

Viewfinder

New York City, July 1995

Of course I remember what I was printing that night. I remember a lot about that time because it was then my whole life changed. Again.

From the beginning of the month it was almost 100 degrees every day, but you can't make decent prints in heat like that, so I'd work at night in my bathroom-cum-darkroom. Usually by ten or eleven it would drop a few degrees and I'd run the air-conditioner for an hour or two. Long enough to cool down the space for the chemicals to function properly, but without giving me a fatal electric bill.

The last negative I printed from was the face of a woman, one of the homeless ones who walks the neighborhood by day and at night dozes on a bench in Stuyvesant Park till a cop tells her to move on. That's her life in summer. In winter, if she's still alive, the woman will sleep over a subway grate, or doze in a train car, or if she's lucky, get into one of the church-run shelters in the neighborhood. She'd never go to the public shelter where her shoes or her coat could be stolen.

I remember thinking, "Could I end up like that?" A lot of women in New York—at least of my generation—had that question lurking somewhere in the back of our minds. Especially those of us who'd left a lot of our lives behind for the sake of "Art."

I stopped down my new Beseler enlarger, adjusted the image into focus. I like to print full frame, but I wanted a closer look at the woman's face. I raised the enlarger, refocused. I could see her eyes behind the pair of cheap glasses, maybe bought from that Korean woman who used to set up her table at the corner of Third Avenue and Eighth.

One lens of the glasses was cracked, the other held to the frame with duct tape. I raised the enlarger, refocused. The woman's face filled the paper, her chin, the top of her head flowed over the edge of the easel onto the narrow

shelf—too narrow, but the only spot in the bathroom with space for the enlarger. I slid the easel to the side and adjusted the enlarger to center on the woman's right hand. A swollen hand, cracked skin, broken fingernails. The hand held a paper cup with the Greek coffee shop pattern—a stylized blue design of the Parthenon. The image on the cup had almost faded away and the homeless woman was using it for begging when I saw her.

I tweaked the focus, set the timer, the light went on, then off, exposing the silver halide crystals on the surface of the paper. The masochism of the darkroom, but the comfort of measuring, of calculations.

Into the Dektol tray to strip off the exposed crystals.

Into the glacial acidic stop bath to end the stripping.

Into the Kodak F-5 fixer to set the image.

Into the archival washer along with the rest of my night's work.

I blew a wad on that washer so my work would be permanent—not last just long enough for my January show.

Already three o'clock. Enough work for one night. I set my wind-up alarm so I wouldn't forget to turn off the washer and headed for my favorite chair in the living room. My nest. It was an ugly piece I rescued from the sidewalk during my first year in the City. Even when I first brought it in, there were a couple of poking springs in the seat and one missing leg. But I'd put a stack of bricks under where the leg should have been and a batik pillow over the springs.

I grabbed the latest copy of *Aperture* magazine and sank into the womb-like comfort. The new issue had a spread on Imogen Cunningham, my hero from way back, from when it all began. Imogen was in her eighties before the photography establishment paid her any serious attention, but by the 1990s the price of her prints was in the stratosphere. Sometimes I've fantasized this could happen to me, imagine my own obit in the Times.

Diana Williams, San Francisco-born photographer, long under-appreciated like her idol, that other West Coast legend, Imogen Cunningham, but now acknowledged one of the supreme innovators of late twentieth century black and white...etc., etc.

Of course I'm no Cunningham. At best, I dig deeper into the grooves made by others. Still, that night I felt exhilarated, a surge of confidence, was sure I'd made at least one or two good ones. It never mattered that I might feel

differently in a month or two. I was wired enough to read the whole issue of *Aperture*—except I fell asleep after page two.

I must have been exhausted because I never heard the alarm go off. And Cashmere my black Persian—who usually wakes me at crack of dawn—apparently had no success either. Every morning she jumps off her perch on top of the bookcase, rubs against my leg and squints her golden eyes at me. Usually I'll feed her, then go back to sleep.

But that morning I even slept through the young stockbroker upstairs doing his fanatical thumps and jumps on my ceiling—"my health regime" he told me when it first started and I knocked on his door to complain. I certainly didn't hear the painter next door crank up the heavy-metal CD that gave her the courage to leave her 19th century oil landscapes and go uptown to design corporate logos. Even the morning coffee fumes from neighbors, the smell of frying onions and spices from the dozens of Bangladeshi restaurants on the block—I slept through it all.

Probably because I was deep in a dream I didn't want to end. A face in the developing tray. It was Lynne, a poet who lived upstairs and killed herself swallowing lithium with vodka. But she faded away and Michael jumped out of the tray. We started to play Chess. Only two pieces left on the board, a saxophone and a cat. It was my move, but I couldn't remember which piece was mine. Then the saxophone started playing, louder and louder.

It was the telephone ringing. Groggy and still half in my dream—I didn't want Michael to go away—I tried to think where I'd left the phone. I never spent the money to put in an extra jack, so I kept it on a 25 foot leash.

The ringing was from the bathroom. Rushing in I tripped over the cord, the phone crashed to the floor...dial tone.

I sat on the toilet, pushed the innards of the beast back into its plastic case. In there, behind the black light-preventing curtains of my darkroom, it was still the middle of the night. In the living room the gray light of an early New York summer morning washed over the dusty stack of bills on my table... but it was still too early for a call. Wrong number?

I switched off the archival washer.

The phone rang again. Goose-bumps up my back. Maybe it wasn't a wrong number.

"I figured you had to be home." It was Carl.

"I was asleep."

“Did you know Michael’s in Ghana?”

“Is he O.K.?” I said in a small voice, terrified.

“He’s over there doing his music thing.”

Would he phone just to tell me this?

“The reason I’m calling—he’s been sick.”

I carried the phone back to the other room, slumped into my chair.

“First it was malaria. Then, just when he was recovering from that, he got hepatitis.”

I held my breath. *Oh, Michael!*

“He says he’s O.K., recovering. But that’s why I’m calling. I think one of us should go see what the score is. I’d go over, but...I can’t right now. Lisa’s expecting any minute.”

I’d heard Carl had remarried. One of his students.

“I know you haven’t spoken to Michael in about five years, but this is—”

“Carl! It’s only been three. Besides, it was his idea not to be in touch. I never wanted that.”

“Look. I don’t want to get into an argument. I’m calling to see if you’d be willing to go. I’ll pay your way.”

“When?”

“Great! I was sure you’d rise to the occasion.”

“I am his mother, you know.”

Carl never wanted to see that it was his decision that led to the rift between Michael and me, but I wasn’t going to get into that again. I tried to listen.

“Michael’s in a hospital in Accra—sounds like a pretty decent place. He says it’s where our embassy people go. As long as he’s there he should be O.K. It’s when he gets out...He’s still a kid without a lot of sense.”

“He’s almost twenty-eight!”

“But kind of...he can be kind of spacey.”

Another loony artist. Like his Mom

“Besides, from what he says, I think sanitary conditions are a lot more primitive over there than Malaysia ever was—even thirty years ago.”

Thirty years! God. That long.

“Do you have a valid passport?”

“Yes.”

I hoped I could find it. Five years earlier I’d gotten one in the vain hope I might sell enough prints from my annual show to take a trip. Never dreamed Carl would pay for me to travel—and to Africa!

Carl said he’d let Michael know I’d be coming. He’d order a ticket at once, have it mailed to me, would wire me expense money.

“You’ll need a visa, but I’ll call the Ghanaian embassy, tell them it’s an emergency, get the ball rolling. Can you give me your passport number?”

“Hold on a second.”

I rummaged in my underwear drawer—it was still there.

I have to admit, that has always been a good thing about Carl. He knew how to plan. How to get things done. Never my strongest point.

After we hung up my body spoke to me of lack of sleep, of need for caffeine, but my brain was whizzing at light speed.

I’d thought I was beyond feelings connected to Carl. Believed the burden of resentment had shriveled up and died of old age. But suddenly, when I wasn’t looking it pounced from behind, lithe, muscular, and sharp of claw.

Michael and I never fought—at least nothing major. It was like the separation of continents, the movement imperceptible. First Michael couldn’t come for summers; then he got new interests, new friends; he came for Christmas and Thanksgiving less and less. I didn’t really see what was happening till the gulf was too wide to bridge—as wide as the ocean that at that moment lay between us.

Cashmere’s plaintive cries for food sent me into the kitchen. I filled her food and water dishes, put coffee in a filter. The comfort of morning rituals.

Will Michael and I even know each other anymore—recognize each other when I get off the plane?

Once I found a photograph on the street. Who knows how long it’d been lying there, attacked by sun and rain and snow and city grit. I could see the shapes of two people, but not their faces or even what sex they were. At the time it gave me the idea for a series of prints.

But if one of the people in that old photo saw it after all that time and exposure to the elements—say it was a woman—she would have no idea who the other person was, or even if she belonged in the picture herself.

I toasted a bagel, hunted for butter in the fridge, but there was only an old piece that looked petrified. I threw it out.

Will Michael wish it were Carl coming instead of me?

I carried coffee and dry bagel into the other room, sat in my womb chair to think. It was still too early, but first I'd get in touch with Peggy. Then Eve...

My thoughts kept going back to Michael. I remembered he'd wanted to go to Africa, but it was still only a dream for him then—the last time we'd talked. What did he look like now? Did he still have a beard? He was trying to grow one after college. Carl had a beard when we first married, but he said it itched a lot and shaved it off. Just before we went to Malaysia.

Malaysia! Where my whole life began to change. Where I fell in love with photography.

I remember the day Carl and I first arrived. Thirty years ago. God! Thirty years! How was that possible? What was it like there now? I couldn't imagine. But I had seen recent photos of Kuala Lumpur, transformed into a modern city, a metropolis of skyscrapers. And the rural *kampong* we lived in, and sleepy Muar town? If Kuala Lumpur was so different, so utterly changed, what could they possibly be like? The fact is, the Malaysia I knew, the one Carl and I lived in so long ago, no longer exists in this world.



Aperture

Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.

June 1965

The heat. At the door of the plane and walking down the portable stairs into that fiery furnace I wondered how I'd be able to stand living there for a year. Carl had said it might be hard at first, coming from Northern California to two degrees above the Equator, but we'd soon adjust.

Heat seared the inside of my nostrils. Humidity lay on my skin like syrup—my pores gasped for breath. Maybe I won't adjust, I thought. Maybe our bodies aren't like rational little machines that adapt wherever we put them.

Walking across the tarmac, I could feel the super-heated asphalt burning through my thin-soled sandals. Before we even got to the terminal building Carl's face was covered with drops of sweat, and his hair and shirt looked like he'd walked under a shower. He always sweated more than I did, but in that heat and humidity my dress clung to my legs and I could feel my new perm going from smooth waves to frizzy squiggles.

Inside the musty darkness of the Kuala Lumpur terminal it was almost as hot as out on the tarmac. Those were the days before air-conditioning was taken for granted. Plus, I was soon to find out, the British had thought it unhealthy, unnecessary, and practically immoral. Though the country had been independent for almost eight years, what the Brits thought still counted for a lot. According to Carl, one wild rumor had it that the Prime Minister, an upper-class Malay, spoke English in his sleep.

As our eyes adjusted from the bright light, Carl and I looked around for George Yazik. We didn't know him but Carl's academic advisor had heard of this Ph.D. candidate in Linguistics who was living in Kuala Lumpur.

"It's understood that academics look out for each other overseas," he told Carl.

We didn't know much about this George Yazik, but he'd sent a telegram in response to Carl's letter: "Wire arrival. Will reserve hotel. Meet plane."

The only other American in Malaysia Carl had heard anything about was a woman political scientist from Cornell who was somewhere on the East Coast of the Malay peninsula—but nobody could give him an address for her. Few Americans, it seemed, had discovered Malaysia at all, much less as a source of Ph.D. dissertations. Carl said there had to be Americans attached to our Embassy in Kuala Lumpur and at the Consulate in Singapore. And probably we'd meet some left-over Brits.

A tall, gangly man about our age—obviously American—came toward us.

"Welcome to beautiful Kuala Lumpur!"

He squeezed my hot hand in his large damp one.

"You don't look as hot as I feel," I said.

"This? This is nothing. When I was a kid in Nebraska we harvested wheat every day in 100 degrees. Drank hot coffee to keep cool."

This confirmed a swiftly emerging theory of mine that bodies are stuck with their childhood thermostat.

"Is this all you brought?" George asked as he and Carl each lugged one of our two big suitcases to the tiny Yazik Morris Minor.

"We shipped the rest through American Express. Including most of my research materials. It takes about four months, but they should get here pretty soon."

Only one of our suitcases fit in the small trunk; the other would have to ride on the back seat with one of us.

Carl asked George if there were other American academics in the country—did he know of any.

"There's that woman from Cornell on the East Coast, the one you mentioned in your letter, but nobody's ever seen her. She's either gone native or left already. Of course there's Rick Pressman up in the wilds of the Central Highlands—if he still counts as an American."

"What's he doing there?" Carl asked.

"Pressman's an anthropologist. An expat, teaches somewhere in England—Manchester—Leeds—I forget. Married to a Brit. Marjorie. They're both dying for company, stuck up there in the jungle. A year already. You'll have to go see them after you get settled in."

As soon as George mentioned Pressman, the expatriate anthropologist, I saw Carl's body tense. Ph.D. dissertations have to be original work, something nobody else ever wrote about, even if it's so trivial nobody would ever want to read about it. If somebody trumps you on your research, it's curtains for your Ph.D. degree. I could feel my own stomach muscles tighten. Our future hung on Carl getting that Ph.D.

Carl offered me the front seat, but I could tell it was perfunctory, could see he really wanted to grill George about this Pressman guy. So I volunteered to sit in back. I was too hot and tired to talk much anyway, except to be cranky and whine about the heat—which nobody needed, not even me.

"Oh, by the way," Carl said after we were in the car, "what's this fellow Rick studying?"

He asked so casually I knew he was terrified. Carl had enough worries already. Maybe he wouldn't be able to find a *kampong* where we could live, or villagers who'd cooperate, or his Malay wouldn't improve enough for interviews—languages didn't come easily to him—or the government would get suspicious of this foreigner poking around, or we could put every penny of both our savings and one or two years of our lives into this project and still not come up with a dissertation that pleased his advisors. And now—worst of all—maybe this Rick Pressman character was a whole year ahead of Carl, studying the exact same thing.

"Pressman's studying kinship patterns."

George eased his Morris off the airport road, cutting into traffic on a main highway.

"He's interested in how Malay marriages are arranged based on family ties. First cousins, and so on. The kind of thing you anthro guys love."

Did I detect the barest hint of a patronizing tone? Did linguists feel they were a purer race?

"Kinship patterns?" Carl said, obviously wanting to be absolutely certain.

"Right."

"That's great! Terrific!"

The relief in Carl's voice! His own dissertation topic was land tenure issues: how inheritance of land affects social status and education in a Malay *kampong*. A far cry from arranged marriages. At least in the mind of an anthropologist.

"I'm sure Diana and I will want to visit them." Carl wiped his forehead with his saturated handkerchief. "I'll definitely want to pick his brain about Malay culture."

My stomach muscles unknotted. It was so hard to be the wife and just look on. Already I'd seen Carl worry his way through his Comps, the written exams. I wanted everything to go well for him in Malaysia. When Carl worried too much, it put me under a lot of strain, having to reassure him that everything was going to work out.

"Say, maybe Rick could even find a *kampong* for you guys up there," said George. "You don't have a place yet do you?"

"No, but I think we'll probably look on the West Coast," Carl said. "People at the University of Malaya that I've communicated with suggested that."

"It is a pretty godforsaken area up there in the center of the country. I don't know how his wife stands it. Kathy has barely survived here in K.L. Every now and then Rick and Marjorie make it down here to civilization, looking wild-eyed. But the West Coast is different. For one thing, no matter where you go it's easy to get to K.L. and Singapore. The Brits set up the road system that way. I was getting sleepy, but resisted dozing off. I was excited at having arrived at last, and George drove so fast, weaving back and forth across the road, dodging motor scooters, buses, mopeds, motorcycles, bicycles, and trucks. I didn't see many cars—later I'd find out only the rich could afford them, had to pay a hundred percent import tariff.

The largest trucks carried massive hardwood logs, and others were loaded with sacks of rice, and what George said were bundles of smoked latex. Trucks and buses belched diesel fuel exhaust making a nasty smog—specks of black grit had already settled on my face and bare arms. The scenery didn't exactly fit my idea of a tropical paradise—flat gray land pock-marked like the moon, muddy water filling in the craters. George said tin-mining had left it like this. A dusty green scrub was trying to creep over the scarred landscape.

Most people on the move rode bicycles. Covered from neck to ankle in traditional Malay clothes, a man, his wife, and child somehow all managed to ride on a single bike. On the rear of his bike, a Chinese man, naked except for baggy shorts, carried an enormous pig tightly caged in bamboo. Cargo of other bike riders: a hundred pound sack of rice; a cage of live chickens; a stalk of bananas as tall as the rider. . . . about then I must have dozed off.

Carl and I had been married for two years. I met him in the Anthro Department where I was working as the assistant secretary and he was studying for his Ph.D. I had a B.A. from the same university, but in those days we educated females were very confused about who we were, who we should be, who we wanted to be. We were reading books like the *Feminine Mystique* and the *Second Sex* and getting restive, but we hadn't yet gotten the courage to make a frontal assault on male privilege. Newspapers carried two help-wanted sections: one advertised jobs for women, the other listed (better paying) jobs for men. The guys hadn't yet decided we'd be allowed to compete with them for careers.

I had a vague idea there were earlier feminists, knew my grandmother was forty before women got the right to vote. But Women's Lib[eration] was still a confusing jumble of ideas for those of us living on the West Coast. Most women from my graduating class were working on their Ph.T. degree—"Putting Hubby Through." Meaning they had snagged a future doctor, lawyer or college professor and were supporting him through grad school.

I'd always loved to draw and paint, thought I would major in Art. But my mother—who never went to college and never worked a day in her life outside the home—told me Art was not practical.

"You'll need something to fall back on if your husband dies," she said.

Never mind I didn't even have a boyfriend at the time.

The only options for educated women: nursing, teaching or secretarial work. Did I want to change bedpans and give shots? Maybe I could stand teaching high school social studies. . . . but that plan didn't last. I hated the education courses.

So I took a job as assistant secretary in the Anthropology Department.

Then I met Carl. He was going to be a professor. Even more exciting, he wanted to live for a year or two in Malaysia, a place so exotic none of my friends had ever heard of it. Besides, Carl and I were going to be partners in his research project—my history degree had given me some skills for that.

Suddenly I woke up. The car had stopped and George Yazik was telling Carl, "It's not fancy. No elevator, no wall-to-wall. But it's new, clean, you've got your own bathroom. And the price isn't too bad. Fifteen ringgit a day."

This was more than we'd expected to pay but maybe we'd be there only a couple of nights. (At the time fifteen ringgit was equal to about five dollars.)

Seeing our looks after he told us the price, George said,

“It’s this, the Hilton, or a place with straw mattresses and fleas.”

Carl and I both told George the place would be fine. I definitely was not up to fleas.

After Carl signed us in at the front desk, the guys hauled our two heavy suitcases up to the third floor. The whole place was unpainted concrete, the floors covered in an ugly tan linoleum that looked new and had a chemical stink. Our room: a double bed; small table; one straight-back chair; and high up on one wall a curtainless window. The room was hot and stuffy—the same as everywhere.

George stood gingerly on the frail chair and opened the window. I turned a dial on the wall which started the slow silent whirl of a ceiling fan. I’d never seen one of these before—in Northern California at that time no kind of fan was necessary. When I turned the switch all the way, the motor whined a high-pitched shrill, the brand-new white blades rattling as they slapped the air and sent a hot breeze down on us.

Carl asked if there was a phone in the lobby, wanted to call American Express about our stuff, and make appointments at the University.

“I can take you around places tomorrow,” George said. “Phones here... well, usually the connection is so bad it’s not worth trying. Better to just go wherever you need to. Anyway, for tonight, Kathy and I want to take you out to dinner. To our favorite place.”

I was so hot and tired I’d forgotten to even wonder if George were married.

“Great idea,” Carl said. “How do you feel about that, Diana?”

Naturally I agreed. I was in no mood to go hunting for a place to eat in a city and country neither of us had ever been to. We’ll probably go to a Malay restaurant, I thought.

“Sorry I can’t tell you where we’re going to have dinner,” George said. “Kathy ordered me to make it a surprise. Is six o’clock O.K. for us to come by?”

After George left we both took showers. There was no hot water faucet, but a cold shower felt great after the first shock—even if the effect didn’t last too long. Neither of us put on any clothes and I remembered 19th century photos I’d seen of Indonesian and African women wearing only a few beads. They definitely had the right idea. I lay on the bed, but even with the fan going it was too hot to fall asleep. Carl, a towel under his buttocks, sat on the chair reading

the *Straits Times*, the local English language paper. I watched sweat trickle down his back; every few minutes he had to wipe his steaming glasses.

The mattress was foam rubber and felt like it was generating its own heat as it reflected my body temperature back on me.

“Why do they have rubber mattresses in a climate like this? I feel like I’m lying on a stove.”

“Probably because rubber is cheap. They grow a lot of it here.”

Carl had told me the English ran rubber plantations in Malaysia and it looked like those trees were still producing the stuff like crazy.

Remembering that heat rises, I slid off the mattress onto the linoleum floor thinking it might be slightly cooler down there.

From below, I could see Carl’s bare back. He hunched over the little table, resting his elbows on either side of the newspaper and I studied that tiny patch of dark hair at the base of his spine. The black ringlets on the back of his head glistened with sweat and curled even tighter than usual. I loved to run my fingers through his thick curls and pull at the miniature ones on his chest. And to rub my smooth shaved legs against his rough, furry ones.

My own hair was hot and damp on my neck. I shifted position to pull it away, wished I’d chopped it off short or let it grow long so I could wear it up. Instead I got a perm! How stupid, to have my hair a length that would stick to my neck. But I’d never been in a tropical climate before, so how would I know?

I didn’t know anything—why was I even there? For a moment I panicked—feeling trapped in Carl’s dream. What was my own vision? What did I want to do in life? My mind was totally blank on those questions. Then I realized, no matter what, I’d left the damned secretarial job behind. Remembering that, I relaxed a bit. Maybe here in Malaysia, I’d even have the time to figure something out for myself.

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At six o’clock we met George and Kathy Yazik in the hotel lobby.

“Welcome to the ends of the earth!” Kathy said and gave me a hug.

I was startled, came from a family that hugged only its own, and then only when occasion demanded, as when I said goodbye to my mother’s sister, my only living relative. It was only later, when I lived in New York City with

all those Italians, Jews, African Americans, Latinos that I learned hugging was a normal way to greet friends.

Kathy was almost as tall as George, and Carl and I—five-seven and five-five—were runts by comparison. George’s hands and feet were twice as big as Carl’s and he looked the part of a lanky Midwestern farmer. Kathy had the kind of body romance novels and fashion magazines used to call “willowy.” Meaning slender and graceful. I was pretty much the opposite: stocky and awkward. Seeing Kathy’s hair, thick, honey-blond, and up off her neck in an elegant French-roll, I felt a stab of jealousy. A French-roll of my fine, mouse-brown hair would have been pitiful.

The four of us squeezed into the Yazik car and George drove us down Batu Road, a cobblestone street which he said was the main drag in town.

“*Batu* means stone or brick,” said Carl, obviously pleased to show off some Malay to me. So far I didn’t know a single word, was counting on the tutor Carl hoped to hire.

Most of the buildings on Batu Road were two-story Chinese shophouses. George explained the system: “On the ground floor is a family business and the store owners live on the second floor with their relatives. Sometimes ten to fifteen people in a couple of rooms.”

He said most buildings in Kuala Lumpur were brick, the surfaces thinly plastered with cement. I noticed this outer skin had been painted with white-wash, some of it tinted a watery pastel. A black stain spread over the lower half of most buildings and a greenish-gray growth crept over the red-tile roofs.

“That’s all mold or fungus—whatever,” Kathy said. “Wait till you go in your closet for a pair of leather shoes you haven’t worn in a week or two. They’ll be covered in that green gunk. Maybe *orang putehs* don’t thrive in the heat and humidity here, but it’s perfect for that stuff.”

“*Orang puteh* means ‘white man,’” Carl said.

“Or ‘white woman, white child, white people’—et cetera, ad nauseam, as you’ll soon find out. Oh, George, honey—look! There’s a place to park right in front.”

The restaurant was definitely not what I’d expected. It was an A&W Cafe. I knew A&W root beer from home, but never knew that A&W restaurants existed. This café had opened three weeks ago and Kathy and George said they’d already eaten there four times. They were so enthusiastic about sharing their discovery of this “American joint” in the heart of Kuala Lumpur, staffed

by Malaysian Chinese, that I wasn’t about to say anything ungrateful, like “Gee, we were really hoping for a Malay meal.” And Carl didn’t say peep either.

“An oasis in the desert,” said Kathy as we looked over our menus.

“Real hamburgers,” George enthused, “and genuine A&W root beer.”

He ordered two burgers, root beer and a double side of french fries that looked a lot like English chips.

“It’s practically the only place in town besides the Hilton or the Embassy with air-conditioning!” Kathy raved.

At first the chilled air, the temperature of a walk-in refrigerator, felt great, but after a while I had goose-bumps, wished I’d brought a sweater. Was it possible my body was adjusting to the climate already?

The root beer tasted like...root beer. But the hamburgers were dried out little disks of what George said was Australian beef. Eating them was like chewing cardboard, even when I soaked mine with watery ketchup from England. Carl and I exchanged sly looks: George and Kathy had been away from home too long.

Over “dinner” George told us about his thesis: how living in an urban, polyglot setting was affecting the language of Malays. He and Kathy were staying in Kampong Baharu, an all-Malay compound in the heart of Kuala Lumpur. Their neighbors had migrated to the capital from many different parts of the country.

“I’m sort of envious of you,” George said to Carl, “getting to live in a real Malay *kampong*.”

“I’m not. I like being able to go to the hairdresser and play bridge.”

“Kathy’s the type who’d go camping if I’d carry an inner-spring mattress for her.”

“Double-bed size, dear.”

After George paid the bill, over Carl’s mild protests, we all went for a walk along Batu Road.

“Where can you go for a Malay meal in this town?” Carl asked George, trying to be subtle, trying not to sound critical of the A&W.

“There aren’t any Malay restaurants in K.L.”

“Honey, there are those pitiful street stalls in Kampong Baharu.” She turned to me. “But, you’d never want to touch anything there, Diana. Greasy fried stuff and maybe a *rendang*. But flies crawling all over the place. Yuk.”

George agreed with her that the only place to get good Malay food was in a Malay home.

This seemed strange. Carl had told me Malays were more than half the country, and Kuala Lumpur had almost 250,000 people.

“Isn’t the government run by Malays?” I said.

“Sure, there are a few Malays here.” George said. “But Kuala Lumpur is basically a Chinese city—except for a few Indian shops. Generally, Malays don’t live in cities. They *duduk kampong*.”

“And if you want any kind of a meal at all,” Kathy added, “you have to go to Singapore. There aren’t even any good Chinese or Indian restaurants here in K.L. When we want to eat well we go to Francis’s—he’s got the best cook in town. Chinese, of course.”

Kathy explained that Francis was an English expat who owned a small but thriving ad agency.

“He’s having a party this weekend—we’ll take you. Any *orang puteh* passing through is always welcome at Francis’s. And it’s a lot more fun there than at those stuffy Embassy parties where they water the drinks and you have to practically bribe a waiter to get an hors d’oeuvre.”

We’d been walking past a couple of blocks of Chinese shops. The front of each store was completely open to the street—no doors or plate glass windows. The upstairs windows didn’t have glass or screens either. Wooden shutters swung open to catch any breeze that might be passing through.

From the upper floors, sounds of voices and the banging of metal cooking pots. I smelled charcoal smoke, frying onions, garlic, fish. There was one spicy odor I didn’t know. George said it was cigarettes that had cloves mixed in with the tobacco. All the smells were pretty intense for me; I grew up in a family where nobody smoked and my mother hardly ever cooked garlic or fish because, “it would stink up the house.”

George stopped under one open window. “Listen. Do you hear that?”

At first I was just aware of men speaking Chinese. Then I realized there was an irregular clicking sound.

“Mah-jong,” he said. “The Chinese are addicted to it.”

I remembered from childhood in San Francisco a black-lacquered box inlaid with mother-of-pearl. Inside were bamboo-backed ivory tiles, the creamy bone etched with red and green designs. But I had no idea how to play the

game. My grandmother told me her mother had brought it back from a tourist trip to China.

By now, there weren’t many customers left in the shops. Shopkeepers and their *kulis* wrestled with wooden boards, setting them in place across the front of their stores, closing for the night. One shop was fragrant with a dozen varieties of bananas and plantains: green ones Kathy claimed were already ripe, red ones as long as my arm, yellow ones no bigger than Carl’s fingers.

“What’s the news here from Vietnam?” Carl asked. “There wasn’t much in the *Straits Times* today.”

My stomach knotted-up again—I’d been trying not to think about the war, about how close we were to it.

“Oh, there’s lots of news,” Kathy said. “I get sick to death of it. I think this senseless war will go on forever.”

“Mostly the Malaysian government follows the U.S. line,” said George. “Which means all the papers do too. English, Malay, Chinese.”

“Censorship?” Carl asked.

“Yes, but largely self-imposed. It’s not so long ago they put down a communist insurgency here. And Malays are fanatically anti-communist.”

“Communists—here?” I said, anxious. Carl hadn’t told me about that.

“Mostly in the jungle. The guerillas were almost all Chinese, and Malays hate Chinese. It boils down to pigs, dogs, and usury. Islam and Chinese culture are not exactly compatible. As for what the local Chinese are thinking about communism, or about Vietnam...they keep that to themselves. The Special Branch arrests people for sedition.”

Carl had told me the Special Branch was something like the CIA and FBI all rolled into one and they were the people Carl worried about, the ones who could throw us out of the country for being too nosy, for asking what they thought were the wrong questions.

Hearing George and Kathy talk about Vietnam and communist guerillas here wasn’t exactly reassuring. From the beginning I’d worried about coming so close to the war—Vietnam was less than 500 miles to the North. Carl had said we’d be as safe as if we were in California. But now I wondered.

We passed another store closing for the night, one that stank like cow manure which turned out to be the odor of dried fish. There were gunny sacks and bamboo baskets full of minnows, twisted eels; splayed flounders, and creatures I’d never seen before.

The shop next door sold bolts of brightly colored synthetic fabric, cooking utensils and medicine.

“All that stuff is from China,” George said “Malays may hate communism, but they love to buy Chinese goods.”

“You can’t buy anything made in China at home,” I said. We all knew the U.S. didn’t recognize their Communist government.

So many new smells, sounds, and things to see. I thought about the camera we’d bought for Malaysia. Carl had justified paying for the latest technology—single-lens-reflex—because he wanted good slides for teaching. It was too dark by then to get good shots, but maybe while we’re here, I thought, I could do something of my own with this camera. From painting teachers at the university I’d learned to scorn photography as not truly Art with a capital “A,” but setting up a painting studio in a village hut was likely impossible, and now we did have a great camera. I should study the manual that came with it, I thought, and buy a book on photography. There must be a decent camera store somewhere in this city.

“What’s happening with *Konfrontasi*?” Carl asked.

“Old Sukarno’s got a bug up his you-know-where, but it’s a tempest in a teapot.”

“Naturally he wants the oil,” George said. “The Indonesian part of Borneo is only jungle with stone-age Dayaks.”

I didn’t know anything about Borneo so he explained that North Borneo had been a British colony and South Borneo, Dutch. At independence, English-controlled Borneo became part of Malaysia and the former Dutch islands, including South Borneo, became Republika Indonesia. But all the oil was in the North.

“It’s sort of pitiful,” Kathy said. “Here we are only fifty miles from Sumatra across the Straits of Malacca. Every few weeks a ragged, half-starved bunch of Indonesian soldiers in a leaky boat lands somewhere on the West Coast.”

“Does that mean it could be getting dangerous here?” I said, imagining men armed to the teeth.

Kathy laughed. “Any of those guys who don’t drown on the way over are promptly tossed in jail. That’s all *Konfrontasi* amounts to. One theory is they want to be arrested. I guess it’s one way to immigrate.”

Suddenly it was totally dark, most of the shops shut, some with metal gates and enormous padlocks over the boards. In front of others I saw tall men setting up rope-mattress beds, pushing them against the shop walls. They

wore long smocks of thin white cotton over narrow white pants. Wisps of hair poked from under white turbans, untrimmed beards spread over their broad chests. One man lay on his cot reading a book, a double-barreled shotgun next to him. Three other men sat on a bed quietly talking, their shotguns propped against the wall.

“They must be Sikhs,” Carl said.

“Chinese *towkays* hire them for protection,” said George. “The Brits depended on Sikhs in the Indian Army, you know. They have a reputation for being fierce fighters. Pretty much everywhere here Sikhs are hired as guards. When you go to the bank you’ll see them wearing bandoliers of live ammo, waving their shotgun in your face. It’s a way for these guys to get money to send home to India, or to bring the family over.”

They looked formidable, those Sikhs, tall as George. But most had gray beards. How many years had they been sleeping outside of shops at night, sending the money home?

“Are Sikhs Hindus or Muslims?” I asked.

“Neither,” said Carl. “They have their own religion.”

At that point I didn’t care what it was, my mind couldn’t absorb anything else.

“Want to go for a nightcap?” George asked as we passed a row of bars.

Carl looked at me. “I don’t know about you, Honey, but I’m bushed. It’s been a long day.”

Suddenly my exhaustion overwhelmed me. Only the excitement of the new and exotic had kept me going.

“I’m pretty wiped out too.”

Carl asked if we could take a rain-check. George and Kathy assured us they understood. They’d been through the travel-culture-shock-experience themselves.

On the way back to the car we passed a grotto-like darkness with a sign out front reading “Tivoli.” The red neon buzzed and sizzled. Wasn’t there an amusement park in Copenhagen called Tivoli Gardens? Or a Tivoli in Italy? Wherever the original Tivoli, it was far from that seedy bar in Kuala Lumpur.

From inside the place a scratchy Elvis moaned his sad lines of *Heartbreak Hotel*. Out front, on the sidewalk, at a little round table three *orang putehs*, sat drinking beers, men still teenagers, teens with military haircuts. The boys’ pale faces shone like moons in the greenish glow of the street lamp, a rash of pimples across the cheeks of one of them. I could tell they were Americans even without

hearing them speak—the way one of them laughed, how they all slouched in their chairs.

When they saw us—Kathy and me—they stared, like they hadn't seen a woman in a while. I had a fleeting image of hungry puppies drooling over a piece of raw meat before they attacked it. I wasn't used to being stared at like that.

After we got to the car I said, "Those guys in that bar—they looked like American soldiers. Do we have troops in Malaysia?"

"Definitely not," said George. "No way will the Malaysian government go for that. Those guys are here for R&R. They get it after six months in Vietnam—assuming they're still alive and in one piece. They're just starting to come here, but soon it'll be very big. A guy in the Embassy told me. More and more U.S. troops up North, more and more R&R down here."

"I bet most of them'll go to Penang," said Kathy. "Not much for them to do here except drink Dewars and screw Chinese prostitutes. On second thought, that's probably what they'll do in Penang. Only up there they can sleep it off on a four-star beach."

"It'll mean big money for Malaysia," said George. "This government is super-puritanical, but they manage to turn a blind eye when it suits them."

At the hotel, after another cold shower, I fell asleep almost as soon as I lay down. But we'd forgotten the ceiling fan, left it on high, so sometime before dawn when the temperature dropped a couple of degrees, I woke up, shivering. I was exhausted, but made myself get out of bed to turn off the fan. Through the tiny window, dim light from street lamps shone into the room. For a moment I studied Carl, his high cheekbones, his full lips. A day's growth of beard darkened the lower part of his face. Since we'd married I often watched him like this when he was asleep, wondering what he was like inside. Did I really know his thoughts?

Again I dropped like a stone into deep sleep, but this time I dreamed: a game of mah-jong with Kathy who hid the pieces in her thick hair. Carl waved a double-barreled shotgun, whispering "Watch out, watch out!" A soldier with acne pushed his naked body up against mine. I felt desire, fear, revulsion.

Carl was gently pressing against me. The gray light of dawn glowed through the little window—still early. I knew it was Carl slipping himself between my legs, but even as we kissed, stroked each other, I was half in that crazy dream—with those mixed feelings.

Without the fan spinning, the room had got muggy again. We were both sticky, especially Carl. As he moved on top of me, his sweat dripped onto my face and slimed where our bodies connected.

"What's wrong?" he said, pulling out and rolling off.

"I don't know. I just had this horrible dream. It was like being raped. And now we're both so sticky..."

"O.K., O.K." Frustration in his voice. Maybe hurt and anger.

I felt guilty, but not enough to continue sex. We lay side by side on our backs without speaking. Finally Carl got up, switched on the ceiling fan and went into the bathroom. I heard the shower come on.

I lay there, not moving, listening to splashing water, traffic sounds beginning outside.

Fragments of yesterday, of last night in my head.

Kathy and George.

I liked to be perceptive, analytical about people, but how did I feel about them? Sometimes my own instincts were a mystery to me—including how I felt about Carl.

I'd wanted to marry him. Didn't know him very long before we got engaged, but I liked him. And I wanted to have sex, came from a family where it was expected you'd be a virgin when you married.

"If you let a man get what he wants, he won't respect you," my mother told me more than once. "They'll all try, even the best of them. But you have to hold back. That's the woman's responsibility. She can control these things."

That was the extent of my mother's sex education program. The thought of being damaged goods kept me in line, and I wasn't the only one who worried about that. A couple of weeks before Carl and I left the States I got together with Carole, a friend from elementary school. After we drank too much wine I found out she'd suffered under the same sex education program. She gave in to her fiancé before they got married, but she felt so guilty every time they did it she couldn't relax.

And she still didn't enjoy sex like she thought she should. It seemed neither of us felt passion for our husbands the way a woman was supposed to. The way women did in books or movies. Sometimes I felt as if my feelings were submerged somewhere, but whenever I tried to swim toward them, like shapes in deep water they would slip away in the dark.

I knew I should stop thinking all that negative stuff—it was totally stupid. Besides, I really loved Carl, and was proud to be married to a future college professor.

By the time he came out of the bathroom I was on my stomach, half dozing, half pretending to be asleep. I heard him put on his clothes and go out of the room. Before long I would need to get up, shower and dress, would want some coffee and something to eat before George came at nine to take us to American Express.

3.

Three weeks later George and Kathy took us to a party at the home of the ex-pat English adman, Francis. In those days, in California, you got dinner invitations for six o'clock, but Kathy said they'd pick us up at eight. To me, eight meant dessert, coffee, and drinks. I asked her if we should eat first.

"Why on earth would you do that? I told you he has the best cook in town."

I explained. She laughed at me.

"People here don't eat before ten—or later—not till we get tired of drinking."

When we arrived at Francis's George steered us through a crowd of *orang putehs*, Chinese, Sikhs, and Tamils. I didn't see anyone who looked Malay. But I'd already learned that Muslims weren't supposed to drink, and that all Malays were Muslims. A lot of guests were puffing on cigarettes, and my eyes and throat stung from the thick cloud of smoke that choked the air despite Francis's ceiling fans.

About half the guests were *o.p.*—the K.L. abbreviation for *orang puteh*, as I'd learned. Only a week in Malaysia and I already took dark skin for granted—*orang puteh* skin was exceptional there, the pelt of an exotic creature, its hide ranging from translucent white, through peeling sunburn (mine), to a dark golden tan (Carl's). *O.p.* hair could be classified as straight or wavy, and tended to light brown (mine) or sun-bleached blond. Carl's dark curls were the exception among K.L.'s *orang putehs*.

As soon as I looked around I felt self-conscious about my hair and clothes. The men didn't look much different from the way guys dressed at

parties in the States—like Carl and George they wore slacks and dress shirts open at the neck. Only two English old-boy types—men our parents' generation—suffered under navy blazers and their school ties.

But the women dazzled—preened resplendent in electric blue chiffon, crimson taffeta, jade satin, and creamy Thai silk made into saris, cheongsams, and mini-skirts. The young *orang putehs* and Chinese women wore the mini-skirts. Their dresses, held up by thin shoulder straps, showed lots of bare back and leg—in that climate who was going to wear stockings! Above every female neck, of whatever age or ethnic group, rose sleek, well-sprayed beehives, french-rolls, or the new "flip" cut.

My own party outfit was a wash-and-wear black print skirt that hung below my knees, and a scoop-neck black cotton blouse. How could I have thought it would be "dressy" in the tropics? As for my hair—next to those elegant coiffures copied by maids or local salon artistes from European fashion magazines—the less said the better.

My first thought was to go shopping for a cocktail dress the next day. But on second thought I assumed we'd soon be living in a *kampong* and how many times a year would we get to parties in K.L.? Our new language tutor said if I wanted to be accepted by villagers I should think of having some *bajus* made—long two-piece outfits that covered Malay women from neck to wrist to ankle. Anyway, our budget didn't have the money for fancy *o.p.* party clothes. I'd just have to grin and bear it for a little while longer in my unstylish outfit.

George pointed to a man leaning against the carved teakwood bar.

"Our host."

Francis looked about our age, maybe a few years older, one of those tall, skinny, sandy-haired Brit types with a turned up nose and badly peeling sunburn. He had one arm around a stacked Eurasian girl who was spilling out of her red Chinese silk dress. His free hand held a martini which he drained, then gave the glass to his Chinese barman.

As we approached, Kathy whispered, "She's not his wife. He plays the field."

Francis's date was so plastered she could only giggle when he asked if she wanted another martini. He got his fresh one in a frosted glass the bartender produced from a freezer somewhere back there. If he could do that, I wondered, why doesn't he have air-conditioning? Then I remembered what the English thought about refrigerated air. Looked at in one way, they were right. If people

set their thermostats at the same level as the A&W Café, sooner or later everybody would get pneumonia.

George made the introduction: “Carl and Diana Williams. The two new Americans I told you about. Anthropologist and wife. *Kampong*-hunting.”

“Charming. A pleasure, I’m sure. Wonderful to have new people—we’re so ingrown here. Practically incestuous.”

The date lost her balance, and Francis grabbed her arm before she could go down all the way. “I hear you’re off to bury yourselves in the *ulu*. Come, let’s sit and have a chat.” He gently dismissed George and Kathy with a wave.

“Get Wang to mix you a couple of good stiff ones, and ask him to send Cho over to take orders from our new arrivals.”

Carl and I followed Francis and wobbling date to another room, with fewer people and a cluster of graceful rattan chairs decorated with batik pillows.

I admired the beautiful Malay cloth.

“Indonesian,” Francis corrected me. “Malays couldn’t manage anything that fine in the artistic line. Poor things, they’re just country cousins of that great civilization across the Straits.”

Soon Carl and I had warm beers in hand and a waiter brought us a dish with little pieces of barbequed meat skewered on slender bamboo sticks.

“*Satay*,” Francis explained. “Pork *satay*. The Chinese know it’s the best, but don’t tell your Malay friends. They only eat chicken or goat—believe they’d go straight to the eternal fires if they ate *daging babi*.”

While Francis’s date dozed on his shoulder he talked about himself. Envied Carl—really an academic at heart—double first in Classics at Oxford. Got into the business thing from lack of imagination plus a desire to escape the English climate. Making piles of money here in K.L.—not through ambition, just no competition.

“One of these days the locals will catch onto my game.”

He meant the ad business, but George had hinted at vague rumors around town that Francis’s agency was a front for an MI6 operation.

“When Malaysians see there’s money in advertising I’ll be out of a job. So for now I’m piling up filthy lucre against that rainy day.”

Francis began to quiz Carl about his research plans. I’d heard all this a hundred times and also didn’t enjoy being a fifth wheel—it just brought up my own feelings of failure over career plans. Francis probably noticed my restlessness—not as drunk as he appeared?—and urged me to go get a fresh drink.

I wandered back to the room with the bar and joined Kathy and a small group of women. But all they talked about was clothes and their hairdressers. George was off on the other side of the room flirting with a Chinese girl whose cheongsam was slit up to her underpants.

I got another beer and picked hors d’oeuvres off passing trays carried by white-jacketed Chinese waiters. The *satay*, spicy shrimp, and many tidbits I couldn’t name were the best thing about the party. There was enough liquor to float a ship: Dewars, Stolichnaya, French Cognac, Chardonnay. At home I drank wine, but in that heat just the smell of it made me nauseous. Beer seemed better suited to a tropical climate and the local Anchor brand I was drinking was as good as European beer.

I tried conversation with a Chinese man and his wife. He ran an electrical equipment import company and the wife played a lot of bridge. I left them before my lack of interest was too obvious, before my eyes glazed over.

An American man about my age, from the Embassy, introduced himself, but all he wanted to talk about was how much he hated Kuala Lumpur and every detail of why he loathed being posted there. Not one decent restaurant, the climate was wretched, the people hicks, you had to go to Singapore to shop and even there it was nothing compared to Hong Kong. I escaped by telling him I had to pee.

Coming back from the bathroom, I saw a middle-aged Indian woman standing alone. But she was obsessed with her Malay servants—they were all lazy, incompetent, stole anything not nailed down. Chinese servants were more honest, but cost too much. I pretended sympathy but slipped away with the same excuse I’d used on the American. Unlike him she seemed offended.

I launched into a series of brief conversations with other Malaysians but each one followed a predictable pattern.

“How do you find our country?”

“I like it very much.”

“What do you think of the food here?”

“It’s quite good.”

“Can you eat spicy food? I heard Americans can’t eat it.”

“We’re learning to do that.”

“Where are you living?”

“At the Teacher Training College for Malays.”

“I didn’t know there was such a place here in K.L.”

“Well, we won’t be there long. We’re going to live in a Malay *kampong*.”
 “Really! But why?”

George was still flirting with the Chinese girl. I thought of trying Kathy’s group again, but it sounded like they’d only added bridge to their discussion of clothes and hairdos.

For a moment I considered joining a newly-arrived Chinese couple who were looking around the room for somebody to talk to. But what was the point? I couldn’t bear one more superficial conversation.

I started to roam the house and study its design. Francis had told us he’d had it constructed to his own specifications. It looked new, and not a cheap project, apparently built with some of his filthy lucre. The design seemed suited to the climate—if you weren’t going to have air-conditioning. High ceilings accommodated the silently whirring fans and each room opened onto a covered veranda. On one of them servants were setting up long tables, presumably for our dinner.

The doors to the verandas were wooden louvers that were folded all the way open to admit the slightly cooler evening breeze. I didn’t see any internal doors—half-walls and potted trees or bushes separated most rooms. Everything designed for maximum air circulation, yet capable of being quickly shut against a violent tropical downpour. Carl and I had already experienced a couple of those, were learning to recognize the sound of an advancing wall of rain in time to run for cover.

I noticed large black and white photographic prints on several walls, wondered who had made them, thought maybe I could meet some local photographers willing to give me tips on taking pictures. But before I could get closer to study the prints, out of the corner of my eye—movement, color. An aquarium? I walked around a bushy potted fern and there was a glass tank about ten feet long. Mounted on a low wall, it reached halfway to the ceiling. The effect was quite beautiful, like a living painting or sculpture: lights above and below the tank shone into the water casting a blue glow into the dim room.

Inside the aquarium: ceaseless movement, an aquatic ballet. Swift fish raced back and forth, slow ones advanced and retreated with stately deliberation. From the watery floor, plants waved graceful fronds in the undulating liquid. The fish were of all colors, even iridescent ones, even fish so transparent you could see their spine and intestines. A school of fish the size of my fingernail flickered through

the center and a creature half as long as my arm grazed the glass wall as it glided by.

I saw a dozen tiny sea horses, an ugly misshapen brown monster, two angels who waved bridal-veil fins. A jelly fish drooped from the surface, set in motion by the wake of others. At the bottom of the aquarium an eel slithered between two chunks of coral. And what was that opaque gray thing lying still as a stone, hidden in the sea grass—a miniature shark?

“Amazing, isn’t it.”

I started at the unexpected male voice.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean frighten you.”

While I’d been absorbed with the aquatic show, another American had come to see the fish

“No, it’s O.K. They’re just so beautiful.”

“I never tire of looking at them,” he said. “It’s one of the reasons I put up with Francis’s drunken orgies.”

“I’ve never seen anything like this—in a private home.”

“It’s salt-water. Tropical specimens. Francis claims they’re all from around here, but I think some of them are from further away. Like that one.” He pointed to a fat, slow-moving yellow fish. “Indian Ocean’s my guess.”

A tall man, over six feet. White slacks, conservative print sport shirt, worn California-style, outside his trousers. A Negro, a Black. Well, not really “black.” His skin was lighter than that of many Malays. But he had slightly kinky hair and full lips.

“I’m Horace Euling,” he said. “Are you new in town?”

“Diana Williams. My husband is an anthropologist. We came to do the research for his Ph.D. dissertation.”

I held out my hand and he took it. He was the first Negro I ever shook hands with.

I told him about our plan to live in a rural *kampong* for Carl’s study. He seemed interested. We talked about the fish—Horace knew quite a bit about them, a detailed knowledge of some species.

“Are you with the Embassy or here at the University?” I asked.

Somehow he didn’t seem like a businessman.

“Neither. I’m a physician.” He said this quickly, almost as if to get it over with. “Don’t you want a drink? You must be thirsty after looking at all that water.”

“Not really. Thanks, anyway.” I pointed at the opaque gray fish; he’d moved out of his hiding place, slowly circling the tank. “Is that a shark?”

“Yes. But I don’t think he’ll do much harm. Francis keeps him well fed.”

“Are most of your patients *orang putehs* or do you treat Malaysians too?”

As soon as the words were out of my mouth I could feel myself blushing from my stupid mistake. I was trying to be so clever, using a Malay phrase. But Dr. Euling wasn’t an *orang puteh*.

“My patients are all Americans,” he said with an ironic smile and what seemed a touch of bitterness. “I’m stationed in Vietnam.”

“Oh,” is all I could manage, trying to think how I could compensate for my blunder, also thrown off by his Vietnam answer.

“Diana? Are you back here?” It was Kathy’s voice. Then she came into view from behind the ferns. “Oh. Sorry to interrupt, but dinner’s about to be served. George and Carl are saving places for us.” Seeing that I was having a conversation with this American she added, “I’m sure we could make a place for you at our table.”

“Yes, wouldn’t you like to join us,” I said eagerly, trying to soften my mistake.

“Thanks very much, but I’ve already made arrangements for dinner.”

“Well, take a raincheck,” said Kathy. “We’d better get going, Diana. The guys can’t hold the fort indefinitely.”

“It was good talking with you.” I said lamely.

He nodded politely. Kathy took me by the arm and led me off. It felt a bit rude to leave in that way, but I thought maybe I could talk to him later in the evening.

“Who was that?” Kathy asked as we made our way to a veranda on the other side of the house.

“His name is Horace Euling. Said he’s a doctor in Vietnam. He must be in the Army.”

“Is he a Negro?”

“I guess so. He looks like one, doesn’t he?”

This sounded pretty stupid, even as I said it.

Dinner was fantastic, the best Chinese meal I’d ever eaten. Carl said so too. We sat at Francis’s table and he was an entertaining host, full of jokes and stories, mostly making fun of the English, especially in their colonial role.

I didn’t think about Dr. Euling again till we were about to leave the party. I realized I didn’t see him among the other departing guests.

“I met a Dr. Horace Euling earlier,” I said to Francis. “He said he’s stationed in Vietnam.”

“Oh, yes. A quiet fellow. Rather shy of company, Euling, but very good in conversation. We have a common interest in photography. Did you notice the prints on the walls—half of them are his. I’m a dreadful idiot when it comes to the technical side but he’s first rate there. Suppose it’s his scientific training. I pick his brain whenever he’s in town. Let’s hope he’s not blown to bits in that dreadful war.”

“Do you know many American military people?”

“I avoid most of them like the plague. No offense to you Yanks, I hope.”

“What a fantastic party,” Kathy said in the car as George drove Carl and me back to the Teacher Training Institute where we were living in a small faculty apartment, vacant for the summer. Except for the incredible food and that amazing aquarium the evening had seemed pretty boring to me. But I usually felt that way about parties. I’d look forward to them—sometimes—but when I got there it usually turned out to be stupid conversations and a lot of drinking. Maybe if I’d liked drinking more. . .

There was also an air of unreality about being in a crowd like that. Maybe because Carl and I were already deeply into learning Malay, preparing to live in a rural *kampong*, another world from parties of the international set in K.L. At least that was the idea I’d formed from everything Che’gu Haji Aris, our language teacher, was telling us about village life.

He grew up in a *kampong*, didn’t come to K.L. till his college days. Later he spent two years in London, getting a higher degree in education. By 1965 he was semi-retired. In fact, Carl and I were beginning to think somebody twisted his arm to get him to teach us.

It was George who first suggested this was probably the case.

“Of course he’s cheerful and polite to you. After all, he’s a Malay. He wouldn’t think of hinting he doesn’t want this job.”

“Is that enough?” I said. “Being a Malay, I mean, to account for his attitude?”

“You’ll see after you’ve been in a *kampong* for a while.”

After we were home from the party, in bed, I told Carl I was looking forward to being in a village and away from the artificial life of Kuala Lumpur. I knew that would please him and it did. We made love and it wasn't bad. Slightly cooler weather helped. Less sweat.

After Carl fell asleep and I was getting drowsy, images from the party—faces, voices, tastes, colors drifted through my fading consciousness. But I was surprised to see Horace Euling's long tapered fingers brush against the glass wall of the aquarium. By then I believed in a hundred percent equal rights for Negroes. But I'd never been attracted to one.

4.

I dreamed my parents and I were walking on the campus in Berkeley, under the plane trees next to the campanile as the carillon in the tower began to chime. When I was three or four years old my Dad had told me there was a man in the very top of the tower who played those bells on a giant piano. For a long time I believed that man was a prisoner, forced to play forever till someone with magic powers came to release him.

But only one bell was ringing—our alarm clock. I was far from the Berkeley campus, far from the one-room apartment in Oakland where Carl and I lived for the first two years of our marriage. Homesickness, and grief for my dead parents attacked. But I needed to will them away, to shower, breakfast, and get to language lesson in forty-five minutes. No time for memories.

Our Malay language teacher, Che'gu ("teacher") Haji Aris bin Mohammed Idris, was a man from our parents' generation. We met with him six days a week from eight to eleven—before it got too hot to think. Che'gu Haji Aris was almost as short as Carl, with a broad, dark face bisected by an Arab hook nose. He combed his thinning hair—glistening with Brylcreem—straight back from his high forehead. Che'gu was a cheerful teacher who smiled a lot and I had a hard time not staring at his mouth which held three twenty-four-carat gold-capped teeth, top row, front and center. I'd never seen gold front teeth before.

"Why didn't he get enamel caps?" I asked George one night. "Enamel must be cheaper and they'd look like his own."

The four of us sat in a bar on Batu Road, having farewell drinks. George's research finished, the Yaziks were leaving Malaysia for home.

"Can't answer that one. Maybe some Brit—like the governor general—had them. The Brits are a century behind us in dental work. Or could be it's a status symbol. Gold's important here as personal savings and as a sign of wealth. The poorest Malay woman has some gold jewelry against a rainy day."

"Like when her husband takes his second or third wife and stops feeding her and her kids," Kathy said.

I knew I would miss Kathy and George. Carl and I would be on our own, no longer any experienced *orang puteh* academics around to give us advice.

The next morning during our mid-morning break from cramming Malay words into our heads, I asked Che'gu if many Malay men had four wives, like the Prophet Mohammed said they could. He laughed.

"Only for uneducated men is this still custom. Most of us are content with our one beloved spouse."

"Is this true in *kampongs* too?"

"On the West Coast. Perhaps on the East Coast it is different."

Maybe, I thought, his views aren't typical because he's lived in England, and yet he did have that very Malay way of speaking formally and using flowery language and excessive politeness which could sometimes get on your nerves.

"Mrs. Diana," Che'gu said, changing the subject, "I observe you are an educated person. Although I know much about the pedagogical training of Mr. Carl, I know nothing of your own schooling."

"I got a B.A. degree in history from Carl's university."

"And what is Mrs. Diana's profession, if I may be so bold as to ask?"

This put me on the spot, bringing up painful feelings on the subject.

"Well, uh, I haven't decided yet. I want a career. But right now I'm going to be busy helping Carl with his research."

I tried to sound like an enthusiastically supportive wife, but inside, I felt a sudden panic as if I were drowning, afraid I'd never find my own identity, would be completely swallowed up in Carl's life.

“It is a fine thing for spouses to help one another,” said Che’gu. “Well, shall we resume our lesson?”

Most afternoons Carl went *kampong*-hunting. He met with Malays at the University or in government offices, people who expressed interest in his project. Sometimes I went with him, sometimes I wandered around K.L. with our camera, shooting whatever I saw: food vendors, construction sites, government buildings, people carrying heavy loads on bikes or on foot. Occasionally taking pictures got me angry looks or a threatening harangue in a Chinese dialect. But I was beginning to understand a few things, like how the built-in light meter worked and how the angle of the sun near the Equator made shooting a lot more difficult.

If I went with Carl to his meetings I saw how pleasant everyone was and also how unhelpful. Carl didn’t know how to interpret this and I didn’t have a clue. George had told us at the beginning it wouldn’t be easy to find a place.

“First of all, nobody advertises *kampong* houses. You’re not going to find anything in the *Straits Times* or *Berita Harian* like: ‘New one-room hut for quiet non-smoking couple.’ Everything here is completely personal. You’ve got to be properly introduced to what may or may not be a prospective source of housing, drink gallons of their damn sugared tea, make hours of polite boring conversation. Then you wait and hope. Took us a month to find a place and we just wanted to be here in K.L.”

Over the next weekend, rain came in successive, torrential waves, making humidity in the classroom on Monday morning even more unbearable than usual. Che’gu mopped his face with his handkerchief, the mosquito population of the room had doubled—as had the number of *chechaks*, swift little lizards that scurried up walls and across the ceiling eager to swallow any insect within range.

“Mr. Carl,” said Che’gu after the vocabulary drill that always opened our lesson, “May I ask how your search for a *kampong* home is progressing? I know this is a question of great importance to the outcome of your studies.”

“This damn country!” Carl slammed his fist on the desk. “Everybody sounds so helpful. Is so sure I’ll find a *kampong*. But nobody wants to help me find one.”

Che’gu looked startled by this outburst and I was too, even though nobody knew better than me what Carl was going through. No *kampong*, no research. No research, no dissertation. No dissertation, no Ph.D. No Ph.D., no college teaching job. What Carl had wanted for years.

“I’m sorry, Che’gu. Please forgive me. It’s not your fault. You’re doing so much to help us and we appreciate it.” Carl was clearly embarrassed by his own anger. “I’m just discouraged about not finding a *kampong*. And if I can’t, why are we taking up your time every day?”

“The men I meet are all friendly, but when I ask them, ‘What’s the name of your home *kampong*? Maybe I could go there,’ they tell me, ‘Oh, I’m so sorry, but people there are suspicious types. They’ll never cooperate.’ Or: ‘Unfortunately, it’s not a typical village at all. Not suitable for your research.’ Or: ‘There was communal violence nearby last year. I don’t think you’d want to take your wife there.’ Sometimes I get the feeling they invent reasons on the spur of the moment.” Carl batted futilely at a hovering mosquito, wiped his forehead and neck. “I’m sorry Che’gu. You just got an earful you didn’t need.”

Che’gu who always stood when teaching us, as if he had a whole classroom of students instead of just Carl and me, sat in the chair next to his desk. I hoped Carl hadn’t alienated our patient teacher. I knew how depressed and desperate he was. Every day we talked about how it was beginning to look like Malays didn’t want *orang puteh* poking around in their lives.

Che’gu scratched his head, rubbed his chin, frowned.

“Mr. Carl, perhaps I may be able to give some measure of assistance in this matter. Recently it occurred to me I have knowledge of what might be a suitable *kampong* located in Muar District of Johore State. My father-in-law, Haji Musa bin Mohammed Salleh, whose domicile is in Muar town, has a cousin who resides at about the sixth or seventh milestone from there. In *Kampong Bukit Lalang*.”

I glanced at Carl. He stared at Che’gu.

“I did in fact broach the subject with Pak Haji when my wife and I journeyed to Muar this past weekend. My father-in-law is elderly, in failing health, so we try to visit the dear old fellow whenever we can. Pak said he would speak with his cousin, a man some years retired from the British Civil Service. Then, as luck would have it, the cousin was in town and dropped by for a visit. He seemed interested, even excited, at the possibility of having English speakers living near at hand. As I said, formerly he worked for the British. The man

said he even knows of an empty house in Bukit Lalang. I myself know this village—formerly a sister of my mother resided there. In my humble opinion it is a good *kampong* for your purpose.”

Carl looked transfixed as if by a religious vision. I held my breath.

“I hope, Mr. Carl, I have not presumed too much by undertaking inquiries on your behalf.”

Che’gu paused to wipe his fogged glasses and gave Carl a sly smile, like a mischievous child savoring the success of a naughty prank.

“No, No, No. Of course not. I’m just speechless. Che’gu, How can I ever thank you enough?”

“It is not yet a concluded matter, of course. There must be the approval of the district *penghulu*, the village *Ketua Kampong* and, of course, if there is a house, it should be a suitable one for you and Mrs. Diana.

5.

Muar District, Johor State

Across the broad expanse of the Muar River—heavy with mud making it the color of café au lait—lay Bandar Maharani. This old Sanskrit name for Muar town meant either “Queen of Cities,” or “City of the Queen.” The fast moving river, deceptively smooth on its surface, was fringed by scrub and pandan on our side. On the opposite bank, I could see a row of shophouses, minature in the distance.

Che’gu had said we should spend at least a week in Muar, “assuming no complications.” Did he mean that if things went badly we’d better get out of there fast? Malays expected you to read between the lines. Our American way of calling a spade a spade—definitely not their style.

We had traveled to Muar by long-distance Mercedes taxi, which sounds elegant, but it was how everyone there traveled. Everyone, that is, except poor villagers who rode crammed into buses along with chickens and other livestock, or *orang putehs* who had their own car. A car was not in our budget.

The taxi system worked like this: you’d go to a field where dozens of black Mercedes lay in wait. A driver would call out his destination. If you were

going there or anywhere along the way, he’d sell you a seat. As soon as he sold four, he’d leave. Sometimes this happened quickly.

The Kuala Lumpur-Singapore trunk road passed through Muar and the only way to cross the river was by ferry. Because of the small size and primitive nature of this ferry, taxis and buses ran either between Kuala Lumpur and Muar or Muar and Singapore. If you wanted to go the whole distance between the two, you had to take the ferry and catch another taxi or bus on the far side. When we got to the river that day, two trucks, and a couple of private cars were lined up waiting to get across. Our Chinese taxi driver—waiting for passengers headed back to Kuala Lumpur—said there was talk of a bridge, but he doubted it would happen.

“*Orang Melayu* no want bridge. Gov-men, *orang Melayu*. Ferry, *orang Melayu*. Dapat banyak wang, *orang Melayu*.”

He sneered as he said Malays were making a killing off this ferry, meaning: lazy, stupid Malays are getting rich at the expense of us industrious, smart Chinese taxi drivers.

Between the taxi stand and ferry, three Malay vendors squatted by little charcoal stoves cooking *satay*. Nearby, a Malay teenager sold cold drinks from a plastic ice chest. We’d just missed the ferry and our driver said it would be another half-hour before it came back. Hungry and thirsty, I hinted to Carl, and he bought us each a bottle of orange squash and a half-dozen sticks of goat *satay* that was tough and stringy.

“Francis was right about pork being better,” I said.

“Shh,” Carl whispered. “Someone here might speak English.”

The ferry, a flat wooden platform propelled by a large outboard motor, landed on our side of the river with a thud. A single steel cable that hung low over the water, stretching from bank to bank, was what kept the ferry from spinning out of control and floating downstream into the Straits of Malacca. It could accommodate at most four vehicles per trip, but as many foot passengers as could squeeze onto it. Actually, there were only a few of us on foot that day, including the other passengers from our taxi, a Malay husband and wife, coming to Muar for a family wedding. Carl and I were the only *orang putehs* in sight.

In midstream I looked over the flimsy rail at small whirlpools roiling the creamy surface. The steel cable that kept us on course was badly rusted. And fifty miles across the Straits of Malacca, in Indonesia, Sukarno issued daily threats against Malaysia. How could you feel really safe in this country?

To top it off, according to an article in the *Straits Times* that week, the U.S. government was increasing the number of troops in Vietnam to 150,000. As I got shots of the *satay* vendor and the ferry, I remembered the photographer I met at Francis's, the Army doctor. Would he get some great shots? Would he survive the war?

As we made the crossing, buildings on the far shore gradually grew to full size. Carl took my hand. I knew he was anxious as well as hopeful about Bukit Lalang, "our" village. The ferry docked with a jolt—I had to grab the railing to keep from falling. We climbed steep stone steps up to a road that ran between the shop houses and the river.

Two oxen lumbered by straining at a cart loaded with bags of cement. Malay schoolgirls rode by on bicycles, somehow managing despite their ankle-length skirts. Farther on I saw a half-dozen black Mercedes, likely taxis waiting for passengers going to Singapore. Next to them, a cluster of *betchas*, three-wheeled bikes with a passenger seat barely wide enough for two people. We'd gotten used to riding them in K.L.

Two *betcha* drivers peddled our way, gaining speed, each trying to get to us first. Carl gestured that he wanted one of them to carry us and the other our suitcase, but the guy who got to us first insisted on carrying both of us and our large suitcase. The other driver wasn't going to give up, though, and the two men started yelling at each other. Carl solved the problem by putting me and suitcase in one *betcha* and sitting in the second one himself.

"*Kemana, Tuan?*" Carl's driver asked where we were going.

"*Rumah Rebat Kerajaan.*"

George had told us the British built these Government Rest Houses for their civil servants and businessmen to stay in when they had to travel around in the country. Our Che'gu Haji Aris said the Rest House in Muar would be a good place for us to book a room.

Our *betcha* drivers bent low, straining their thin bodies to peddle the weight of their loads. We moved along the waterfront, turned down a cross street, mid-day sun beating on us. Sweat dried almost as soon as it oozed out of the bare back of the man in front of me. He'd pulled his faded sarong above his knees, and his calf muscles were knots of wood. When he'd smiled at us, bargaining, I saw he'd lost all his teeth. Not a young man. Forty. Fifty. The sun burned the top of my head—why hadn't I worn a hat or scarf? To protect his head, the *betcha* driver had twisted a faded rag into a turban.

The town seemed asleep, few people out, shops looked empty. We passed an open square with a movie theater on one side, but the only activity I saw was a stray cat furtively hunting mice or garbage. Maybe, I thought, the place comes alive when it's cooler, at night or early in the morning. I was exhausted from the heat, from getting up at six and making the four hour trip from K.L. I hoped for a nap at the Rest House. The *betcha* drivers peddled through a residential area with a mix of European-style bungalows, Malay homes on stilts, and Chinese houses on concrete slabs with thick bars on all the windows. Enormous old trees cast a cooling shade, and soon there was a hint of breeze, smell of salt air. We moved through a park-like area with mowed lawns, flowering hibiscus bushes, palm trees, and several tile-roofed, yellow-stucco buildings. The drivers pulled up at the entrance to one of them. Mine called out to an elderly Malay in frayed white jacket who was dozing on the covered porch. Seeing new arrivals he stood erect and came to greet us.

That evening we went to call on our Che'gu's father-in-law. In his garden, under a red hibiscus and an ancient climbing jasmine that scented the entire neighborhood, we sipped sugared tea and ate the black sticky-rice cakes I was getting addicted to. Pak Haji Musa was charming in that ornate, convoluted way of the older generation of Malays. The old gentleman did look frail, with sunken cheeks and loose flesh hanging from his bones. His English was almost as weak as my Malay, but to help communication one of the old man's grandsons who studied at the local English-stream high school joined us.

"Tomorrow-lah, you come here nine o'clock. Pak Haji Musa take you to *Penghulu* Haji Yahya and next day-lah, comes *orang tua* ("old man") Haji Osman."

I was getting confused by all the new Malay words and names and Carl asked who was this Haji Osman. The boy looked at him as if an *orang puteh* smart enough to go to university should have known this.

"Haji Osman, *Adek* Pak Haji Musa—he was *kuli* for English-lah. Now he sit at Kampong Bukit Lalang."

I quickly looked up the word *adek* ("younger brother") in my dictionary and whispered to Carl that this Haji Osman must be the cousin of our host whom Che'gu had told us about. The one who knew about a village for us.

Two days later, after a successful visit with the *Penghulu*, we were in the back seat of an ancient black Mercedes taxi headed to "our" village. In the front

seat, chatting with the Malay driver, sat Haji Osman bin Abdul Rahman, the ex-civil servant, a wiry old man. He wore a neatly pressed shirt which retained only a trace of the original color, and the white skull cap of one who has made the Pilgrimage. He spoke excellent English—apparently the British had done something worthwhile there—and everything he said was tinted with an ironic tone. His skeptical, squinty eyes were magnified by a pair of glasses that kept sliding down his nose;

“Luckily, I found this Malay lad to drive us,” he said. “He is from Kampong Bintang Mas.”

Wherever that was!

“It is better to employ a Malay than to put oneself at the mercy of the infidel Chinese. Even if they do have newer, more comfortable automobiles.”

As we drove, our guide, and this “lad,” who I calculated to be on the far side of 40, were complaining passionately in Malay, about some shared grievance.

Turning in his seat, Haji Osman spoke in English to Carl.

“The British knew how to run this country. I could respect them even if I did not love them. After they left us, the office in Muar was run by young boys, ignorant and arrogant yokels, before whom I was forced to grovel.” He sighed at the painful memory. “It became a daily test of fortitude, working in that office. Even so, I carried on that I might receive at least something of my pension.”

Carl nodded attentively, as the old geezer rattled on.

After we’d gone a few miles out of town, a truck, overloaded with huge logs that Haji Osman said were harvested in the back country beyond Bukit Lalang, careened toward us, forcing our driver to pull onto the grassy margin.

“*Orang China!*” cried Pak Haji. “The Devil take him!”

Now we were passing through a village and I stared out the car windows, trying not to miss a single detail: Two women squatted by a pipe stand washing clothes; some children played tops; a man hoed his vegetable garden, pausing to stare at us. I was sorry we couldn’t stop, wished I could shoot some pictures, but I knew Carl was eager to get to Bukit Lalang.

Here in the countryside with no brick and not much asphalt to hold the heat, the air was fresher, cooler. The smell of plants from thick vegetation replaced city smells of dust and diesel fuel. Behind the Malay homes, which were all raised up two or three feet on stilts, stood tall coconut palms and large trees I couldn’t identify. Most of the houses were small and needed paint; only one

or two were large and prosperous looking. In front and to the side of the houses were small fruit trees, vegetable gardens, flowering hibiscus, and a plant with red and yellow-speckled leaves. In some of the front yards potted geraniums and orchids sat on rows of boards arranged like miniature bleachers as if the flowers were watching a soccer game. Here and there a goat grazed, chickens pecked at insects, ducks bathed in mud puddles; a large goose ran honking after a kitten.

“Welcome to Kampong Bukit Lalang,” said Pak Haji. “Indeed, *lalang* is what thrives best here, heh-heh-heh.”

And on everyone’s plot of land grew *lalang*—elephant grass—from neatly trimmed to wildly waist-high, from controlled patches to engulfing fields.

Our taxi passed a wooden, barracks-like structure set on a concrete slab. Behind open windows covered in chicken wire I caught a glimpse of children—the village school. The driver steered his car onto the grass margin and stopped in front of a small house with peeling paint and foot-tall *lalang*.

Carl paid the driver who turned the car around and headed back toward town. I wondered how we’d return to Muar, but probably something was arranged.

I took a deep breath of country air and inhaled acrid fumes of wood smoke. Was this from cooking fires? I’d been told villagers cooked with wood. But mixed with those fumes was a nastier stench. Something like vinegar, only more chemical.

Hearing me cough and sniff, Pak Haji said, “That is the odor of rubber manufacture. It is unpleasant, but it is the livelihood of our villagers.”

Our Che’gu had told us Bukit Lalang produced rubber and that most villagers made a living tapping their own trees or those of neighbors. Carl’s dream had been to live in a rice-producing *kampong* like ones in *National Geographic*: in the background acres of lush green *padis* fringed with graceful coconut palms, in the foreground two smiling children tending a water buffalo wallowing in the mud. But by the time we got to Bukit Lalang he was glad to have any *kampong*.

“Please, Enche Carl, come into my poor home.”

I’d already noticed Haji Osman never addressed me. So it was beginning—my inferior status as a woman.

The old guy scrambled up a three-step ladder to his front door and entered, inviting Carl to follow. I wasn’t going to wait around for an invitation, and climbed up too.

“Forgive my humble circumstances, Enche Carl. If my wife had not departed this world, and if my fellow Malays had not stolen half my pension, I could welcome you in grander style.

He unrolled a large mat woven of pandan leaves, brittle with age, which he laid out on the floor, then gestured for us to sit on it. His was a traditional Malay front room with no furniture except a small table in one corner. Over it hung a wall calendar with Chinese characters and a photo of a Chinese girl, in what used to be called a “pin-up” pose. The girl wore a tight-fitting yet high-collar blouse and smiled enticingly.

“By the way, Enche Carl, the *Ketua Kampong* of this place, Sayang bin Ruslan, knows we have arrived and I expect he shall be with us before long. In the meantime, would you care for a cup of tea? I make it English-style with milk and sugar.”

Waiting for Pak Haji Osman to bring out our tea, I wondered how the *Ketua Kampong* could know we were here; our Che’gu had said there wouldn’t be any telephones in Bukit Lalang.

“Do you think he had a pre-appointed time for the guy to come or did we miss something?” I said.

Carl shrugged, went to the window, looked out through faded curtains at the road.

“Maybe there was a secret hand-signal.”

Later I understood that nothing happened in that *kampong* that wasn’t observed and reported to somebody. Not in any organized way, but there were a lot of villagers with not much to do but gossip.

As Pak Haji brought out a tray with cups of tea, a man called a greeting from the road,

“*Selamat*. Is Pak Haji at home?”

“*Naik-lah*.” Come in, said Pak Haji Osman.

Enche Sayang bin Ruslan wasn’t much older than Carl, tall for a Malay, slender, light-skinned. He politely refused tea, but joined us, sitting cross-legged between Carl and Pak Haji on the mat. Yes, Malays might refuse tea, but if Carl or I ever declined, it was taken as a social insult. I’d already seen the hurt in their eyes.

Enche Sayang projected a tense formality. Perhaps, I thought, because he was unused to sitting near a woman not his wife. Our Che’gu had told us Malay men were expected to follow a strict code of behavior in relation to women. Or

maybe this Enche Sayang was nervous because it was a tremendous responsibility having two *orang putehs* come to his village, *orang putehs* who might even live there. Who knew what damage we might do, what undermining of tradition we might accomplish, what chaos might ensue.

I noticed that Enche Sayang and Pak Haji, although scrupulously polite with one another, had no great mutual affection. The old man seemed irritated by the younger one’s presence and the *Ketua Kampong* was cool and spare in his words with our host. Was there some history of a power struggle in the *kampong* and the old man believed he should have been selected *Ketua Kampong*? Or was it simply a clash of personalities—Pak Haji the sharp-tongued critic, always comparing present conditions with “the good old days.”

Formalities observed, Enche Sayang said, if it was our wish, he would be happy to give Enche Carl and Enche Dinah a tour of the village.

“You’d better if they’re to live here!” said Pak Haji with a smirk. “And don’t forget to show them the house.”

Enche Sayang looked pained.

“Yes, there is empty house, Enche Carl, but I fear, not fine enough for you and Mrs. Dinah. (I was already used to having people not able to pronounce my name.) It is not an old house, but it is small. A home for *orang miskin*.”

“We don’t expect a palace,” said Carl.

The *Ketua Kampong* looked anxious. His English wasn’t as good as the old man’s.

“Mr. Carl means,” said Pak Haji, rolling his eyes, “Amongst us they intend to live a life of poverty as we do.”

Then he spoke in Malay for the benefit of Enche Sayang.

“Ah.” Enche Sayang nodded, but his face showed he was not convinced that white people would want to live in poverty.

As Carl and I left the house, Pak Haji suggested Enche Sayang show us some rubber processing as we passed through the village.

“I’m sure Enche Carl wants to understand how we villagers earn our living. I too would come with you, but my arthritis pains me today.”

We walked along the margin of the highway, then turned towards a grove of those large trees I’d noticed as we came from Muar town. Enche Sayang said they were all rubber trees. He pointed to an enormous old one, three feet in diameter, heavily scarred from daily cuts. A viscous white substance dripped from a fresh cut into half of a coconut shell. I got a couple of close-up shots of

the layered pattern of scars, each cut made parallel to and just below the previous one. Yes, there would be a lot to shoot here, all I needed to do was learn how to make decent pictures.

Carl looked pleased I was getting photos, and this gave me a feeling of confidence that he'd support my own career idea. But I didn't feel ready to discuss it with him yet. I was afraid he might misunderstand, think I wouldn't give him the time I'd promised to help with his research.

"These old trees give not much," said Enche Sayang. "I am plant new ones with help from government."

"Do you tap rubber every day?" Carl asked.

"Yes. If not rain. If trees are wet sap will run all over and is lost."

Back along the road we passed a home where the white latex had been poured into rectangular metal pans. To this had been added that vinegary acid that tickled the inside of my nose and made my eyes water. It coagulated the latex sap into a spongy solid and nearby a man was passing one of the quivering white slabs through a metal wringer cranked by a young boy. The wringer reminded me of the machine my grandmother had used to squeeze out water from laundry.

Next, the man hung the flattened rectangle on a sort of clothesline where other snowy sheets swung in the breeze like large white pillow cases.

Nearby I saw a stack of latex sheets, but these were stiff and a rich golden brown.

"This is after smoke. From a wood fire," said the *Ketua Kampong*. "Rubber must be smoke to keep. We sell smoke rubber to *orang China* in Sungai Kering. *Orang China* sell to lorry driver, carry to Singapore."

Carl asked him where this Sungai Kering village, was located, and Enche Sayang pointed up the road beyond where we could see.

"*Orang China* live Sungai Kering. *Orang Melayu*, Bukit Lalang."

Carl asked if any Chinese families lived in Bukit Lalang, but Enche Sayang looked surprised by the question.

"We don't mix," he said.

I was beginning to feel the heat of the mid-day sun. Carl was sweating a lot as usual, wiped his face and neck with his handkerchief.

"Please excuse me we must walk so far," said Enche Sayang. "But we are soon there."

We passed a pipestand gushing water; two women squatted next to it washing clothes in shallow enamel basins. Their children who had been splashing themselves with water as we approached saw us and ran to hide behind their mothers. Peeking out, they smiled, giggled, "*Orang puteh! Orang puteh!*"

The mothers stopped washing and pulled their scarves over their faces. They looked shy, not frightened.

"No *orang puteh* live in our *kampong* and none stop here since the last Englishman," said Enche Sayang.

"When was that?" Carl asked.

"Old District Officer have come for ceremony of open new water pipes. Year before I marry." He thought a moment. "1955."

I wondered what people there did for water before those pipes were installed, imagined filthy, microbe-laden streams. But Carl would find out that sort of thing in his research.

Ever since we'd left Muar town, I noticed an amazing light. The landscape between Kuala Lumpur and Muar was gloomy, blighted by tin-mining or swallowed by vast foreign-owned rubber estates with dark military rows of trees. But here light filled the air so completely it seemed almost solid, as if I could reach out and touch it. It must be the angle of the sun and high humidity, I thought. Ever since we'd arrived in Bukit Lalang cumulus clouds had been changing into thunder-heads; light slanted through the dark clouds like shafts from heaven in religious paintings. I wondered if I could somehow capture this solidity of the atmosphere on film.

Enche Sayang stopped opposite a small unpainted house set back from the road. The corrugated metal roof was still shiny and the unpainted wooden walls hadn't weathered. But this new house looked abandoned, the shutters closed like the eyes of someone sleeping. Surrounding the house a waist-high field of *lalang* obscured any path that might exist, like enchanted hedges or forests that grow up to conceal the way to an imprisoned heroine.

The place's forsaken appearance was heightened by the contrast between it and the homes on either side; both were old and needed repairs, but each had trimmed *lalang* and dirt borders that were weeded and raked. Later we were told this was done to prevent mosquitoes from breeding, as well as for aesthetic reasons.

"It looks good," said Carl of the little uninhabited house. "Can we go inside?"

"We must watch for snakes. They live in tall *lalang*."

Enche Sayang led the way in, gingerly parting the *lalang* as we approached the house. He said the owner was newly married but after building his home could not find work in the area and left to be a driver in K.L. He and his wife now lived in Kampong Baharu. I thought of George and Kathy; we hadn't talked with any *orang putehs* since they left.

"How much does he want for rent?" Carl asked.

"Twenty ringgit a month."

About seven dollars.

The house was one room on stilts and down behind it, on a dirt floor with thatch roof, a cooking shed. I assumed a dirt floor was necessary for safety to cook over a wood fire. Would I have to do that? Maybe we could get a camp stove...it was going to be like camping.

Carl asked about the two empty light-bulb sockets, one hanging from the ceiling in the house and the other in the cooking shed. Enche Sayang told him the place was wired, could be connected to the electrical line that ran along the road.

Carl looked at me, "What do you think?"

"It looks fine to me."

"We'll take it," Carl said to Enche Sayang.

He looked doubtful. "There is no place to bathe."

"Could we make a bathing place?" Carl asked.

"Perhaps a room can be made next to the kitchen."

When I asked about a toilet, he looked embarrassed, made a vague gesture toward the *butan*, the bushes and trees about twenty yards behind the house. He probably knew *orang puteh* had more elaborate arrangements. Not that I wanted to go bare-bottomed into snake-infested bushes. But certainly something could be done...maybe an outhouse?

I noticed a chicken coop between the house and the *butan*, but it also looked abandoned, the door wide open, and not a bird in sight.

"Does that belong to the house?" I asked.

Enche Sayang said it belonged to the house next door. "They have chickens but one night python come. In morning is inside, sleep, full of chickens. A snake eight meters long. Chinese from Muar come, buy, kill, take away. Chinese eat such things. Not *orang Melayu*," he said with disgust.

From college biology I remembered that pythons squeeze their victims to death. I hoped there weren't any more pythons around.

While we stood looking at the empty chicken coop, a man from the house the chickens had belonged to joined us.

Enche Sayang, who wore *orang-puteh* shoes, pressed trousers and a polyester shirt with long sleeves failed to conceal his disapproval of Abdul Hamid who came barefoot, a sarong around his hips, and naked above the waist. He had the sun-darkened skin and hard muscles of a day laborer and when he smiled, beautiful white teeth.

Abdul Hamid spoke no English, though I had enough Malay to understand that if we were to live in this house he would like to be our *kuli*—haul our water from the pipestand and cut our *lalang*. Carl responded enthusiastically. Enche Sayang was stony-faced but said nothing. Abdul Hamid bowed and wandered back to sit on his front porch.

I thought about the fact we'd only met three people in this *kampong*, but none of them liked each other. Haji Osman looked down on the *Ketua Kampong*, Enche Sayang resented the Haji, and looked down on Abdul Hamid. Kathy and George had talked about Malay jealousy—we might be getting a taste of it.

Carl and Enche Sayang walked back to the road to see where the electrical tie-in would be. I stayed behind the house, deciding where a bathing room and outhouse might be built. As I moved slowly through the *lalang*, watching for snakes, suddenly I cried out. I'd almost stepped on an enormous reptile-creature, a giant lizard, almost four feet long. Quickly I backed away, but the monster didn't move, except for its tongue which flicked out to catch an insect.

Abdul Hamid heard me and ran over to help, but when he saw the creature he laughed. Through his words and gestures I got the idea the animal was slow and lazy, ate only insects and plants.

But what was it? Ever the good student I looked up "crocodile" in my Malay pocket dictionary. *Buaya* was the Malay word.

"*Buaya*?" I asked Abdul Hamid.

He shook his head and pointed at the creature.

"*Buaya Darat*."

What did *darat* mean?

Again to the dictionary. *Darat* meant "land" or "interior."

Land crocodile?

"*Buaya Darat*," I repeated.

He showed his gorgeous teeth in a smile, pleased I'd understood.

In primitive Malay I said, "Today I meet a *buaya darat*."

This sent Abdul Hamid into a laughing fit. What was that about?

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Through words and gestures, he explained that *buaya darat* is also slang for a man who chases after women. Then he put his hands over his face to show he was embarrassed at his impertinence. Presumably, for giving me, a woman and an *orang puteh*, such an explanation. But his body shook with laughter.

Pythons, *buaya darat*, no stove, no bathhouse, no toilet. I was beginning to feel a bit overwhelmed.

Having returned from the road, Enche Sayang looked at Abdul Hamid with extreme disapproval, not even knowing what he'd said. Carl stared at the giant lizard. Its hide was gray, smooth, without the bumps and scales of a crocodile. Its only movements the occasional blink of eye and the swift tongue that flicked to take any insect that made the mistake of flying too near.

Later, I would tell Carl what Abdul Hamid said about the other meaning of *buaya darat*. But not there, in front of Enche Sayang.