

# JOSS *and* GOLD

Shirley Geok-lin Lim

Afterword by Leong Liew Geok



THE FEMINIST PRESS  
AT THE CITY UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK



Copyright © 2001 Shirley Geok-lin Lim  
Afterword copyright © 2001 Leong Liew Geok  
All rights reserved.

Published by The Feminist Press at The City University of New York  
365 Fifth Avenue, New York, New York 10016  
feministpress.org

**Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data**

Lim, Shirley.

Joss and gold / Shirley Geok-lin Lim.

p. cm.

ISBN 1-55861-265-3

1. Americans—Malaysia—Fiction. 2. Chinese—Malaysia—Fiction.  
3. Women—Malaysia—Fiction. I. 4. Kuala Lumpur (Malaysia)—Fiction.  
Title.

PS3562.L459 J6 2001

813'.54—dc21

00-069145

CIP

This publication is made possible, in part, with public funds from the National Endowment for the Arts and the New York State Council on the Arts, a State Agency. The Feminist Press would also like to thank Mariam K. Chamberlain, Helene D. Goldfarb, Florence Howe, Joanne Markell, and Genevieve Vaughan for their generosity in supporting this publication.

Text design and composition by Dayna Navaro.

Printed on acid-free paper by Transcontinental Printing in Canada.

06 05 04 03 02 01 6 5 4 3 2 1



To Charles Bazerman, as always, with gratitude

*Book One*

**CROSSING**  
~

**KUALA LUMPUR/PETALING JAYA**

**1968-1969**

## One

**L**i An was rushing to get to her second class on time. A new tutor, she was timid with her students, arts freshies just arrived at the university in June. The big dark Ceylonese student, Gomez, had looked at her during the first meeting as if to say he didn't believe she understood Keats's "Ode on Melancholy" as well as he did. His superior stare had made her doubt her decision to begin the year with the poem, considering there were easier passages in the practical criticism collection every first-year student had to read. She had selected the "Ode on Melancholy" on impulse, although she had presented it to the class with an air that suggested she had carefully planned to teach it. That was her first mistake, and being late now was her second.

Henry had taken the car early. He was always up early and in his biology lab by 7 A.M. She had insisted on keeping her motorbike after they married. The 125 cc Honda couldn't keep up with the Norton and Suzuki motorbikes and speeding taxis on the Federal Highway, but it carried her fast enough, with lots of wind in her face.

Six students were waiting for her in the tiny seminar room—four girls, Gomez, and a pale Chinese boy who had made the wrong selection in courses. Wong, inarticulate, giggled nervously when he didn't understand something, but when she spoke to him about changing to a different subject, he refused. He had heard the geography lecturers were notori-

ous for failing their students, and he hoped she would be easier on him.

It wasn't more than a few minutes after the hour, but the students looked at her reproachfully, as if she had stolen something from them. This morning she had prepared a prose passage from D. H. Lawrence's *Sons and Lovers*, and she read it aloud, relishing the overflow of sibilants like spiced chickpeas in her mouth. When the students ventured no comments, she spoke with increasing recklessness, ignoring the giggles from the corner and Gomez's glare: "You see, Lawrence suggests that physical attraction, sex, is a powerful force."

The Chinese girls lowered their eyelids. Pretty Eurasian Sally listened intently, and Mina, the Malay student whose father worked in the Ministry of Agriculture, who said she wanted to be an actress, and who Li An knew admired her, remained silent, seemingly unconvinced.

When the hour was over, Li An sat in the empty room, unable to move. Was this struggle of English words against unyielding minds what she wanted?

Only last year she had been cramming for the exams and couldn't have enough of English literature. The library was crowded with students—a hundred seemed to be waiting on line at the reserved books counter—and so cold with air-conditioning that everyone wore sweaters and cardigans. She sat upstairs, reading old copies of *Scrutiny* and copying fine phrases by F. R. Leavis, occasionally tearing off her sweater and running outside in the blazing sun to the back of the faculty lounge, where she bought sizzling flaky curry puffs and smoked two cigarettes in a row. All the English lecturers seemed glamorous and witty, even portly ones like Mr. Mason, and Jane Austen's novels dazzled her with social comedy that unflinchingly ended in civilized marriage.

Henry was very kind to her that year. One afternoon in the library she fainted from lack of sleep and food and too much reading, and he offered her a ride back to the residential hall in his car. That evening he visited her with jars of Brand's Essence of Chicken in their distinctive green boxes and a bottle of eau de cologne. He was a chemistry graduate student

whose father owned rubber estates, a brick factory in Segamat, a lorry transport company, and blocks of housing estates in various towns, including a few in Petaling Jaya. Henry, the eldest son, was living with his father's second wife in Kuala Lumpur while he was studying at the university.

"You can't be serious!" Gina said, when Li An began seeing Henry. "He's such a China-type! What can see in him, lah?"

"Plenty of money, man," Ellen mocked. "Now no more hawk-er food, only air-con coffee shops."

"Henry, oh Henry, buy me diamond ring, big like pigeon egg," Gina yodeled unbelievably.

They pummeled each other, hooting and laughing.

Of course Li An wasn't serious! She was wild, smoked a pack of cigarettes a day, spent the rest of her small scholarship funds on petrol for her secondhand Honda, and hardly ever washed her three pairs of Levi's.

She brooded on Henry's love in between studying for finals. It was like being on two different planets.

In the library there was her body's silence—a silence that was filled by the conversation she was listening to intently, in a world of insidiously overpowering words. To be an English student was the most enviable position in the world! Everyone should be jealous of me, she thought.

Outside the library she swung her dirty blue-jeaned leg over the Honda and turned the throttle till it roared, grinning at her Indian friends, Raja, Maniam, and Paroo. A swaggering teddy boy, she rode her bike bent over the handlebars. The Indian students made a space for her in the lecture halls whenever she rushed in late, having sped her motorbike all over Kuala Lumpur and Petaling Jaya.

But later, in Henry's white Mercedes, on her way to dinner at his second mother's house, she thought of his father with fear. Mr. Yeh, a short thick man in his late forties, spoke Hokkien with a loud brutal voice. He wore sleeveless undershirts and transparent tetralyne shirts that didn't conceal the powerful rolls of muscle in his chest. His hair was cropped short like a Hailam butcher, and if you didn't know who he was, you could easily mistake him for one. She had seen butchers just like him, standing behind blood-splattered wooden

trestles in the wet markets, hair bristling under their bloodied singlets, cleavers in massive hands, looking as meaty as the unskinned haunches of pork hanging on giant hooks beside them. A rich odor surrounded them, the fragrance of lard cakes, and she imagined them like impassive murderers before their execution.

Second Mrs. Yeh was dressed in an expensive lace blouse and London-imported skirt. She studied Li An carefully.

"Hello, Auntie," Li An said. She wriggled her toes in the worn Bata sandals and hoped the stain from the afternoon's curry puff wouldn't show on her jeans.

Second Mrs. Yeh, she suspected, could probably see right through her cotton T-shirt to the discolored bra straps. Auntie had those peculiar women's eyes that could detect immediately where a fingernail had cracked and not been filed. Whenever she looked at Li An, her glance stayed on the frayed thread, on the loose button.

Auntie was very different from Li An's mother. Li An's father had died when she was three, and her mother had remarried a year later. Then, beset by baby after baby, she had never had time, it seemed to Li An, to look at her. Li An's stepfather, Han Si-Chun, a rubber trader who spent many weeks each year traveling to plantations in the interior, had commanded every atom of her mother's body ever since—in childbearing, housecare, cooking, and dutifulness to his family, his loud bossy sisters and infirm yet ever-present parents. No one ever talked about her father, whom, Li An concluded, was supposed never to have lived if her mother was to prove a good wife to her second husband. Her older brother escaped to Sarawak when he was seventeen and seldom wrote. In her turn, with a scholarship to the university in Kuala Lumpur, she had fled Penang and a home more pathetic than an orphanage, she told herself. In an orphanage at least one could feel sorry for one's life. Her mother had asked for no pity, and all Li An's British children's books forbade self-pity and imagined adventure instead—flight, exploration, conquest. She could find no sentiment in her childhood.

So it surprised her that she found Auntie's judgment important, indeed, longed for her approval. Auntie, who

held her queenly head high, seemed quite pleased that Henry had found a common modern college girl like her.

People like Second Mrs. Yeh, she thought, didn't need books. Their lives were straightforwardly one-way. All their moments were filled, but they never had to rush, for they had already arrived. For them, life was settled and smooth.

Such women saw details. Details were important for them. Auntie told Li An how she had shopped for blankets with exactly the correct peach shade to match her sheets and bedroom curtains and walls. She showed her the blankets while they were still in their clear plastic covers.

"How lovely!" Li An patted the plastic, hiding her impatience.

Pleased, Auntie showed off the reddish brown jadeite carving of the goddess of mercy, Kuan Yin, that she had bought in Hong Kong last month. "Very good bargain," she said in her pleasant slow voice, stroking the stony flow of hair on the Kuan Yin.

Li An tried to memorize the jadeite's translucent veins, its gold color pouring through polished brown and red streaks like running fire. One day, she thought, when she became an older, confident woman like Second Mrs. Yeh, she might be examined on how much she knew of the world of stones and things, and this was her first lesson.

They ate giant black mushrooms steeped in wine, cold abalone, paper-wrapped chicken, bok choy fried with prawns, curried pork. Li An took small helpings, but still her jeans grew uncomfortably tight. Did Henry eat like this every evening? The food was delicious, but too much of it and it became hateful, the tastes clashing in an indigestible mass.

Auntie gave orders to the servants who carried the dishes in, Mr. Yeh silently ate several large servings of meat and vegetables, and Henry talked about Professor Forster's experiments with mimosas.

"You know, whenever you touch them, the leaves close up? Forster is studying where the sense of touch is located in the cells and measuring the degree of sensitivity—why the mimosa doesn't close when the wind blows on it but

reacts to human breath. If there's a trigger threshold, where the trigger is encoded genetically."

Henry spoke with concentration, paying no attention to the food and eating whatever Auntie put on his plate.

"I'm thinking of switching to biochemistry. Forster is a geneticist, and he wants me to make the move."

"Why, it's almost like poetry," Li An said. "That's the touch-me-not, isn't it? I prefer the name to mimosa. Mimosa sounds like a European flower, alien. We played with touch-me-nots for hours when we were kids." She remembered the delicate branching foliage with its pink-purple globular flowers. Common weeds, they grew thick with painful prickly thorns over the wasteland by her home in Penang.

"I'm not sure what poetry is." Henry smiled with a slight embarrassment. "But Forster's work is exciting. Biogenetics is the real science of life. All the exciting discoveries are waiting to be made there."

He didn't understand the fuss Li An made over words. "Words are more a bother than anything else," he explained. "They create problems for people like me who can't use them very well, and they make problems for people like you who use them too well."

He didn't tell her he knew most people found him boring because he was shy and couldn't express his feelings, and they thought her wild because she was always expressing her feelings. He thought he understood her very well. She was a shy girl who used words to cover up her insecurity in the way he used silence to disguise his shyness.

When he had picked her up off the library floor where she had fainted, she had seemed an undernourished parcel of fragile bones. But when he came by the residential hall that evening, she had recovered and become brash and talkative. Full of ideas, spilling long sentences, she dazzled him. He suspected she was putting on an act, but she entertained him even if he didn't take her talk seriously.

She was being entertaining again tonight, talking on the similarities between their two courses of study. "The real science of life! That's exactly how I see literature!"

Henry marveled that Li An was so enthusiastic, running after every little bit of excitement.

"What literature does is connect things, even the most unlikely things. Like Donne and the Metaphysical poets. He connected sex with a flea bite, love with a compass. That's what we have to do in our lives, connect with others."

Henry glanced at his father. Although Ah Pah generally spoke only Hokkien and Malay, he understood English and could speak it if necessary. Henry wasn't sure what Ah Pah would make of her patter, but he wished she hadn't mentioned sex. Old-fashioned Chinese couldn't be expected to understand that kind of talk.

"Do you want some fruit?" Second Mother interrupted. "We have Australian plums."

He looked at his Second Mother to observe her expression. She was absorbed in moving the dishes to the side of the table.

Li An shook her head. "No, thank you, Auntie, I'm full already. It was a very nice dinner."

Relieved, Henry returned to his mushrooms. Ah Pah, he knew, never bothered with family affairs. People expected his father to demand certain responsibilities of him, the eldest son, but that had never been the case. He had done well in school, and Ah Pah had allowed him to proceed in his studies without once talking to him about his plans for the future. His brothers were still in high school, and Mark, who appeared to like business, was expected to work in one of his father's companies.

Henry was interested only in science. From an early age he had been fascinated by the properties of materials, how matter changed properties when combined with other elements, how reactions could be measured and predicted so that the entire world might be seen as a matter of measurements and reactions. One needed only to observe phenomena carefully to understand and predict how nature worked. Second Mother's calm self-absorption predicted that Ah Pah would find Li An acceptable.

None of his friends talked to him about Li An. They were all pushing to finish their master's and win a fellowship to some university in Europe or America. Many were planning to marry before continuing; it would be too difficult being alone in a strange country, they confided. Their girl-

friends were nurses or elementary school teachers who cooked well and smiled a lot.

He had not been interested in a girl before. He had been too shy, and the kinds of girls who went out with the science students were shy plain ducks also, so he had never tried.

Li An, however, was different. She talked too much and too fast, which embarrassed him. She liked roaming on her motorbike like a boy. Her tight jeans showed her thighs and calves, and her smoking made her conspicuous in a crowd. Men picked her out immediately as someone they could tease. She was like a Western girl—bold, loud, and unconcerned about her reputation.

He liked her bright round face that buzzed with ideas, but he wanted to marry her because her body drove him crazy. In the evenings when he kissed her good night, with her breath in his mouth, he wanted to swallow her. In her men's clothing, she was still soft and curved. He trembled each time he held her, the longing was so bad.

That night he drove to Lake Gardens and parked under the tall African tulip trees. He switched off the car lights, and they were silent in the fuzzy darkness for a long time, breathing the moist cool air.

Backed up in her corner, Li An looked out of the car window as the shadows slowly yielded to her sight. The faint glow from a sky seeded with stars and a quarter moon showed neatly scythed fields and tall reeds concealing dim puddles.

He felt a painful pressure in his upper chest and twisted his body to evade it. He resented that she could sit so near and seem indifferent, her profile hidden in a reflectiveness that he suspected didn't include him.

This must be what a man feels when he is in love, he thought, this jealous stab in the chest, this desire to take, to penetrate the other and leave her no space for anything but himself. His voice quivered as he spoke. "What will you do after the exams?"

Li An laughed. "Do?" She seemed to be mocking him. "It depends on the results. If I do well, I'll get a scholarship and go to America."

"America? Why America?" He choked as he repeated the

word. He had not thought she would leave—leave Kuala Lumpur, leave the university, leave him. But then, they had never talked about her plans.

"Why not America? Isn't that where everything is happening? It's so boring here. Nothing ever changes. No one is doing anything, no one is writing poetry, no one is painting, no one is singing, no one is going anywhere. So why not go to America?"

"You're like a child!" He was glad that the anger filling him was easing the pain in his chest. Yes, she was childish, playing at dressing up like a boy when she was already a woman, whining about boredom and roving on a motorbike as if she could chase it away.

"All kinds of things are happening here. This is the time for us to assert ourselves. We are going to be the most important people in the country because we are the people with brains. Malaysia has just become a nation. It's only eleven years since independence, so how can you expect there to be poetry or art yet? It's like science. You have to work every day with your experiments, and then someday you will discover that truth which no one else has found. Malaysia is like an experiment. Going to America is a selfish way of acting."

She had never thought of her life as something belonging to a group, rather than to herself. It was the first time she'd seen Henry angry. He was usually objective and tolerant, like a kind teacher.

"You really believe something is happening here?"

"Happening? Why are you always asking for something to happen? Perhaps when it does you may not like it after all!"

"But nothing ever changes here!" she cried out. "Everybody seems so dull. The girls only talk about boys and worry about their hair and clothes, and the lecturers drone on and on. I don't want to spend my life teaching in some small town, like Mrs. Devi in sixth form, teaching the same history year after year, growing old and stuck in a rut."

"Am I so dull?" He could no longer bear it. His anger had disappeared, leaving his arms weak. He could not raise them to touch her.

He knew he was dull. Short and pallid with unremarkable



eyes, he was pitifully unobtrusive. Although he was successful at work, girls like Li An paid no attention to men like him.

"Please forgive me, Henry."

She put her arms around him and squeezed him as if to comfort a child. He liked the strong way she tightened the pressure around his arms.

Putting her head on his chest, she rubbed it against him. He found the gesture unnerving.

"I don't mean you. You aren't dull at all. The work you're doing on genetics is wonderful! I envy you because you have work that is important. You know where you're going and where you belong. I wish I were a man and a scientist. Then there would be a place for me here. I could be a doctor and learn to cure tropical diseases. Or I could work with tropical plants like you are doing. But all I know is English. The only thing I can do with English in Malaysia is to teach."

He couldn't think with her face so close to him. "Marry me," he said, his cheek against hers. "Marry me, and stay with me. You won't have to teach. I'll pay off your government bond, and you won't be forced to go back to your town. You don't have to work if you don't want to."

His body was shaking as if he was hurting. He closed his eyes as her breath, a warm breeze, went by his ear. His lungs grew congested with fear, and he felt in such danger he could hardly speak.

He had not meant to say it. They had known each other for only three months, since September, and he didn't approve of her. She had a reputation—not a bad one like a loose woman, but a reputation all the same—for being bold and free.

"Oh, no, Henry, you don't know how poor I am." She didn't move away from him. "I have nothing in my life. My father's dead, my mother's remarried someone who doesn't want me in his house, my brother in Sarawak has a child and no time for me. All I will have is my degree."

She dropped her arms and moved away, pressing her back to the far corner of her seat. Her voice was strong and mocking again.

He was confused. Was she saying yes or no?

"I don't care. I have money." He stopped. Did it sound as if he were trying to impress her? "My grandmother left me an inheritance."

He felt ashamed even as he spoke. That wasn't what he wanted to tell her. He didn't want her to marry him for his money.

"You could write, Li An. I'll let you write. You say it's time for Malaysians to write about themselves. You can't write about Malaysia in America."

He wanted to tell her he loved her, but he was too shy.

She wished he hadn't spoken. She had been having a good time looking at the curved bow of the moon and the black drooping branches, thinking that trees were more often black than green to animals that came out at night, when he had begun questioning her.

She thought she understood what Henry wanted when his body trembled, and if he insisted she might be willing. She was curious, and he would be grateful; he wouldn't hurt her.

But then he put his arms around her and put his head on her hair. He was like a little boy silently demanding her attention.

The sliced moon remained unmoving, a stationary section of an illuminated body, unreachable in space.

Like me, she thought. No one can reach me. She was terrified by the power of her isolation. Pity for herself overcame her, and she turned her head up to kiss him.

They married in March, before Li An was offered the position as tutor in the English department. Henry didn't have to pay off her government bond after all. She was still going to teach, but here at the university.

**R**elieved Li An was marrying well, Mrs. Han made no suggestions to delay the wedding. She came to Singapore for the ceremony without her children or her husband, who had long ago stopped acknowledging his stepdaughter's existence except as an unwelcome intruder from his wife's intemperate youth. Henry's mother had decided on the festivities, a combination of traditional and modern; the most important ritual, the tea ceremony, was held in her home.

Outside the large rambling bungalow off Tanglin Road, pink oleander bushes bloomed by the entrance and a tall casuarina trailed long-needed branches along the side of the circular drive. Li An was given Henry's old bedroom, and Henry slept in his brother Mark's room. Mrs. Yeh, showing utmost respect, put Li An's mother in the large bedroom in which Mrs. Yeh's mother-in-law had once slept. After the wedding Mrs. Han was taking the train alone home to Penang, and Li An and Henry would stay at the Shangri-La Hotel for a few days before returning to their new house, which Mr. Yeh had bought for them, in Petaling Jaya near the university.

Li An was struck by how different Henry's mother was from Li An's own mother or from Second Mrs. Yeh. Although Chinese, Mrs. Yeh wore a sarong and kebaya, and chattered in Malay. Unlike Second Mrs. Yeh, she did not speak English. Her buxom body, unconstrained in a cotton chemise, gave the impression of an overstuffed pillow, while Auntie held her

trim body as if it were on a tight leash. Li An's mother, belted and dowdy in a Western dress, kept to the outside of the Yeh family circle, smiling and silent.

Mrs. Yeh appeared to be looking at ten things all at the same time, as if the world were a vague blur of objects and people, and she depended on her amah for everything. Throughout the day she could be heard calling, "Amah, amah! Where's my purse? Amah, did you call for the dumplings? Have you cleaned Henry's suit? Bring me some chrysanthemum tea—I'm so tired I feel ill."

Yet she did no work that Li An could see, except to talk at the same time to everyone around her, stopping only to address someone new who might have walked into the room. Li An's mother seemed pleased to offer Mrs. Yeh an acquiescent ear, agreeing to all her suggestions in soothing sounds that could have been in any language.

The house was full of visiting aunts and cousins. Mr. Yeh, however, stayed with Auntie in a friend's house nearby. Li An was surprised to see how well First Mrs. Yeh got along with Auntie. "Sister," they greeted each other in Hokkien, and Mrs. Yeh insisted on serving drinks herself to her husband and his second wife when they came into the house.

It must be very strange, Li An thought, to have your husband a distant visitor, and to welcome his mistress—even though the Chinese called her a second wife—to your home. She studied Mrs. Yeh, expecting to find hidden jealousy and resentment, but Mrs. Yeh was offering jolly comments about the wedding to Auntie, smiling her shortsighted smile, and seeming really pleased to have everyone, including Auntie and Li An's mother, with her.

The morning of the wedding, Mrs. Yeh and her husband sat on two heavy rosewood chairs in the living room. Li An, wearing a short clinging red dress that she had found in a boutique on Orchard Road, poured tea into small porcelain cups, knelt, and served them to her new in-laws. Mr. Yeh was impassive. Only when Henry knelt and gave him the cup with two hands did he blink and nod his head.

The night before, Li An's mother had whispered to her that as she had come without her husband she did not wish to have

tea served to her. But when Mrs. Yeh led her by the hand to her chair and made her sit down as Henry's new mother-in-law, she sipped the tea that Henry and Li An offered, smiling and giggling even as she protested at the respect shown. While Mrs. Yeh smiled and smiled at Li An, Henry, Mark, and Jing, her youngest son, Li An noticed Auntie standing behind the gathered guests, head erect on her squared shoulders, frowning moodily at the scene.

When the wedding party drove in Mercedes sedans to the downtown office for the civil ceremony, Li An wore the white lace gown with puffed sleeves and the tiara of white satin flowers and tulle, like a flirty veil, that Auntie had picked for her at Robinsons in Kuala Lumpur. She had taken Li An to the fitting, and had carried the gown with her to Singapore.

At the civil ceremony, Auntie stood by Mr. Yeh's side while the two younger sons accompanied Mrs. Yeh. For a moment Li An felt Second Mrs. Yeh was standing in for her mother, who had stayed behind with the guests in the confusion of hurrying to make the appointment on time. "Go, go," her mother had urged when Li An lingered to persuade her to join the Yehs for the drive to City Hall. "Go with your husband and your family."

When Li An said "I do," the strange phrase fell out of her mouth with an unexpected pang, as if she were surrendering something precious or had accepted responsibility for some lifelong task she didn't want.

Henry gave her a big grin, but she put her head down and stared at the fancy lace that gleamed like white metal in the fluorescent lighting. The gown made her look like the brides in photographs that photo studios plastered on their walls to advertise their business. The tulle tickled her forehead, and she had to restrain herself from scratching. The gown fit so tightly that the long zipper pressed against her spine like a hard rod and forced her to hold herself stiffly even when she wanted to droop and sigh.

But the mood passed. The wedding dinner, shark's fin soup, crab rolls, roast squab, and what seemed like twenty other dishes, also passed.

Li An sat with the six Yehs, herself now a Yeh, and poked at the squab that still looked like a pigeon, its delicate soy-stained wings folded under a puffed chest. The white-clothed table was littered with fragile wing bones. She couldn't make herself eat. Noisy gnashing and chewing from the forty tables, each with ten guests, shattered against her ears. She imagined she could hear a brittle crunch of teeth against the frail tendons of lovely blue-brown birds in flight.

She was wearing her straight red dress again. Gently, under the tablecloth, she rubbed her stomach to ease her nausea.

She had wanted to sit with Ellen and Gina, but of course that was impossible. A wedding was a family affair. She moved her head unobtrusively, trying to spot them.

They had been called the Three Musketeers at the university, for they had done almost everything together. When she wasn't alone, she was with Ellen and Gina. They had rooms on the same floor, called each other in the mornings for breakfast, showered in the evenings at the same time, walked at night to the library together, holding hands and joking. They separated when they had lectures, for Ellen was studying economics and Gina history. Then Henry came along.

After she told Ellen and Gina she was marrying Henry, they stopped making fun of him. A barrier had come up between them. Gina began walking back to the residence hall with Paroo, who was smitten with her. He carried her books, ignoring the university men who passed them on motorbikes yelling, "Ho, Paroo."

For the last few months of their final year, Paroo waited in the television room each evening until Gina came downstairs. "Oh, it's you again!" she'd say. "What, you want to walk with me to the library, yah?"

Paroo, almost six feet tall, a fair-skinned Hindu Punjabi, wore a crushed look around Gina, who was only five feet tall, and he responded in the gentlest voice to her abusive humor.

"Hey, why you never talk, lah?" she demanded of him whenever Li An joined them. "Your mother make you scared of woman. You one big baby."

Among them, Gina's family was the most traditional. Her father was the principal of a Chinese school in Johore. Her mother had been active in the Kuomintang movement in China before she had come to Malaya in an arranged marriage, and Gina was the only one in her family to have an English education. All her brothers and sisters had been educated in their father's school, but to mark their new British citizenship in the Federated States, her parents had sent Gina, the youngest child, to an English-language school.

Gina had a Chinese name, Wei-hua, but called herself Gina after Gina Lollobrigida, whose movies she loved.

"I hate everything Chinese," she declared, "including tight-fitting cheongsams, greasy dim sum, kung fu movies from Hong Kong, and boring Chinese boys!"

For a time she made friends with the Malay students. "Everyone should marry Malay, because that's the future of the country," she repeated to whoever would listen.

But the Malay boys didn't care for her. She was too talkative and playful. The Malay girls shunned her, and the boys began to talk about her, which someone or other was sure to report back.

With Li An and Ellen, she showed a superior Chinese side. "We Chinese," she said. "We Chinese are brainy people. We Chinese know how to make money. We Chinese know how to respect the past. We Chinese have the oldest history in the world. We Chinese are the people making this country run."

At the same time she disliked the Chinese she met. Walking out of a shop, she fumed, "Chinese are so money-minded. It's not the British who are a country of shopkeepers; Chinese also got shopkeeper mentality."

Once, passing by a table crowded with Chinese students in the silent library, she whispered loudly, "Aiyo! China-types only good for mugging. Everything must learn by heart. Got no brains otherwise." The students stared at her, then returned to their books, not having seen her at all.

She thought their flat cheeks and noses the ugliest faces on earth, called their straight hair oily, and was repulsed by their slender build. "Chinese men got no sex appeal," she declared. "All like tapeworms. I like Technicolor men with backbone."

When Li An met Gina's father at the beginning of their second year, she found him stern and strict. "Wei-hua, carry your bags, ah!" he ordered Gina as he stood by the car with her bags still in the trunk, and then looked Li An up and down as if to check on her qualifications to be Gina's friend. "He's like a king cobra, ready to strike," she told Ellen.

After the exams Gina returned to Johore, where her father had arranged a teaching position for her at the local high school, and Paroo returned to his family in Ipoh. He had not come with Gina to Singapore, although Li An had invited him to the wedding.

Li An and Ellen couldn't see Gina living with her Chinese family in a small town full of Chinese-educated families. She had enjoyed too much freedom during the three years of university studies.

Ellen was even more Westernized than Gina. It was because Ellen was always talking of America that Li An had first begun to think she would like to go there also. "But, of course, you can afford to go," Li An said enviously. "You're rich!"

Ellen's father owned a successful stationery store and a bookshop in Kuala Lumpur, and she was the only daughter in a family of three. Much spoiled, she received a Hillman Minx in her first year at the university so she could drive the short distance home for visits during the weekends.

She had grown up reading all the comics and Western magazines that her father's bookshop carried, beginning with *Superman* and moving on to *Teen*, *Seventeen*, *True Confessions*, *Time*, and *Life*. The bookshop attracted tourists and expatriate shoppers, and Ellen spoke English with an exaggerated American accent, imitating the white people she met there.

She sometimes spoke English with what she thought was a French accent. A Frenchman had come by the bookshop a few times, trying to persuade her father to carry French newspapers like *Le Monde*. He had taught her some French phrases, and she sprinkled her jokes with these phrases whenever she was in a good mood.

"Parlez-vous français? Oui. Je t'aime toujours." Ellen ran these words through, varying the sequence every so often, like a clever parrot rewarded for showing off her words.

The Frenchman left Kuala Lumpur after a few weeks, but Ellen never forgot him. He was a hero to her, with his romantic language full of rolling consonants and seductive vowels.

But she didn't like any of the boys she met at the university, although they liked her. Big boned, with full pointy breasts, she looked more like Gina Lollobrigida than Gina did. Men usually stared at her with watering mouths. Her hips were unusually curved for a Chinese, and in jeans and an expensive American sweater she attracted even the white teachers, who usually acted as if students were a faraway mirage to whom they airmailed their lectures. Mr. Pound, who had come out of England just two years earlier, had asked a male student about Ellen, and the gossip soon went around that she could have Mr. Pound any time she wanted.

Ellen, however, preferred being with Li An and Gina. "Humph!" she'd sniff. "All these men want only one thing. They all have dirty minds."

She was not happy when Li An took up with Henry, and she became depressed when Gina and Paroo began dating.

It was Gina to whom Ellen was really close. In the first two years at the university Ellen had roomed with Gina. When Li An visited them, Ellen taught them nonsense songs she had learned from the Western tourists at the bookshop. They sang their favorite again and again, beginning softly and ending at the top of their lungs with boisterous laughter.

Everybody hates me,  
 Nobody loves me,  
 Guess I'll go eat worms.  
 Big fat ones and skinny little ones,  
 Oh how they wriggle and squirm.  
 I'll bite off their heads  
 and suck out their juice  
 and throw their skins away.  
 Nobody knows how I can thrive  
 on worms three times a day.

Each time they finished singing the song, they tickled each other under the arms and ended up wrestling on the bed.

Li An knew Ellen missed the good times, when they were three together. What, she wondered, was ahead for them now, separately?

Auntie, sitting next to her, nudged her with her elbow. "You should eat a little from each dish," she urged softly. "The family will think you don't like the dinner or that you are proud."

The waiter had already removed the squab and was slicing fillets from the large steamed snapper. Li An looked at the snapper's huge eye, turned gelatinous in the ginger wine.

Celebrating a wedding with slaughtered birds and fish is not a good omen for anyone's future, she thought rebelliously. We should have driven north to the Cameron Highlands and been married by an Anglican pastor, with only a gardener and a cook for witness. We would have had cucumber sandwiches by ourselves in front of a fire, and I would have drunk Darjeeling tea with real cream. I would have brought my copy of Wordsworth's poems and read the "Intimations" ode to Henry.

She was certain Henry had never read the poem. But would he have understood what Wordsworth meant by "splendour in the grass" and "glory in the flower"?

She remembered the actress Natalie Wood in a movie with the title *Splendor in the Grass*, which was about young love, heartbreak, and death. At her wedding the only dead things were birds and fish. She knew Henry, who found her hand on her stomach and led her up to each of the thirty-nine tables to wish their guests yam-seng, would never break her heart.

Ellen and Gina, sitting together, giggled like old times. They had paired off naturally, having traveled together in Ellen's Minx, and were sharing a room at a small hotel.

"Yam-seng, yam-seng! Drink up!" Henry's relatives, his father's associates, friends and their wives, all kinds of strangers drank to their good health and happiness.

Gina said above the shouts, "Samseng, samseng!" and Ellen waved her glass of Hennessy brandy tipsily to Gina's heretic cry of "Hooligan, hooligan!"

### Three

**T**hree months after the wedding, Ellen called and suggested they meet for lunch to discuss how they could help Gina and Paroo.

Gina was still teaching history at the Chun Hsien High School and came up to Kuala Lumpur only during school holidays. Then she met Paroo, who would come down from Ipoh.

Gina and Paroo had become a despairing couple. Over rounds of Tiger Beer at various pubs, they complained endlessly of their families' disapproval, usually to Ellen, who lent them her flat and went to live with her parents whenever Gina came into town.

They were an unlikely romantic pair. Li An couldn't imagine what they talked about when they were alone together, except their despair. They were like a pair of lapsed believers, hating their Chinese and Punjabi communities, and clinging to each other to make up for everything they'd lost.

The Bistro was dark and frosty with air-conditioning. Li An couldn't see anyone's face at the tables, and everyone whispered like spies. The smell of fatty lamb chops and stale mustard circulated in the blowing air, providing a foreign excitement indoors, away from the afternoon's humidity and glare.

"Hss, hss, I'm here," Ellen whispered, as Li An walked between the tables and banquettes, peering at the diners while trying to avoid appearing nosy. She was already drinking a beer,

### CROSSING

and the waitress was waiting at the table before Li An could slide into her seat.

"Two San Miguels," Ellen ordered. "You want lamb chops or spring chicken?"

"They've got fried mee?"

"No fried mee," the waitress interrupted. "Only Western food here."

"Two lamb chops." Ellen didn't wait for Li An to choose. "Bring mustard."

"You shouldn't have ordered the beer for me. I'm riding the Honda today, and one beer goes right to my head."

"Don't worry, man. You don't have to finish it."

Li An knew Ellen meant she would drink her own second beer and then finish Li An's also. After graduating with a Second Lower in economics, Ellen had worked for the Federal Bank, hated the bureaucracy, joined the Overseas Chinese Bank, hated the managers—all swollen-headed men, she said—quit, was looking for another job, only not teaching, and thinking of applying to do a master's at an American university. Her father paid her bills and gave her an allowance while she was making up her mind about her future. Each time Li An met Ellen, they drank beer. Ellen would have three in a row. The beers loosened her tongue, and she talked for hours in a drawling half-American accent.

"What are we going to do about Gina and Paroo?"

"Do? What can we do?" Li An sipped the San Miguel cautiously. The waitress had left a large head of suds in the glass.

"They should either marry or separate."

"Looks like they want to get married. I can't understand why they don't just run away and do it. After all, they don't need anyone's permission."

"You know Gina is scared of her father."

"So what? Who isn't scared of her father? But this is the twentieth century. We are all Malaysians. What is this nonsense about cannot marry Indian, cannot marry Chinese? Even Malays and Chinese are marrying each other now."

The lamb chops arrived, slippery and tough. Li An struggled with her dull knife and sawed at the gray undercooked meat. Thin blood oozed under the blade.

"You've never understood Gina!" Ellen swallowed the last bit in her glass and reached for the second. "Gina's putting on an act. Actually she's insecure underneath. That's why she gets along so well with Paroo. They're both fakes and cowards. People think Paroo is tough because he's six feet tall and a Punjabi. You know, like the Punjabi guards at the Overseas Chinese Bank? But he's a softie inside. Gina tells me he cries more than she does."

Li An reached with her napkin and wiped the foam mustache off Ellen's upper lip.

"Thanks. Well, if we don't take charge of their lives, they are really going to be ruined."

"I don't see how they are being ruined. Besides, no one can take charge of anyone else's life."

"Li An, you are one of the most selfish people I've ever met." Ellen chewed a piece of lamb fat. "Just because you are happily married to a rich husband you've forgotten your friends. Now you're an important English tutor, going to be an important English professor, all your old girlfriends are out of the window."

Ellen had said this so often Li An didn't mind her.

"Look, why don't we arrange a civil wedding for them the next time they come to Kuala Lumpur? Then their families can't interfere anymore. Paroo and Gina can find jobs teaching here, and you can take care of them as much as you wish."

In the semi-darkness she could see Ellen grin.

"You are so naive," she said, drawing out the last word. "First, they have to sign to request the marriage. Second, they are bonded and can't just leave their jobs. And third, they are afraid their families will reject them."

"Oh, I can't stand this weakness!" Li An thrust her arms out so violently that she spilled some beer. "Who cares about families? If they love each other, what does it matter what the parents say? Sometimes I think Gina enjoys making a fuss. She wouldn't marry Paroo even if she could. He's an excuse for her not to make a decision about her life. He's a spineless jellyfish, and she's using him for her own crazy reasons. She's determined to make her life miserable, and she's having a good time crying and carrying on with him."

She knew she was talking too loudly. Even as she spoke she was sorry for speaking as she did.

The last time Gina and Paroo had come to Kuala Lumpur for a weekend, they had spent more time with Ellen and Li An than alone.

"My mother, she cries every day. She says she is already arranging a marriage for me with a young college lady from New Delhi, her uncle's friend's daughter. She is every day showing me her picture, although she says I shouldn't look because it's like taking the young lady's virtue away. Quite pretty girl. But how to marry a stranger?" Paroo crossed his ankles, appearing like the man of the house in bare feet and lounging on Ellen's new rattan rocker.

"Hell, stranger!" Gina sat cross-legged on the floor beside him. "Your mother thinks she's Indian, so cannot be stranger. Not like me, Chinese girl. How to make me part of her family, eh?"

Listening, Li An could see how someone might consider it ludicrous for Gina and Paroo to marry. She saw Paroo at home with a pretty dark Hindu wife in a green-and-red sari carrying a solemn-eyed child in her arms. The house would smell of turmeric and sandalwood, and Ganesha would be smiling by an altar in the corner of a neat living room, elephant's trunk upraised for Deepavali visitors. This should be Paroo's future, Li An thought.

And Gina? Gina should never marry. She was too difficult, too unhappy, too confused.

No clear picture of Gina's future came to Li An, only rooms visited, like Ellen's, with fashionable glass-topped coffee tables and beer glasses leaving wet rings on them. No vision of a Chinese marriage came with Gina, only single women joshing each other, walking through shops and restaurants in large cities, heads together companionably like flocks of blue and gray pigeons pecking at life together.

Perhaps this was because she couldn't imagine Gina as other than what she had been when they were a trio. She knew it was unfair to dismiss Paroo so lightly. After all, she had married Henry, and she had changed. Paroo must have changed Gina in some way also.

"Ho, so you agree that Paroo is useless?"

What was Ellen smiling at, Li An wondered resentfully.

"That's two of us," Ellen continued. "But Gina thinks she can't live without him. She writes these miserable letters, ten pages long, about how she loves his Punjabi soul, how he is so pure, how he even smells different from Chinese men, like a manly flower. Can you imagine that, a manly flower?"

For a moment they hooted as in the old days, but the feeling of abysmal hilarity quickly vanished.

"She doesn't know how her letters hurt me." Ellen coughed to clear her throat. "Every day, ten long bloody pages, going on and on about her misery and Paroo's pure love."

"Why don't you just not read them?"

"Oh no, there may be something else in them. Sometimes she remembers me—and you—and then she does tell me a bit about herself in Johore."

Li An felt hopeless. It all seemed rather boring—Ellen's intense interest in Gina, Gina's unhappy affair with Paroo. It reminded her of her tutorials, her intense unhappy interest in language, and the discussions that went on and on, saying the same thing in different ways while the secret of it all, the mystery of the life behind the words, was never talked about. "Well, then, what do you suggest?"

"Gina should marry Paroo. Then she can decide whether that's what she really wants." Ellen finished the second beer.

Li An looked at her watch. She had promised herself she would do some reading at the library in the afternoon. Besides, she wanted Ellen to leave before she could order another beer.

"Here, have mine," she said, pushing her half-filled glass over. "You know that's not the way to do things. You decide whether you want to marry first, before you marry."

"But you didn't do that," Ellen said, her face in the glass. "You married without deciding."

"Oh, shut up!" She thought for the thousandth time that Ellen should have taken English. Ellen's fascination with European accents, her admiration for everything Western, and her quickness of mind would have made her as good an English student as herself.

"I made the right choice, didn't I? Even if I didn't make it. Henry's a wonderful husband. What do you know about men, anyway? You don't even like them. I bet you'll remain a virgin all your life."

"Since when does losing your virginity make you a bigger expert on men? Does making a hole in the earth make you a farmer?"

Li An laughed. It was impossible to hide anything from Ellen. Ellen saw with a witch's eye. Li An didn't mind marriage, it was only the boredom she minded—but Ellen insisted on seeing that Henry was the reason for her boredom.

If it wasn't for Henry, Li An didn't know what she would do. Probably drink like Ellen, or get messed up in some miserable affair like Gina. It was only the first month of tutoring at the university, and already she was tired of the routine.



**T**he next tutorial meeting was better. She had picked a George Herbert poem.

Sweet day, so cool, so calm, so bright,  
The bridall of the earth and skie,  
The dew shall weep thy fall tonight,  
For thou must die, . . .

This time every student approved of her choice. Something about death appealed to Sally, Gomez, Mina, the Chinese girls, and Wong. They were all enthusiastic about the sentiment of making something spiritual out of death, something stronger than wood or sweets, something that lasted longer than a human life. She left the seminar room thinking perhaps it wasn't so terrible to be an English teacher if she could get everyone to agree on one beautiful poem.

Ellen was trying a new job as an assistant manager at the Cold Storage supermarket and had not called her in five days. It was good to be by herself for a while, Li An thought, smiling as she entered the faculty lounge to buy a pack of cigarettes. She noticed the tall American because he was also looking for cigarettes.

"You teach here?" he asked. "Can you ask him if he has any filters?"

She gave Ratnam an amused smile. "Ratnam understands

English. He's just too embarrassed to speak it to you. Dia nak rokok filter," she said to Ratnam, who never minded her bad Malay.

Ratnam ducked his head under the counter to check his cigarette store.

"I'm American," the stranger said, as if it explained his ignorance. "Chester Brookfield." He stuck out his hand.

It was hairy and sweaty. She was sure it wasn't clean.

She shook it delicately, still reticent around white people—unlike Ellen, who had seen them steal books and cheat on bills. The only white people Li An had met were British teachers and lecturers, and she associated whites chiefly with governors and other colonial officials, and with the great Romantic poets and novelists about whom F. R. Leavis wrote. Every white person in the university seemed to be superior and aloof, and she avoided the lecturers when she could.

Chester was different, she supposed, because he was American. For one thing, he didn't have an important job. He was teaching woodworking at the Petaling Jaya Vocational High School.

Woodworking, he explained, was carpentry as an art. You made dowels, fitted joints and pegs, and didn't use screws, nails, or glues. Instead, you planed wood to make joints so tight and smooth that water would not leak out of a wooden pail, and a dresser drawer would pull in and out as if on grease.

Like poetry, she thought, but she didn't dare say it in case he disagreed.

"Lee Ann?" he said, his voice making a melodious upturn below his long pinched nose.

"No, Li An," she corrected him, beating out the syllables in a spondee.

But he couldn't get it right. "Lee Ann, okay?"

His voice seemed naturally lazy, his words slid one into the other like a smooth ride, and she relaxed and smiled, "Okay."

Chester was taking Malay lessons at the university after teaching his morning woodworking classes. His classes at the Vocational High School had not been going well. In fact, only three students had registered for them. No one wanted to be an artisan-carpenter in Malaysia, he said exasperatedly. The

three students came because they wanted to hear about America, and they spent the entire morning asking questions. "How big is America? Is it bigger than Malaysia? England?" "Where you live? What? Con-ne-ti-ket? Oh, New England? New England has Hollywood?" "How rich is America?" "Why you keep your hair long? All Americans keep long hair?"

The Malay language lessons were just beginning. He knew how to say "good morning," "thank you," and "how are you?" and he used these words as often and charmingly as he could. She saw that Chester badly wanted people to like him. He didn't have time for other Westerners, because he spent as much time as he could with Malaysians.

But he didn't keep to one group. He had Chinese friends, who soon included Henry and herself, and Indian friends like Dorisammy and Gopi, and Malay friends like his roommates, Abdullah and Samad.

Being in the Peace Corps, he didn't have much money, but that only made him seem more likable. Not that he borrowed money or asked for anything. When he and Li An started meeting for lunch, he insisted on paying for her. But he wouldn't buy newspapers or shop at stores like Robinsons because, he said, he didn't have the money.

Henry liked Chester. She had invited Chester home for dinner that afternoon after they had spent the lunch hour talking about woodworking and Malaysian attitudes toward manual labor.

"People don't build their own furniture," she told him, puzzled by his classes. "We don't repair anything. If something goes wrong with the roof? Why, Henry gets a laborer to repair it. If the door gets loose? I don't know. I suppose Henry will get a carpenter to fix it. If I need a bookcase and don't have the money to buy it? That doesn't happen. If I'm the type that needs a bookcase, I'll have the money to buy one. Otherwise I won't be reading books."

He looked at her incredulously. "Do you mean only rich people read books here?"

She thought of Second Mrs. Yeh. Rich people she had met didn't read books at all. "I mean the middle class," she

replied smugly. *Middle class* sounded academic; she felt she was claiming the status of a university lecturer by saying it.

He laughed. "You can't fool me. I've been here for only four weeks, but there's no way you can convince me that the shopkeepers and restaurant managers and bank cashiers read books. That's your middle class."

She was humiliated. Listening to him she felt ignorant of her own society.

When he came for dinner, she asked Letchmi to make a Malay meal, the most Malaysian food she could serve the American newly arrived from New England. While she was checking the food in the kitchen, Chester and Henry talked about the discovery of the structure of DNA. Chester told Henry about experiments that a biochemist at Princeton was doing with protein nuclei, and Henry asked polite questions about cellular structures.

She was glad she had asked him home. She was determined to adopt him and show him that Malaysia was a modern country, not backward as he had been told during his Peace Corps training.

"What kind of literature do you teach?" Chester asked after he had stuffed himself with rendang and chili kang-kong and rice. She was surprised at how he could eat the spicy food in huge gulps without any complaints. "Perhaps I was a Malay in another life," he laughed when Henry commented on this ability. "Actually I've been eating Malay food with my roommates, and I've grown accustomed to the heat."

She showed him the practical criticism text, a mimeographed stapled collection of typed poems and passages from the sixteenth century to contemporary times. She was familiar with every piece, for she had written on all the selections when she was a student.

Chester turned the pages and began to laugh. He laughed so hard he fell off the armchair and the yellow sunflower cushion fell with him.

"I don't see what's so funny," she said, picking the cushion off the floor and pretending to dust it.

"This is too rich! I can't believe you are teaching this stuff here. Why, there's nothing here but English poetry and

excerpts from British novels. What can your students learn from this?"

She wanted to push the cushion into his face. "This is a collection of the best in English literature. There's Donne, and Keats, and A. E. Housman, Lawrence, George Eliot, Dickens, even the most contemporary like Hopkins . . ."

He laughed harder, thumbing the pages like a gambler rifling through a stack of cards. "Hopkins? Gerard Manley?" He began reading aloud from the page, "I caught this morning morning's minion," then asked, "What's he got to do with Malaysia? And Housman? I'm not sure I've heard of him."

She snatched the textbook from him, glad to find him ignorant on one thing. "There," she said, finding the page and returning the book to him.

He read the poem aloud while Henry listened with a sympathetic smile.

Into my heart an air that kills  
From yon far country blows:  
What are those blue remembered hills,  
What spires, what farms are those?  
That is the land of lost content,  
I see it shining plain,  
The happy highways where I went  
And cannot come again.

He chanted the words, exaggerating the rhythm and lifting his eyebrows at the images.

She knew he was making fun of the poem, declaiming the words *spires* and *farms* with mock relish. But at the same time she couldn't help appreciating the music of the English words. The killing air came out of the words and echoed in her body even as Chester and Henry were smiling at the absurdity of the ideas. Her body went quite still. How beautiful! she thought, and felt the poem making her a different person.

Then Henry began to laugh loudly.

"Give that back to me!" she cried, reaching for the text.

The two men were immediately silent.

"Don't get so mad! It's not a sacred book, like the Bible.

Look, I don't mean to be rude, but it's no good teaching these kinds of poems any more. This is all British culture, get it? British. We had a revolution and threw them out with the tea bags, so I know what I'm talking about. You've got your own culture. That's what you should be teaching." Chester offered her the text with two hands as if in a peace offering.

"But it's not culture I'm teaching. It's literature. It's language, words, images, feelings . . ."

"The English language, you mean. English literature, English words, English images."

"Well, aren't you speaking the English language, too? Did you throw it out with your tea bags? How come you don't have your own American language? What would it be? American Indian? Eskimo?" She took the text gently, as if he had battered it, and like a mother she were going to heal its wounds.

"Li An can win any argument," Henry said proudly.

"You should be in politics then, not English literature." Chester stressed *English* as if it were a dubious term.

"I'm in literature," she corrected him, "except the literature is written in the English language. I've read American literature too, you know, and a lot of American literature is as English as Housman. Like Pound and Eliot and Henry James. What do you think of them, going off to Britain and living outside of the United States most of their lives? Yet Professor Sanders included them in the American literature course. They were some of the most important American writers we studied."

Chester shrugged. "I majored in anthropology. I think artifacts are important, things people make for their daily lives. I haven't studied too much literature, especially the kind that gets taught. I don't think I can learn as much about people from books as from the things they make and use every day. Like pots and pans, and clothes, and sleeping materials, and statues for worship."

Boring! she thought, but she was too polite to say it. Instead she asked, "So, have you learned anything from your classes?"

"Not from my woodworking students. Except that working with your hands is not valued here. No, I've learned more from my roommates and from the Malay lessons. You know, Malay is the only real culture in this country."

"What do you mean?" Henry wanted to know.

"It's the original thing. People are still living it, not like Hopkins and what's his name, Housman—poetry that comes from somewhere else."

"And the Chinese?" Henry asked.

Chester pushed his long brown hair off his face, a woman's gesture that shocked Li An. She noticed that his hair grew in a clear pointed widow's peak in the middle of his high forehead. It had reddish tints like Auntie's jadeite Kuan Yin, and glittered like a live animal.

"The Chinese aren't really Malaysian, are they?" he answered. "They're here for the money. They speak Chinese and live among themselves. They could as easily be in Hong Kong or even in New York's Chinatown."

Henry's cheeks were spotted with red, and his eyes were yelling louder than his words. "What does that make Li An and me? My family? My friends? We don't want to be in Hong Kong or what you call Chinatown. Our traditions are Chinese, but that doesn't make us less Malaysians. What makes Malay a real culture and Chinese not real? Are you not real here in Kuala Lumpur and only real in America?" Under his breath he muttered in Hokkien, "Red-haired ghost."

She was grateful for Henry's uncharacteristic rudeness. She felt they formed a united pair in their outrage.

"You better watch out, Chester," she said in a sisterly tone, holding Henry's hand. "Saying things like that could get you killed. Oh, I'm joking," she continued as Chester sat up, alarmed. "You wouldn't know that recently people here have been having the fiercest arguments about what is a Malaysian. You sound just like the ultra-Malay politicians who want to kick the Chinese out of the country. My mother's family has been in this country for five or six generations, and some of the Malays are really immigrants who have just arrived from Indonesia in the last few years. You can't make any judgments based on who or what is 'original.' Sure, the Chinese traditions came from China, but Islam came from Saudi Arabia, didn't it? And no one says it's not original. Everything in Malaysia is champor-champor, mixed, rojak. A little Malay, a little Chinese, a little Indian, a little

English. Malaysian means rojak, and if mixed right, it will be delicious."

"Rojak? That hot salad with mango and bean curd and peanuts?"

"And lots more. You see, what you are saying is quite wrong. Chinese and Indians are also Malaysians here. What matters is what you know you are, inside." She put her hands to her chest. "Give us a few more years and we'll be a totally new nation. No more Malay, Chinese, Indian, but all one people."

"Hey, Lee Ann," Chester said, beaming, "you almost sound like an American."

Chester looked glum the next time Li An saw him. She had been going to the lounge every afternoon, hoping to meet him there, but it was more than a week before she saw him coming in to buy cigarettes from Ratnam.

"Whatever you have must be catching," he said. "The headmaster has switched me from woodworking to teaching English. The Peace Corps told him it would have to be woodworking and he agreed, but now he says he really needs another English teacher, not a carpenter."

She laughed maliciously. "You'll be teaching Donne and Shakespeare and Hopkins?"

"Worse. He caught me singing folksongs to my students. You know," Chester sang a line, "To everything, turn, turn, turn." He grimaced as Li An applauded. "They wanted to learn American songs. But based on that he thinks I can teach the 'General Paper'—writing essays and answers to comprehension questions. Now the students expect me to write essays for them to copy and memorize for exams. I don't understand why everyone wants to learn English. It's not going to do them any good. No one seems to understand that the British are gone."

"But you're not British. You're American, and you're here."

"Well, you people sure are going to have some problems."

She bit her nails, annoyed. "I don't see any problems. Why is a language a problem?"

He stared at her through the cigarette smoke and pushed his hair back nervously. "My roommates have been telling me things. They don't like it that I'm teaching English. They call it the language of the bastards."

"In English?" She made her voice sarcastic.

"You don't understand. I'm just visiting. I don't live here. Hell, I don't want to be responsible for anything here. In the Peace Corps we're not supposed to interfere with a country's politics. You know, Lee Ann, you should be doing something else."

Her good humor at seeing him again was gone. "Why do you worry about me? I was going to offer to bring you to Pusat Besar, the new Malay bazaar, but you're so whiny, better forget about it, lah!"

"Now you're talking like my roommates," he said, smiling. "Okay. We go, lah."

It was strange having Chester behind her on the seat. She thought everyone stared at them as the Honda roared down Batu Road. He was heavy, and the bike couldn't move as fast, but she liked the way his hand rested lightly on her shoulder. He was so much taller that as he spoke she couldn't hear him above the wind, and he had to bend to talk into her ear.

The new Malay bazaar had opened just last week. Strings of ceremonial palm and decorative paper flowers still hung between the stalls, but there were few shoppers. The stalls were crowded with carved wood statues, crises, serving spoons of buffalo horn, the distinctive black and white of Kelantan silver, and all kinds of batik cloths—folded in sarong lengths, laid out as tablecloths and napkins, and swaying from poles in long tunics and skirts. Each stall displayed the same goods.

The shopkeepers sat on chairs by their stalls, sullen and ill-at-ease, as if they would rather be somewhere else. Everything smelled new and artificial. Business was not good.

She didn't want to buy anything. The Malay bazaar was for tourists, but Chester was the only tourist in sight. "So many things to sell, and no one to buy!" she said lightly, although she felt oppressed by the sight. "You'll have to buy something."

Finally he picked out two pieces of checked sarong cloth

for himself. Abdullah and Samad wore sarongs like these around the house, and he wanted to surprise them with his own.

"Wait," he said when they got back to the Honda. He took the key from Li An, gave her his package, and straddled the machine. "Get on."

She liked to feel the air speeding by with her eyes closed. He was not as reckless as she was, and his tall trunk sheltered her from the stink of afternoon traffic. The railway station with its arabesque of Ali Baba minarets passed in a flash. The motorbike wove in between the packed lines of cars leaving the city, then Chester stopped by an open shack near Brickfields, an area so crowded with immigrant Indians that she had never dared visit it.

"My favorite tea place," he said. "Come on."

They squatted on low rickety stools. Flies buzzed over the tables and tin plates of lentil cakes covered with wire meshing that lined the counter. The Indian cook, chubby and bare-chested with a stained white dhoti carelessly wrapped over his round stomach, poured the beige-colored tea in long streamers from one metal container to another, stretching the liquid into a shape.

The tea was hot and sweet. Sweat immediately sprang up on her cheeks and the nape of her neck. She felt hopelessly out of place, but Chester was munching a slice of fruitcake with every sign of satisfaction.

"I come here every day. Best tea in town."

She stared at the unwashed concrete as black as a dirt floor. Clusters of flies were dipping their proboscises in puddles of what must have been orange squash. She was glad the tea was burning hot.

"Where did you learn to ride a motorbike?" she asked, turning away from the flies to look at his flushed face with its sharp lines, so unlike Henry's face.

"Bermuda. We used to go to Bermuda for winter vacations."

Bermuda. The word struck her like a cymbal. Chester had ridden a motorbike in Bermuda. He had been everywhere—America, Bermuda, now Kuala Lumpur. He seemed to her rich in experience, a prince passing through, while she was a frog sitting in a well.

"I don't have a license. Samad says the police will never stop me because I'm white, orang puteh."

It was almost five. Henry would be home soon. Without looking at him, she said, "I have a license. And I have to be back before six."

He got off the Honda at a bus station near the university and she rode home alone, arriving in time for a shower before Henry returned from the lab.

Ellen knew at once that something was happening.

"Nothing's happened, stupid!" she protested. "Henry likes him. He's a friend."

"Where can you hide?" Ellen said, her eyes watchful. "When a woman has the itch, the whole world can see it."

"Oh, rubbish!" Li An had not wanted to meet Ellen for lunch. She had been going to the lounge every afternoon hoping to meet Chester there. They had run into each other this way several times, and he had taken her on her Honda each time to some sight or other in Kuala Lumpur. They had even ridden to the Batu Caves.

She climbed the more than one hundred steps in the silent sizzling afternoon humidity gladly. They were the only people at the caves. No one went up those steps in the afternoon, when the equatorial sun was at its cruelest. At the top, inside the cool dark cave smelling pungently of bat droppings and of the marigold garlands that wreathed the stumps swelling out of the earth—lingams, Chester told her, representing the Hindu concept of male godhead and potency—she had almost fainted, and had to sit on the earthen floor with her head below her knees.

He was apologetic. "You're so small, I forget you don't have the same energy I do. No, stay there and keep your head down. The blood has to circulate. That's what causes the blackout, when there isn't enough blood circulating."

She wondered if her cream-colored jeans would be horribly dirty when she stood up. The earth was cool beneath her, dry and firm. She put her head further down and cocked her knees high to keep her balance. The strong smell of the marigolds mixed with the smell of her body coming up between her legs and with the sweet brown smell of the earth.

She breathed slowly and deeply as he had advised her. The dizziness was gradually slowing. Her head ached, but a stable center expanded and her stomach righted itself. She concentrated on blood, which she saw circulating through the millions of veins in her brain, but all the time she was conscious of Chester squatting beside her and patting her on the back. Pat, pat. His hand was large and determined. She wished he would stroke gently instead.

They didn't stay long at the Batu Caves. It was a distance from her house, and he knew she had to be home each day before six. This afternoon she barely had time to get into the shower before Henry arrived home early.

At first she had wanted to tell Henry about the sightseeing trips with Chester. After all, he knew she met Chester occasionally in the afternoons.

Henry approved of the Peace Corps. He knew the Peace Corps was doing good work in some villages with irrigation and improved rice seed. They both admired Chester for volunteering two years of his life to teach in a low-ranking school when he had a degree from Princeton and could be studying at another prestigious university. It was the kind of idealism they had never felt. Only America, they said, could produce such idealistic people.

But she never told Henry. She knew he wouldn't approve of her wasting time.

He himself worked hard every day, going to the lab on Saturdays and Sundays to check on his experiments. His work did not stop on weekends. Plants grew and reacted every day; cells multiplied and died whether one was watching them or not, and he had observations to make, tests to do, notes and reports to write, measurements to calibrate, new tests to carry out, new observations to make, and so on.

Henry had no time to waste, and when she did mention Chester he was relieved she had someone to talk to and didn't complain as much about being bored.

But Ellen knew something was different when she talked about Chester.

"So America has come to you," she joked. "What are you

going to do when you run out of interesting places to see? You'll have to make a decision then." And again, "You'd better not see any sights at night. At night all colors look the same."

Today Ellen didn't talk about Li An and Chester. Gina and Paroo were coming to Kuala Lumpur for the school holidays, and she was trying to arrange something for them.

Gina was being most uncooperative, Ellen complained. She wanted to be with Paroo, but she wouldn't consider marriage, not with Paroo's mother against it and her own family ignorant of his existence.

Ellen had finally written to Paroo, to his school in Ipoh in case his mother opened his mail, suggesting that he request a civil wedding in Kuala Lumpur and present it as a possibility to Gina when they were next together.

Perhaps his flowery manliness would overcome Gina's hesitations, Ellen said cynically.

"I'll talk to Gina," Li An offered reluctantly, "although you are closer to her. You're right. There's no reason they shouldn't marry if that's what they want. She shouldn't be miserable because he is of a different race."

She thought she now could imagine Gina as Paroo's wife. As teachers, Gina and Paroo would serve as models of a new kind of Malaysian. Gina would wear a sari occasionally to prove her adoption of Indian culture. She would tie her long hair back in a neat bun and wear the bindhi, the red mark of the married woman, on her forehead, but otherwise she would be the same Gina, loud and brash, for that was what Paroo loved about her, the spirit that rudely scolded herself and everybody else with laughter. Once Gina was married, whatever drove her crazy about life would quiet down. She would have light-brown children who would look both and neither Indian and Chinese, the new Malaysians.

Chester had told her the problem was the same all over the world. He told her about Martin Luther King, Jr. "People should be judged 'not by the color of their skin, but by the content of their character,' the man said! Of course, Paroo and Gina would both be seen as non-whites in America. But it's the same problem all over the world." Yes, Li An thought, the dream seemed the same for Gina as for Americans.

**W**hen she heard that Paroo had requested and received a date for the civil wedding, Gina screamed so loudly that Li An ducked.

"Bloody nosy idiots!" she screamed. "You all think life is so easy, just go get married, everything comes out right. My father will disown me if I marry a keling-kwei, a Tamil devil. He cannot even tell the difference between Tamil and Punjabi! How can I live with Paroo? I am Chinese. How to hold my head up? My brothers and sisters will jeer at me. All my friends in town, I'll be dead to them. You and Ellen have your own lives to live, you can't take care of me all the time. What am I going to do without my family?"

Paroo sat beside her, his elbows on Ellen's dining table and tears sticking to his lashes.

"Oh, never mind," Gina said, kissing his shoulder. "I know Ellen and Li An put you up to this. They're my best friends, but they don't know our problems. We'll think of something, I promise you."

"Maybe if you come to my house and my mother meets you she will like you," Paroo said in a forlorn voice. "My mother is usually a nice woman, she is very nice to our relatives. She will not treat you badly."

"You don't know my father! He would kick me out of the house if I brought you home. He's already a Confucian, daughters are no good anyway, and if I bring home a Punjabi,

forget it! I'm disowned!"

Paroo must have heard this argument many times before, for he hid his face in his hands and wouldn't say a word.

Finally Li An left, indignant at their cowardice. She would tell Ellen her interference had done no good. She was washing her hands of the two; they could do whatever they wished as far as she was concerned.

But it was Ellen who called her the next morning. "Oh God," she said. Li An had never heard Ellen distraught. "Gina and Paroo. They took sleeping pills. In my flat. The police just called me. I'm going over to the police station. Oh God!"

"What happened to them?"

Ellen's sobs seemed to shake the receiver. "Gina's dead," she wailed. "She's dead. She killed herself."

That fool! Li An thought angrily. Into the mouthpiece she said, "Do you want me to come over? I'll wait for you at your parents' house. You're not going back to your flat now, are you?"

It's strange, she thought. I should be crying, like Ellen. Instead she felt strangulated, as if Gina had placed an invisible bag over her head and she was choking.

Ellen didn't know how long the police questioning would take. Her father was insisting she talk to a lawyer first in case there were problems with the families suing her. She didn't know what was going to happen in the next few days, and would call when they could meet.

Li An had no tutorials to give that day. The morning stretched on as she found herself wandering between the library and the lounge.

The library was crowded with students, although it was still months before the final exams. Groups of young men stationed themselves at the entrances to the different buildings, staring at the young women as they walked to their lectures.

She was safe from these public intrusions. Less than a year separated her from the senior students, but she was a tutor, had passed into the forbidding company of teachers, and had taken on their properties of privacy and power.

How alone she was! There was no one she could share her feelings with, no one to talk to about Gina and Paroo. Ellen had forgotten to tell her what happened to Paroo. Was he dead?



Didn't he take the sleeping pills as well? Where were their bodies? Who was going to tell their parents, Gina's large family clustered in the Chinese school in Johore, and Paroo's nice mother probably grinding her curry paste this morning? Would they be buried together? That was unlikely. Each family would blame the other's child. If my son hadn't met your cheap dishonorable daughter. If my daughter had not met your murderous seducing son.

She found a grassy bank with young nipa palms between two buildings, away from students' lecture routes and the groups of young men buzzing by, and sat in the frugal shade to think out why Gina would have chosen to die rather than to live. But there was something artificial in her solitude. The bright tropical morning, the open campus with its neatly mown grass and carefully planted trees and bushes, in the distance young people moving gracefully, books in arms—none of this corresponded to the confusion in her mind.

She could see Gina's and Paroo's bodies sprawled casually over Ellen's bed, more casual together dead than alive. How was she to make sense of their despair and stupidity, of the apparently numberless and nameless family members they feared?

No breeze stirred on the grounds. The undergrown nipa palm fronds hung still as if etched in the blue sky.

She stood up impatiently. She was only playing with her thoughts. The feeling that was clear to her was this constricted anger, not guilt. If Gina had survived, she would have shaken her for playing the fool.

Then she thought, but Gina isn't in this world anymore. The entire blue sky and the hot still air contained Gina nowhere. Her tears came slowly and reluctantly.

She drank the fresh lime juice she loved and hoped Chester would come by the lounge. She smoked one cigarette after another, thinking, he'll come before this cigarette is down to its stub.

She had finished half a pack before he came in with Abdullah.

Abdullah had completed a degree in history the same year she'd graduated and was a journalist at the new paper. She seldom read the new paper; it was too political, and it published

daily editorials demanding special rights for Malays. Reading it made her feel she was in danger of attack in an alien country, and she refused to buy it. If enough Malaysians refused to buy the new paper, she hoped, it would simply stop publishing.

At first it had made her uncomfortable that Chester and Abdullah were roommates, but then she had spoken to Abdullah on several occasions and found him funny and gentle. She liked talking to him, although his conversation was always about politics. His position was quite clear, but he argued with her subtly, like a good partner observing the patterns and courtesies of an elaborate dance. She didn't feel threatened when he explained the need for Malay special rights intelligently and elegantly; he made it seem fair and just, a readjustment to the fundamental design of the dance. She liked the idea of the Malaysian future as this gentle weaving readjustment and had asked Abdullah why his paper did not present its position in that light. He answered that it did, she was simply not reading it correctly. Now, however, she wished Chester had come alone.

"She's your friend, yah?" Abdullah asked. "The one who kill herself? I call Chester at school soon as I hear. My paper is covering the story, you know, and I recognize her name. She part of your gang, yah?" He gave her a sympathetic glance as he took the seat beside her.

She had sat at the table furthest in the corner, and the ashtray was a mound of stubs.

"Is there anything we can do?" Chester took the other seat, on her left.

She felt comforted. It was a small world after all; one kept running into people one knew or had met in a previous life. Even Gina and Paroo had not been so alone, if only they had taken advantage of their friends.

She looked more keenly at Abdullah. Of course she would rather Chester had come without him, but it was he who had brought Chester here.

"Were you one of the Malay boys Gina flirted with in her second year?"

"Yah, she flirt with everyone. It was Samad she like best—she like the cowboy look."

Li An remembered Samad as the one who wore a hat when he stood with his group outside the library. "Like Shane, lah!" Gina had exclaimed, and teased him shamelessly for minutes in front of all the boys. But Samad had never taken her up on her teasing; he had merely grinned and remained with his friends. The Malay boys never visited the girls at their residential hall.

"The Indian boy didn't die," Abdullah said, in reply to Li An's question. "Not enough sleeping pills, so when he woke up, he try to slash his wrists, but he make so much noise that the landlord come up and find them."

"Jeezus," Chester said as if hearing it for the first time. "You people sure take things hard."

She found herself crying. The thought of Paroo, his wrists wrapped in bandages, in a hospital ward, thinking of Gina dead, was more than she could bear.

Abdullah gave her a paper napkin from the stack on the table, but the tears kept rolling from her eyes. She was aware the two men had shifted their chairs a little away from her; she was embarrassing them, so she swallowed hard and licked the salt from her lips.

"Very difficult, this interracial affair," Abdullah said to Chester. "Better that like stay with like. Indian and Chinese cannot mix, too many differences—food, custom, language. To be husband and wife must share same religion, same race, same history. Malay and Chinese also cannot mix, like oil and water. Malays have many adat, Islam also have shariat. All teach good action. Chinese have no adat, they eat pork, they like gamble, make money." He stopped, then said to Li An, "Of course Chinese also have their own religion. But they must become like Malay if they want to marry Malay."

She wasn't listening. The pink napkin crumpled to wet shreds as she blew her nose, and she picked up another one. The napkins were edged with prints of red phoenixes. Only last month Auntie had given her a red sateen jacket stitched with red phoenixes just like these. "Phoenix is very strong good luck charm," she'd explained, one long finger tracing the upraised wings, red silk thread melded onto red fabric. "Best for long

life, new life. Best for young married woman." Remembering, Li An picked nervously at the napkin's edges.

Abdullah must have understood her silence, for he said he had to return to the office and left.

She put a cigarette to her mouth with damp fingers.

"Don't cry," Chester said as he struck a match.

Through her tears and the smoke she saw his frank brown eyes and the high long nose. She wished he would kiss her, but then there was Henry, and it was nothing like that between Chester and herself.

"Why didn't you call me at the lab?" Henry asked when she told him about Gina that evening. "You know you can disturb me any time. How could you have stood it alone all day?"

She didn't tell him she had spent the afternoon with Chester.

Chester had taken her to his favorite tea shack. She was so pleased to be away from the university that she loved the dirty floor stained with the same old sticky orange squash puddles, the crinkly cellophane-wrapped fruitcake slices, even the fat Indian cook reknitting his dhoti unselfconsciously in front of her.

She had told Chester about Gina and Paroo, lowering her voice in case the cook was listening when she narrated Paroo's description of his mother's obstinate rejection of Gina. After all, it was disloyal of Paroo to complain about his mother, and any Indian might be offended by the story.

Chester had said Gina probably had a father problem. It wasn't just Chinese, but a universal psychological problem. Gina really wanted to marry her father, and her relationship with Paroo was never a serious thing with her.

Li An was shocked, but she didn't want to show him how much she disapproved of what he was saying. That Gina might have loved her father in that way! Even to consider it was painting a sin on her memory. And who would dare tell Paroo that Gina wasn't serious about him! She had killed herself out of love for him. This thing Chester called an Electra complex was all right for American girls, she thought, they had a perverted sexual culture, but Gina was not a pervert.

But she didn't argue with Chester. There was so little time before she had to return home, and she loved listening to his deep authoritative voice, even if he didn't understand the kinds of race barriers that Gina had faced.

Henry understood all too well. "Gina was too Chinese," he said. "It's all her fault. Poor Paroo! She didn't have enough guts to change herself, so she took the easy way out. He isn't so lucky."

Gina had always struck Li An as terribly bold. It wasn't courage she lacked, she thought, but imagination. She hadn't been able to imagine what kind of life she could have without being Chinese. History taught no lessons about changing one's race. It only taught about war and violence between people, even people of the same color and blood. Gina hadn't been clever enough to rise above history.

She didn't attend Gina's funeral in Johore. Her family had not informed Ellen of the arrangements, and Ellen, on her lawyer's advice, had distanced herself from the tragedy. She was simply an old college friend who had loaned her flat to Gina and had known nothing of the affair with Paroo.

"You don't know how difficult it was to lie to them," she said passionately to Li An, who had come to help her move out of the flat.

Ellen had paid for movers to pack her furniture and possessions. She couldn't bear to be in the flat for long.

The police had removed all Gina's and Paroo's things—Ellen had pointed them out. There were a few articles of clothing, a couple of small suitcases, some makeup.

Ellen had lied and kept Gina's hairbrush for herself. It was a small bristle brush with a wooden handle, and when Ellen showed it to Li An some of Gina's short coarse hair was still tangled in the spikes.

But they couldn't cry anymore, and handled the brush tenderly as if it had been a part of Gina's body, a piece that wouldn't be buried with her.

Ellen was drinking a Tiger beer, although it was only eleven in the morning. Despite her parents' pleas she was moving to a bungalow, alone.

"Cannot live with them. This cannot do, that cannot do. I have an interview with Weston Allen. Good pay. I won't need my father's bloody money."

She did not talk about leaving for America again.

When the moving van arrived, Ellen wouldn't do anything. She stood by the bedroom window morosely looking out at the rows of small yards below. Every yard was fenced with a high iron gate and hurricane steel mesh. Half of each yard was covered with concrete; the other half-yards were a curious mix—overgrown with crab grass or thick thrusting lallang, crowded with pots of yellow and purple flowering orchids on trestles, or littered with broken bricks and overturned plastic pails.

Li An stood by Ellen for a moment. Did Gina and Paroo gaze out at this scene of shabby litter before they lay on the bed with their pills and glasses of water? The living room and kitchen at the back looked out on to the more scabrous sight of sheets, towels, and underwear drying to a tough texture in the burning sun.

The movers were yelling at each other as they maneuvered the rocker down the stairs. Ellen was leaving the bed and mattress behind. The landlord, who had never met Gina, was happy to have it for his next tenant.

"Would you ever throw yourself out of a window?" Ellen asked. The steel-framed window panels were opened wide, and she pressed lightly on the sill, her rounded breasts and trunk leaning slightly over the edge.

"Oh no!" Li An said, without thinking. "Never."

"Me too." Ellen turned away. "These workmen are so slow, they take all day to move. Let's go to the Bistro after they've finished."

"But you have to direct the movers to your new flat and wait for them to unpack," Li An reminded her. "One always moves to some place else! You can't just pack and leave, you also have to unpack and settle in."

Ellen was slower these days. She wasn't so quick with her comments. Something had turned in her, and her affection wasn't as free. She had a grudge against the world, and was concentrating only on the possibility of the new position at Weston Allen.

Li An felt she could leave Ellen alone, but Ellen still called, sometimes every day. Even after she began the new position, which meant six weeks of intensive training, she called every night. Sometimes they talked about Paroo, whom Li An had visited at the hospital. Ellen wouldn't visit him although she said she had nothing against him; it wasn't his fault that Gina died and he lived.

Li An took Chester with her to the hospital. At their first visit Paroo had wept the entire time. It was as if she had carried in the vision of Gina dead beside him as he sawed at his wrists with the shining blue Gillette blade that he had brought from Ipoh for shaving. His cries that had sent the landlord upstairs were less from the pain, although the cuts had hurt sharply, than from the discovery that he was still alive while Gina was cold. She was no longer breathing, she would never come back. That was what made him cry aloud, and also what made him less urgent with the blade. He had realized that even in death she wouldn't be there for him.

Paroo cried without dignity, sobbing so hard the nurse came running in and told them they had to leave, they were upsetting him.

Li An called before going the second time. Paroo came to the phone and said yes, he was leaving the hospital in a few days. He was returning to Ipoh, although his principal had written a letter terminating his post, and yes, he would like to see her to say good-bye.

"I don't think I should go with you," Chester said. "After all, I don't know the guy and he may want to see you alone."

"No, no!" She could not visit Paroo alone. She was afraid of him after what he had been through. He had been so close to death that he seemed to her like a ghost or a murderer. She needed someone to protect her.

Dressed in a short-sleeved shirt and the striped blue pajama pants of the hospital, Paroo was able to smile this time.

"Peace Corps volunteer?" he queried in almost his old hearty tone. "What trouble you Americans doing here, ha? All Peace Corps fellows in India belong to the CIA. My good friend Pushpa tells me this."

Chester talked to him about teaching the General Paper. They could almost have been conversing in a coffee shop.

"But, you know, my headmaster, he's not an understanding fellow. He reads the papers and thinks I am a bad man. Now I don't have a job in Ipoh." Paroo smiled as he gave this dismal news.

"Hey, maybe I can get something for you at my school!" Chester was excited. He liked making things happen, fixing up problems, fitting pieces together. "I'll speak to my headmaster. He's also Indian, Mr. Govinand, M.A." He laughed at his own joke. "He's very keen on that title. We all have to address him as Mr. Govinand, M.A., especially if we want anything out of him. I'm sure he'll help you out. The school is short of English teachers. The students are complaining that I am the only trained English teacher they have, and I am not even an English major. The kids who aren't in my classes are constantly getting their parents to complain. Mr. Govinand will jump at the chance to have you teach in his school."

Paroo beamed. His face filled out and lost its shadowy contours. What a good friend Chester was, and he didn't even know him. Would Mr. Govinand really offer him a job? How wonderful if he could teach in the same school with this very nice Chester! Was there a place for him after all he had been through? Would everyone let him forget what had happened? His eyes filled, pity for himself and fearful hope all mixed up with the tears.

Taking one direct glance at Li An's slatternly Indian wrap skirt and T-shirt, the seam under the right armpit fraying, Auntie said to Henry, "When are you going to have your baby?"

Li An, who had barely slid her slippers off by the accordion gates, stubbed her toes sharply against the raised floor. Did Auntie see something in her she had missed? She had been fitted for the diaphragm and used it every time. Henry was planning to continue his biochemistry studies in West Germany. Professor Forster had nominated him for an impressive doctoral fellowship at Baden-Baden, and he was taking German classes at the Goethe Institute every Saturday.

The professor had invited Henry and Li An for dinner last month—a compliment to Henry, as Forster was not gregarious—and had told her she could easily teach Chinese there. Germans were enthusiastic about everything oriental. He was surprised when she said she couldn't read and write Chinese and spoke only Hokkien. He didn't believe the Germans would accept her as an English teacher: they were meticulous about the correct accent, he said, and while it was good she was doing a master's degree in English literature, it didn't—he paused here—it might not do her much good in Baden-Baden.

Later that night, Henry said she would always find something to do, she was so self-reliant. She would make friends, study German literature, learn to cook German meals. She could write poems about their travels. Having a baby was not in their plans.

Second Mrs. Yeh had said "your baby" as if there were already one present. Li An closed her eyes and hoped it wasn't true.

Henry seated himself on the La-Z-Boy lounge near the air conditioner and opened the pages of the *New Straits Times*.

"You must have a baby soon," Second Mrs. Yeh said directly to Li An.

Relieved, Li An walked on the shining terrazzo floor, polished and cool beneath her bare soles. "In another few years," she replied, stroking her favorite blue ceramic vase by the carved rosewood coffee table. Everything in the house was expensive.

She liked coming to visit when Mr. Yeh wasn't home. This time he was in Kuala Kangsar checking on the lorries at his new transport branch. She called him "Ah Pah" now, but they didn't speak to each other.

He spoke occasionally in Hokkien to Henry about his studies. "Are you working? Good. What kind of work? The same kind as last time? Why always the same kind? Scientists work like that? Good, good."

But usually he was silent, almost somnambulant, when they came for dinner on Sundays. Li An told Chester it was amusing that important Chinese towkays in real life were just tired old men.

"I could not have a child," Auntie continued, "although I prayed to Kuan Yin and gave money to the Peng Ho Temple. Such is my fate. But you have a healthy body. Use it while you're young."

Her eyes penetrated through Li An's crumpled clothes. Li An felt her body unused, like a sealed jar. Auntie probably knew all about her diaphragm.

She watched as Li An walked restlessly on the smooth stone, sank on the pillowed sofa, and tapped one bare foot before her.

"A woman marries for children. She cannot be safe otherwise." Turning to Henry, Auntie said softly, "We are always changing. You must let her change with you."

"After Germany," Henry said with a pleasant smile.

Li An thought again how good he was. She would have screamed with frustration at Auntie's bossiness. Henry always spoke gently, as if addressing his laboratory touch-me-nots.

He explained things clearly, specifically, and with Li An, in such a pleading tone that it left her abashed.

With him, she felt all her brassy prickly ways withdrawing, closing, as if she were going to sleep. She was a sleepwalker in Henry's life, and she trusted him implicitly to decide their future.

Still, she didn't understand why she did not tell him about her meetings with Chester. Perhaps because he didn't seem to mind whenever Chester came over or perhaps because he liked Chester and she didn't wish to suggest something about their relationship that would get in the way of the friendship.

Henry hadn't been upset when Chester brought Abdullah and Samad one evening for a visit. He had just come home and Li An was coming out of the shower when the car honked out on the road. "Must be Ellen," she called from the bedroom, hurriedly toweling her hair dry.

"Chester brought some friends," Henry warned from the front door, and she took the time to comb out the knots in her damp hair.

She did remember Samad, the boy who had smoked with the cigarette dangling from his lower lip, one hip hitched out and a cowboy hat shadowing his handsome face in front of the library entrance most afternoons. He was almost as tall as Chester but didn't have Chester's ease.

"Nice house," he said, lighting a cigarette and crouching on the Danish armchair Auntie had picked for them. His eyes slid over her quickly to look at Henry. Handsome as he was, he was more comfortable with men. "Your own?"

"My father's," Henry hesitated. "Drinks?"

Li An wondered if they would ask for beer.

"You have rose syrup?" Chester answered. "That's my roommates' favorite drink." He was a teetotaler, he explained, like Abdullah and Samad, and he also had a sweet tooth and liked very sweet drinks.

Chester is right, she thought, he could have been Malay in another life.

Instead they drank Coca-Cola, Chester making a fuss about how he had come to Malaysia to get away from the States,

and here he was with Samad, the cowboy, drinking Cokes.

Abdullah and Samad kept looking at Henry with reflective eyes. "Science types and arts types never mix, lah," they explained to Chester. "That's why Henry stay away from people like us. But Li An so pretty he cannot stay away."

She laughed at their flattery.

Samad was doing radio work, writing reports. Soon, he said, he would be put in charge of a new program, "The World We Live In." He was planning to interview farmers, fishermen, tradesmen like hawkers and stall-keepers, and religious teachers.

She gathered he would interview only Malays. The program was going to be in Malay. Again she felt uncomfortable. Samad had done his degree in geography—surely his program was intended to bring in the entire world?

"That's just great!" Chester had finished his drink while the others had only sipped at theirs. "Abdullah in the papers and Samad in broadcasting—between them they will conquer Malaysia!"

"Of course, there will always be place for English," Abdullah said, smiling at Li An, "and for scientists."

The smell and sizzle of fish frying in the kitchen made Samad jump up. "Must go and leave you to your makan."

They wouldn't have dinner with them; besides, Li An wasn't sure if pork was being served. Abdullah and Samad, she knew, would be mortally insulted if pork were on the table. She let Letchmi cook whatever she wished and was thankful she didn't have to do the shopping for meals.

She brought out peanuts and potato chips instead and pressed them to stay a little longer.

"The politics today is not good." Abdullah crunched on a handful of peanuts. "The Chinese not like the government so much, but they make big mistake. It is this government that protect them. The Malays are very very patient. We don't say Chinese no good. All people good. Our religion teach us this. But why Chinese say Malay no good, government no good, want to change government?" He looked at Henry to gauge his response.

Henry said, "I see your point."

"Like English," Abdullah said. "Don't want you to feel bad, yah, Li An, but English is bastard language. In Malaysia we must all speak national language."

For a moment everyone stared at each other.

Could they really do it, she wondered? What would happen if they all suddenly switched to Malay right now? How would she express herself? Like a halting six-year-old, groping for light in a darkened world? Her world was lit by language. The English ingested through years of reading and talking now formed the delicate web of tissues in her brain. Giving up her language would be like undergoing a crippling operation on her brain. Of course, she would be able to move and sleep and eat, her outward appearance would not change. But without her language she would be as handicapped as any armless and legless beggar in the street.

"For us Malays, yah, we have to speak English everywhere—in school, office. We not so good in English. But why must we speak English? That not our national language." Abdullah's voice was gentle; he spoke in the same manner Henry did, like a teacher explaining a difficult lesson to a favorite child.

Of course, she thought, it must be just as bad for Abdullah to express himself in English instead of Malay. He must feel like the blinded six-year-old groping around in his mind for the objects of his thoughts. He must have been made mute at the university by the loss of his language.

But how well he explained himself, even with his simple slow English! She felt an admiration for him.

"But what will happen when you go overseas?" Henry shook his crossed leg a little impatiently. "I'm learning German now, so I understand how difficult it is to study in a foreign language. But I have no choice. If I want to continue my studies in Germany I have to know German."

"That is less than one percent of the people," Samad replied. Unlike Abdullah, he refused to eat anything. "For the one percent, of course they must learn English. This one percent will be top government people. Everybody else like taxi driver, even teacher, why need English? Malay is good enough for this country."

"But who will choose the one percent? What about Malaysians

who may want to strive to join that one percent? What if they don't want to be taxi drivers but want to be scientists? What if they believe they need English as well as Malay?" As soon as Li An stopped her rush of questions, she saw she had done something wrong. Samad had hooded his eyes in a blank expression, Abdullah was frowning, and even Henry was biting his lip.

Chester stood up, stretching his arms above his head. His arms were so long they almost touched the ceiling. He scratched his sharp peaked hair. "Got to go," he said. "Dinner time. Must makan, lah."

She stood by the wrought iron gate sadly to wave good-bye. Abdullah was driving a new Fiat. They were laughing as they drove away, as if they had already forgotten the conversation.

Henry came up to her while she continued to stand indecisively. The sun had set and it was dark, although the heat still rose from the asphalt road.

"What did I say wrong?" She was desperate.

"It is rude to contradict people."

"But I wasn't contradicting, I was only pointing out . . ."

"You see," he interrupted, "you're doing it again." He sighed. "You have become too Westernized. First, you must accept what people say. If you cannot agree, you must still be quiet. Men get upset when women contradict them."

"But you're not like that, Henry. You let me say what I feel. I know you couldn't agree with Samad's position, he's . . ." She couldn't find what she meant.

"It is better not to disagree." His voice, while gentle, was cold.

She burst into angry tears. "You're like everyone else in Malaysia, Chinese, Malay, even Chester. A woman has no right to a mind of her own. She should only listen and echo what men say."

Surprised, he put his arm around her shoulder. "I don't believe that. Of course I'm proud you're so intelligent. But you must use your intelligence for agreement, not for arguing. That's the Chinese way. Even the men follow that rule."

She shook his arm off. "Oooh!" she ground out from the back of her throat. "But I'm not Chinese. I'm Malaysian!"

## Eight

**E**llen and Chester liked each other immediately.

"So, this is the secret boyfriend," she said, poking him playfully in the ribs. "Why she's hiding you? So husband no see?"

Chester laughed. "Husband see, husband don't mind. I'm just a harmless guy from the United States of America." He lifted his arms to show he had nothing to hide.

She poked him again, but he wasn't ticklish. "Ha!" She poked him some more. "When men sniff around, they want only one thing."

Li An was painfully embarrassed. "Ellen doesn't think women and men can be friends without some hanky-panky."

"That's never been my experience either." Chester bowed to Ellen, who laughed loudly and pressed a hand to her side as if she were having a stitch. "At last," he said, "a Malaysian with a sense of humor!"

Ellen wasn't pleased Paroo was to begin teaching in Petaling Jaya in January. "You'll see," she warned moodily, "he's a troublemaker. Better watch out, Chester. Some people bring trouble wherever they go."

"That's not fair!" Li An remembered Paroo's face all slack with unresisting tears at Chester's offer. "Why, Paroo is the one who suffers from other people's troubles. He is all soft. He couldn't make trouble if he tried."

"That's exactly what I'm saying." Ellen moved a chair vigorously from one side of the room to the other. She glared

and shook her head when Chester offered to help. "What do you think I am, soft like Paroo?"

Ellen had found a two-story house in old Petaling Jaya, where fast-growing softwood trees kept the front yard in deep shade and a constant litter of rotting leaves. Overgrown bushes bloomed with blood-red ixora. The house had an appearance of utter neglect, and the gray-green ivy trailing over the hurricane fence—an original sight in an area of pampered flowering hedges—added to its air of desolation. The rent was exorbitant, but Ellen preferred living alone, and her parents helped with expenses.

Her job at Weston Allen was so-so, she said. It didn't pay as well as it should because it had three levels of pay for the same work: a high salary for the British brought over on two-year contracts, a lower salary for the Malaysian men, who were all scrambling for promotion, and the lowest pay for women like Ellen, who were hoping the company would change its policy soon.

Dragging the rocker closer to the coffee table, she placed her bare feet on the glass top with a bang. "You know, Paroo's a jinx. He's empty inside. That's the kind that attracts trouble. Nature abhors a vacuum."

Li An thought Henry would have approved of Ellen's words. Newton had said that. Or was it Einstein?

"We know Gina was the trouble, but she would have survived if it wasn't for the vacuum." Ellen kicked at the table-top viciously with her heel. "You'll see, he's a parasite. He needs to suck on someone, and you'll be the one, Chester."

But then, one could say that Paroo would have been all right if Gina hadn't come along, Li An thought. Remembering what Henry had said about her arguing, she kept silent instead.

"Isn't it true?" Ellen appealed to Li An. "Gina was just like us. We all have problems. That's life. Of course," she smiled maliciously, "Li An doesn't know yet she has problems, but we know, right, Chester?"

"So why should Gina have killed herself?" Ellen's voice spun upwards. "We're strong. Gina was a strong person. It's Paroo's fault she's dead."



She caught herself on the up spin of hysteria and laughed. "If only you men would leave us women alone, we'd be all right."

Li An picked up the beer mug from the coffee table as Ellen's foot swept close to it. Chester leaned back on his chair as far as he could.

It was Saturday afternoon and Henry was at the Goethe Institute studying German with Mrs. Schneider. He was already able to read some elementary passages.

Li An had refused to take the course with him. "It will give me something to do when I'm in Germany," she said. "Besides, after listening to Abdullah and Samad, I'd be better off studying Malay literature." She was half serious about it. Chester could read Malay better than she did, and he had been studying it for only six months.

Now whenever she looked at the wretched mimeographed practical criticism poems she disliked them. She felt like a fraud after every tutorial. Did she ever believe these were her poems, speaking from her body as much as from the poets'?

Her body felt stranger and stranger each day. Her nerve ends vibrated on a strangely immediate and vivid plane, but everything else was distant. When she talked about the poems to her students, there was no longer a singing connection between the language and her body. Instead, there was talk, slow and difficult, the students unable to grasp the thick leaden ropes she threw to them. Then there was her new body, singing to itself, without any form or language. She could not reach it with her mind.

When Henry kissed her, when he penetrated her mouth, she could not reach her new body even then. The resonating sensation, she thought, was like a golden honey piling in combs in the hive of her body, sweetening somewhere else beyond her mind and beyond Henry.

She spent less time with Chester now. When they were together there was a numbness in her, as if she were waiting for a disaster. Instead of heading off on adventures, they spent most of their time together talking. Rather, he talked and she listened.

Listening nervously to Ellen now, Li An wondered if she was also turning into a vacuum, like Paroo.

Chester was explaining to Ellen that Paroo had asked to room with him, but with three bedrooms in the house, Abdullah and Samad were adamantly against the idea. "Not to worry," he added. "My friends Zuni and Bala say they are looking for someone to share their apartment."

"Flat," Ellen said. "Why you Americans use big words like *apartment* and *elevator* instead of *flat* and *lift*? Aiyoh, everything about America must be so big, lah. Even your words are all so long." Ellen gave a wicked smile.

Li An saw that Ellen amused Chester. He looked appreciatively at her bold lounging body, her legs propped on the low table and her large breasts stuck out in the air. Ellen rested her head on the back of the rocker. Her whole stance was insolent and carefree.

She also appreciated Ellen's stance. Her own body was like a tuning fork that had been struck. She could not sprawl like Ellen did and be self-contained—she would be quivering and pained. She tensed her shoulders and clenched her hands instead, even as Ellen looked knowingly at her, and she knew that Ellen knew.

"Do you like her?" she asked Chester jealously. She had wanted them not to like each other. She wanted them each, separately, for herself, the way she had Henry and Ellen. Ellen was barely polite to Henry, who disliked her but wouldn't admit to it.

She kept the bike engine running as he answered. He had gotten off by the shop corner near his flat.

"Sure," he spoke loudly above the engine. "I've met lots of women like her at Princeton. They make the best friends for guys sometimes." But he looked uncomfortable even as he said this and rumbled her hair good-bye.

She wondered what he meant, and also what he meant in touching her hair. It was the first time he had touched her so intimately. But he had spoken in such a way that she knew she didn't have to be jealous of Ellen.

To Ellen she said, "Be careful, he's going to fall for you!"

Ellen only said, "Naw, he's a dope. He's not going to fall for anyone but himself."

But she knew Ellen liked Chester. Ellen asked each time they met, "Where's your boyfriend, ah?" When Chester came along for visits, she drank more avidly, always Tigers, and the two argued endlessly about American politics. She was as comfortable with Chester as she was with Li An. In her everyday jeans—she wore only tailored suits for work—she sat with legs wide apart or flung over furniture.

Sometimes Henry came along. He and Ellen negotiated conversation around Chester and Li An. It was almost a foursome, except Chester still went out some afternoons with her, to the tea shack at Brickfields or around Kuala Lumpur; then she felt it was just Chester and herself.

"No use hiding behind me," Ellen said one afternoon over lunch. "You're as bad as Gina. You want or you don't want? Your Henry is really blind. Everyone else can see what's happening."

"I don't see why you're always suggesting there's something between Chester and myself." Li An was petulant. "We don't meet each other as often anymore. In fact, he usually has Abdullah with him when we meet at the lounge. If Henry doesn't think I'm doing something wrong, I don't see why you should."

"Don't see, don't see," Ellen mimicked her. "Your Henry doesn't want to see. Why women so crazy, I'll never know! I bet Abdullah can see what's happening. You don't have to lie to me. I see the way you look at him. You never look at Henry that way. That Chester, I can kill him!"

It was true Abdullah had said just the other week as Chester was in the washroom, "My good friend Li An, you must be careful. These Peace Corps people, they leave us and go back to America. They are not our people."

She pretended she didn't understand him. "But Abdullah, you tell me I'm not your people either! Soon Henry and I will go to Baden-Baden. Where am I ever going to find my people?"

Abdullah had kind dark eyes. "You must find your way, Li An. If you a Malay girl, I can help you. Sometimes I think too bad you are born Chinese. Chester, he's very nice man, yah, but, you know, he also inside orang puteh. He try to be Malaysian, but it's only playing. He's not serious, you know?"

It was hopeless. No one understood why she liked Chester. They all believed she was having an affair. Except Henry. And Chester. Chester respected her. He treated her with friendly restraint, as a guide to Malaysia.

He was someone who was at loose ends, like she was. Bobbing in the busy directed lives of other people, they were unmoored and uncaptured. They had bumped into each other accidentally, and now sometimes found themselves drifting together down the same stream.

She was always rushing, late for somewhere, but actually, her life was an aimless spinning sensation, passive and pushed about by all sorts of people. Like Abdullah, whose newspaper she now read every day. It frightened her more and more. She couldn't understand how gentle, understanding, kind Abdullah was connected to those articles, which preached that there was only one kind of people that counted, that anyone who disagreed should be imprisoned or sent back to China or India.

"Would China want me?" she wondered. She had been born in Malaysia. What did China have to do with her? But she had learned her lesson. She never argued with Abdullah. She made herself grateful that he was kind to her.

When she was with Henry she was moored to his life. Professor Forster was arranging for Henry to begin his fellowship in Baden-Baden in June 1970, after he finished his doctorate. She could never get so far on her own, she knew, and she was pleased to be towed beside Henry.

Auntie had stopped nagging them for a baby and was teaching her how to dress properly for a colder climate. To please her, Li An gave up wearing jeans when she went to her house for dinner, and she spent afternoons shopping with Auntie for fitted dresses and elegant skirts. She gave up her attempt to write poems and instead, to satisfy her department head, read about seventeenth-century English poetry in her library cubicle.

Chester complained that he didn't want to continue teaching at the Vocational High School. He had been there for less than a year, but he was beginning to dislike Mr. Govinand and his officiousness. Paroo was always waiting for

him after classes and during breaks. He wished Paroo would find another girlfriend—he didn't want to listen to him talk about Gina again. He'd never even met Gina!

The longer he stayed with Abdullah and Samad, he said broodingly, the more he realized how different he was from them. He was tired of drinking rose syrup and of having chilies in his food. When he ate with Li An, he ordered pork chops and poured thick ketchup on the meat defiantly; he wasn't a Muslim, he repeated, and pork had fewer calories than fatty beef.

He liked her company, he said, because she alone didn't expect him to behave in any one way. He was teaching her about the United States, and she was interested in the constant news from Washington, the demonstrations against the Vietnam War, what was happening on the American campuses. He took her to the United States Information Service library, where she chose books by William Carlos Williams, Wallace Stevens, Robert Penn Warren, and John Dos Passos.

"You can't write poems based on those Shakespearean sonnets, Lee Ann," he said. "The world's changed. If you'll read modern writers, you'll see what I mean." America seemed so far away, he complained; he hadn't realized how much he missed home till then.

They were like two homeless orphans when they were together, Li An thought. Out for a good time. They talked about her desire to write, and how difficult it was for her to write in English, and he told her about how the United States was a melting pot. Everyone melted into the American middle class. In his junior year he had taken a course on American literature, and he had been impressed by how writers like Walt Whitman spoke for a democratic American vista.

"Of course, black people in America face a lot of discrimination," he said, "because of their color. You Chinese Malaysians will never have the same problem of social discrimination. There are too many of you here. The only thing is, you'll have a problem writing in English. English has left with the British. You should really emigrate to the States."

She felt her boat whirling in the current of his talk. China, Baden-Baden, America. She felt at home only with him and with Ellen.

It's not that I suspect you," Henry said, swallowing hard. "But Chester is a man. Perhaps I've been too busy. I should have done more things with you. You are so lively, I always knew you would need more attention than other women."

Forster had told him that he should have a few days off and perhaps take Li An away for a holiday. "Ah, it's not to alarm you," Forster had mumbled, "but women, um, don't like to be neglected. You, um, you've been working very hard. You have a great future in front of you. But a young scientist, he's got, he's got to take care of his family too."

Perhaps he'd seen Li An with Chester more than once at the USIS library or riding on the Honda to some coffee shop. "Those Americans," he'd added dryly, "they're new to Malaysia. They don't observe the rules like we do."

"But nothing's happened!" she protested. "You see him as often as I do." It wasn't true, but she refused to be shamed by her lie.

Henry was miserable. He had never felt such burning misery—it made him want to turn his face away, shut his eyes so he wouldn't have to see her. No, he didn't suspect her. Wouldn't a man know if his wife had been with another man? Wouldn't he feel her skin, her inner flesh, as tainted? He would have felt the difference in her.

But he did suspect. He suspected her tomorrows. Forster had closed off the possibility of trust. What could he tell of

what Li An might do the next day, or next year, with Chester or with any other man? He suspected the future in her.

"Let's go to Bangkok for two weeks," he pleaded. "It's April. You don't have any tutorials, and I can miss my German classes. We've never had a holiday together."

Just last month they had celebrated their anniversary. Or rather, Auntie had reminded them to.

Auntie liked the Western custom of romantic anniversaries and holidays, and made occasions out of Christmas and Boxing Day, the English New Year, Easter, St. Valentine's Day, and personal birthdays. She kept a calendar that marked British holidays—the Queen Mother's birthday, Queen Elizabeth's birthday, Whitsunday, Bank Holidays, Poppy Day—but she celebrated only the holidays that the expensive department stores observed. Although she wasn't a Christian, she bought colorful chocolate eggs for Easter that no one ate, and decorated the house with palms blessed in the Anglican Church. Unlike Mrs. Yeh, out of the Chinese religious festivals she celebrated only the Chinese New Year. His mother, Henry told Li An, had prepared elaborate food and invited monks to the house for Vesak Day, Ching Ming or All Souls' Day, and the anniversaries of his grandparents' deaths. She had observed special feast days to request blessings for important family events, such as when Mr. Yeh's new cement factory was opened or when Henry was sitting for his final examinations.

He and Li An didn't take holidays seriously. Christmas had been merely an interruption in his lab work; in fact, he had been so anxious about an experiment that he had gone to the lab on Christmas day.

They refused the banquet Auntie wished to throw for their anniversary. Instead, she gave a dinner at her house, and Professor Forster and his wife, Mrs. Schneider and her husband, and Ellen had come.

Li An didn't ask Chester because Abdullah and Samad would have to be invited as well, and that would have made the dinner difficult as Auntie would have had to avoid serving pork in the meal. Samad especially had become very strict about exposure to anything haram, like pork, that was a spiritual pollution.

Henry saw now he had been unwise to encourage Li An to amuse herself however she pleased. "Yes, Bangkok," he repeated. "We'll stay at the Oriental, it's supposed to be very romantic. And you can buy as much Thai silk as you wish."

She sat subdued beside Henry in the small Fokker Friendship plane, relieved that he was making all the decisions. The stewardess wore a tightly wrapped printed skirt and moved down the aisle modestly, her swaying buttocks a focus for the passengers' eyes. She handed them cold towels sprinkled with cologne. Li An hated the sticky scent, and she despised the purple spotted orchid on her plastic meal tray.

Over the isthmus, the plane hit an air pocket and the trays went bouncing off the retractable tables. The woman behind her screamed. Li An clutched Henry's warm hand and thought that she wouldn't mind dying now. Her mind was so distant from her body, she couldn't tell which was further away—both were receding from her, as she spun down a stream in the bucking plane. Then the airstream turned smooth and they landed safely.

The airport was breathlessly humid and noisy. On the broad road from the airport, she looked out at the pleasant flat fields and wide drains—they could have been narrow canals—with thick clusters of large-leafed plants and white and pink lotus flowers floating on them. In the city, the taxi honked and honked as pedicabs darted and blocked its way. Masses of pedestrians stepped off crowded curbs and pushed against the taxi even as the light turned green. The air was distinctly brown and clouds of carbon monoxide puffed out of the backs of buses and lorries into the taxi's open windows. She closed her window although the taxi wasn't air-conditioned: the press of traffic and people and the sour air made her nauseous.

In the Oriental's red and gold lobby scattered with brocade-covered chairs, Li An pretended not to notice the porter's rude handling of their two small bags. "He probably thinks we won't tip him," she thought miserably, and in their cool carpeted room she could only stand in suspense until Henry handed over a handful of coins.

In the mornings Henry accompanied her as she wandered through the boutiques in expensive hotels. She fingered the heavy texture of silks shimmering with unlikely colors—the sheen of fuchsia, oleander pink, tart lemon yellow, and pale cream like the first squeeze of coconut. She studied the flowered cottons. Their huge blossoms seemed obscene—hungry mouths that would fix on her body if she wore them.

She didn't like anything in the shops, although obediently she chose three lengths of silk and obediently stood still as the saleswoman passed the measuring tape around her chest, neck, and arms. She was being bound in duty to Henry, who was pleased she was having the silks tailored into loose tunics. They would be sensational in Baden-Baden.

In the hot afternoons they visited the temples. She walked in a torpor through the Temple of the Emerald Buddha. When they emerged from the dark interior, the stone courtyard burned under her bare feet as she scrambled to put on her shoes. Friezes of bodhisattvas, demon kings, and royal personages blurred as she moved slowly before them. At the sixth or seventh temple, she stared at the giant reclining Buddha and wanted to sink down with it and swell with emptiness. She could not see the figure whole. It was too vast. She could only observe as separate parts its enormous head, then the glazed eyes as large as empty dinner plates, the panoramic trunk parallel to the ground, a river of flowing robes frozen in gold. The great feet were sculpted horizontally inert, their toes perfectly formed—not like her small ones, permanently crooked.

The worst time of the day was the evening, when she had nothing to say to Henry. They had tea at the Oriental and she ordered cucumber sandwiches that were exactly as she fancied the British must have enjoyed them, thin sliced white bread and translucent wafers of cucumber between, and the butter to stick them together.

They ate in hotel restaurants. She could have Thai specialties, continental cuisine, Shanghai delicacies, Mughal curries, even Australian carpetbagger steaks stuffed with oysters. She chewed her food and felt it stick her mouth shut.

She wasn't homesick. She didn't think at all of their house in Petaling Jaya with the real Danish modern furniture,

the open living room, and the young banana trees Letchmi had planted in the backyard. She was struck down by a vast emptiness that swirled in her like the brown water of the Chao Phraya River swirling lazily past the garden of the Oriental.

Even Henry knew the holiday was not a success. The last night at the hotel he held her close in bed. "You don't like Bangkok," he said, wrapping her in his arms, she lying still like a bird in a covered hand. He didn't want her moving restlessly, gazing restlessly, never concentrating on one sight, always on the verge of moving away from his side.

"I do, I do," she assured him. "Only it's too large. I feel like a fly on a wall. I'm not sure what to do here, the whole city is a blank wall to me."

"But we've visited temples and stores. We took the boat down the river."

"I do like it." She kept her face hidden on his chest and muffled her voice. "Thank you, Henry. It's the grandest holiday I've had." She licked his ear and caressed him carefully, yielding obediently as his passion silenced them.

He was jubilant the next day. He loved returning to their home. Letchmi didn't like being alone for two weeks and fussed over them. "Missy want a lime drink? I iron all master's shirt."

Letchmi had come to them from an unhappy childless marriage to a tapper on a rubber plantation. One day her husband had knocked at the door and threatened to drag her away, and Henry had called the police. Her husband never came back, and she doted on Henry.

They had bought a brass Nataraja in the Bangkok Sunday flea market for Letchmi, and she hurriedly kissed it and carried it to her room, afraid they might change their minds about the gift. Now she unpacked their bags and was busy arranging piles of clothes for the wash.

Li An picked up a book, a study of seventeenth-century Puritanism in the American colonies, and lay on the uncomfortable Danish sofa to read it. Chester had found it for her in the USIS library. It would help round off her readings in English seventeenth-century poetry, he said; there was more to Western history than British history. She hoped Henry would

leave for the lab. It was Sunday, and perhaps Chester would be at home. She knew she wouldn't see him, not after Henry had disapproved, but they could talk on the phone.

But Henry stayed home all day catching up on the papers, which were full of stories of the upcoming elections.

"Look," he said, "your friend Abdullah is doing it again."

It was an editorial in Abdullah's paper.

"How can they expect us to take this quietly?" He smacked the page and it tore.

She smoothed the page and pieced the torn parts together. It was the usual call for unity against a common enemy. The elections must change nothing, the editorial said, unless it was for the benefit of the real people, the ra'ayat. The ra'ayat must assert their power in whatever way necessary. Let the enemy beware of pushing the people too far. The conflict would be deadly.

The black print squiggled before her tired eyes like little worms.

Suddenly she was reminded of Gina, dead, it seemed to her, for the longest time. She fancied these were the same worms that had crawled over Gina's flesh, breeding millions of other black worms, and now they had escaped the steamy earth and were crawling on hundreds of thousands of Sunday papers.

She was afraid of what she read, for the warning rang true. She remembered Abdullah's gentle patient voice explaining his vision of a single people. For separation to be nurtured, there couldn't be the possibility of love. Love broke down the purity of a vision of singleness. Hatred, then, was preferable to the breaking of the single self, to the possibility of a tearing down of race.

Ten

**A** new Henry waited for her each morning and drove her to the university. He picked her up promptly at noon for lunch, and even followed her in the evenings to visit Ellen. In Henry's watchful company, Ellen sat in front of the television glumly most of the time instead of joking around as she usually did with Li An.

Professor Forster had shamed Henry into recognizing his duty to Li An. He had accepted a one-year position as a lecturer in the biology department, and then they would leave for the sophisticated freedom of Baden-Baden, where she would not feel so confined. In the meantime, it was his duty to lessen the constraints of a narrow academic life, to entertain her and occupy her hours.

Besides, he was writing up the results of his experiments. He did not enjoy writing, and could only write in his office for a limited time. He tired easily when he had to fumble with words to shape them into sentences. They fell into awkward masses that he had to worry over and reform. "I wish you could do the writing for me," he said, jokingly.

She had begun to write again, but in a desultory manner. She tried to begin a daily journal.

1 May

Read Cranshaw. Am getting more interested in Puritan literature. Jane Austen novels too much fiction, worse than True

Romances. No happy-ever-after except perhaps in next life. Very hot today. Lunch with Henry at Maxim's. Papers still full of bad news.

2 May

Tired of English literature. Puritan ideal of new kingdom of God on Plymouth Rock something to think about. Is this what Abdullah means by country for Islam? Ironic history—difference between city on a hill and America after Watts riots, King assassination. Malaysia too tolerant for American-style violence. Visited Auntie with Henry. She's expecting Ah Pah back next week.

3 May

A writer's journal is supposed to be more interesting than this. Can't be a writer when life is so boring. Still very hot today. It's always very hot in Kuala Lumpur, why am I making a note of it? I don't even have weather to write about. Mornings clear, increasing heat and humidity through the day, thunder-showers in the late afternoon, clearing by evening, clear skies at night. A daily journal. More interesting reading in the newspapers. Lots of political reporting. Everyone wants his piece of the cake. Problem is it's the same piece of cake; someone's got to lose. Or so the papers say. Is this true of life? My life? What's my piece of cake? Am I winning or losing?

5 May

Have to take the journal more seriously. Haven't written in almost two days. Surely there must be something to write about! Hard to take anything seriously when it's so hot. Stayed in bedroom all day with air-conditioning going full blast. Something's wrong with me—I'm not depressed am I? USIS books overdue, haven't read two of them. Tried to write a poem following Williams's variable foot. Chester's suggestion to read American poetry. Doesn't sound like me. But nothing I've written sounds like me—whiny, petty, dissatisfied. Poetry already too grand, fine attitudes. How to write a good whiny poem? Maybe I should be a journalist like Abdullah. Poetry is for people who know something. No wonder I'm depressed.

6 May

Returned books to USIS. Don't like riding in KL anymore. It's crowded and dangerous, buses smoking carbon monoxide in huge clouds, taxis pushing you into the drains, pedestrians jumping at you from hidden corners. Wonder if it'll become as bad as Bangkok? I'd run away. Strange to be in USIS library without Chester. First time. Place looked deserted, dreary. His loud voice makes everything cheerful. The library is dull, feel of heavy novels, *Time*, *Newsweek*, reference books. Strange, it has Malaysian staff dealing with the public. The Americans stay to themselves—I can see them in the offices behind the glass doors. So unlike Chester. I think I see him everywhere. It's the Peace Corps mentality, he tells me, to be out with the local people.

7 May

It's Thursday. Ran into him in the lounge. He wanted to know what happened. I think he misses me. Told him I was working on my writing—he thinks it's my thesis on seventeenth-century religious poetry. If only he knew this journal is it! Had lunch with Henry at Bistro. I hate the Bistro. Told Henry I should spend some time alone with Ellen. After all, our friendship goes further back than Henry. He's being very kind. Papers going on about elections. Everyone's talking about it. Even the department head made some comment in passing, something about having to be sensitive to everyone's point of view. Of course, he's so high up he can see everyone's point of view clearly. I'm confused. Are the Chinese not true Malaysians? Is the problem that we are not Malays? Maybe Gina was right after all. Maybe everyone should marry Malay. Then we'll all be one people. But I can't imagine Henry married to a Malay girl, he's such a China-type!

8 May

Friday. Chester called the department, wants to know why I'm avoiding him. I'm so impatient with him. I don't think he sees me as a woman. I told him I'm married and Henry doesn't like me going out with other men. Perhaps that will shock him into

some understanding. Peace Corps men are like modern-day monks, poverty and no idea of women. Henry is right, he's always right. I have to be careful around Chester, otherwise something stupid will happen. Chester wants to talk about us. I know Henry won't like my meeting him. Maybe we can talk in Ellen's house. In front of Ellen. She'll keep things straight.

12 May

Exciting Tuesday. Elections today. Looks like some victory for our side. Our side? Here I am, didn't vote, but I have a side, know which is my piece of cake. Henry wants to go to a party tomorrow to celebrate with his biology friends. Why is he so political suddenly? Seems to me that everyone is so political suddenly, everyone's talking about this right and that right, everyone in the lounge and along the corridor. Buzz, buzz, like red ants, very excited, marching around with rumors. Too much is happening. I haven't been reading for a week, except the newspapers. Even Auntie started talking to Ah Pah about politics on Sunday. All this talk about Chinese rights makes me sick too. Malay rights, Chinese rights. No one talks about Malaysian rights. I am a Malaysian. I don't exist.

"You go to the party by yourself," Li An said. "Ellen wants to talk to me about switching jobs again."

She was only half lying. She had run into Chester in the lounge. This time he appeared to have been waiting for her.

She knew she shouldn't have accepted his invitation, but it was as if the hysteria of the elections had touched her. Chester also seemed more nervous than usual. He kept pulling his long hair off his face and twisting it at the back into a knot that immediately unraveled.

"Couldn't we just talk? Abdullah and Samad are up to their necks with the election news, and I'm getting homesick. Maybe it's just the one-year mark. I've been warned about it. After the first year the Peace Corps gets a whole lot of dropouts. Like your system can't take all that foreignness anymore. I'm even dreaming of my old high school, like I miss it! I'm in bad shape." His laugh was nervous.

She called Ellen at work from the lounge.



"Now you want me to entertain your lover boy? All right. I'll be home by five-thirty. You want a chaperon, but the harm is already done."

Why did Ellen always have to be so brusque, she wondered. She wished she could confide in a caring mother, someone like Second Mrs. Yeh, not like her own mother, all wrapped up in her stepfather and second family.

For months she had thought of Ellen and Chester as her best friends, but now she had too many secrets from them. Secrets about her feelings.

Feelings separated people from each other, even when—or especially when—they were about the other person. Ellen with her witch's eyes had seen her feelings for Chester even before she was aware of them, but she still had to pretend with Ellen. She wasn't like Gina, who had shared her feelings with Ellen. Ellen would like her to do that, but it would be like being unfaithful to Chester. Or was it to Henry?

Li An didn't want to leave the house before Henry did. She was afraid he would follow her to Ellen's house, even though she knew he would never stoop so low. His party began at six, and she had told Chester she would meet him at Ellen's at five-thirty.

At five-fifteen she was ready to leave, but she waited for Henry to get into the shower before riding off. He was touched by her waiting and kept talking to her. Finally she reminded him, "It's 5:35. You'll be late for your party."

Chester was sitting on the cement steps by the gate when she arrived. It was almost six, but Ellen's car wasn't there and the gate was padlocked. The ixora bushes that grew over the fence drooped over his head, and his feet were in a pile of large brown acacia leaves that the wind had blown neatly into the corner.

"I'm sorry," she apologized. "Ellen said she'd be here by five-thirty, and she's never late."

He was gloomy and good-natured at the same time. "That's all right. I'm accustomed to being left alone." He looked at her as if expecting her to do something about it.

"What shall we do?" She pushed the Honda stand down and stared into the dark garden behind the locked gate.

If only she had the key to Ellen's house! She could not ask Chester home—Letchmi might say something to Henry, and what if Henry was still at the house? He would suspect she had planned to bring Chester home as soon as he was gone.

"We'll give her another ten minutes. Perhaps her car had a flat tire." His voice was mildly reasonable, while she felt a terrible fury against Ellen. Ellen, she was sure, had deliberately forgotten about them. Ellen was punishing her for liking Chester, just as she had wanted to punish Gina for liking Paroo. Ellen was drinking at some pub in Kuala Lumpur and had ordered another beer instead of leaving.

A large green leaf fell from the overhanging acacia branch and landed at her feet.

Chester did not rise from the steps. He reached for the leaf and fingered it, turning it back and forth in a relaxed manner.

"Have you really been working on your writing?" His eyes were on the leaf.

She couldn't lie to him.

"I have to make a decision, whether to stay on in Kuala Lumpur," he said when she didn't reply. "Perhaps I'm not cut out for the Peace Corps. I know some volunteers who ask for a second two-year term. I met this couple at training camp who'd been to Lahore, a desert village. They were thin and burned brown. You'd think they were victims of a famine. But they were going back for a second term. They couldn't wait to go back to their village. She was teaching school, all ages, from kindergarten to grandmothers. He was helping the farmers find wells. Been digging for two years and found only a few wells. I thought I would be like them, teach and dig wells at the same time. That's why I volunteered for woodworking. You're doing something useful with your hands. Who knew no one would be interested in woodworking here?"

He'd forgotten about waiting for Ellen. Li An saw he wanted someone to talk to. He needed a listener, and the steps before a locked gate, out in the night air, was as good a place for him as any.

"I don't belong in this country." His voice was slowing down, as if he was running out of things to say.

"Oh, go back to America!" She made herself sound hard and uncaring. Chester didn't seem to be listening. She searched the dark road for a sign of Ellen's car. There was no one in sight. The other houses were lit, but all their gates were closed. A television squawked from the next house. They could have been in a foreign country.

He kept talking about having to decide soon. It got dark suddenly, and she couldn't see his face although he was only a few feet away. The scent of cooling leaves and ixora mixed with the night, forming a warm circle around her. She sat beside him on the steps. They were so narrow her head touched his shoulder.

"Come on," he said. "Give me your keys. I'll give you some coffee at my place."

All the way to his bungalow, she wondered if Abdullah and Samad would be home. The corner coffee shop was deserted, and the roads were dark and empty. She didn't stop to ask why. The desertion was like something she was imagining.

Samad was home. He unlocked the iron gates and pulled them in hurriedly. "Why are you on the road? Are you crazy?" His face was unsmiling. "Don't you know there's a curfew? Lucky nothing happen to you."

He looked at her with dislike. "What's she doing here?" He would talk only to Chester.

"I brought her for some coffee." Chester put his arm around her shoulder lightly as if to excuse her.

"What curfew?" She saw again the empty roads and locked gates.

Samad wouldn't answer.

"It's the elections, isn't it?" Chester asked.

"Yah, those people threw pork in our people's backyards and started a lot of trouble."

From the way Samad's eyes refused to meet hers she knew it was also her trouble.

"She has to stay here for the night," Samad said to Chester. He sounded bitter. "But she cannot sleep in Abdullah's room."

"What will I tell Henry? He'll be worrying about me!"

Samad started up the stairs. "I'm going to my room," he said over his shoulder. "There's nothing I can do."

She heard his door shut.

Only Letchmi was home when she called. "Oh, Missy," she babbled, "you be careful! Master already call, say cannot come home. He also worry about you. I pray to Nataraja keep you safe."

Chester remained cheerful. "The bed isn't too clean," he said as he brought her upstairs. "I never was good at laundry." And indeed the bed was unmade, the sheet had been pushed to the foot and was trailing on the floor.

A saucer of cigarette stubs was on the floor, and a pile of paperbacks balanced by the crumpled pillow.

"I'm going on the roof to check if anything can be seen."

She followed him as he stood on a chair and pushed up through a small door in the ceiling and hoisted his body through. He clasped her hand and heaved her up like a sack of rice, and she lay with her arms and trunk on the flat roof, taking in the cool night air before scrambling to her feet.

The roof was flat and without any railings. Although she was standing in the middle of its expanse, she was immediately swept by vertigo. She kept her eyes shut for a time. The air was cool but smoky.

"Look," he said, his hand on her shoulder, "there's a glow over there. And I can see smoke."

When she opened her eyes she saw that one side of the night sky was touched with orange. In the orange light tiny dark lines rose like drifting spider webs. They could hear nothing. The entire area of closely built row houses was silent. It seemed as if there was a blackout as well as a curfew. Everyone seemed to have turned off their lights, to have shut their doors like Samad, and disappeared.

Chester was exhilarated. "It's a historic moment," he repeated. "Do you realize that? May thirteenth. We're seeing history before our eyes."

All she saw was the black silent area of Petaling Jaya, the dim fire on the skyline, and webs of feathery smoke.

Later she lay on his bed and wondered what she was feeling. The riots were the trouble predicted for after the elections. People like Abdullah had been expecting it. The Chinese could not win without trouble starting up, he had said.

She hadn't expected anything. Perhaps, stubbornly, she had hoped that Abdullah was wrong, that elections could be won or lost without race, religion, language, the whole divisiveness of the country going off like strings of firecrackers. That smoke did not come from fireworks, she knew.

Chester had given her a sarong to sleep in. She knotted it more securely around her chest, thinking, this is Chester's sarong.

She couldn't keep the trouble in her mind. Her heart was beating very fast right under the sarong knot, and her body was vibrating quietly. The vibrations, she recognized, were a natural motion of her body. Every body was constantly vibrating. The breath, pulse, heartbeat, set up a ceaseless motion, a tension of desire that was life.

The reading lamp was still on downstairs. He looked up as she walked down the steps. He had been reading a paperback. He wore a sarong around his waist. His chest was broad and flat, and reddish hair grew thickly on the front. His nipples were small and rosy. She could hardly take in his nakedness. "I'm frightened," she said, and meant it.

Before he reached for her, he turned off the light. It was only then that she knew he loved her after all.

## Eleven

She was still asleep when Abdullah knocked and pushed the door open. Above the whirring of the standing fan and her own gummy drowsiness she heard him say, "Eh, Li An! You must go now. Get up quick! The curfew lift for only one hour so people can get home. Quick, lah!"

Nervously, she sat up. The checked sarong was still knotted around her. She had fallen asleep without tidying Chester's bed and the stack of paperbacks strewn beside the pillow. Her face had lain on one and its spine had left a painful crease on her cheek.

Abdullah stood by the door. "You get change quick. I take you home."

Her clothes didn't seem to fit that morning. She felt hollowed out and overflowing with a sweet energy. She wished she could take a bath before dressing, but Abdullah was tapping at the door again.

"Better I drive you," he said. Chester was nowhere in sight. She remembered he had walked her upstairs, his arm around her waist, and had kissed her at the door. She had heard him falling into Abdullah's bed before the strongest lassitude swept over her, and then Abdullah had knocked.

The front door was open and the garden gate as well. Abdullah must have just come home, she saw. Her Honda was still outside the gate.

"We bring your Honda another day. Safer you go in my car."

The cool quiet morning air woke her finally. Every gate was shut, every door unopened. They were the only people out on the road.

She looked shyly at Abdullah as he drove through the empty roads. His face, brown with square-cut cheeks and chin, was set and determined. Through puffy eyes he stared at the road ahead. She noticed his white shirt was rumpled as if he had slept in it.

"What happened?"

"A riot in Kuala Lumpur."

"What happened?" she asked again.

"I told you the Chinese cannot push us too far. This is our country. If they ask for trouble, they get it."

She had known, and she hadn't known. Abdullah, she knew now, was telling her his truth. *We/Our country. They/No country.*

His truth was wrong; she was sure it was wrong. You cannot be born and live in a place all your life without that place belonging to you. How could you not grow roots, invisible filaments of attachment that tied you down to a ground, a source of water? If a tree were pushed off the earth it stood on, deprived of its water, it would die.

But this was not the time to argue with Abdullah. Perhaps after today she and Abdullah would never be able to argue again.

Letchmi was unlocking the gate before Abdullah could honk. She must have been waiting by the window all morning. Henry was on the phone, and Abdullah drove off immediately, without saying good-bye. Henry put down the receiver as soon as she came in, with Letchmi hurriedly locking the gate and door behind them.

"I can't get through to Ah Pah! No one's picking up the phone!" He rubbed her shoulder distractedly.

All she could think of was her shower. She needed to wash Chester's touch off her body; she was afraid Henry would be able to feel where she had felt Chester. Her face, her breasts, her thighs, her fingers, she was sure, must smell of Chester's mouth and sweat. And Letchmi with her woman's sense would surely know she had been with another man.

"I have a nervous stomach," she said, hurrying to the bathroom, where she stripped and stayed under the hot stinging shower for long minutes. Carefully she powdered her whole body, shaking the talc generously as if to cover over the fingerprints.

Henry was still trying the phone when she came downstairs, clean in fresh shirt and pants.

"All Ah Pah's businesses are closed because of the curfew. I don't want to call Mark in Singapore. They may become frightened."

He was obviously alarmed. He kept picking up the receiver and dialing the number and counting the beeps before putting down the receiver.

By afternoon Henry was positive something had happened to Ah Pah. Li An had never seen him in this state. He withdrew to the armchair by the phone and in silence sat all day, staring with a frown at the wall. After he had refused her urgings to drink some coffee, have some breakfast, eat some lunch, call again, she sat on the sofa near him and pretended to read.

She tried the radio several times, but aside from the brief news announcement of the curfew hours and reports that the army and police had everything under control, there were only the usual pop songs.

Like his touch-me-nots, Henry sat in closed silence, his usual reasonable cheerfulness and purposeful activity contracted into a suffering suspense. When the call came, he was not surprised.

It was the doctor who called, not the police. Auntie was suffering from shock and minor bruises—she had hidden herself in a cupboard full of Ah Pah's shirts and pants, neatly ironed and hanging from expensive wood hangers. Somehow she had contracted her body, pulled the cupboard door shut, and remained in a folded, contorted position, neck almost disjointed among the entangled hangers, without a cry of pain to give away her presence. She had remained so until the police finally arrived, then banged her head against the door, and so they had discovered her. Mr. Yeh, who had not managed to conceal himself, was dragged into the living room and killed.

The doctors were overworked, with the numbers of reported casualties mounting. Auntie did not have to remain in the hospital, and she had asked to go to Henry and Li An.

The police would not release Mr. Yeh's body. The family could make funeral arrangements, but the body could not be viewed for fear of further public disorder.

Auntie would not leave their house for the next few weeks. "Don't go," she begged whenever Li An tried to leave for the university. She didn't like being alone with Letchmi, whom she distrusted. "She'll open the door to them," she warned. "You cannot trust other people, only your own kind."

Henry could not help. He was too busy talking to lawyers and to Ah Pah's business associates and the managers of various companies and factories.

Their house was filled with wreaths and bouquets of flowers. Ah Pah had been buried quickly, without the customary public wake, but word had gotten around the community. Enormous circles of frangipani, daisies, chrysanthemums, and tall spikes of dahlias and arum lilies that would have been sent to the wake came to the house instead.

Li An refused to have them in the house. Their heavy scent reminded her of Ah Pah's corpse rotting in the cheaply constructed coffin the hospital had ordered, one of hundreds of the same type used for all those killed and sent to the morgue that Wednesday. But she did not throw the flowers out. Instead they were placed outdoors, propped on bamboo stakes and falling over vases, jars, bottles, anything that would serve to hold them as they wilted and browned in the stifling May heat.

Even with the wreaths left outdoors, the thick scent of hundreds of full blossoms decaying together filled the house. Without a breeze, the musty air drifted in through the windows and filled her nostrils with remorse. She had never felt at ease with Ah Pah. He who to her had appeared brutal had been brutalized himself, and now her body was slow with aches and regrets.

One morning when she went out to open the gate for Henry as he went to meet directors of a company in which his father had been the major shareholder, she saw her Honda parked

outside. She looked for a note attached to the handlebars, but there was only the machine with its worn red plastic seat and the round steel womb of its fuel tank gleaming in the sunshine.

Henry did not notice the Honda as he backed the car out. He had become preoccupied after Ah Pah's death, and he now seemed to have taken on his father's sunken silence.

She wheeled the Honda into the front yard and stood it among the leaning wreaths and over-toppling lilies like another memorial.

She waited for Chester to call.

By the middle of June, Auntie had found a house in Petaling Jaya near them, and Henry put the Kuala Lumpur house up for sale. Much of the lovely rosewood furniture had been broken. Nothing had been stolen, but a furious orgy of destruction had smashed, battered, slashed, torn, ripped, and scattered the possessions in the house. All the blue-and-white porcelain vases, plates, cups, and ginger-jars that Auntie had collected over the years from Taiwan, Hong Kong, Indonesia, and Singapore had been smashed. The delicately colored pastel fabrics that covered the chairs and beds had been ripped. The red-gold jadeite Kuan Yin lay beside Mr. Yeh's body. Someone had used it as a club.

Auntie said she had cried most when she saw the Kuan Yin beside her husband. It was she who should have laid beside him, but she had been so terrified that she had hidden herself, and survived instead.

Even after she moved into her new house, Auntie insisted on Li An's company.

A new group of students began at the university, and again Li An taught Herbert's poem. This time she felt a new awkwardness talking about death. "All must die," Herbert had written. Gina had died, and Ah Pah, and hundreds more in the riots since she had last read the poem aloud.

The students seemed many years younger than herself. "Only a sweet and virtuous soul," Herbert wrote, lived after death. The students, quieter than those the year before, and less critical, listened with neither questions nor conviction. Unbelievably, she heard herself talk about the quest for

meaning in the face of death and the affirmation of absolute virtue in the face of universal corruption.

Every day Auntie tried to recover her settled vision. She would say in the morning, "I'm going shopping for curtains. This house is so dusty, the windows cannot be opened. I have to keep the air-conditioning on all the time. Maybe heavy curtains will keep the dust out."

But in the afternoons she was still waiting for Li An to come home. "It's too soon," she explained. "The shops aren't in a safe area. I don't know what kind of taxi driver I'll find. I may get someone dangerous."

Her sight had cracked and was now crossed with lines of fear. Henry drove Auntie home each evening, where she was met by a Chinese amah, hired to keep her company through the night.

Each day as she waited for Chester to appear at the faculty lounge Li An refused to allow herself to be afraid. She knew he was planning something for them, something wonderful. No man could touch a woman as he had her without love, and love had inevitable consequences. She repeated the consequences in her mind as she drank lime juice and smoked another cigarette. She would not go to Baden-Baden. Chester would explain everything to Henry. Beyond that she could not imagine anything else.

By July she was afraid she had only imagined everything.

When she finally saw him walking through the door, his tall figure coming in from the bright sunshine into the dim lounge, a horrible pain went through her. Chester went to the counter for cigarettes, and it was Abdullah who came up to her first.

"I heard about your father. Very sorry."

"My father-in-law." She felt foolish almost immediately. It didn't matter that Ah Pah was her father-in-law; Abdullah's condolence was the same.

"Terrible," he continued, not seeming to notice her correction. "We must make sure this thing never happen again. The country must change. A terrible thing happen, but it is not so bad if it teach us a lesson. In Malaysia, rights of the ra'ayat

must come first, like in the French Revolution and American Revolution. If rights of people not first, then surely more killing and all kinds of problems. This is what history teach us. Some people must suffer; history show some must be sacrifice for majority good. But we all Malaysians, yah, even those who must sacrifice."

Her eyes filled. The admiration she felt for him spilled into her eyes. But she didn't believe him. Mr. Yeh would not have understood Abdullah's nobility on his account. Auntie would have been outraged to see her sitting with him in such a friendly manner. Even Henry, she suspected, would have disagreed with him.

But she wanted to believe Abdullah. He gave a meaning to the senseless slaughter, the unspeakable fears of the last month. Silent, she pressed his hand. He was uncomfortable and moved it away as soon as he could.

Chester joined them with an opened Coca-Cola bottle in his hand. He tipped his head and drank straight from it. "Has Abdullah told you I'm leaving next month?" He noticed her tears and put the bottle down.

"Li An is crying about her father-in-law."

"I'm sorry. We heard about it only last week. It's been a tough few weeks. I had to make a report to the U.S. Embassy. Our parents were after the embassy people to make sure we were safe, and we were warned not to get involved with the local trouble. I was told to stay home as much as possible. If it wasn't for Samad and Abdullah I'd have starved to death. I didn't even get to the market." Chester stopped and drank from the bottle again, for she was crying hard now. "Do you want us to leave?"

When she shook her head, Abdullah said, "I must see Encik Hamid for an interview. I come back and get you later, okay, Chester?"

Li An wiped her eyes with the crumpled paper napkin. "When are you leaving?"

"Umm," Chester lit a cigarette and inhaled for a moment, "about the third week of August. My mother is really pleased I'm coming home. The Kuala Lumpur director doesn't seem to mind that I'm leaving before my term is up. The Peace Corps

is concerned about its volunteers in Malaysia, and is urging us to consider our options. It isn't good for Americans to get in the middle of foreign national politics."

She listened hard. Was he explaining something to her that she was missing? "And then?"

"And then?" He sounded surprised. "I don't know. Probably graduate school, if I can find one to take me so late. I don't want to work yet. Teaching here has shown me I'm not ready for the working world—it's a grind."

You don't remember a thing, she thought. Didn't you lie down beside me, didn't you swallow me up? Even as she questioned him silently her feelings closed against him. Her eyes had dried, and without any effort she lit a cigarette, shaking her head at his offer of a light.

"Isn't it strange," she said mockingly, "how people who don't know what they want end up at university?"

## Twelve

**S**he could not be cheerful at the farewell party Samad and Abdullah gave for Chester.

Henry had forgotten about Professor Forster's warnings when he heard Chester was leaving. Besides, Li An was constantly with Auntie, while Chester was spending his last few weeks in Malaysia traveling around the country and seeing as much of it as he could.

He went up to Kedah to stay with Samad's family in their village, and to Johore, where Abdullah's father was a retired civil servant. He took off with some Peace Corps friends to the Penang beaches, and spent a day in Malacca among the ruins of Portuguese and Dutch fortresses and tombs.

At the party he described a revelation he had under a flame-of-the-forest tree in Malacca, by the fifteenth-century Portuguese gatehouse, the A Famosa.

"Looking up at those crimson flowers—you know how beautiful they are, with long tassels and so bright against the blue sky—I thought how futile the Portuguese were in coming to Malacca. What I have learned this year is that white people have no place in the East. The East is like the flame-of-the-forest. It's going to remain beautiful no matter what happens. But everything the Portuguese did, their cannons and forts and churches, it's all dead history, out of place . . ."

"Stoned out of your mind!" Robert interrupted.

Robert had been Chester's traveling companion. He was

staying for the second year in Malaysia, and he was enjoying the pathos of good-byes surrounding Chester's departure.

"Would you believe it? First time he's been stoned. What a sight! He's lying under this tree, looking at the flowers as they're falling down, and mumbling. Hey, real Cheng Mai Gold!"

Ellen snorted. "What gold? You Americans are a terrible influence. Marijuana, R and R, Vietnam GIs. Suddenly got prostitutes everywhere. Where Malaysia like this before?"

Everyone looked uncomfortable.

The room was full of different people who didn't know each other: Peace Corps Americans with slim Malay and Chinese girls, Malay journalists and broadcast staffers from Samad's and Abdullah's offices, Indian and Chinese teachers from the Vocational High School, friends Chester had made at Malay classes at the university. He seemed to know everyone.

Paroo was somewhere in the crowd. He had tried talking to Li An, but the noise was too loud and the bodies pressing on them pushed them apart.

Above the confusion Ellen's question was heard by many. She had been drinking but her speech wasn't slurred.

"You're right." Chester was as relaxed as Ellen was sharp. "That's why I'm getting out. Americans don't belong here. We're hurting the place. Like Malacca. It was just an old fishing village until those gunboats came along."

"No, it was never just an old fishing village," Robert interrupted, laughing. "Isabella Bird called the country 'The Golden Chersonese,' way before there was Cheng Mai Gold. That's the fancy Victorian way of saying 'peninsula,' get it? She was on to something. Chester's problem," he added, addressing the circle around them, "is he'd rather be in America. He can't see himself here, even stoned."

Li An hated Chester then. She had visited Malacca with Henry months before she met Chester, and had loved its ruins and air of melancholic decay. Even its rundown shadows breathed of adventures and encounters, and she had pointed out to Henry these possibilities in the moldering colonial, Chinese, and Malay structures that crowded the town. History, she insisted, was living in Malacca, visible in the gorgeous Eurasian children and the Latin mass they heard that

Sunday at St. Francis Church. The tropical breezes from the Straits blew reminders of generations of strangers and exiles from distant places. The rustle in the heavy leaves of the sea almond trees on St. Paul's Hill, by the roofless church and sagging stone walls, carried stories that Li An could still imagine, stories written in the Latin script on the sarcophagi rising from the lallang-covered hillsides, the Chinese calligraphy carved above the ornate doors of merchants' homes, and the cursive Jawi lettering proliferating by the Malay mosques.

Listening to the laughter that followed, she was glad Chester was leaving. How could she have thought she loved him, she wondered, when he was so shallow and ugly in his thinking?

Yet she was afraid all the time. Although she had washed her body thoroughly the next morning, Chester, she feared, had marked her forever.

If Henry hadn't been so preoccupied with his grief, with the legal and business problems arising from Ah Pah's death, with the demands placed on him by his mother, brothers, and Auntie, with his neglect of his lab work and teaching duties, he would surely have noticed the changes in her body. In the mornings she dragged herself out of bed, the early nausea already rising in her mouth.

At first she thought it was because she was miserable over Chester's leaving. But now her nipples were sore. They tingled all by themselves, without touch or thought. Her body had a life of its own—it hurt and was sick. Through the heat and noise she wondered if she should tell Chester. He was flying to London the next day, and then home to New York. But there were too many people at his party.

It was hardly three months since Mr. Yeh's death, since the arson and the riots. Henry and Li An had stopped wearing black after the first month because it made them too conspicuous, mourners of a public execution. There was grief enough everywhere. She saw it in the tight faces of pedestrians, the whispers of once bold debaters in the faculty lounge, the uneasy glances over the shoulders in restaurants as diners lowered their voices.

No one knew what to believe. Was it prophesied in the stars or was it retribution for arrogant Chinese overreaching of goals?



Some excused the killings as a simple matter of spontaneous outrage against economic oppressors; others thought them calculated murderous revenge, manipulated mob hysteria. Someone called the violence a disease of the blood, striking, as the historians noted, every thirty years, like malarial fever that ravaged and then lay dormant before running its course again. How many had been struck? No one dared to ask.

Like a victim, Li An wondered about her past behavior. What had she done to contribute to Ah Pah's death? Perhaps if the brainy Chinese like Henry and herself confessed to their arrogance, gave up their selfish interests in their own well-being, submitted themselves to the will of the Malay ra'ayat, the killings might not have occurred.

She didn't believe that, just as she didn't believe that if she forgot what happened that night, her body would stop hurting. But she couldn't go on thinking of Ah Pah's death or her body's tenderness all the time. With the other guests at Chester's party, she was tired of grief and fear.

Only a few months after the riots, they were desperate for a good time. Their voices rose in a frenzied babble. Grabbing beers and orange squashes, roasted chickpeas and peanuts, they lit cigarettes and moved restlessly from corner to corner.

A stranger stepped on her foot and didn't notice her wince. Henry was talking to another stranger near the kitchen. A tall, thin American was saying enthusiastically, over Li An's head to someone she couldn't see, "Out at Genting the epiphytes grow to tremendous sizes. Ooah!"

Suddenly the lights went off, music blared, and men of all sizes were clutching women and pushing them around and around the little space in the middle of the room. Li An found herself backed into a corner by bodies gyrating to the scratchy twang and bang of electric guitars and drums.

At the front door Chester, with Paroo by his elbow, was welcoming latecomers. Someone had lit an incense stick and the scent of patchouli overwhelmed the malty sting of Tiger and Anchor beers.

Li An wondered what would happen if she were to push her way to Chester's side and say—she would have to shout to be heard—"I'm pregnant." Would everyone stop dancing?

Would the horrible music be turned off? Would the lights go on, and Henry and Abdullah come running to hold her hand? Would Paroo congratulate her?

But she imagined Chester's face falling, as ignorant of what it meant for her to be pregnant as he was ignorant of what it had meant that night when she—her body—could not be sorry for the riots, when she forgot, never knew, she was Malaysian and Chester was American.

"So your heart is broken?"

Li An's breath caught. Had she been talking aloud? It was only Ellen, who smiled wickedly.

"No, not broken." Li An tried smiling back. "I'm pregnant."

The words were shaped before she could stop herself. No one would hear her. She had merely moved her lips. The guitars twanged more ferociously; the women threw their bodies with greater abandon.

"You bloody fool!" Ellen scowled. "With an American." She scowled in Chester's direction. "You didn't tell him."

Ellen knew everything about her, Li An thought. How did she get so close?

Li An shook her head. A wildly spinning dancer bumped into her, then spun away without a word. The drums pounded in her head.

"What are you going to do?"

Before she could think of an answer, Henry was behind Ellen, pointing to the door. Ellen's nails dug into her wrist, but she pulled away, relieved.

At the door Chester was talking to Robert's girlfriend, an Indian in a transparent sari whose cinnamon skin gleamed like a moth under the door light. She had just arrived, late, and was already waiting for Robert to take her home.

Li An was conscious that she would never see Chester again; she did not plan to say good-bye to him at the airport. She bit her lip, afraid her mouth would shape the words that would change her life.

"Lee Ann, you come and visit me someday."

The dusky goddess was waiting for them to leave—she hadn't finished telling Chester about Robert's bad behavior at her parents' home last night.

JOSS and GOLD

"You too, Henry."

Awkwardly Chester hugged her.

As she moved out of his arms she saw his face, young, shy, confused. How could she have expected him to take charge of her life? He was as lost as she was.

She couldn't cry.

She sat in the white Mercedes as Henry drove home, and the satellite streets of Petaling Jaya were as bleak as the silence in her mind when she pondered her future.

*Book Two*

CIRCLING  
~

WESTCHESTER COUNTY, NEW YORK

1980