The first victim was a British planter, and everyone at the Club said what a shame it was that after fifteen years in the country he was killed just four days before he planned to leave. He had no family, he lived alone; until he was murdered no one knew very much about him. Murder is the grimmest, briefest fame. If the second victim, a month later, had not been an American I probably would not have given the Johore murders a second thought, and I certainly would not have been involved in the business. But who would have guessed that Ismail Garcia was an American?

The least dignified thing that can happen to a man is to be murdered. If he dies in his sleep he gets a respectful obituary and perhaps a smiling portrait; it is how we all want to be remembered. But murder is the great exposer: here is the victim in his torn underwear, face down on the floor, unpaid bills on his dresser, a meager shopping list, some loose change, and worst of all the fact that he is alone. Investigation reveals what he did that day – it all matters – his habits are examined, his behavior scrutinized, his trunks rifled, and a balance sheet is drawn up at the hospital giving the contents of his stomach. Dying, the last private act we perform, is made public: the murder victim has no secrets.

So, somewhere in Garcia's house, a passport was found, an American one, and that was when the Malaysian police contacted the Embassy in Kuala Lumpur. I was asked to go down for the death certificate, personal effects, and anything that might be necessary for the report to his next of kin. I intended it to be a stopover, a day in Johore, a night in Singapore, and then back to Ayer Hitam. Peeraswami had a brother in Johore; Abubaker, my driver, said he wanted to pray at the Johore mosque; we pushed off early one morning, Abubaker at the wheel, Peeraswami playing with the car radio. I was in the back seat going over newspaper clippings of the two murders.

In most ways they were the same. Each victim was a foreigner, unmarried, lived alone in a house outside town, and had been a resident for some years. In neither case was there any sign of a forced entry or a robbery. Both men were poor, both men had been mutilated. They looked to me like acts of Chinese revenge. But on planters? In Malaysia it was the Chinese towkay who was robbed, kidnaped, or murdered, not the expatriate planters who lived from month to month on provisioner's credit and chit-signing in bars. There were two differences: Tibbets was British and Ismail Garcia was American. And one other known fact: Tibbets, at the time of his death, was planning to go back to England.

A two-hour drive through rubber estates took us into Johore, and then we were

speeding along the shore of the Straits, past the lovely casuarina trees and the high houses on the leafy bluff that overlooks the swampland and the marshes on the north coast of Singapore. I dropped Peeraswami at his brother's house, which was in one of the wilder suburbs of Johore and with a high chain-link fence around it to assure even greater seclusion. Abubaker scrambled out at the mosque after giving me directions to the police headquarters.

Garcia's effects were in a paper bag from a Chinese shop. I signed for them and took them to a table to examine: a cheap watch, a cheap ring, a copy of the Koran, a birth certificate, the passport.

'We left the clothes behind,' said Detective-Sergeant Yusof. 'We just took the valuables.'

Valuables: there wasn't five dollars' worth of stuff in the bag.

'Was there any money?'

'He had no money. We're not treating it as robbery.'

'What are you treating it as?'

'Homicide, probably by a friend.'

'Some friend.'

'He knew the murderer, so did Tibbets. You will believe me when you see the houses.'

I almost did. Garcia's house was completely surrounded by a high fence, and Yusof said that Tibbets's fence was even higher. It was not unusual; every large house in Malaysian cities had an unclimbable fence or a wall with spikes of glass cemented on to the top.

'The lock wasn't broken, the house wasn't tampered with,' said Yusof. 'So we are calling it a sex crime.'

'I thought you were calling it a homicide.'

Yusof smirked at me. 'We have a theory. The Englishmen who live here get funny ideas. Especially the ones who live alone. Some of them take Malay mistresses, the other ones go around with Chinese boys.'

'Not Malay boys?'

Yusof said, ‘We do not do such things.’

‘You say Englishmen do, but Garcia was an American.’

‘He was single,’ said Yusof.

‘I’m single,’ I said.

‘We couldn’t find any sign of a mistress.’

‘I thought you were looking for a murderer.’

‘That’s what I’m trying to say,’ said Yusof. ‘These queers are very secretive. They get jealous. They fight with their boy friends. The body was mutilated – that tells me a Chinese boy is involved.’

‘So you don’t think it had anything to do with money?’

‘Do you know what the rubber price is?’

‘As a matter of fact, I do.’

‘And that’s not all,’ said Yusof. ‘This man Garcia – do you know what he owed his provisioner? Eight hundred-over dollars! Tibbets was owing five hundred.’

I said, ‘Maybe the provisioner did it.’

‘Interesting,’ said Yusof. ‘We can work on that.’

Tibbets was English, so over lunch I concentrated on Garcia. There was a little dossier on him from the Alien Registration Office. Born 1922 in the Philippines; fought in World War II; took out American citizenship in Guam, came to Malaysia in 1954, converted to Islam and changed his name. From place to place, complicating his identity, picking up a nationality here, a name there, a religion somewhere else. And why would he convert? A woman, of course. No man changed his religion to live with another man. I didn’t believe he was a homosexual, and though there was no evidence to support it I didn’t rule out the possibility of robbery. In all this there were two items that interested me – the birth certificate and the passport. The birth certificate was brown with age, the passport new and unused.

Why would a man who had changed his religion and lived in a country for nearly twenty years have a new passport?

After lunch I rang police headquarters and asked for Yusof.

‘We’ve got the provisioner,’ he said. ‘I think you might be right. He was also Tibbet’s provisioner – both men owed him money. He is helping us with our inquiries.’

‘What a pompous phrase for torture,’ I said, but before Yusof could reply I added, ‘About Garcia – I figure he was planning to leave the country.’

Yusof cackled into the phone. ‘Not at all! We talked to his employer – Garcia had a permanent and pensionable contract.’

‘Then why did he apply for a passport two weeks ago?’

‘It is the law. He must be in possession of a valid passport if he is an expatriate.’

I said, ‘I’d like to talk to his employer.’

Yusof gave me the name of the man, Tan See Leng, owner of the Tai-Hwa Rubber Estate. I went over that afternoon. At first Tan refused to see me, but when I sent him my card with the Consulate address and the American eagle on it, he rushed out of his office and apologized. He was a thin evasive man with spiky hair, and though he pretended not to be surprised when I said Garcia was an American national I could tell this was news to him. He said he knew nothing about Garcia, apart from the fact that he’d been a good foreman. He’d never seen him socially. He confirmed that Garcia lived behind an impenetrable fence.

‘Who owned the house?’

‘He did.’

‘That’s something,’ I said. ‘I suppose you knew he was leaving the country.’

‘He was not leaving. He was wucking.’

‘It would help if you told me the truth,’ I said.

Tan’s bony face tightened with anger. He said, ‘Perhaps he intended to leave. I do not know.’

‘I take it business isn’t so good.’

‘The rubber price is low, some planters are switching to oil palm. But the price will rise if we are patient.’

‘What did you pay Garcia?’

‘Two thousand a month. He was on permanent terms – he signed one of the old contracts. We were very generous in those days with expatriates.’

‘But he could have broken the contract.’

‘Some men break.’

‘Up in Ayer Hitam they have something called a “golden handshake.” If they want to get rid of a foreigner they offer him a chunk of money as compensation for loss of career.’

‘That is Ayer Hitam,’ said Tan. ‘This is Johore.’

‘And they always pay cash, because it’s against the law to take that much money out of the country. No banks. Just a suitcase full of Straits dollars.’

Tan said nothing.

I said, ‘I don’t think Garcia or Tibbets were queer. I think this was robbery, pure and simple.’

‘The houses were not broken into.’

‘So the papers say,’ I said. ‘It’s the only thing I don’t understand. Both men were killed at home during the day.’

‘Mister,’ said Tan. ‘You should leave this to the police.’

‘You swear you didn’t give Garcia a golden handshake?’

‘That is against the law, as you say.’

‘It’s not as serious as murder, is it?’

In the course of the conversation, Tan had turned to wood. I was sure he was lying, but he stuck to his story. I decided to have nothing more to do with the police or Yusof and instead to go back to the house of Peeraswami’s brother, to test a theory of my own.

The house bore many similarities to Garcia’s and to what I knew of Tibbets’s. It was secluded, out of town, rather characterless, and the high fence was topped with barbed wire. Sathya, Peeraswami’s brother, asked me how I liked Johore. I told him that I liked it so much I wanted to spend a few days there, but that I didn’t want the Embassy to know where I was. I asked him if he would put me up.

‘Oh, yes,’ he said. ‘You are welcome. But you would be more comfortable in a hotel.’

‘It’s much quieter here.’

‘It is the country life. We have no car.’

‘It’s just what I’m looking for.’

After I was shown to my bedroom I excused myself and went to the offices of the Johore Mail, read the classified ads for the previous few weeks and placed an ad myself. For the next two days I explored Johore, looked over the Botanical Gardens and the Sultan’s mosque, and ingratiated myself with Sathya and his family. I had arrived on a Friday. On Monday I said to Sathya, ‘I’m expecting a phone call today.’

Sathya said, ‘This is your house.’

‘I feel I ought to do something in return,’ I said. ‘I have a driver and a car – I don’t need them today. Why don’t you use them? Take your wife and children over to Singapore and enjoy yourself.’

He hesitated, but finally I persuaded him. Abubaker, on the other hand, showed an obvious distaste for taking an Indian family out for the day.

‘Peeraswami,’ I said. ‘I’d like you to stay here with me.’

‘Tuan,’ he said, agreeing. Sathya and the others left. I locked the gate behind them and sat by the telephone to wait.

There were four phone calls. Three of the callers I discouraged by describing the location, the size of the house, the tiny garden, the work I said had to be done on the roof. And I gave the same story to the last caller, but he was insistent and eager to see it. He said he’d be right over.

Rawlins was the name he gave me. He came in a new car, gave me a hearty greeting, and was not at all put off by the slightly ramshackle appearance of the house. He smoked a cheroot which had stained his teeth and the center swatch of his mustache a sticky yellow, and he walked around with one hand cupped, tapping ashes into his palm.

‘You’re smart not to use an agent,’ he said, looking over the house. ‘These estate agents are bloody thieves.’

I showed him the garden, the lounge, the kitchen.

He sniffed and said, ‘You like curry.’

‘My cook’s an Indian.’ He went silent, glanced around suspiciously, and I added, ‘I gave him the day off.’

‘You lived here long?’

‘Ten years. I’m chucking it. I’ve been worried about selling this place ever since I broke my contract.’

‘Rubber?’ he said, and spat a fragment of the cheroot into his hand.

‘Yes,’ I said. ‘I was manager of an estate up in Kluang.’

He asked me the price and when I told him he said, ‘I can manage that.’ He took out a checkbook. ‘I’ll give you a deposit now and the balance when contracts are exchanged. We’ll put our lawyers in touch and Bob’s your uncle. Got a pen?’

I went to the desk and opened a drawer, but as I rummaged he said, ‘Okay, turn around slow and put your hands up.’

I did as I was told and heard the cheroot hitting the floor. Above the kris Rawlins held his face was fierce and twisted. In such an act a man reverts; his face was pure monkey, threatening teeth and eyes. He said, ‘Now hand it over.’

‘What is this?’ I said. ‘What do you want?’

‘Your money, all of it, your handshake.’

‘I don’t have any money.’

‘They always lie,’ he said. ‘They always fight, and then I have to do them. Just make it easy this time. The money –’

But he said no more, for Peeraswami in his bare feet crept behind him from the broom cupboard where he had been hiding and brought a cast-iron frying pan down so hard on his skull that I thought for a moment I saw a crack show in the man’s forehead. We tied Rawlins up with Sathya’s neckties and then I rang Yusof.

On the way to police headquarters, where Yusof insisted the corpse be delivered, I said, ‘This probably would not have happened if you didn’t have such strict exchange control regulations.’

‘So it was robbery,’ said Yusof, ‘but how did he know Tibbets and Garcia had had golden handshakes?’

‘He guessed. There was no risk involved. He knew they were leaving the country because they’d put their houses up for sale. Expatriates who own houses here have been in the country a long time, which means they’re taking a lot of money out in a suitcase. You should read the paper.’

‘I read the paper,’ said Yusof. ‘Malay and English press.’

‘I mean the classified ads, where it says, “Expatriate-owned house for immediate sale. Leaving the country. No agents.” Tibbets and Garcia placed that ad, and so did I.’

Yusof said, ‘I should have done that. I could have broken this case.’

‘I doubt it – he wouldn’t have done business with a Malay,’ I said. ‘But remember, if a person says he wants to buy your house you let him in. It’s the easiest way for a burglar to enter – through the front door. If he’s a white man in this country no one suspects him. We’re supposed to trust each other. As soon as I realized it had something to do with the sale of a house I knew the murderer would be white.’

‘He didn’t know they were alone.’

‘The wife and kids always fly out first, especially if daddy’s breaking currency regulations.’

‘You foreigners know all the tricks.’

‘True,’ I said. ‘If he was a Malay or a Chinese I probably wouldn’t have been able to catch him.’ I tapped my head. ‘I understand the mind of the West.’