For the past week or so, I have been putting off writing my report to the State Department – three pages to sum up my two years in Ayer Hitam – and then, this morning, your letter came. A good letter – what interesting things happen to people your age! You're game, impatient, unsuspicious: it is the kind of innocence that guarantees romance. I'm not mocking you. The woman sounded fascinating. But I advise you to follow your instinct and not see her again. It is possible to know too much. A little mystery is often easier to bear than an unwelcome fact; leave the memory incomplete.

Forgive my presumption. I haven't done my report, and here I am lecturing you on romance. I do think you'll be all right. You had quite a scare in Ayer Hitam – your bout of dengué fever has become part of the town's folklore. Isn't it amazing? What happens after the ghostly episode in the tropical place – the haunting, the shock? Of course – the victim picks himself up and leaves, meets a woman on the plane, and has another experience, totally unrelated to the ghost. Stories have no beginning or end; they are continuous and ragged. But the sequel to the ghost story must be something romantic or ordinary or even banal. I have never believed that characters in fiction vanish after the last page is turned – they have other lives, not explicit or remarkable enough for fiction, and yet it would be sad to think they were irrecoverable.

You mention getting 'culture shock' when you arrived home. I know the feeling. You certainly didn't have it in Ayer Hitam. I'm sure you'll be back here sooner or later, as a contract teacher or whatever. It's fairly easy to get to countries like this; it's very hard to leave, which is why all of us who don't belong must leave. We crave simple societies, but they're no good for us. Now I understand why these rubber planters stayed so long – overstayed their visit, wore out their welcome. We have no business here. Up to a point – if you're young enough or curious enough – you can grow here; but after that you must go, or be destroyed. Is it possible to put down roots here? I don't think so. The Chinese won't, the Tamils can't, the Malays pretend they have them already, but they don't. Countries like this are possessed on the one hand by their own strangling foliage, and on the other by outside interests – business, international pressures (as long as the country has something to sell or the money to buy). Between jungle and viability, there is nothing – just the hubbub of struggling mercenaries, native and expatriate, staking their futile claims.

You asked about Squibb and the others. The others are fine. Squibb is another story. It was he who said, 'I came here for two weeks and I stayed for thirty-five years.' I didn't say anything, but I thought: Those first two weeks must have been the only ones he

spent in this country that mattered.

He is so strange. I found it impossible to read his past; I have no idea what will happen to him. He told me that he had been in the Club dining-room when I entered, my first day in Ayer Hitam. He took credit for recognizing me – he discovered me – and sometime later he gave me the lowdown on the other members. He told me about Angela Miller's breakdown and how Gillespie used to drive an old Rolls. He filled me in on the Club's history – the polo, the cricket, the outings they made to Fraser's Hill just after the war. 'Your people are all over the place,' he said. And they were, too – though now, apart from missionaries and teachers, there isn't an American between here and the Thai border. 'Gillespie's an old-timer,' he said. 'Plays polo. An American who plays polo is compensating for something. I've got no time for him.' And yet Gillespie's murder shook him.

'Bachelor,' he said, when I told him I wasn't married. 'But you're too young to be a confirmed bachelor. Singapore's the place for a dirty weekend, by the way. Evans goes down now and again. Strang used to go, when his wife was on leave. His wife's devoted to him – you won't get anywhere with her. The Prossers are about your age, but they're new, and dead keen on the drama group. The locals are thick as two planks, the Sultan's a bloody bore, the missionaries don't speak to me, Angela's a rat-bag, and Alec Stewart's an odd fish. Yes, he's an odd one, he is.'

I looked at Squibb.

He said, 'He likes the lash.'

I must have made a face, but he went on talking. Already he had taken me over. He had put it this way: if the people didn't like him, they would not take to me; if he found them odd, so would I. He wanted me on his side.

I hesitated, hung fire, or whatever the word is. I made him understand that I'd see for myself. And all this time, in the way a person offers information in order to get a reaction, he was searching my face, listening hard. He wanted to know what I was up to. What were my weaknesses? Did I drink, whore around, do my job? And, of course, was I queer?

I'm afraid I disappointed him, and perhaps many others. Typically, the Consul is a character: a drinker, a womanizer, reckless, embittered, a man with a past, an extravagant failure of some sort with a certain raffish charm. I wasn't a character. I didn't drink much. I was calm. I thought I might make an impression on him, but if I did – on him or the others – it was not because I was a bizarre character, but because I was pretty ordinary, in a place that saw little of the ordinary.

I tried to be moderate and dependable, for the fact is that colorful characters – almost

unbearable in the flesh – are colorful only in retrospect. But Squibb was angling. He wanted me on his side, and he searched me for secrets. He saw nothing but my moment of revulsion when he told me about Alec: 'He likes the lash.' I listened attentively: the Club Bore, that first hour, strikes one as a great raconteur.

He was what some people call a reactionary; he was brutal and blind, his fun was beer. It had swollen his little body and made him grotesque, a fat red man who (the memory is more tolerable than the experience) sat in the Club at nine in the morning with a pint of Tiger and a can of mentholated Greshams, drinking and puffing. Smoke seemed to come out of his ears as he grumbled over the previous day's Straits Times.

I used to wonder why he stayed, when others had gone. Like many so-called reactionaries he had no politics, only opinions, pet hates, grudges, and a paradoxical loathing for bureaucracy and trust in authority. He wanted order but he objected to the way in which order was established and maintained. If he'd had power he would have been a dictator – it was true of several other expatriates in Ayer Hitam – but weak, he was only a bore.

He wanted my friendship. He shared his experience with me: don't wear an undershirt, take a shower in the morning when the pipes are cold, keep drinking water in an old gin bottle, have a curry once a week, don't drink brandy after you've eaten a durian. That kind of thing; and as for unresponsive people, 'Beat them,' he said, 'just beat them with barbed wire until they do what you want.'

It was so simple with Squibb – you punished people and they obeyed. He had a theory that most people were glad to be dominated: it was the tyrant's contempt. 'They like to be kicked,' he'd say, and his mouth would go square with satisfaction. 'Like Alec.'

You know some of this. Wasn't it odd that he didn't like anyone – not anyone? That should have told us something about him. And he had failed at being a person, so he tried to succeed at being a character – someone out of Maugham. What tedious eccentricity Maugham was responsible for! He made heroes of these time-servers; he glorified them by being selective and leaving out their essential flaws. He gave people like Squibb destructive models to emulate, and he encouraged expatriates to pity themselves. It is the essence of the romantic lie.

Fiction is so often fatal: it hallows some places and it makes them look like dreamland: New York, London, Paris – like the label of an expensive suit. For other places it is a curse. Ayer Hitam seemed tainted, and it was cursed with romance that was undetectable to anyone who was not sitting on the club verandah with a drink in his hand.

'He likes the lash,' Squibb had said, about Alec, and he looked for my reaction.

I couldn’t hide it. I was shocked. I made a face.

‘The whip,’ he said, giving a little provisional chuckle of mockery. ‘His missus beats him. The rotan. Pain. Why else would he be here? He was cashiered from the Royal Navy for that.’

I didn’t believe it, and yet what Squibb had said frightened me: it was cruel, pitiful, lonely agony. I could almost picture it. What if it was true? We lead lives that even the best fiction can’t begin to suggest. Angela: was she the person who had a nervous breakdown, the queen of the Footlighters, or the Sultan’s mistress? She was all three and much more, but no story could unify those three different lives; they were not linked. The truth is too complicated for words: truth is water.

Squibb was animated that day, revealing secrets, trying to obligate me with his own rivalries. What more damaging fact could one learn about a doctor than that he was engrossed by pain and had another life as the victim in some strange sexual game?

I had said, ‘What will you say about me?’

‘Ever tried it – the lash?’

I closed my eyes.

He said, ‘Don’t take it so hard,’ and he gave me a gloating, rueful laugh.

It was a brief conversation; it initiated me, it disturbed me deeply, and it affected everything that happened after that. I was circumspect with Alec, and Squibb went his own way. Because of what Squibb had said, I never got to know Alec very well. If Alec had a secret it was better left with him. And we got on fine because I never inquired further. He must have thought I was rather distant with him, and there were times – when he looked after you, for example – that I thought he was unnecessarily hard, confusing pleasure with its opposite and seeing pain as a cure, or at least a relief.

The person who appears to have no secret seems to be hiding something; and yet there is a simpler explanation for this apparent deception – there probably isn’t any secret. We tend to see mystery in emptiness, but I knew from Africa that emptiness is more often just that: behind it is a greater emptiness.

I didn’t like Squibb well enough to look for more in him. I liked Alec too much to invade his privacy. For the most part they stayed on the fringes of my life in Ayer Hitam. I didn’t depend on them. I never felt that I had been admitted to the society here, but I began to doubt that society of that kind – ambitious order – really existed.

Sometimes, after a session at the Club, Alec would say, ‘I’ve got to be off. My missus is

waiting.' And I would get a dull ache in my soul imagining that he was going back to his bungalow to be whipped. It made me wince. I didn't want to think about it. But the one fact that I had been told made me suspicious of everyone I met, and when I realized the sort of double life that people led – and had proof of it – I felt rather inadequate myself. What was my life? My job, my nationals, my files: hardly enough. I wasn't a character; it was the other people who mattered, not me. I've always been rather amused by novelists who write autobiographically: the credulous self-promotion, the limited vision, the display of style. Other people's lives are so much more interesting than one's own. I am an unrepentant eavesdropper and I find anonymity a consolation.

So I have had an interesting two years. And it looks even better – more full – now that it's nearly over: teeming with incident. Those were hours and days. I've already forgotten the months and months when nothing happened but the humdrum hell of the tropical world, the sun directly overhead and burning dustily down; steam and noise; the distant shouting that might have been some deaf man's radio, the fans blowing my papers to the floor and my sweaty hand losing its grip and slipping down the shaft of my ballpoint pen. Who wouldn't reminisce about ghosts, and even miss them a little?

I never made a friend here. If I had I think I would have seen much less of this place. I am old enough now to see friendship as a constraint. Perhaps, as you say, we will meet again. But I'm rambling – I was telling you about Squibb. Is there more? Yes, if you stay long enough, 'look on and make no sound,' and if you're patient enough, truth – colorless, odorless, tasteless – comes trickling out. Because no one forgets what he has said more quickly than the liar.

'You'll have to have a party,' said Squibb, when he heard I was being posted back to Washington. Need I say our numbers have been substantially reduced? For Squibb, a party these days is a way of excluding the locals – he doesn't count his Malay wife. Remember, I barely know the man.

The party at his house was his idea – drinks. I had never been to his place before. Strang, the Prossers, Evans (he's off to Australia at the end of the month), the Stewarts. Squibb had the good grace to invite Peeraswami, but the poor fellow didn't know which way to turn – he looked at the little sandwiches, the spring rolls, the vol-au-vents. 'This is having meat in it, Tuan?' he whispered. The shapes threw him a bit. Instead of eating, he drank; and he started talking loudly about the merits of Indian toddy. Then: 'What will happen to me when you go?' Perhaps I have made a friend. Poor Peeraswami.

Stewart made a speech: 'Our American colleague' – that kind of thing. Jokes: 'I approve of nudity – in the right places,' 'Keep that bottle up your end,' 'How can you be an expert in Asian affairs unless you've had one?' After this, several embarrassing minutes of Alec's personal history, begun – as such stories so often are – by Alec

shouting, ‘And I’m not ashamed to say –’

Peeraswami took out his hanky and vomited noisily into it. Then he ran out of the room.

As guest of honor, I could not leave until the others made a move. Without realizing it, I was wandering from room to room. Squibb has a library! Military histories, bad novels, Wallace’s The Malay Archipelago, blood and thunder, and the usual bird and flower books one finds in every expatriate household. And souvenirs: sabers, spears, a samurai sword, bows, arrows, hatchets, Dyak weapons, Chinese daggers, a jeweled kris, and a rack of blowpipes that might have been flutes.

Squibb followed me in and boasted about how he’d stolen this and paid fifty cents for that. I saw a similar assortment on the wall of an adjoining room.

‘More treasures,’ I said, and went in.

Squibb cleared his throat behind me as I ran my eye along the wall: bamboo rods, rotans, flails, birches of various kinds, handcuffs. They were narrow, shiny, cruel-looking implements, some with red tassels and leather handles, all on hooks, very orderly, and yet not museum pieces, not gathering dust. They had the used scratched look of kitchenware and – but I might have been imagining it – a vicious smell.

How was I to know I was in his bedroom? The bed was not like any other I had ever seen – a four-poster, but one of those carved and painted affairs from Malacca, probably a hundred years old, like an opium platform or an altar. I stared at it a long time before I realized what it was.

I said, ‘Sorry,’ and saw the straps on each post.

‘No,’ said Squibb.

If I had left the room just then I think it would have been more embarrassing for him. I waited for him to say something more.

He picked up a bamboo rod and flexed it, like a Dickensian schoolmaster starting a lesson. He tapped one of the bedposts with it. The headboard was inlaid with oblong carvings: hunting scenes, pretty bridges, and pagodas. He said, ‘It’s a Chinese bridal bed,’ and whacked the post again.

Something else was wrong: no mosquito net. I was going to comment on that. I heard the hilarity of the party, so joyless two rooms away.

Squibb, puffing hard on a cigarette, started to cough. The whips on the wall, the flails, the rods, black and parallel on their hooks; the heavy blinds; the dish of sand with the burned ends of joss sticks. I had discovered the source of his old lie, but this was not a truth I wanted to know in detail. If he had said, 'Forget it,' I would have gladly forgotten; but he was defiant, he lingered by the bed almost tenderly.

He said, 'And this is where we have our little games.'

Straps, whips, stains: I didn't want to see.

He laughed, his old gloating and rueful laugh. Two years before he had prepared me; and I had been shocked, I'd failed the test. Now I didn't matter: I was leaving in a few weeks. We were strangers once more, and he might not even have remembered how he'd made this all Alec's secret.

He put the bamboo rod back on the wall and glanced around the room. He seemed wistful now. What could I say?

'It's time I went,' I said. He nodded: he released me.

This was a week ago. Since then he has treated me with sly and distant familiarity. I know his secret; it is not one I wished to know, but it makes many things clear.

So much for Squibb. Are you sorry you asked? There is no scandal. Apparently, I was the only one who didn't know. The scandal is elsewhere – the language barrier once more: I'm accused of calling the Sultan's daughter a pig. Being a Muslim, she objects. Actually, I called her a prig. It's all I'll be remembered for here. But that's another story.

My bags are packed, my ang pows distributed. As soon as it became known that I was leaving I was treated as if I didn't exist: I was a ghost, but a rather ineffectual one. Once a person signals that he is leaving he ceases to matter: he's seen as disloyal; his membership has ended, conviviality dies. But Peeraswami is still attentive: he covets my briefcase. I think I'll give it to him if he promises to look after my casuarina tree. I've already recommended him for a promotion; I'll deal with the others later, in my own way.

Now I must write my report.