There is a curious tree, native to Malaysia, called ‘The Midnight Horror.’ We had several in Ayer Hitam, one in an overgrown part of the Botanical Gardens, the other in the front garden of William Ladysmith’s house. His house was huge, nearly as grand as mine, but I was the American Consul and Ladysmith was an English teacher on a short contract. I assumed it was the tree that had brought the value of his house down. The house itself had been built before the war – one of those great breezy places, a masterpiece of colonial carpentry, with cement walls two feet thick and window blinds the size of sails on a Chinese junk. It was said that it had been the center of operations during the occupation. All this history diminished by a tree! In fact, no local person would go near the house; the Chinese members of the staff at Ladysmith’s school chose to live in that row of low warrens near the bus depot.

During the day the tree looked comic, a tall simple pole like an enormous coatrack, with big leaves that looked like branches – but there were very few of them. It was covered with knobs, stark black things; and around the base of the trunk there were always fragments of leaves that looked like shattered bones, but not human bones.

At night the tree was different, not comic at all. It was Ladysmith who showed me the underlined passage in his copy of Professor Corner’s Wayside Trees of Malaya. Below the entry for Oroxylum indicum it read, ‘Botanically, it is the sole representative of its kind; aesthetically, it is monstrous … The corolla begins to open about 10 P.M., when the tumid, wrinkled lips part and the harsh odour escapes from them. By midnight, the lurid mouth gapes widely and is filled with stink … The flowers are pollinated by bats which are attracted by the smell and, holding to the fleshy corolla with the claws on their wings, thrust their noses into its throat; scratches, as of bats, can be seen on the fallen leaves the next morning …’

Smelly! Ugly! Pollinated by bats! I said, ‘No wonder no one wants to live in this house.’

‘It suits me fine,’ said Ladysmith. He was a lanky fellow, very pleasant, one of our uncomplicated Americans who thrive in bush postings. He cycled around in his bermuda shorts, organizing talent shows in kampongs. His description in my consulate file was ‘Low risk, high gain.’ Full of enthusiasm and blue-eyed belief; and open-hearted: he was forever having tea with tradesmen, whose status was raised as soon as he crossed the threshold.

Ladysmith didn’t come round to the Club much, although he was a member and had appeared in the Footlighters’ production of Maugham’s The Letter. I think he

disapproved of us. He was young, one of the Vietnam generation with a punished conscience and muddled notions of colonialism. That war created dropouts, but Ladysmith I took to be one of the more constructive ones, a volunteer teacher. After the cease-fire there were fewer; now there are none, neither hippies nor do-gooders. Ladysmith was delighted to take his guilt to Malaysia, and he once told me that Ayer Hitam was more lively than his hometown, which surprised me until he said he was from Caribou, Maine.

He was tremendously popular with his students. He had put up a backboard and basketball hoop in the playground and after school he taught them the fundamentals of the game. He was, for all his apparent awkwardness, an athletic fellow, though it didn't show until he was in action – jumping or dribbling a ball down the court. Perhaps it never does. He ate like a horse, and knowing he lived alone I made a point of inviting him often to dinners for visiting firemen from Kuala Lumpur or Singapore. He didn't have a cook; he said he would not have a servant, but I don't believe he would have got any local person to live in his house, so close to that grotesque tree.

I was sorry but not surprised, two months after he arrived, to hear that Ladysmith had a fever. Ayer Hitam was malarial, and the tablets we took every Sunday like communion were only suppressants. The Chinese headmaster at the school stopped in at the Consulate and said that Ladysmith wanted to see me. I went that afternoon.

The house was empty; a few chairs in the sitting room, a shelf of paperbacks, a short-wave radio, and in the room beyond a table holding only a large bottle of ketchup. The kitchen smelled of peanut butter and stale bread. Bachelor's quarters. I climbed the stairs, but before I entered the bedroom I heard Ladysmith call out in an anxious voice, 'Who is it?'

'Boy, am I glad to see you,' he said, relaxing as I came through the door.

He looked thinner, his face was gray, his hair awry in bunches of standing hackles; and he lay in the rumpled bed as if he had been thrown there. His eyes were sunken and oddly colored with the yellow light of fever.

'Malaria?'

'I think so – I've been taking chloroquine. But it doesn't seem to be working. I've got the most awful headache.' He closed his eyes. 'I can't sleep. I have these nightmares. I –'

'What does the doctor say?'

'I'm treating myself,' said Ladysmith.

‘You’ll kill yourself,’ I said. ‘I’ll send Alec over tonight.’

We talked for a while, and eventually I convinced Ladysmith that he needed attention. Alec Stewart was a club member Ladysmith particularly disliked. He wasn’t a bad sort, but as he was married to a Chinese girl he felt he could call them ‘Chinks’ without blame. He had been a ship’s surgeon in the Royal Navy and had come to Ayer Hitam after the war. With a young wife and all that sunshine he was able to reclaim some of his youth. Back at the office I sent Peeraswami over with a pot of soup and the latest issue of Newsweek from the consulate library.

Alec went that night. I saw him at the Club later. He said, ‘Our friend’s pretty rocky.’

‘I had malaria myself,’ I said. ‘It wasn’t much fun.’

Alex blew a cautionary snort. ‘He’s not got malaria. He’s got dengué.’

‘Are you sure?’

‘All the symptoms are there.’

‘What did you give him for it?’

‘The only thing there is worth a docken – aspirin.’

‘I suppose he’ll have to sweat it out.’

‘He’ll do that all right.’ Alec leaned over. ‘The lad’s having hallucinations.’ ‘I didn’t know that was a symptom of dengué,’ I said.

‘Dengué’s a curse.’

He described it to me. It is a virus, carried by a mosquito, and begins as a headache of such voltage that you tremble and can’t stand or sit. You’re knocked flat; your muscles ache, you’re doubled-up with cramp and your temperature stays over a hundred. Then your skin becomes paper-thin, sensitive to the slightest touch – the weight of a sheet can cause pain. And your hair falls out – not all of it, but enough to fill a comb. These severe irritations produce another agony, a depression so black the dengué sufferer continually sobs. All the while your bones ache, as if every inch of you has been smashed with a hammer. This sensation of bruising gives dengué its colloquial name, ‘breakbone fever.’ I pitied Ladysmith.

Although it was after eleven when Alec left the Club, I went straight over to Ladysmith’s house. I was walking up the gravel drive when I heard the most ungodly shriek – frightening in its intensity and full of alarm. I did not recognize it as

Ladysmith's – indeed, it scarcely sounded human. But it was coming from his room. It was so loud and changed in pitch with such suddenness it might easily have been two or three people screaming, or a dozen doomed cats. The Midnight Horror tree was in full bloom and filled the night with stink.

Ladysmith lay in bed whimpering. The magazine I'd sent him was tossed against the wall, and the effect of disorder was heightened by the overhead fan which was lifting and ruffling the pages.

He was propped on one arm, but seeing me he sighed and fell back. His face was slick with perspiration and tear-streaks. He was short of breath.

'Are you all right?'

'My skin is burning,' he said. I noticed his lips were swollen and cracked with fever, and I saw then how dengué was like a species of grief. 'I thought I heard a scream,' I said. Screaming takes energy; Ladysmith was beyond screaming, I thought.

'Massacre,' he said. 'Soldiers – killing women and children. Horrible. Over there –' He pointed to a perfectly ordinary table with a jug of water on it, and he breathed, 'War. You should see their faces, all covered with blood. Some have arms missing. I've never –' He broke off and began to sob.

'Alec says you have dengué fever,' I said.

'Two of them – women. They look the same,' said Ladysmith, lifting his head. 'They scream at me, and it's so loud! They have no teeth!'

'Are you taking the aspirin?' I saw the amber jar was full.

'Aspirin! For this!' He lay quietly, then said, 'I'll be all right. Sometimes it's nothing – just a high temperature. Then these Chinese … then I get these dreams.'

'About war?'

'Yes. Flashes.'

As gently as I could I said, 'You didn't want to go to Vietnam, did you?'

'No. Nobody wanted to go. I registered as a CO.'

Hallucinations are replies. Peeraswami was always seeing Tamil ghosts on his way home. They leaped from those green fountains by the road the Malays call daun pontianak – 'ghost leaf' – surprising him with plates of hot samosas or tureens of curry;

not so much ghosts as ghostesses. I told him to eat something before setting out from home in the dark and he stopped seeing them. I took Ladysmith's visions of massacre to be replies to his conscientious objection. It is the draft-dodger who speaks most graphically of war, not the soldier. Pacifists know all the atrocity stories.

But Ladysmith's hallucinations had odd highlights: the soldiers he saw weren't American. They were dark orientals in dirty undershirts, probably Vietcong, and mingled with the screams of the people with bloody faces was another sound, the creaking of bicycle seats. So there were two horrors – the massacre and these phantom cyclists. He was especially frightened by the two women with no teeth, who opened their mouths wide and screamed at him.

I said, 'Give it a few days.'

'I don't think I can take much more of this.'

'Listen,' I said. 'Dengué can depress you. You'll feel like giving up and going home – you might feel like hanging yourself. But take these aspirin and keep telling yourself – whenever you get these nightmares – it's dengué fever.'

'No teeth, and their gums are dripping with blood –'

His head dropped to the pillow, his eyes closed, and I remember thinking: everyone is fighting this war, everyone in the world. Poor Ladysmith was fighting hardest of all. Lying there he could have been bivouacked in the Central Highlands, haggard from a siege, his dengué a version of battle fatigue.

I left him sleeping and walked again through the echoing house. But the smell had penetrated to the house itself, the high thick stink of rotting corpses. It stung my eyes and I almost fainted with the force of it until, against the moon, I saw that blossoming coatrack and the wheeling bats – The Midnight Horror.

'Rotting flesh,' Ladysmith said late the next afternoon. I tried not to smile. I had brought Alec along for a second look. Ladysmith began describing the smell, the mutilated people, the sound of bicycles, and those Chinese women, the toothless ones. The victims had pleaded with him. Ladysmith looked wretched.

Alec said, 'How's your head?'

'It feels like it's going to explode.'

Alec nodded. 'Joints a bit stiff?'

'I can't move.'

‘Dengué’s a curse.’ Alec smiled: doctors so often do when their grim diagnosis is proved right.

‘I can’t –’ Ladysmith started, then grimaced and continued in a softer tone. ‘I can’t sleep. If I could only sleep I’d be all right. For God’s sake give me something to make me sleep.’

Alec considered this.

‘Can’t you give him anything?’ I asked.

‘I’ve never prescribed a sleeping pill in my life,’ said Alec, ‘and I’m not going to do so now. Young man, take my advice. Drink lots of liquid – you’re dehydrating. You’ve got a severe fever. Don’t underestimate it. It can be a killer. But I guarantee if you follow my instructions, get lots of bed rest, take aspirin every four hours, you’ll be right as ninepence.’

‘My hair is falling out.’

Alex smiled – right again. ‘Dengué,’ he said. ‘But you’ve still got plenty. When you’ve as little hair as I have you’ll have something to complain about.’

Outside the house I said, ‘That tree is the most malignant thing I’ve ever seen.’

Alec said, ‘You’re talking like a Chink.’

‘Sure, it looks innocent enough now, with the sun shining on it. But have you smelled it at night?’

‘I agree. A wee aromatic. Like a Bengali’s fart.’

‘If we cut it down I think Ladysmith would stop having his nightmares.’

‘Don’t be a fool. That tree’s medicinal. The Malays use it for potions. It works – I use it myself.’

‘Well, if it’s so harmless why don’t the Malays want to live in this house?’

‘It’s not been offered to a Malay. How many Malay teachers do you know? It’s the Chinks won’t live here – I don’t have a clue why that’s so, but I won’t have you running down that tree. It’s going to cure our friend.’

I stopped walking. ‘What do you mean by that?’

Alec said, ‘The aspirin – or rather, not the aspirin. I’m using native medicine. Those tablets are made from the bark of that tree – I wish it didn’t have that shocking name.’

‘You’re giving him that?’

‘Calm down, it’ll do him a world of good,’ Alex said brightly. ‘Ask any witch doctor.’

I slept badly myself that night, thinking of Alec’s ridiculous cure – he had truly gone bush – but I was tied up all day with visa inquiries and it was not until the following evening that I got back to Ladysmith’s. I was determined to take him away. I had aspirin at my house; I’d keep him away from Alec.

Downstairs, I called out and knocked as usual to warn him I’d come, and as usual there was no response from him. I entered the bedroom and saw him asleep, but uncovered. Perhaps the fever had passed: his face was dry. He did not look well, but then few people do when they’re sound asleep – most take on the ghastly color of illness. Then I saw that the amber bottle was empty – the ‘aspirin’ bottle.

I tried to feel his pulse. Impossible: I’ve never been able to feel a person’s pulse, but his hand was cool, almost cold. I put my ear against his mouth and thought I could detect a faint purr of respiration.

It was dusk when I arrived, but darkness in Ayer Hitam fell quickly, the blanket of night dropped and the only warning was the sound of insects tuning up, the chirrup of geckoes and those squeaking bats making for the tree. I switched on the lamp and as I did so heard a low cry, as of someone dying in dreadful pain. And there by the window – just as Ladysmith had described – I saw the moonlit faces of two Chinese women, smeared with blood. They opened their mouths and howled; they were toothless and their screeches seemed to gain volume from that emptiness.

‘Stop!’ I shouted.

The two faces in those black rags hung there, and I caught the whiff of the tree which was the whiff of wounds. It should have scared me, but it only surprised me. Ladysmith had prepared me, and I felt certain that he had passed that horror on. I stepped forward, caught the cord, and dropped the window blinds. The two faces were gone.

This took seconds, but an after-image remained, like a lamp switched rapidly on and off. I gathered up Ladysmith. Having lost weight he was very light, pathetically so. I carried him downstairs and through the garden to the road.

Behind me, in the darkness, was the rattle of pedals, the squeak of a bicycle seat. The

phantom cyclists! It gave me a shock, and I tried to run, but carrying Ladysmith I could not move quickly. The cycling noises approached, frantic squeakings at my back. I spun round.

It was a trishaw, cruising for fares. I put Ladysmith on the seat, and running alongside it we made our way to the mission hospital.

A stomach pump is little more than a slender rubber tube pushed into one nostril and down the back of the throat. A primitive device: I couldn't watch. I stayed until Ladysmith regained consciousness. But it was useless to talk to him. His stomach was empty and he was coughing up bile, spewing into a bucket. I told the nursing sister to keep an eye on him.

I said, 'He's got dengué.'

The succeeding days showed such an improvement in Ladysmith that the doctors insisted he be discharged to make room for more serious cases. And indeed everyone said he'd made a rapid recovery. Alec was astonished, but told him rather sternly, 'You should be ashamed of yourself for taking that overdose.'

Ladysmith was well, but I didn't have the heart to send him back to that empty house. I put him up at my place. Normally, I hated houseguests – they interfered with my reading and never seemed to have much to do themselves except punish my gin bottle. But Ladysmith was unobtrusive. He drank milk, he wrote letters home. He made no mention of his hallucinations, and I didn't tell him what I'd thought I'd seen. In my own case I believe his suggestions had been so strong that I had imagined what he had seen – somehow shared his own terror of the toothless women.

One day at lunch Ladysmith said, 'How about eating out tonight? On me. A little celebration. After all, you saved my life.'

'Do you feel well enough to face the club buffet?'

He made a face. 'I hate the Club – no offense. But I was thinking of a meal in town. What about that kedai – City Bar? I had a terrific meal there the week I arrived. I've been meaning to go back.'

'You're the boss.'

It was a hot night. The verandah tables were taken, so we had to sit inside, jammed against a wall. We ordered meehoon soup, spring rolls, pork strips, fried kway-teow, and a bowl of laksa that seemed to blister the lining of my mouth.

'One thing's for sure,' said Ladysmith, 'I won't get dengué fever again for a while. The

sister said I'm immune for a year.' 'Thank God for that,' I said. 'By then you'll be back in Caribou, Maine.'

'I don't know,' he said. 'I like it here.'

He was smiling, glancing around the room, poking noodles into his mouth. Then I saw him lose control of his chopsticks. His jaw dropped, he turned pale, and I thought for a moment that he was going to cry.

'Is anything wrong?'

He shook his head, but he looked stricken.

'It's this food,' I said. 'You shouldn't be eating such strong –'

'No,' he said. 'It's those pictures.'

On the whitewashed wall of the kedai was a series of framed photographs, old hand-colored ones, lozenge-shaped, like huge lockets. Two women and some children. Not so unusual; the Chinese always have photographs of relations around – a casual reverence. One could hardly call them a pious people; their brand of religion is ancestor worship, the simple display of the family album. But I had not realized until then that Woo Boh Swee's relations had had money. The evidence was in the pictures: both women were smiling, showing large sets of gold dentures.

'That's them,' said Ladysmith.

'Who?' I said. Staring at them I noticed certain wrinkles of familiarity, but the Chinese are very hard to tell apart. The cliché is annoyingly true.

Ladysmith put his chopsticks down and began to whisper: 'The women in my room – that's them. That one had blood on her hair, and the other one –'

'Dengué fever,' I said. 'You said they didn't have any teeth. Now I ask you – look at those teeth. You've got the wrong ladies, my boy.'

'No!'

His pallor had returned, and the face I saw across the table was the one I had seen on that pillow. I felt sorry for him, and as helpless as I had before.

Woo Boh Swee, the owner of City Bar, went by the table. He was brisk, snapping a towel. 'Okay? Anything? More beer? What you want?'

‘We’re fine, Mr Woo,’ I said. ‘But I wonder if you can tell us something. We were wondering who those women are in the pictures – over there.’

He looked at the wall, grunted, lowered his head, and simply walked away, muttering.

‘I don’t get it,’ I said. I left the table and went to the back of the bar, where Boh Swee’s son Reggie – the ‘English’ son – was playing mahjong. I asked Reggie the same question: who are they?

‘I’m glad you asked me,’ said Reggie. ‘Don’t mention them to my father. One’s his auntie, the other one’s his sister. It’s a sad story. They were cut up during the war by the dwarf bandits. That’s what my old man calls them in Hokkien. The Japanese. It happened over at the headquarters – what they used for headquarters when they occupied the town. My old man was in Singapore.’

‘But the Japanese were only here for a few months,’ I said.

‘Bunch of thieves,’ said Reggie. ‘They took anything they could lay their hands on. They used those old ladies for house girls, at the headquarters, that big house, where the tree is. Then they killed them, just like that, and hid the bodies – we never found the graves. But that was before they captured Singapore. The British couldn’t stop them, you know. The dwarf bandits were clever – they pretended they were Chinese and rode all the way to the Causeway on bicycles.’

I looked back at the table. Ladysmith was staring, his eyes again bright with fever, staring at those gold teeth.