Not one person I had known in Africa was my age – they were either much older or much younger. That could hardly have been true, and yet that was how it appeared to me. I was very young.

The Indian seemed old; I had never spoken to him; I did not know his name. He was one of those people, common in small towns, whom one sees constantly, and who, like a feature of the landscape, become anonymous because they are never out of view, like a newspaper seller or a particular cripple. He was dark, always alone, and threadbare in an indestructible way. He used to show up at the door of the Gujarati restaurant where I ate, The Hindu Lodge, an old man with a cardboard box of Indian sweets, and he said – it was his one word of English – 'Sweetmeats.'

In my two-year tour in Uganda I saw him hundreds of times, in that open doorway, blinking because of the flies near his face. No one bought the food he had in the dirty cardboard box. He showed the box, said his word, and then went away. It was as if he was doing it against his will: he had been sent by someone conspiring to find out what we would do with him, a test of our sympathy. We did nothing. If anyone had asked me about him at the time I think I would have said that I found him terribly reassuring. But no one asked; no one saw him.

Ayer Hitam, half a world away, had her Indian conspirators, but being political, they had names. Rao had been arrested on a political charge. It was said that he was a communist. I found the description slightly absurd in that small town, like the cheese-colored building they called the Ministry of Works or the bellyache everyone referred to as dysentery. In Malaysia a communist meant someone either very poor or very safe, who gathered with others in a kind of priestly cabal, meeting at night over a table littered with boring papers and high-minded pamphlets to reheat their anger. I could imagine the futile talk, the despair of the ritual which had its more vulgar counterpart in the lounge of the Ayer Hitam Club. It was said that the communists wanted to poison the Sultan's polo-ponies and nationalize the palm-oil estates. They were people seeking to be arrested. Arrest was their victory, and in that sense they were like early Christians, needing to be persecuted because they wished to prove their courage. They were conspirators; they inspired others in conspiracy against them. Most Malays were superstitious about them. To speak too much of the communists was to give their faith an importance it didn't deserve. But when they were caught they were imprisoned.

Rao had been in prison for some time. The Embassy told me of his release and how he

had returned to Ayer Hitam. I was ashamed to admit that I had never heard of him. My people gave me a few facts: Rao had been a real firebrand; he had given public speeches; he had started a cell in the mission school; he was a confidant of the Chinese goldsmiths who were, somehow, Maoists; he had caused at least two riots in town. I was skeptical but interested: large affairs, wild talk – but the town looked small and tame and too sparsely populated to support a riot. An unlawful assembly, perhaps, but not a riot.

Virtually everyone I knew suspected me of being a spy. I was seen as a legitimate conspirator. In a small way I suppose I was. My information was negligible: I was sorry it mattered so little. It would have been encouraging to know that my cables were eagerly awaited and quickly acted upon. But what I sent was filed and never queried, never crucial. I was in the wrong place. I could have reported on the Chinese goldsmiths, but I knew better. Theirs was a sentimental attachment to China, their nationalism the nostalgia of souvenirs, like calendar pictures of Tien-An-Men Square in Peking. I reminded myself that an Italian in the United States would have a feeling for Italy no matter who governed. It was the same with the Chinese. My cables were as eventless as the town. I knew I didn't count.

I was surprised when the Political Section asked me to see Rao privately and find out what he was up to. I assumed that if I approved him he might be offered a scholarship to study in the States. There was no better catch than an ex-communist. People would listen to him, and he could always have the last word. He knew the other side: he had been there. If I flunked him, I knew – it was the system – he would be unemployable.

Rao worked, I found out, in the office of the town's solicitor, Francis Ratnasingham. I spoke to Francis and he said that he had no objection to my talking to Rao during office hours: 'He will be flattered by your interest.'

Rao came into the room carrying a tray of papers. It looked for a moment like a shallow box of food. He held it out and gave me a wan smile.

'They said you wanted to talk to me.'

His voice was flat and had a hint of defeat in it, which contradicted what I had heard about him, the speeches, the riots he'd caused. He was heavy – jail weight, like the useless bulk of a farm turkey. He looked underexercised and slow.

I said, 'I don't want to take you away from your work.'

'It doesn't make any difference.'

I tried not to stare at his big soft face. This was a firebrand! He looked at the tray, as if surprised to see it in his hands, then placed it on a desk.

‘I hope you’re not busy.’

He said, ‘Francis told me to expect you.’

Ratnasingham’s office was in Victoria Chambers on the main street, Jalan Besar. I said we could have a drink at the Club. Rao suggested tea at City Bar, and it was there that he said, ‘I reckon you saw me on television in KL.’

‘No,’ I said. ‘When was that?’

‘Two months ago.’

‘What did you do?’

‘I recanted.’ He smiled.

I stared: recanted?

He said, ‘I had to do it twice. They didn’t like my first try – they said I didn’t sound sincere enough.’

I had heard that political prisoners had been made to recant, but I didn’t realize the government televised it. Rao said it was one of the conditions of release.

‘How long were you in jail?’

‘Seven years.’

I couldn’t hide my astonishment. And I put it in personal terms – seven years was the length of my whole Foreign Service career. So Rao and I were the same age, conspiring differently.

He said, ‘You don’t believe me.’

‘It’s a hell of a long time to be in jail.’

‘Yes.’ He stirred his tea. ‘But I took lessons. I did correspondence courses. I studied. It helped the time pass.’ He shrugged. ‘How do you like Malaysia?’

‘I’m enjoying myself.’ This sounded frivolous. ‘Maybe I shouldn’t be.’

‘Why not? It’s a nice country. We have our problems. But –’ He shrugged again, and laughed. This time his amusement seemed real.

‘What were you studying in prison?’

‘Law – an external degree from London University. They sent me books and lessons. They were very good about it. They didn’t charge me anything.’

‘You got the degree?’

‘Oh, no,’ he said, and he sighed. ‘There were too many interruptions. I couldn’t keep the written material in my cell without permission. I had to request it from the warders and they needed a chit from the prison governor. One day they would give me a book but no paper. The next they’d give me paper but no pencil or book. I’d ask for a pencil. They’d give it, but take away the paper.’

‘That’s torture,’ I said.

‘Maybe,’ he said. ‘It was a problem.’

‘But they were doing it deliberately!’

He nodded. I searched for anger on his face. There was only that dull look of amusement. He said, ‘It made the time pass.’

‘I can see why you didn’t get the degree in prison. What a relief it must be to have your own paper and pens and books and make your own rules for a change.’

‘I don’t make any rules,’ he said, and sounded defensive.

‘I mean, about studying,’ I said quickly.

‘I don’t study.’

‘But you said you were working for a degree.’

‘In prison,’ he said. ‘It was important at the time, even that business about paper but no pencil. When I was released, I stopped. I didn’t need it.’

I said, ‘You could continue your studies in the States.’

He shook his head.

‘Don’t you want to leave the country?’

‘It’s them. They wouldn’t give me a passport.’

‘You could get a traveling document. I might be able to help you with that.’

He smiled, as if he had been told all of this before.

‘Why don’t you leave?’

He said, ‘Because they wouldn’t let me back into the country.’

‘So you can never leave?’

‘I don’t say never. I don’t think about time anymore.’

‘Do you mind me asking you these questions?’

He said softly, ‘I know who you are.’

‘I would genuinely like to help you.’

He laughed again, the authentic laugh, not the mechanical one. ‘Maybe you could have helped me, seven years ago. Now, no.’

‘What are the other conditions of your release? You had to recant, you’re forbidden to leave the country –’

‘You don’t understand,’ he said. ‘I recanted voluntarily. I don’t want to leave the country. It’s my choice.’

‘But the alternative was staying in jail.’

‘Let’s say it took me seven years to make up my mind.’ He stared at me and frowned. ‘It wasn’t a hasty decision.’

He was impenetrable. And he looked it, too. He was not tall, but he was large, square-headed, and had a thickness of flesh that wasn’t muscle. I could not help thinking that he had deliberately become like this as a reproach to all action; it was his way of sulking.

He said, ‘I know some chaps who were in even longer than me, so I don’t complain.’

This was news. ‘You keep in touch with other prisoners?’

‘Oh, yes,’ he said lightly. ‘We’re members of the Ex-Detainees Association.’

‘You have a club?’

He nodded. ‘I’m the secretary.’

I might have known. Ayer Hitam was full of clubs – Chinese clan associations, secret societies, communist cells, Indian sports clubs, the South Malaysia Pineapple Growers’ Association, the Muslim League, the Legion of Mary, the Methodist Ramblers; and I was in one myself. No one lived in the town, really; people just went to club meetings there.

Rao looked at his watch. He said, ‘Five o’clock.’

‘I’ve kept you.’

‘It doesn’t matter. I don’t have any work to do. I’m just a file clerk. They won’t sack me.’

‘Have another cup of tea. Or what about splitting a large Anchor?’

‘I don’t drink beer,’ he said. ‘I learned to do without it.’

I couldn’t ask him the other thing, how he had gone so long without a woman. But I was curious, and when he said ‘I should be heading home,’ I offered him a ride.

In the car he spoke to Abubaker gently in Malay, and Abubaker laughed. For a moment they looked like conspirators sharing a secret. But Rao, as if guessing at my interest, said, ‘I told him I wanted to buy his posh car.’

‘Do you?’

‘Not at all.’

We drove for several miles in silence.

Rao said, ‘It was a joke, you see.’

His house, a small two-room bungalow, unfenced, exposed to the sun, was directly on the road – an odd place to be in so empty a landscape.

Rao said, ‘Will you come in?’

He was being polite. He didn’t want me.

I said, ‘All right. But just for a minute.’

After the business of making tea and his carefully setting out a dish of savories that were like macaroni coated with hot pepper, there seemed nothing to say. The room was bare. It did not even have the calendar most of the houses in Ayer Hitam displayed. It had no mirror, no pictures. It was, surprisingly, like a jail cell. He lived alone; there was no sign of a woman, no servants' quarters, no books.

A timber truck went by and shook the windows.

'I like it here,' said Rao, almost defiantly.

He left the room and came back with a large plastic-covered book with thick pages, a photograph album. He showed me an old blurred snapshot of a dark schoolboy in white shorts. He said, 'That's me.' He showed me a picture of a Chinese man. 'He was one of the warders.' A palm tree. 'That's Mersing. There are beautiful islands there. You should visit.' A battered car. 'That belonged to my uncle. He died.' There were no more pictures. Rao said, 'When I have some free time I take out this album and look at the pictures.'

But they were pictures of nothing. He had no fire. I had suspected him of keeping something from me; but he hadn't, he was concealing nothing, he had been destroyed.

He said, 'I told you I couldn't help you.'

And I left. I was driving back when I remembered that poor Indian in Kampala. I hadn't thought of him for years. I was sad, sadder than I had been for a long time, because I knew now he was dead.

It took me weeks to write my report on Rao. I had to suppress the implications of what I'd seen. I put down the obvious facts, and – saying that he'd returned to normal life – invented a happy man, whom prison had cured of all passion. The conspiracy was complete. But I was glad he had showed no interest in a scholarship or a travel grant, because when I reflected on Rao I saw his transformation as the ultimate deceit. I knew I would not have trusted him an inch.