'd lost practically everything. By this time, they knew their way, and they spent all that Saturday bushwhacking through the ulu. They were still headed in that deliberate way of theirs for the monkey island, and now I remember that a lot of people called him "Monkey" Parrish. She claimed it was mythical, didn't exist, except in the crazy fantasies of a lot of sakais; but Monkey said, "I know what you've done with it, my darling – you've lost that island!" And naturally he laughed.

‘They were making camp that night in a grove of bamboos when it happened. It was dusk, and looking up they saw one of those enormous clouds of flying foxes in the sky. Ever see them? They’re really fruit-bats, four feet from tip to tip, and they beat the air slowly. You get them in the ulu near the coast. Eerie, they are – scare the wits out of you the way they fly, and they’re ugly as old boots. You can tell the old ones by the way they move, sort of dropping behind and losing altitude while the younger ones push their noses on ahead. It’s one of the weirdest sights in this country, those flying foxes setting off in the twilight, looking so fat and fearsome in the sky. Like a bad dream, a kind of monster film – they come out of nowhere.

‘She said, “Look, they’re heading for that island.”

‘He said, “Don’t be silly – they’re flying east, to the coast.”

“‘There’s the light,” he said, “that’s west.” She claimed the bats preferred islands and would be homing in on one where there was fruit – monkey food. The wild monkeys slept at night, so they wouldn’t bother the bats. She said, “I’m going to have a look.”

“‘There’s no torch,” he says, and he laughs like hell.

“‘There’s a moon,” she says. And without another word she’s crashing through the bamboos in the direction the foxes are flying. Parrish – Monkey Parrish – just laughed and sat down by the fire to have a pipe before bed. Can you see him there, chuckling to himself about this wife of his who loses everything, how he suddenly realizes that she’s lost herself and he has a fit of laughter? Great hoots echoing through the jungle as old Parrish sees he’s rid of her at last!

‘Maybe. But look at it another way. The next morning he wakes up and sees she’s not there. She never came back. At first he slaps his thigh and laughs and shouts, “She’s lost!” The he looks around. No map, no compass, no torch – only that low dense jungle that stretches for hundreds of miles across the top of the country, dropping leeches on anyone who’s silly enough to walk through it. And the more he thinks about it the more it becomes plain to him that he’s the one who’s lost – she’s wished him away, like the wedding ring and the torch and the fifty-dollar bill. Suddenly he’s not laughing anymore.

‘I’m only guessing. I don’t really know what he was thinking. I had the story from her, just before she left the country. She said there were only two monkeys on the island, a male and a female, bickering the whole time, like her and her late husband. Yes, late husband. No one ever found him – certainly not her, but she wouldn’t, would she?’