‘Welcome, welcome,’ said Sundrum, tightening his sarong and showing me to a chair. He had raised his voice; there were children playing under the window, shouting and thumping against the frail wall of the house.

‘I’m surprised you get any work done, with that racket.’

‘Children,’ said Sundrum. ‘I love them. Their voices are music.’

It was my first visit to Sundrum’s. I had met him at Alec’s Christmas party, where he’d talked about the snow he had always wanted to see. Sundrum had been introduced to me as a teacher. I discovered later that he was a writer as well, Ayer Hitam’s only novelist. And I was moved by that description: the Chekhovian character stifling in an airless provincial town, comforted by his books, puffing his pipe, casting ironic glances at his neighbors and keeping his diary up to date.

‘So you have this symphony every day?’ The children were still at it, yelling and banging.

‘How else could I work?’ said Sundrum. He was half-Chinese, half-Indian and so looked Malay, with a potbelly and a grin. It was a Malaysian grin, the result of the heat, and it seemed cooked into his face. ‘Foreigners say this is a noisy country. I never notice it – perhaps it is because I am so busy.’

‘I’d be embarrassed to tell you how little I have to do.’

‘Writing is my life,’ he said. ‘I realized when I was in jail that life is short. I’ve had to make up for lost time.’

‘You don’t seem the criminal type.’

‘I was imprisoned for my views. It was during the Emergency.’

‘You must have had strong views.’

‘I was held a month and then released.’

‘I see.’ A month’s imprisonment: people got that for letting mosquitoes breed in their back yard. But I was angry with myself for ridiculing his jail sentence.

Sundrum said, ‘I didn’t suffer. I listened to the birds. It is a matter of perspective. Perspective is everything, don’t you agree?’

‘Absolutely.’

‘People come here and write about Ayer Hitam. They are tourists – what do they know?’ He threw open his arms and said, ‘But if you live here it’s different! You have perspective. You don’t hear children screaming – you hear the voices of the future. Music.’

I was sorry I’d mentioned the children. Was he trying to rub it in?

‘This is quite a library,’ I said, indicating the bookshelves, a rare sight in a Malaysian household. A pedestal held a dictionary, which was open in the middle.

‘My books,’ said Sundrum. ‘But what do they matter? Life is so much more important than books. I write, but I know I am wasting my time. Do you know what I always wanted to be?’

‘Tell me.’

‘A gatherer of coconuts,’ he said. ‘Not a farmer, but a laborer – one of these men who climbs the trees. Have you seen them? How they scramble up the vertical trunks? They cling to the tops of the trees and hack at the coconuts.’ He motioned with his hands, illustrating. ‘They defy gravity. And they see more from the tops of those palm trees than anyone on the ground. I have spoken to those men. Do you know what they say? Every coconut is different.’

‘Is that so?’

‘Every coconut is different!’ He said it with surprising energy. ‘They are the true poets of this country. They have perspective. I must say I envy them.’

Coconut gathering didn’t seem much of an ambition. I had seen trained monkeys do it in Ayer Hitam. But Sundrum had spoken with enthusiasm, and I was almost persuaded. I thought: At last, a Malaysian who doesn’t want a car, a passport, a radio, his airfare to New York. He was the first really happy man I had met in the country.

‘I can’t climb the coconut trees,’ he said. ‘So I do the next best thing. I write about it. You see?’

He raised his foot to the low wicker table and with his toe pushed a book towards me. The title in green was The Coconut Gatherer. He said, ‘This is my tree.’

‘I’d love to read it,’ I said.

‘Take it with my compliments,’ he said. ‘It is about a boy who lives in a kampong like this. He is a sad boy, but one day he climbs a coconut tree and sees the town of Ayer Hitam. He leaves home, and the book is a record of his many unfortunate adventures in the town. He is bitterly disappointed. He loses his money. He is starving. He climbs a coconut tree in Ayer Hitam and sees his kampong. He goes home.’ Sundrum paused, then said, ‘I am that boy.’

A Malay woman entered the room with a tray of food. She set the tray down on a table and withdrew, self-conscious as soon as her hands were empty.

‘I hope you’re hungry,’ said Sundrum.

‘It looks good,’ I said.

He urged me to fill my plate. It was nasi padang, prawns, mutton chops, chicken, curried vegetables, and a heap of saffron rice; we finished with gula malacca, a kind of custard with coconut milk and sweet sauce. Sundrum ate greedily, wiping his hands on his sarong.

‘I wish I had your cook,’ I said.

‘I have no cook. I made this myself. That girl you saw – she is just the amah.’

‘You’re not married?’

‘I will marry when my work is done,’ he said.

‘You should open a restaurant.’

‘Cooking is a creative activity,’ he said. ‘I would rather cook than write. I would rather do almost anything than write. For me, enjoyment is going down to the jelutong tree where the old men gather, to listen to the stories of the old days. They are much wiser than I am.’

I couldn’t mock him; he spoke with feeling; I believed his humility to be genuine. And again I was ashamed, for what did I know of the town? I had never spoken to those old men. Indeed, my life seemed to be centered around the Club and the Consulate, the gossip of members, the complaints of Americans. Sundrum said he envied the coconut gatherers, but I envied Sundrum his peace of mind in this green clearing. It was an aspect of life that was so often overlooked, for there was contentment here, and just admitting that made me feel better, as if somehow Sundrum represented the soul of

the people.

After lunch he took me around the kampong and introduced me. My Malay was no good then; I let him do all the talking and I barely understood what he was saying. I was impressed by the familiar way he greeted the old men and by their respectful attitude toward him. And I think that if I could have traded my life for his I would have done so, and changed into a sarong and spent the rest of my days there, swinging in a hammock and peeling prawns.

'Don't forget the book,' he said, when I told him I had to go. He rushed back to the house to get it, and he presented it in a formal, almost courtly way. 'I hope you enjoy it.'

'I'm sure I will.'

'You were very kind to come out here,' he said. 'I know it is not very exciting, but it is important for you to see the whole of Malaysia, the great and the small.'

'The pleasure is mine.'

He took my hand and held it. 'Friendship is more important than anything else. I tell my students that. If people only realized it, this would be a happier world.'

I hurried away and almost hated myself when I remembered that I was hurrying to a cocktail party at Strang's. Now it was clear that Milly Strang wasn't coming back, and Strang was behaving like a widower. He needed cheering up; he would have taken my absence to mean moral disapproval.

That night, after the party, to recapture the mood of my visit to Sundrum's I took up The Coconut Gatherer. I read it in disbelief, for the story was mawkish, the prose appalling and artless, simply a sludge of wrongly punctuated paragraphs. It went on and on, a lesson on every page, and often the narrative broke down and limped into a sermon on the evils of society. The main character had no name; he was 'Our Hero.' I was surprised Sundrum had found a publisher until I looked at the imprint and saw that it was the work of our local Chinese printer, Wong Heck Mitt.

I soon forgot the book, but Sundrum himself I thought of often as a good man in a dull place. He was a happy soul, plump and brown in his little house, and I was glad for his very existence.

It was a year before I saw him again. The intervening time had a way of making Ayer Hitam seem a much bigger place, not the small island I knew it to be, but a vastness in which people could change or disappear.

I had expected to see him at Alec's Christmas party. He was not there, though the party was much the same as the first one. I arrived at Sundrum's house one day in early January, and he looked at me half in irritation, half in challenge, the kind of hasty recognition I had become accustomed to: he saw my race or nationality and there his glance ended. He didn't remember my name.

'I hope I'm not disturbing you,' I said.

'Not at all. It's just that I've had so many visitors lately. And I've been on leave. Singapore. The Straits Times was doing a piece about me.'

His tone was cold and self-regarding, but the room was as before – bizarrely so. The same arrangement of books, the open dictionary, The Coconut Gatherer on the low wicker table, and at the window the children's laughter.

Sundrum offered me Chinese tea and said, 'Listen to them. Some people call that noise. I call it music.'

'They seem pretty excited.'

'They caught a python in the monsoon drain yesterday. That's what they're talking about. The whole kampong is excited. They've probably killed it already.' He listened at the window, then said, 'They have no idea what I do.'

'How is your writing?'

'Writing is my life,' he said. 'I learned that in jail when I had no pencil or paper. But I make up for lost time.'

I said, 'It must have been the worst month of your life.'

'Month?' His laugh was mocking and boastful. 'It was closer to a year! I'll never forgive them for that. And I know who was behind it – the British. It was during the Emergency – they couldn't tell us apart. If you were so-called native you were guilty. You people have a lot to answer for.'

'I'm not British,' I said.

'You're white – what's the difference? The world belongs to you. Who are we? Illiterates, savages! What right do we have to publish our books – you own all the printeries. You're Prospero, I'm Caliban.'

'Cut it out,' I said. 'I'm not an old fool and your mother isn't a witch.'

‘I’ll tell you frankly,’ said Sundrum. ‘When the Japanese occupied Malaysia and killed the British we were astonished. We didn’t hate the Japanese – we were impressed. Orientals just like us drove out these people we had always feared. That was the end; when we saw them fall so easily to the Japanese we knew we could do it.’

‘Really?’ I said. ‘And what did you think when the Japanese surrendered?’

‘I wept,’ he said. ‘I wept bitterly.’

‘You should write about that.’

‘I have, many times, but no one wants to hear the truth.’

‘I take it you’re having some difficulty being published.’

‘Not at all,’ he said. ‘I’ve just finished a book. Here.’ He picked up The Coconut Gatherer and handed it to me. ‘Just off the presses. It’s coming out soon.’

I turned the pages to verify that it was the same book and not a sequel. It was the one I had read. I said, ‘But this isn’t about the Japanese.’

‘It is about self-discovery,’ he said. ‘Do you know what I always wanted to be?’

‘A coconut gatherer?’

He looked sharply at me, then said, ‘I’m not ashamed of it. I can’t climb coconut trees, so I do the next best thing. I write about it.’

I handled the book, not knowing what to say.

‘Take that book,’ he said. ‘See for yourself if I’m not telling the truth.’

It was too late to say that I had already read it, that he had given me a copy on my last visit. I said, ‘Thank you.’

‘I’m sorry I can’t offer you anything but this tea. My cook is ill. She is lying, of course – helping her husband with the rice harvest. I let her have her lie.’

‘This tea is fine.’

‘Drink up and I will show you the kampong,’ he said.

The old men were seated around the great tree; a year had not changed their features or their postures. Seeing Sundrum they got to their feet, as they had done the previous

year, and they exchanged greetings. On my first visit my Malay had been shaky, but now I understood what Sundrum was saying. He did not tell the old men my name; he introduced me as someone who had come 'from many miles away, crossing two oceans.' 'How long will he stay?' asked one old man. Sundrum said, 'After we discuss some important matters he will go away.' The men shook my hand and wished me a good journey.

'What a pity you don't understand this language,' said Sundrum, as we walked back to the house. 'It is music. Foreigners miss so much. But they still come and write about us. And their books are published and ours are not!'

'What were you talking about to those old men?' I asked.

'About the snake,' he said, and walked a bit faster.

'The snake?' No snake had been mentioned.

'The python that was caught yesterday. It is going to be killed. They think it is a bad omen, perhaps it means we will have a poor harvest. I know what you think – a silly superstition! But I tell you I have known these omens to be correct.'

I said, 'Have you known them to be wrong?'

'To you, this must seem a poor kampong,' said Sundrum. 'But a great deal happens here. This is not Ayer Hitam. Every year is different here. I could live anywhere – a schoolmaster can name his price – but I choose to live here.'

I looked again at the kampong and it was less than it had seemed on my previous visit, smaller, dirtier, a bit woebegone, with more naked children, and somewhere a radio playing a shrill song. I wanted to leave at once.

'I have to go,' I said.

'Europeans,' he said. 'Always in a hurry.'

'I've got work to do.'

'Look at those old men,' he said, and turned and looked back at the jelutong tree. 'They have the secret of life. They sit there. They don't hurry or worry. They are wiser than any of us.'

'Yes.' But I thought the opposite and saw them as only old and baffled and a bit foolish, chattering there under their tree year after year, meeting their friends at the mosque, facing the clock-tower to face Mecca, talking about the haj they would never take and

going home when it got dark. Islanders.

Sundrum said, ‘When I was in jail I used to hear the birds singing outside my window and sometimes I dropped off to sleep and dreamed that I was back here on the kampong. It was a good dream.’

‘You’re happy here.’

‘Why shouldn’t I be?’ he said. ‘I’m not like some people who write their books and then go to Singapore or KL to drink beer and run around with women. No, this is my life. I have my books, but what do they matter? Life is so much more important than books. I have no wish to live in Ayer Hitam.’

Ayer Hitam could be seen from the top of a palm tree; for Sundrum it was a world away, a distance that could scarcely be put into words. A year before I had seen him as a solitary soulful man, who had found contentment. Now he seemed manic; another visitor might find him foolish or arrogant, but his arrogance was fear. He had that special blindness of the villager. How cruel that he had turned to writing, the one art that requires clear-sightedness.

I said, ‘You weren’t at the Christmas party this year.’

‘I went last year.’

‘I know.’

‘Were you there? I didn’t know the people well. I went to gather material. I’ve finished with Christmas parties, but I still need perspective – perspective is everything. From the ground, all coconuts look the same, but climb the tree and you will see that each one is different – a different shape, a different size, some ripe, some not. Some are rotten! That is the lesson of my novel.’

We had reached his house. I said, ‘It’s late.’

‘I promised you my book,’ he said. ‘Let me get it for you.’

I heard him crossing the floor of his house, treading the worn planks. No, I thought: every coconut is the same. It takes time to decide that your first impression, however brutal, was correct.

There was no party that night. After dinner I sat down with The Coconut Gatherer. The book was identical to the one he had given me the previous year, the friendly flourish of his inscription on the flyleaf exactly as it was in the other copy. But I read it again, this time with pleasure. I admired his facility, the compactness of his imagery, the

rough charm of his sermonizing. It was clumsy in parts: he had no gift for punctuation. But I could not fault him for these mechanical lapses, since beneath the husk and fiber of his imitative lyricism so much of what he described was recognizably true to me.