PAUL THEROUX

THE FLOWER OF MALAYA

‘Is she one of yours?’ they’d ask on the club verandah when a white girl went past. Nothing salacious intended: they were just wondering if she was American. It was in this way – a casual inquiry to which I did not have an answer – that I discovered Linda Clem. We assigned names to strangers, a tropical pastime, nicknaming them at a distance; she was ‘The Flower of Malaya.’ For a brief period I found it hard to think of her and not be reminded of that disappointed ghost the Malays believe in, who is known simply as Pontianak, ‘The Ghost.’ Pontianak has a pretty face and is always alone. She takes a trishaw, but when it arrives at the destination and the driver asks for the fare, the seat is empty, Pontianak is gone. Or she stops a man on a jungle path – something Malay women never do – and asks the man to follow her. The offer is not usually refused, but when she turns to go the man sees she has an enormous hole in her back. Then she melts away. At night, before heavy storms, she can be heard weeping in the banana groves. Pontianak is the ghost of a woman who died in childbirth and she has been sighted from Kota Bharu on the north coast to Kukup in the south; the Javanese know her, so do the Sumatrans. She gets around, but what does she want?

Linda Clem got around, and she had Pontianak’s melancholy. It seems to come easily to most women – there is a kind of sisterhood in sadness. She was a teacher. That word, so simple at home, spells disaster in the East. They have such hopes, and it always ends so badly. She taught English, most of them do, never asking themselves what happens when a half-starved world is mumbling in heavily accented English, ‘I want –.’ She struck me as accident-prone, but I suppose that was her job, her nationality, her boy friend.

She was a plump graceless soul who hated her body. She had fat legs and a bottom only a Chinese upholsterer could have admired. But she had a pretty face with slightly magnified features, and she had long beautiful hair. Within a week of arriving she was in a sarong – ill-fitting, but it took care of those legs. Within a month she was on the arm of a boy vaguely related to the Sultan, a cousin of a cousin, known locally (but inaccurately) as ‘Tunku,’ The Prince. He was a charming idle fellow who owed money at every Chinese shop in town.

A hopeless liaison: he wanted to be American, she aimed at being Malay – the racial somersault often mistaken for tolerance. It was usually inverted bigotry, ratting on your own race. I saw their determined effort at affection, strolling hand-in-hand across the maidan, or at the club social evenings – evidently she thought she was teaching us a thing or two about integration; and at City Bar, smooching under the gaze of the

Chinese secret society that congregated there. I guessed The Prince was using her money – she looked credulous enough to loan it to him. How pathetic to watch the newcomer, innocent to the deceits of the East, making all the usual mistakes.

I waited for the eventual break-up, but it happened sooner than I expected. One morning she appeared at the Consulate just after we opened. She pushed Peeraswami aside, ignored the secretary's squawk, and flung open my office door.

'I'm looking for the Consul,' she said.

'Do you have an appointment?' I asked.

'The secretary already asked me that,' she said. 'Look, this is an emergency.'

She sat down and threw her shoulder bag on a side table. Is it only Americans who treat consulates as their personal property, and diplomatic personnel as their flunkies? 'They move in and walk all over you,' a colleague used to say – he kept his door locked against American nationals demanding service. It earned us, in Ayer Hitam, the contemptuous pity of the European consulates.

Miss Clem said, 'I want to report a break-in.'

'I'm afraid that's a matter for the police.'

'This is confidential.'

'They can keep a secret,' I said.

'You're my consul,' she said rather fiercely. 'I'm not going to any Malay cop.' She was silent a moment, then she said, 'A man's been in my room.'

I said nothing. She glared at me.

'You don't care, do you?'

'I find it hard to understand your alarm, Miss Clem.'

'So you know my name.' She frowned. 'They told me you were like that.'

'Let's try to be constructive, shall we?' I said. 'What exactly did the man do?'

'You want details,' she said disgustedly.

'Isn't that why you came here?'

‘I told you why I came here.’

‘You’ll have to be specific. Are you reporting a theft?’

‘No.’

‘Assault?’

‘Kinda.’

‘Miss Clem,’ I said, and I was on the point of losing my temper, ‘I’m very busy. I can’t read your mind and I’d rather you didn’t waste my time. Now play ball!’

She put her face in her hands and began to blubber, clownish notes of hooted grief. She had that brittle American composure that breaks all at once, like a windshield shattered with a pebble. A fat girl crying is an appalling sight, in any case, all that motion and noise. Finally she spoke up: ‘I’ve been raped!’

I closed the door to the outer office, and said, ‘Do you know who did it?’

She nodded sadly and pushed her hair out of her eyes. She said, ‘Ibrahim.’

‘The Prince?’

‘He’s no prince,’ she said. Then plaintively, ‘After all I did for him.’

‘You’ll have to go to the police and make a statement.’

‘What will I say?’ she said in a small voice.

‘Just tell them what happened.’

‘Oh, God, it was really awful,’ she said. ‘He came through the window with no clothes on – just like that. I was up combing my hair and I saw him in the mirror. He turned off the light and grabbed me by the arm. I tried to push him away, but you know, it was really strange – he was all slippery. His skin was covered by some kind of oil. “Cut it out,” I said. But he wouldn’t. He didn’t say anything. He just lifted me up by the legs like a wheel-barrow, and – I’ll never forgive him for this. I was giving him English lessons!’

‘Tell that to the police. I’ll send you in my car. They’ll want to know the times and that sort of thing.’

‘What’ll they do?’

‘I imagine they’ll arrest him, if they can find him.’

‘They’ll find him,’ she said bitterly. ‘I just saw him in town.’

So Ibrahim, The Prince, was picked up, and Miss Clem pressed charges. Only the younger members of the Club wondered why The Prince had stayed around. The rest of us knew how Miss Clem had ventured into danger; she had led him on and the poor dumb Malay had misread all her signs. Miss Clem had discovered how easy it was, after all, to be a Malay. It was typical enough for farce.

Squibb said, ‘She got just what she deserved. She was asking for it.’

‘She doesn’t know the first thing about it,’ said Strang.

Squibb squinted maliciously: ‘She knows now. The Flower of Malaya’s been deflowered.’

I said I agreed with them – it was fatal to disagree with anyone in such a small post – but I sympathized with the girl. She knew nothing of the country; she had fallen in headfirst. All you had to do to survive was practice elementary caution. In one sense she deserved what she got, but it was a painful lesson. I had some sympathy for The Prince, too; he was not wholly to blame. He had mistaken her for one of his own. But how was he to know? They were all beginners, that was the worst of these interracial tangles: how infantile they were!

Predictably, Miss Clem stopped wearing her sarong. She tied her hair differently, and she began dropping into the Club alone. The members were kind to her – I noticed she usually had a tennis partner, and that was truly an act of kindness, since she was such a dreadful player. Overnight, she acquired the affectations of a memsahib; a bit sharp with the waiters and ball-boys, a common parody of hauteur in her commands, that odd exaggerated play-actor’s laugh, and a posture I associate with a woman who is used to being waited on – a straight-backed rigidity with formal, irritated hand signals to the staff, as if her great behind was cemented to a plinth. Then I disliked her, and I saw how she was patronized by the club bores, who rehearsed their ill-natured stories with her. She encouraged them in racial innuendo; the memsahib lapping at the double peg in her glass. A month before she had been sidling up to a Malay and probably planning to take out citizenship; now she was in a high-backed Malacca chair under a fan calling out, ‘Boy!’

There was, so far, no trial. Ibrahim the Prince was languishing in the Central Jail, while the lawyers collected evidence. But they hadn’t extracted a confession from him, and that was the most unusual feature of the whole business, since even an innocent

man would own up simply to get a night's sleep. The Ayer Hitam police were not noted for their gentleness with suspects.

One night at the Club Miss Clem spoke to me in her new actressy voice. 'I want to thank you for all you've done. I'm glad it's over.'

'You're welcome,' I said, 'but I'm afraid it's not over yet. There's still the trial. You won't like that.'

'I hope you'll be there to give me moral support.'

'I don't like circuses,' I said. 'But if there's anything useful I can do, let me know.'

The following week she had a different story, a different voice. She entered the Consulate as she had that first time, pushing my staff aside and bursting into my office. She had been crying, and I could see she was out of breath.

'You're not going to believe this,' she said. Not the memsahib now, but that other voice of complaint, the innocent surprised. She sat down. 'It happened again.'

'Another break-in?'

'I was raped,' she said softly.

'The Prince is in jail,' I said in gentle contradiction.

'I'm telling you I was raped!' she shouted, and I was sure she could be heard all the way to the Club.

'Well, who do you suppose could have done it?'

She said nothing; she lowered her eyes and sniffed.

'Tell me, Miss Clem,' I said, 'does this sort of thing happen to you often?'

'What do you mean "often"?'

'Do you find that when you're alone, in a strange place, people get it in their heads to rape you? Perhaps you have something that drives men wild, some hidden attraction.'

'You don't believe me. I knew you wouldn't.'

'It seems rather extraordinary.'

‘It happened again. I’m not making it up.’ Then she pulled the top of her dress across one shoulder and showed me, just below her shoulder bone, a plum-colored bruise. I looked closer and saw circling it were the stitch-marks of a full set of teeth.

‘You should have that seen to,’ I said.

‘I want that man caught,’ she insisted.

‘I thought we had caught him.’

‘So did I.’

‘So it wasn’t The Prince?’

‘I don’t know,’ she said.

‘Was it the same man as before?’

‘Yes, just like before. He was terrible – he laughed.’

And her story was the same, even the same image as before, about him picking her legs up ‘like a wheelbarrow,’ a rather chilling caricature of sexuality. Truth is not a saga of alarming episodes; it is a detail, a small clear one, that gives a fiction life. Hers was that horrible item, unusual enough to be a fact and too bizarre to be made up, about the slippery skin of the rapist. He was greasy, slimy – his whole body gleamed. She couldn’t fight against him; she couldn’t get a grip on him. He had appeared in her room and pounced on her, and she was helpless. This time she said she had resisted and it was only by biting on her that he held on.

I said, ‘You’ll have to drop your charges against The Prince.’

‘I’m afraid to.’

‘But don’t you see? He’s in jail, and if it was the same man as before then it couldn’t have been The Prince.’

‘I don’t know what to do.’

‘I suggest you get a telephone installed in your house. If you hear any suspicious noises, ring me or the police. Obviously it’s some local person who fancies you.’

But The Prince was not released. Somehow the police had extracted a confession from him, a date was set for the trial and Miss Clem was scheduled to testify. That was weeks away. In the meantime, Miss Clem had her telephone put in. She rang me one

evening shortly afterward.

‘Is there anything wrong?’ I asked, hearing her voice.

‘Everything’s fine,’ she said. ‘I was just testing it.’

‘From now on only ring me in the event of an emergency,’ I said.

‘I think I’m going to be all right,’ she said, and rang off.

For a brief period I forgot about Miss Clem, the Flower of Malaya. I had enough to keep me busy – visa matters were a continual headache. It was about this time that the Strangs got their divorce – which is another story – but the speculation at the Club, up to then concerned with Miss Clem, was centered on what Milly Strang could possibly be doing in Bali. She had sent a gleeful postcard to Angela, but nothing to Lloyd. Miss Clem dropped from view.

My opposite number came down from Penang on a private visit and we had a little reception for him. The invitation specified ‘drinks 6–8 P.M.’ but at eleven there were still people on the verandah badgering the waiters for fresh drinks. My reaction was tactical: I went into my study and read the cables. Usually it worked – when the host disappears the guests are at sea; they get worried and invariably they take the hint.

The telephone rang. I was not quick and when I picked up the receiver the line went dead. At first I did nothing; then I remembered and was out the door.

Peeraswami had been helping out at the party. As I rushed out the back door I noticed him at the edge of the courtyard, chatting to the kitchen staff. I called to him and told him to get into the car. On the way I explained where we were going, but I did not say why.

Miss Clem’s house was in the teachers’ compound of the mission school. It was in darkness. I jammed on the brakes and jumped out. Peeraswami was right behind me. From the bungalow I could hear Miss Clem sobbing.

‘Go around back,’ I said to Peeraswami. ‘In those trees. If you see anyone, catch him!’

Peeraswami sprinted away. I went into the house and stumbled in the direction of the sobbing. Miss Clem was alone, sitting on the edge of the bed. I switched on the light and saw her sad fat body on the rumpled bedclothes. She had an odd shine, a gloss on her skin that was lit like a snail’s track. But it covered her stomach; it was too viscous to be perspiration and it had the smell of jungle. She was smeared with it, and though she seemed too dazed to notice it, it was like nothing I had ever seen before. She lay down sobbing and pulled a sheet over her.

‘It was him,’ she said.

‘The Prince?’

‘No, no! Poor Ibrahim,’ she sobbed.

‘Take a bath,’ I said. ‘You can come back to my house when you’ve changed.’

‘Where are you going?’

‘I’ve got to find my peon.’

I found him hurrying back to the house. In the best of times he had a strange face, his dark skin and glittering teeth, his close-set eyes and on his forehead a thumbprint of ashes, the Eye of God. He was terrified – not a rare thing in Peeraswami, but terror on that Tamil face was enough to frighten anyone else.

‘Tuan!’ he cried.

‘Did you see him?’

‘Yes, yes,’ he said. ‘He had no clothings, no shirtings. Bare-naked!’

‘Well, why the hell didn’t you catch him?’ I snapped.

‘Tuan,’ said Peeraswami, ‘no one can catch Orang Minyak.’

‘You knew him?’

‘Everyone know him.’

‘I don’t understand,’ I said. ‘Orang is man. But Minyak – is that a name?’

‘It his name. Minyak – oily, like ghee butter on his body. You try but you cannot catch hold. He trouble the girls, only the girls at night. But he Malay spirit – not Indian, Malay,’ said Peeraswami, as if disclaiming any responsibility for another race’s demons.

An incubus, I thought. What a fate for the Flower of Malaya. Peeraswami lingered. He could see I was angry he hadn’t caught Orang Minyak. And even then I only half-believed.

‘Well, you did your best,’ I said, and reached out to shake his hand. I squeezed and his

hand shot away from mine, and then my own hand was slippery, slick, and smelling of jungle decay.

‘I touch, but I do not catch,’ said Peeraswami. He stooped and began wiping his palms on the grass. ‘You see? No one can catch Orang Minyak.’