‘Mine used to sweat in his sleep,’ said the woman in the white dress, a bit drunkenly. ‘It literally poured off him! During the day he’d be dry as a bone, but as soon as he closed his eyes, bingo, he’d start percolating.’

Her name was Maxine Stanhope and practically the first thing she had said to the woman who sat opposite was, ‘Please call me Max, all my friends do.’ They sat on the verandah of a hotel outside Denpasar, in Bali, in the sun the other tourists avoided. They had dark reptilian tans and slouched languorously in the comfortable chairs like lizards sunning themselves on a rock. Lunch was over, the wine was gone, their voices were raised in emphatic friendliness. They had known each other for only three hours.

‘Mine didn’t sweat that much, but he made the most fantastic noises,’ said Milly Strang. ‘He carried on these mumbling monologues, using different voices, and groaning and sort of swallowing. Sometimes I’d wake up and just look at him and laugh.’

‘It’s not funny,’ said Maxine. But she was laughing; she was the larger of the two, and sharp-featured, her hair tugged back and fitting her head closely. There was a male’s growl of satisfaction in her laugh, not the high mirth you would have expected from that quick, companionable mouth. ‘When I remember the things he put me through, I think I must have been crazy. Mine made me warm his cup. I should have broken it over his head.’

‘Mine had this way of pawing me when he was feeling affectionate. He was really quite strong. He left bruises! I suppose he thought he was – what’s the expression? – turning me on.’

‘They always think that,’ said Maxine. She held the empty wine bottle over the other’s glass until a drop fell out. ‘Let’s have another – wine makes me honest.’

‘I’ve had quite enough,’ said Milly.

‘You’re the boss,’ said Maxine. Then she said, ‘Mine weighed two hundred pounds.’

‘Well, mine was at least that. I’m not exaggerating. When I think of him on top of me – it’s ludicrous.’

‘It’s obscene. Mine kept gaining weight, and finally I said to him, “Look, if this goes on

anymore we won't be able to make love." Not that that worried me. By then I'd already taken a lover – not so much a lover as a new way of life. But Erwin said it didn't matter whether you were fat or thin. If you were fat you'd just find a new position.'

'The fat man's position!'

'Exactly. And he got this – this manual. All the positions were listed, with little diagrams and arrows. Arrows! It was like fitting a plug, an electrical manual for beginners. "Here," he said, "I think that one would suit us." They all had names – I forget what that one was, but it was the fat man's position. Can you imagine?'

'Mine had manuals. Well, he called them manuals. They were Swedish I think. You must have seen them. Interesting and disgusting at the same time. He didn't want me to see them – I mean, he hid them from me. Then I found them and he caught me going through them. Honestly, I think I gave him quite a shock. He looked over my shoulder. "Ever see anything like it?" he said. I could hear him breathing heavily. He was getting quite a thrill!'

'Did yours make a fuss over the divorce?'

'No,' said Milly, 'what about yours?'

'He divorced me. Nothing in particular – just a whole series of things. But, God, what a messy business. It dragged on for months and months.'

'Mine was over before I knew it.'

'Lucky,' said Maxine.

'Up till then we'd been fairly happy.'

'Happy marriages so-called turn into really messy divorces,' said Maxine.

'I think not,' said Milly. 'The best marriages end quickly.'

Theirs, the Strangs', had gone on serenely for years, filling us with envious contempt. It fell to pieces in an afternoon of astonishing abuse. They had pretended politeness for so long only an afternoon was necessary. Then we were friendlier toward the couple, no longer a couple, but Milly alone in the house and Lloyd at the Club. The marriages in Ayer Hitam were no frailer than anywhere else, but we expatriates knew each other well and enjoyed a kind of kinship. A divorce was like a death in the family. Threatened with gloom, we became thoughtful. The joking was nervous: Milly had burned the toast; Lloyd had made a pass at the amah. Afterward, Lloyd clung to the town. He was overrehearsed. One of his lines went, 'It was our ages. Out of the horse

latitudes and into the roaring forties.' He was no sailor; he was taking it badly.

Milly, unexpectedly cheerful, packed her bags and left the compound. Within a week she was in Indonesia. Before she left she had said to Angela Miller, 'I always wanted to go to Bali. Lloyd wouldn't let me.' She went, Lloyd stayed, and it looked as if he expected her back: her early return to Ayer Hitam would have absolved him of all blame.

It did not happen that way. Before long, we all knew her story. Milly saw friends in Djakarta. The friends were uneasy with this divorced woman in their house. They sent their children out to play and treated her the way they might have treated a widow, with a mixture of somberness and high spirits, fearing the whole time that she'd drink too much and burst into tears. Milly found their hospitality exhausting and went to Djokjakarta, for the temples. Though tourists (seeing her eating alone) asked her to join them, she politely refused. How could she explain that she liked eating alone and reading in bed and waking when she wished and doing nothing? Life was so simple, and marriage only a complication. Marriage also implied a place: you were married and lived in a particular house; unmarried, you lived in the world, and there were no answers required of you. Milly changed her status slowly, regaining an earlier state of girlishness from the widowhood of divorce. Ten years was returned to her, and more than that, she saw herself granted a valuable enlightenment, she was wiser and unencumbered, she was free.

The hotel in Bali, which would have been unthinkably expensive for a couple with a land surveyor's income, was really very cheap for one person. She told the manager (Swiss, married – she could tell at a glance) she would stay a month. There was a column in the hotel register headed Destination. She left it blank. The desk clerk indicated this. 'I haven't got one,' she said, and she surprised the man with her natural laugh.

The tourists, the three-day guests at the hotel, the ones with planes to catch were middle-aged; some were elderly, some infirm, making this trip at the end of their lives. But there were other visitors in Bali and they were mostly young. They looked to Milly like innocent witches and princelings. They slept on the beach, cooked over fires, played guitars; she saw them strolling barefoot or eating mountains of food or lazing in the sand. There was not a sign of damage on them. She envied them their youth. For a week Milly swam in the hotel's pool, had a nap after lunch, took her first drink at six and went to bed early: it was like a spell of convalescence, and when she saw she had established this routine she was annoyed. One night, drinking in the bar, she was joined by an Australian. He talked about his children in the hurt remote way of a divorced man. At midnight, Milly stood up and snapped her handbag shut. The man said, 'You're not going, are you?'

'I've paid for my share of the drinks,' she said. 'Was there something you wanted?'

But she knew, and she smiled at the fumbling man, almost pitying him.

‘Perhaps I’ll see you tomorrow,’ she said, and was gone.

She left the hotel, crossed by the pool to the beach, and walked toward a fire. It was the makeshift camp of the young people and there they sat, around the fire, singing. She hesitated to go near and she believed that she could not be seen standing in that darkness, listening to the music. But a voice said, ‘Hey! Come over here, stranger!’

She went over, and seating herself in the sand, saw the strumming boy. But her joining the group was not acknowledged. The youths sat crosslegged, like monks at prayer, facing the fire and the music. How many times, on a beach or by a roadside, had she seen groups like this and, almost alarmed, looked away! Even now she felt like an impostor. Someone might ask her age and laugh when she disclosed it. She wished she was not wearing such expensive slacks; she wished she looked like these people – and she hoped they would not remind her of her difference. She was glad for the dark.

Someone moved behind her. She started to rise, but he reached out and steadied her with his arm and hugged her. She relaxed and let him hold her. In the firelight she saw his face: twenty years old! She put her head against his shoulder and he adjusted his grip to hold her closer. And she trembled – for the first time since leaving Ayer Hitam – and wondered how she could stop herself from rolling him over on the sand and devouring him. Feeling that hunger, she grew afraid and said she had to go: she didn’t want to startle the boy.

‘I’ll walk you back to the hotel,’ he said.

‘I can find the way.’ Her voice was insistent; she didn’t want to lose control.

The boy tagged along, she heard him trampling the sand; she wanted him to act – but how? Throw her down, fling off her clothes, make love to her? It was mad. Then it was too late, the hotel lights illuminated the beach; and she was relieved it had not happened. I must be careful – she almost spoke it.

‘Will I see you again?’

‘Perhaps,’ she said. She was on her own ground: the white hotel loomed behind the palms. Now – here – it was the boy who was the stranger.

‘I want to sleep with you.’ It was not arrogant but imploring.

‘Not now.’

Not now. It should have been no. But marriage taught you how to be perfunctory, and Milly had, as a single woman, regained a lazy sense of hope. No was the prudent answer, Not now was what she had wanted to say – so she had said it. And the next day the boy was back, peering from the beach at Milly, who lounged by the pool. In the sunlight he looked even younger, with a shyness that might have been an effect of the sun's brightness, making him hunch and avert his eyes. He did not know where to begin, she saw that.

Milly waved to him. He signaled back and like an obedient pet responding to a mistress's nod came forward, vaulted the hibiscus hedge, smiling. Instead of taking the chair next to her he crouched at her feet, seeming to hide himself.

'They won't send you away,' said Milly. 'You can say you're my guest.'

The boy shrugged. 'At night – after everyone clears out – we come here swimming.' He was silent, then he said, 'Naked.'

'How exciting,' said Milly, frowning.

Seeing that it was mockery, the boy did not reply. He got to his feet. For a moment, Milly thought he was going to bound over the hedge and leave her. But in a series of athletic motions he strode to the edge of the pool, and without pausing tipped himself into it. He swam under water and Milly followed his blue shorts to the far end of the pool where he surfaced like a hound, gasping and tossing his head. He returned, swimming powerfully, flinging his arms into the water. But he did not climb out of the pool; he rested his forearms on the tiles and said, 'Come in. I'll teach you how to swim.'

'I was swimming before you were born.' She wished she had not said it, she wished it was not true. She picked up a magazine from her lap and plucked at a page.

The boy was beside her, dripping.

'Take this,' she said, and handed him a towel. He buried his face in it with an energy that aroused her, then he wiped his arms and threw it aside.

'Time for lunch,' said Milly.

'Let me treat you,' said the boy.

'That's very thoughtful of you,' said Milly, 'but I'm afraid they won't let you in the dining room like that.'

'They have room service. We can have it sent up – eat on the balcony.'

‘You seem to be inviting yourself to my room,’ said Milly.

‘No,’ said the boy, ‘I’m inviting you to mine.’

Milly almost laughed. She said, ‘Here?’

‘Sure. I’ve been here for about six weeks.’

‘I’ve never seen you at breakfast.’

‘I never eat breakfast,’ said the boy. ‘And I’ve only used my room a few times in the past week or so. I met a girl over on the beach – they have a house there. But my stuff is still in my room. My money, camera, passport, watch – the rest of it. I don’t want it stolen.’

‘It must be fearfully expensive.’

‘My mother pays.’

‘How very American.’

‘She’s on a tour – in Hong Kong,’ said the boy. ‘I thought we were talking about lunch.’

‘If you’re a guest at this hotel, then you must have other clothes here. I suggest you dress properly, and if there’s an empty chair at my table I have no objection to your joining me.’ Her voice, that fastidious tone, surprised and appalled her.

The boy’s name was Mark. He told her that over lunch, but he said very little else. He was so young there was practically nothing he could say about himself beyond his name, and it was for Milly to keep the conversation going. It was not easy in her new voice. She described her trip through Indonesia, everything that had happened to her since leaving Ayer Hitam, but after that she was stumped. She would not speak about Lloyd or the divorce, and it angered her that it was impossible to speak about her life without discussing her marriage. Nearly twenty years had to be suppressed, and it seemed as if nothing had happened in those years that could matter to this young boy.

To his timid questions she said, ‘You wouldn’t understand.’ She was hard on him. She knew why: she wanted him in the simplest way, and she resented wanting him. She objected to that desire in herself that would not allow her to go on alone. She did not want to look foolish – the age difference was ridicule enough – and wondered if in shrinking from an involvement she would reject him. She feared having him, she feared losing him. He told her he was nineteen and eagerly added the date of his next birthday.

Milly said, ‘Time for my nap.’

‘See you later, then,’ said Mark. He shook her hand.

In her room, she cursed herself. It had not occurred to her that he might not be interested. But perhaps this was so. He had a girl, one of the innocent witches; but her fate was the Australian who, late at night, rattled the change in his pocket and drawled for a persuasive way to interest her. She pulled the curtains, shutting out the hot sun, and for the first time since she arrived lay down on her bed wondering not if she should go, but where.

She closed her eyes and heard a knock on the door. She got out of bed, sighed, and opened the door a crack. ‘What is it?’

‘Let me come in,’ said Mark. ‘Please.’

She stared and said nothing. Then she moved aside and let the boy swing the door open. He did this with unnecessary force, as if he had expected her to resist.

Milly had not written any letters. A few postcards, a message about the weather. Letters were an effort because letters required either candor or wit, and her solitary existence had hardened her to both. What Milly had done, almost since the hour she had left Ayer Hitam, was rehearse conversations with an imaginary friend, a woman, for whom in anecdote she would describe the pleasures of divorce. Flying alone. The looks you got in hotels. The Australian. A room of one’s own. The witches and princelings on the beach. Misunderstandings. The suspicious eyes of other men’s wives. The mystery and the aroma of sexuality a single woman carried past mute strangers.

Listen, she imagined herself saying; then she reported, assessed, justified. It was a solitary traveler’s habit, one enforced by her separation from Lloyd. She saw herself leaning over a large menu, in the racket of a restaurant – flowers on the table, two napkin cones, a dish of olives – and she heard her own voice: I think a nineteen-year-old boy and a woman of – let’s be frank – forty-one – I think they’re perfectly matched, sexually speaking. Yes, I really do. They’re at some kind of peak. That boy can have four or five orgasms in a row, but so can a middle-aged woman – given the chance. It’s the middle-aged man with all his routines and apologies that makes the woman feel inadequate. Sex for a boy, granted, is usually a letdown because he’s always trying himself out on a girl his age, and what could be duller? It hurts, Jim, and hurry up, and what if my parents find out? What I’m saying, and I don’t think it’s anything to be ashamed of, is Mark and I were well-matched, not in spite of our ages, but on the contrary, on the contrary. It was like coaching a champion. I know I was old enough to be his mother, but that’s just the point. The age ratio isn’t insignificant.

Don’t laugh – the boy of a certain age and his mother would make the best of lovers –

But lovers was all they’d make. Conversation with Mark was impossible. He would say, ‘I know a guy who has a fantastic yacht in Baltimore.’

A yacht. At the age of twenty-three, when Mark was one, Milly had driven her own car to the south of France and stayed with her uncle, a famous lawyer. That handsome man had taken her on his yacht, poured her champagne, and tried to seduce her. He had failed, and angrily steered the yacht close to the rocky shore, to scare her. Later he bought her an expensive ring, and in London took her to wonderful restaurants, treating her like his mistress. He renamed his yacht Milly. Lloyd knew part of the story. To Mark Milly said, ‘I was on a yacht once, but I was much younger then.’

For three weeks, in her room, in his, and twice on the beach, they made love. They kissed openly and made no secret of the affair. The guests at the hotel might whisper, but they never stayed longer than a few days, and they took their disapproval away with them. Milly herself wondered sometimes what would happen to her when Mark left, and she grew anxious when she remembered that she would have to leave eventually. She had no destination; she stayed another month: it was now November, and before Christmas she would exhaust herself of this boy. She was not calculating, but she saw nothing further for him. The affair, so complete on this bright island, would fail anywhere else.

Mark spoke of college, of books he planned to read, of jobs he’d like to have. It was all a hopeful itinerary she had traced before: she’d made that trip years ago, she’d read the books and known all the stops. She felt – listening to him telling her nothing new – as if she’d returned from a long sojourn in the world, one on which he, encumbered with ambition, was just setting out. She smiled at his innocent plans, and she gave him some encouragement; she would not disappoint him and tell him he would find nothing. He never asked for advice; he was too young to know the questions. She could tell him a great deal, but youth was ignorance in a splendid body: he wouldn’t listen.

‘I want to marry you,’ he said one day, and it sounded to Milly like the expression of a longing that could never be fulfilled, like saying, If only I could marry you!

‘I want to marry you, too,’ she said in the same way.

He kissed her and said, ‘We could do it here, the way the Balinese do – with a feast, music, dancing.’

‘I’ll wear flowers in my hair.’

‘Right,’ he said. ‘We’ll go up to Ubud and –’

‘Oh, God,’ she said, ‘you’re serious.’

His face fell. He said, ‘Aren’t you?’

‘I’ve been married,’ she said, without enthusiasm, as she had once said to him, ‘I’ve been to Monte Carlo,’ implying that the action could not possibly be repeated.

‘I’ve got lots of money,’ he said.

‘Spend it wisely.’ It was the closest she had ever come to giving him advice.

‘It would make things easier for us.’

‘This is as easy as it can ever be,’ she said. ‘Anyway, it’s your mother’s money, so stop talking this way. We can’t get married and that’s that.’

‘You don’t have to marry me,’ he said. ‘Come to the States – we’ll live together.’

‘And then what?’

‘We’ll drive around.’

‘What about your college – all those plans of yours?’

‘They don’t matter.’

‘Drive around!’ She laughed hard at the thought of them in a car, speeding down a road, not stopping. Could anything short of marriage itself be a more boring exertion than that? He looked quite excited by the prospect of driving in circles.

‘What’s wrong?’

‘I’m a bit old for that sort of thing.’

‘We can do anything you want – anything,’ he said. ‘Just live with me. No strings. Look, we can’t stay here forever –’

It was true: she had nowhere to go. Milly was not fool enough to believe that it could work for any length of time, but for a month or two it might be fun. Then somewhere else, alone, to make a real start.

‘We’ll see,’ she said.

‘Smile,’ he said.

She did and said, ‘What would you tell your mother?’

‘I’ve already told her.’

‘No! What did she say?’

‘She wants to meet you.’

‘Perhaps – one day.’ But the very thought of it filled her with horror.

‘Soon,’ he said. ‘I wrote to her in Hong Kong. She replied from Bangkok. She’ll be here in a week or so.’

‘Mine was so pathetic when I left him,’ Milly was saying. ‘I almost felt sorry for him. Now I can’t stand the thought of him.’

‘As time goes on,’ said Maxine, ‘you’ll hate him more and more.’ Abstractedly, she said, ‘I can’t bear them to touch me.’

‘No,’ said Milly, ‘I don’t think I could ever hate –’

Maxine laughed. ‘I just thought of it!’

‘What?’

‘The position my husband suggested. It was called “The Autumn Dog.” Chinese, I think. You do it backward. It was impossible, of course – and grotesque, like animals in the bushes. He accused me of not trying – and guess what he said?’

‘Backward!’

‘He said, “Max, it might save our marriage”!’

It struck Milly that there were only a few years – seconds in the life of the world – when that futile sentence had meaning. The years had coincided with her own marriage, but she had endured them and, like Maxine, earned her freedom. She had borne marriage long enough to see it disproved.

‘But it didn’t save it – it couldn’t,’ said Maxine. Her face darkened. She said, ‘He was evil. He wanted Mark. But Mark wouldn’t have him – he was devoted to me.’

‘Mark is a nice boy.’

Maxine said, ‘Mark is lovely.’

‘At first I was sorry he told you about me. I was afraid to meet you. I thought you’d dislike me.’

‘But you’re not marrying him, are you?’

‘I couldn’t,’ said Milly. ‘Anyway, I’m through with marriage.’

‘Good,’ said Maxine. ‘The Autumn Dog.’

‘And Max,’ said Milly, using the woman’s name for the first time, ‘I don’t want you for a mother-in-law!’

‘No – we’ll be friends.’

‘What a pity I’m leaving here.’

‘Then we must leave together.’

And the other woman’s replies had come so quickly that Milly heard herself agreeing to a day, a flight, a destination.

‘Poor Mark,’ said Milly at last.

‘He’s a lovely boy,’ said Maxine. ‘You have no idea. We go to plays together. He reads to me. I buy all his clothes. I like to be seen with him. Having a son like Mark is so much better than having a husband.’

Milly felt the woman staring at her. She dropped her eyes.

‘Or a friend like you,’ said Maxine. ‘That’s much better. He told me all about you – he’s very frank. He made me jealous, but that was silly, wasn’t it? I think you’re a very kind person.’

She reached across the table. She took Milly’s fingers and squeezed.

‘If you’re kind to me we’ll be such good friends.’

‘Please stop!’ Milly wanted to say. The other woman was hurting her hand with the pressure of her rings, and she seemed to smile at the panic on Milly’s face. Finally, Milly said it, and another fear made the demand into a plea. Maxine relaxed her grip, but she held on, even after Mark appeared at the agreed time, to hear the verdict.