SUKARTI RAHARDJO

(AN INDONESIAN IN HONG KONG)

INDONESIA

Nadiyudan, Central Java

When it rained as hard as it was doing now, Karti enjoyed standing at the open front of the shophouse and watching, remaining dry herself except for the odd splash. Right now, next-door at the haberdashers, plastic toys hanging from twine were swinging madly in the wind under the awning, tarpaulins were drumming over exposed bins of cloth and somewhere inside the spidery old proprietor was watching too, all trading temporarily brought to a halt. In the road, four brave lanes of traffic splashed slowly forwards and on the other side of the road it was semi-darkness: a row of ill-lit shops and car and moped mechanics beyond trees and a canal-like ditch. Do your worst, rain, she thought, the town probably deserves it.

‘Rain,’ she said, turning inside.

‘Rain,’ agreed the customer sitting before a cup of ginger tea.

The shop was oblong and dingy. It had plastered walls, a cement floor and a barn-like roof. There were tables and chairs and a few poster ads up. Feeling companionable Karti began to rearranged the chairs around the customer’s table, came across an old bird’s nest fallen to the floor and took it to the bin. The customer was Basri. He was old and his meditation group, known for long silences

and occasional ecstatic shrieks, met at the hall flooded out right now.

'*Bapak* Basri, will you pay today?' she asked him.

He began to search his pockets very slowly.

'If you don't pay, I won't get my wages.'

At this moment the boss, Masduki, forced himself through the warped back door, a small, sweaty, bristle-faced short-tempered man and to Karti a super sweet one, who had given her this part-time job as a favour to her father. She went to lend him a hand with the shopping bags. As a man with two wives and seven children he was never short of errands. His area at the back was dank and ill-lit. There was a counter, a sink, a fridge and a water-heater; a rusty coffee machine and ingredients in various jars and boxes.

'Any business while I was out?' he said.

'Basri's here. And he knows. . . '

'Knows what?'

She turned around and had to admit Basri had gone, his tea glass abandoned on the table.

'How does he do that?' she said. 'Perhaps old men really do have special powers.'

'There's no trick if the girl is brainless.'

'Boss, don't be angry. He's almost as nice as you.'

'Men aren't as nice as you think.'

'You're not going to dock my wages are you?'

'I ought to.'

'But you won't. Men are nice.'

Later the rain stopped. The sun came out, clear and strong and in no time the street had dried out. The town began to cook in its usual hot sunshine, lightly spiced with humidity. The traffic cheered up. The fan on the table regained its indispensability. A last roadside cocktail of aromas wafted in from vaporising drains.

Having swept the floor, Karti sat down to rest her feet and wait for her shift to finish so she could go home. Masduki sorted things out at the back. All in all, an unremarkable afternoon, until three policemen walked in.

The way Masduki reacted, she thought he was just being his eccentric self. He seemed to freeze behind the counter. She glanced quizzically at him and he looked back at her with alarm.

The men in uniform chose a table and sat down. Two hung their belts and pistols on chair backs politely, the other threw his on the table. He had a wide, open-pored face and wore calf-length shiny boots not the scuffed black corps boots of the other two. Straight away he was looking at her, baring a mouthful of strong yellow teeth.

Having lived in Nadiyudan all her life she put two and two together and guessed it was Santoso, Captain of Police, a man strongly disliked in town and someone who was second to the Mayor in the forthcoming elections. She also guessed he was here because of her father.

Her father was running against the Mayor, second name on the Muhsonuddin-Rahardjo ticket and he had told her only a few weeks ago, over the supper table, that the police might make personnel files on all the family. This had dismayed her mother and excited her little brothers. She herself had been cool, feeling (a) whatever it was her father was doing she had her own life and (b) she liked her father better when he was just an agricultural salesman who came home after work.

'Three cendol, *ibu,'* Santoso said to her.

The policemen lit cigarettes. Santoso held his farmer-style between his smallest two fingers. Santoso had no family anyone knew of except his mother who farmed a bit of land in the hills.

Masduki made the drinks without speaking. She stood at the counter and got three glasses ready on a tray, then she took the drinks over to the table. Having served them, she went to stand with her back to the wall. By now she had begun to feel hot and prickly because of their presence.

‘You are Sukarti Rahardjo,’ Santoso said. ‘Bugs, your father calls you, after Bugs Bunny. Very unfair, you are much prettier than that. Do you know who I am?’

‘*Bapak* Santoso?’

‘*Bapak* Captain Santoso. So this is it, your place of work?’ He made a display of looking around. ‘It’s a big thing when you run out of red beans, no? You get excited by more than two customers.’

‘The big thing is not you.’

‘Oh, you are wrong.’

‘I want you to know me,’ he said. ‘Your father and I are counterparts. You know that, don’t you? We never speak of course, he is busy, I am busy, but we talk about each other. Perhaps your father has spoken of me?’

She shook her head.

‘Tell me, do you like the Mayor?’

‘Not really.’

Santoso frowned, took his cigarette out of his fingers and stubbed it out.

‘Foolhardy answer. You take after your father who is foolhardy also. He is saying things which shame the Mayor. This is not a good idea. Let me give you some advice, Bugs. Don’t be like your father.’

One of the policemen passed Santoso a folder of documentation. Santoso flicked through it, found the sheet he wanted, looked at her again.

‘You are the eldest, aren’t you, Bugs?’ He was cold now. ‘Your brothers are Ridhaan and Agus. You have a mother to obey and you have a boyfriend, Idris. My advice to you: get married and keep your head turned towards your husband. Your father’s road is his own.’

They both noticed at the same time a rat peering in from the street. Santoso drew his pistol from its holster on the table and fired. After a deafening crack the room filled with gunpowder smoke. He went to inspect the rat, which lay pulped in the gutter. Masduki came sallying out from behind the counter but Santoso waved his pistol at him and Masduki stopped in his tracks.

‘You’re Masduki, aren’t you?’

‘Yes, I’m Masduki.’

‘Yes, I’m Masduki,’ Santoso ridiculed.

Masduki kept his mouth shut.

Santoso collected his holster from the table. The other policemen pushed their drinks away and rose. Santoso stared at Karti a moment then they walked out. Masduki said to her despondently, ‘Your father really is in danger. I’ve heard it. If you weren’t so brainless I’d have said so before. Still, just now you kept your nerve.’

‘So that’s Santoso,’ she said not knowing what to think.

Home was a bungalow between the fruit market and the back of some warehousing, in a row of badly-made lease housing and it was a ten-minute walk from work through the back alleys. In the living room she threw off her headscarf, dived on the sofa and felt for the Hitachi standing fan with a toe, dialling it up. The sofa stood amongst piles of her father's paperwork – he had no office. An appetising smell of beef rendang came from the kitchen where she could hear her mother cooking.

Karti had considered what to tell her mother about Santoso's visit and decided to say little. Mum had been het up lately, raising stress levels at home, and more alarm would only make things worse. Not only was she showing signs of being afraid of what Karti's father was getting into in politics, but there was something even worse: two days ago her own parents had turned up, run off their farm by property developers.

'Mum, what are we eating?' Karti called out loudly. 'We can't eat cassava because I forgot to buy the cassava. I want round white rice.'

‘Don’t be so fussy,’ her mother called back.

‘Is it yes or no?’

‘All right, yes.’

For Karti, tormenting her mother as she had as a child showed she wasn’t changing. She was a school-leaver and she didn’t want to change. She wanted to enjoy herself and not be tied down by any adult enterprise too quickly, a full-time job or marriage. Idris, her boyfriend, wanted to marry her and she had put him off once already, though her feelings were admittedly mixed. Sometimes she felt she couldn’t wait because in this town no one did *it* before marriage and she was already eighteen.

Her mother appeared in the doorway, glowing from the heat of the back room which served as a kitchen. People said they were alike in their looks and her father liked to make poetic comparisons between their skin and the langsat fruit. They were of similar height too. Mum did not like cooking and waged war with the cramped bungalow, refusing carpet slippers in favour of the elegance of a heeled shoe or bare feet. She was proud of her ankles. Men were supposed to have watched entire basketball matches to glimpse them when she was a schoolgirl.

‘Mum, just to mention, I met Santoso today,’ Karti began. ‘You know, *Captain Santoso*. He came to the shop with two other policemen and they ordered cendol but didn’t finish it. He says he’s Dad’s counterpart and Dad’s foolhardy and he shot a rat.’

Her mother, never relaxed while cooking, looked furious and she quickly added a last detail. ‘Masduki says the whole town’s concerned for Dad.’

‘What does that old gossip know?’

‘Come on, Mum, Masduki’s nice. Santoso’s creepy though.’

‘Forget him. What can a girl your age know about Santoso?’

‘I suppose nothing.’

‘That’s right, nothing. So no more Santoso then.’

‘Yes, Mum.’

Yes, as I knew, best to lay the whole thing before Dad, Karti thought to

herself, pleased with her own judgement.

The boys returned from school and the television went on for half an hour before they ate. Ridhaan was nine, Agus seven. Ridhaan, who could turn on the charm before adults, liked to assert his elder-brother status on Agus by forcing him to repeat everything twice. Agus was pliable and easy-going. The remote control needed a new battery or just didn't work and Agus was the volunteer substitute. Poke him and he put up the volume, shake him and he changed the channel.

At tea Ridhaan formed a rice ball with his fingers and made a great show of eating it for Karti. But Agus wanted her attention too. His classmates had found a new vending machine in the school yard. With correct coins Coca Cola rolled out of the bottom with a satisfying thud, chilled and fizzy. The used can, discarded by his friends, was on the table now, filled with water and Agus took regular demonstrative sips of the brew.

'Coca Cola rots the teeth,' said Ridhaan.

'No it doesn't, it makes them shiny,' said Agus.

'Granny caught a lizard,' Ridhaan told Karti, ignoring Agus. 'Do you want to see it? It's in a box next to my mattress?'

'Where are Granny and Granddad now?' Agus said.

'What?' said Ridhaan.

'Where are Granny and Granddad now?'

'Gambling with their new friends in the market.' Ridhaan, directing his words to Karti, went on, 'Granddad said yesterday, wish us luck, maybe we'll win a new farm, so maybe they'll win a new farm.'

'Let's not talk about anything so silly,' her mother intervened. 'They play for just a few million rupiah, not enough to win or lose anything.'

'I hope they win a new farm,' said Agus, looking very sincere. 'There's not enough room for them here. I mean, I like them being here but they were used to so much space before.'

Karti told her brothers she needed them tomorrow as chaperones because Idris was taking her for lunch at Halal Fried Chicken. They were delighted: the fast-

food place was their favourite. After eating they settled to their homework on the table while her mother made up her father's meal in a banana leaf. Karti put on her headscarf, took the parcel and went outside.

Their quarter of town was quiet from dusk onwards: no traffic, little nocturnal activity; cicadas in the trees yes, frogs somewhere but nothing more. Almost at the door was the market, shut up for the day but taken over by night cook shops illuminated by old-fashioned oil lamps. As Karti came out, men were eating, hunched forward over their bowls and the secretive shadows and harsh pools of light under these lamps made her pause for a second, thinking suddenly of spies and town agents, and she laughed at herself.

At the far corner of the market was a lit street and the mosque was a couple of blocks up, a green-painted concrete complex with no exterior adornment. Ridhaan had been coming in join evening lessons in the Koran but the study room used for this had been taken over by the Alliance and his lessons were off. Now, every time Karti came here to deliver her father's supper she found the same non-political family men hanging around, men who, having completed evening worship saw a chance to smoke a companionable hookah instead of returning home. She liked to assume a business-like air as she came through the aromatic smoke, secretly amused by their harmless masculinity. It was a bit plain high-ceilinged room. Campaign posters were on the walls. The Muhsonuddin-Rahardjo alliance

comprised three small organisations: the True Devout Party headed by Muhsonuddin; the Family Dawn Awakening Party – her father was secretary of that – and the United Muslim Militant Student Association (UMMSA), which usually convened at the agricultural college campus.

Tonight she found a different atmosphere. The family men occupied the doorway area only and no hookahs were lit. The floor was a confusion of school tables and chairs. Students were singing a political anthem, the young men with green ribbons in their lapels, the young women in plain hijab. It was a celebratory atmosphere that took Karti by surprise. A sense of relief immediately followed. If this many people were in high spirits all must be well. Muhsonuddin was nowhere in sight but she spotted her father sitting at a table in front of paperwork.

In a white shirt and dark tie, dressed slightly more a Westerner than an Indonesian, swarthy, slim: that was her father. He saw her and smiled, looking weary but also excited. Did politics become so thrilling when a campaign came in sight of the ballot box? Apparently so. On the table was a draft circular: a promise to repair the roof at the primary school and to fill the pot holes at Baturaden Junction. Seeing supper, he said he was ravenous and took Karti up the winding iron staircase to the roof.

Legs astride on a stool, banana leaf unwrapped, he ate with his fingers, mixing rice and rendang. Karti kicked around admiring the view beyond the low parapet wall. The town was in weak street lighting that indicated the large rectangular grids and intervening puzzles of alleys. The air was balmy and a few stars pierced the fuzz of the night atmosphere.

After he had finished eating she planted her feet in front of him and told him about Santoso's visit, leaving out nothing.

'So he wants me to talk about him?' Her father was amused. 'I do.'

'Why do you think they came? To make a file?'

'Yes. And visit a pretty girl.'

'Dad, are you in danger?'

'Oh your mum is a good cook.' He didn't reply immediately but got up, took

her to the parapet, watched the light-speckled town himself. ‘If Santoso brings guns to a husting we’ll draw our own. But don’t tell your mother that. We are going to win, that’s what they feel downstairs. There’s no time to be afraid.’

‘I want to be involved, Dad.’

He squeezed her arm. ‘I didn’t want to force you, but I’m glad someone has got you interested, even if it’s Santoso.’

She laughed, glad that now she was on board.

He looked at her with a friendly, interested eye. ‘You know what I wish, Bugs? I wish my father – your grandfather – were here. To see all this. Even more, to see you and your brothers.’

She knew her grandfather had been shot in 1965 as a communist during mass killings that took place across Indonesia in a national frenzy. Militia and villagers did the slaughtering and it was something teachers at school were hard-pressed to explain. Whole families had been killed and her father and mother had sought sanctuary in the hills, among political insurgents and guerrilla fighters there. His mother had died of dysentery and her father been given over for adoption. In adult life he had arrived by car in Nadiyudan one day with his agricultural specimens in the boot to start a new life.

‘I don’t like it but I understand why Muhsonuddin is leader,’ she said.

‘Why, Bugs?’

‘Because he grew up here.’

‘Exactly right. Everyone knows Muhsonuddin. Only the farmers know me.’

‘Shouldn’t he be here?’

‘He’s fund raising. He’s good at that sort of thing and we need the money.’

‘What for?’

‘Believe it or not, the Mayor’s side will try to buy all the Election Scrutineers when they arrive. If that happens who knows how safe our ballot boxes will be. So we need to buy at least half of them ourselves.’

‘How crazy.’

They came down the staircase to find the students and married men gone and

together set up a Toshiba printer to make leaflets. She was happy to have her father to herself. In days gone past she had skipped school to ride out in the Daihatsu with him, visiting the farms. He was like a country doctor doing his rounds and she was his assistant twiddling the knobs of the car radio. Now she hoped he wouldn't send her home too fast but the leaflets were almost done.

'If you were Mayor what would you do?' he said.

'Build a mall.'

'Do we need a mall?'

'Yes. There's no place for women to go, to get out of the house and meet each other.'

'All right, Bugs.' Then her did sent her home.

She walked the return route on light feet. The street was sultry and quiet. The day had been a good one. First she toyed with the idea of a mall. It was true there was nowhere comfortable and safe for women to spend a bit of time out of the house. Then she remembered there was nowhere for her to go with Idris either. She always had to imagine something, them breaking into a class-room at night for instance and lying together until dawn. Apart from the central sexual feeling, this fantasy was always on the vague side though there was never any difficulty imagining Idris's fierce ardour or the long flows of intimate talk they would share. Reaching the market she began to run as rats were everywhere.

At home it was thickly quiet. The door of the living room was ajar, her grandparents sleeping inside on the floor. Her mother had left a note: she was watching TV with the neighbours. Ridhaan and Agus were asleep on their mattresses in the bedroom she shared with them. In the shower room she locked the door, undressed, switched on the electric water heater and stepped under the shower. Hot water bounced off her breasts and she soaped them imagining Idris's hands in place of hers, passionately then comically. She washed her hair and stood motionless under the shower for a long time. Chastely clean she changed into pants and a T-shirt and walked up and down the hall brushing her hair waiting for it to dry. Then she lay down besides her brothers on her own mattress and went to

sleep.

At first light, as her brothers slept on, Karti jumped out of bed well-rested and wanting to go and say good morning to her grandparents. She knew she would find them outside at the back under the tamarind tree. They were farmers, dawn-risers and had been going there for the last few days to avoid disturbing the house.

They were sitting on the roots of the tree. The sun was still low and it was only mildly hot. The tree grew in a communal area along the back of the warehouse estate. Karti never had any reason to come out here. It was something of a lush junk yard, the things discarded by householders providing a frame for flowering plants.

They greeted her with happy exclamations of surprise and made space for her. Grandfather was like grandmother: sparkling eyes, wrinkled brown face; they were watching the agile little birds flying in and out of the tree.

‘You always complained of the morning cold when you stayed with us, remember?’ grandmother said.

‘How you complained,’ grandfather said. ‘You didn’t understand how it could be so cold, not like here.’

She did remember: those cold mornings up in the hills and she was glad to find her grandparents in the mood to tease her showing they were all right. She loved their farm, its paddies, shack, coop for chickens, vegetable patches. Grandmother took care of the vegetables and the coop, grandfather the paddies and fruit trees on the outer terraces. Thatched hats apiece, she used to stand in the rain with him keeping watch as rainwater cascaded from one paddi to the other, he ready to step in if a flow grew and threatened to wash away a bund. Now the farm was lost. They had been run off after an escalating campaign of intimidation by people who wanted the land for a hotel.

She had listened in to some of the whispered discussions between her parents about what was next for her grandparents. Town talk said the ultimate investors in the hotel were the Mayor and his wife, Brata and Sekar, information that was political capital for her father. Her mother didn’t want him peppering his campaign speeches with her parents’ affairs and they had argued about it. Besides that, her grandparents had their own minds. It was for them to decide what they would do next and that’s why Karti wanted to sit with them and listen. To bring them onto the subject she asked how they had got on yesterday, gambling with the market traders.

Grandmother dug in the pocket of her shapeless, earth-stained trousers and produced rupiah notes, their winnings. She began talking, telling Karti about the game, played under a lean-to a few blocks from the market. They had had to listen to various jokes about their misfortune from the other players but it turned out those folks were not actually heartless people. Many had farmed themselves at some point in their pasts before coming down to town and had similar stories to tell. By the time the last hand had been dealt they did not feel such outsiders and they had managed to win.

‘From what we heard it’s not all bad here,’ Granddad said. ‘They say life’s easier in town.’

‘And if you want to know,’ Granny added, ‘they all said we had to put this behind us and think ahead. We don’t know what we really think, do we?’ She looked at Granddad. ‘He won’t tell me what *he* thinks. He’s waiting for me to say something.’

‘That is so,’ Granddad confirmed with a smile.

‘We don’t blame the people who ran us out, do we?’ Granny said.

Granddad scratched his head. ‘No, we don’t, but if he came out way we would bash the Mayor with a spade, wouldn’t we?’

‘Yes, we would.’

Karti laughed. ‘You should. I’m not worried about you at all.’

‘Yes don’t, we aren’t finished off yet,’ said Granddad merrily.

A little breeze had came up, whispering through the leaves overhead. ‘*Demit*,’ Granny said, winking. Karti winked back. Of course there were several classes of spirits: the danjang, the lelembut and the setan, but, as Granny knew, a tree like this would be home to a demit or nothing. Old world ideas pooh poohed by Karti’s teachers at school as country superstition but they knew the lore too. If someone wanted something greatly enough from a demit and it wasn’t something trivial, if they wanted it with all their being, the demit might just stir itself.

Next Agus and Ridhaan came out, Ridhaan with the lizard that had spent the night in his shoebox. He opened the lid, the lizard dashed a metre, stopped, took its bearings, seemed to change colour, then disappeared.

‘Yes, let that one find its breakfast,’ said Granddad, ‘I’ll catch you another one.’

Later, as they were all having breakfast, Idris telephoned on the fixed line, a piece of devilry on his part as he could easily have called Karti on her pocket phone. Her father, halfway out of the front door, picked up.

‘Hello, this is Rahardjo.’

‘*Bapak* Rahardjo, this is Idris. May I speak to your daughter please?’

‘Who’s this again?’

‘Idris, son of Muhsonuddin.’

‘Idris. She’s not available at this moment.’

‘Did she leave already? I thought she worked in the afternoons?’

‘She’s helping her mother. GOODBYE.’

Her father hung up and closed the front door behind him. Karti received a text from Idris. *See you at lunch, Daddy’s Girl.*

After Ridhaan and Agus had left for school accompanied by Granny and Granddad, Karti and her mother settled down in the living room. Each let their shoes fall off, with the same reflex to rub a foot with a toe. Her mother rotated an ankle. Karti pulled in her left shank to sit on and clutched the other leg for support. The cat came in and she threw it on her mother’s lap. ‘Granny and Granddad are ok, aren’t they?’ she said.

‘I don’t know. Yes. For now.’

They were silent for a moment.

‘What’s the latest with you and Idris?’ her mother said.

‘He’s going to propose again, I suppose.’

‘When?’

‘When I tell him.’

‘Your dad’s practically married to Muhsonuddin, so you might as well marry his son.’

‘Funny joke, mother. I don’t think dad trusts Muhsonuddin senior, or junior.’

‘Idris was circumcised at eight,’ she added. ‘He said it was the second most painful thing ever to happen to him. The first was being born.’

‘That was certainly more painful for his mother.’

Mum was fair-minded about Idris, granting that he was down-to-earth, funny and good-looking, not blaming him for his shag-faced father. The one thing she did criticise was how Idris had nothing to do, idle like many in town. He might go to Mecca in a few years, change his name as his father had to something grand, but according to her that did not exempt him from doing something useful in the meantime.

‘He washes and he smells nice, that’s what I like about him at the moment,’

said Karti.

‘You can’t say that about everyone in town.’

‘Do you think he’s *virile*?’

‘Somehow, yes.’

‘But with a strict Muslim for a father-in-law that could mean a lot more worship than I’m used to.’

‘So people think. He’s not that devout.’

Mum did not pretend to be an exemplary Muslim and could be withering about others. She was something of an Animist, getting her beliefs on the farm.

Around noon Karti set off for lunch. There was a lane where she was now stopping to admire the frangipanis, a lane she had walked down all her school life without noticing them, too busy being twelve or fourteen or whatever. These trees were greatly to her liking now, growing in an old cemetery enclosed by a stone wall. The lane ran past it and on the opposite side were the backs of cement houses and a few bantam chickens were usually to be found wandering around. She rubbed some petals between her fingers to take the scent, thinking Idris might like it, but the blossoms had little aroma. A moped buzzed up from behind. It was Sundari, her best friend from school, who had started working now as a courier. She put a foot to the ground but left her engine running. She had always been a plus-sized girl full of good nature and Karti had often strolled with her after school, the two of them sharing their dreams for the future.

'Hello, *mbak*,' Sundari said.

‘Hello, *mbak*. How about a mall?’

‘Here?’

‘Don’t you think we need one? I told my dad.’

‘What kind of mall could we have, *mbak*?’

‘Something.’

‘Something so small.’ Sundari laughed. ‘This is only Nadiyudan don’t forget.’

‘Well, it’s growing.’

‘All right. See you in the mall when its built, but I can’t stop now.’

Sundari buzzed off again, turning the corner between two shoulders of concrete, scattering a couple of fowl.

Karti started to think about Sundari. It was sad Sundari had no time of her own any more. Her father had put her to work the moment high school was over. A similar thing had happened to a lot of the class. Many had left for Jakarta and Yogyakarta, the big cities, where you could earn money for your family by working in a factory. They all remained in touch on social media. She heard about factory dormitory life and in return gave them the latest on town. These dears pretended to tease her for having no ambition, for being a homebody and she pretended to be envious of their new financial independence, but she knew she was the lucky one, not trapped yet. Of course, these exchanges fortified her sense of obligation to be bad and not to become serious too fast. Another thing, Sundari, like a lot of girls, was focused on the correct practice of Islam, but she wasn’t. She only wore a headscarf to please her father.

From the lane onto the main town avenue. Here on opposite sides of the road were the school and the restaurant. Outside the school, rickshaw men sat in the saddles of their bicycles under trees waiting for the kids to come out. She crossed the road.

Halal Fried Chicken was, by Nadiyudan standards, a large airy place. It had the town’s sole wall window. It was an old hangout of hers and adored by her brothers. The food was Western with Javanese touches. It imitated KFC but hardly anyone knew KFC. She went in to a smell of baked sweetened buns and hot oil,

bought a cup of cola and waited for the others at a window table.

On the hour, children in their blue and white uniforms streamed out of school. Ridhaan and Agus came across the road holding hands. Idris arrived just in time to throw in his order at the counter and pay. He was wearing jeans and a T-shirt, looking at ease and as carefree as usual. Ridhaan and Agus insisted on being the ones to carry the trays, stopping at the sauce depot before reclaiming the window table.

'Idris,' said Ridhaan, slipping into one of the conjoined cemented-down plastic chairs, 'if your dad's going to be Mayor what's our dad going to be? I'm not being cheeky, Idris, I really want to know.'

'Well, a town can only have one Mayor.'

'My dad should be Regent then, your dad can be Mayor.'

'Yes, why not.'

Instead of speaking, Karti was engrossed with a deep-fried chicken thigh which she was eating carefully and thoroughly.

'Tell me what they teach at the old school nowadays,' said Idris.

'The *old school*,' Ridhaan parroted. 'What they are teaching at the *old school*.'

'Earthquakes,' said Agus. 'It's lucky we don't have them. In China the *old school* would get shaken to bits.'

'We have a volcano instead,' said Ridhaan. 'If that goes we're in trouble, except it won't, it's too old.'

Karti let Idris fend off all her brothers' talk until the school bell rang again when there was a general movement towards the door. Ridhaan and Agus finished their chicken, said goodbye and caught up their school mates, leaving them alone at table. She watched her brothers cross the road then smiled at him.

'If your dad's going to be Mayor, what's my dad going to be?' she said whimsically.

'Well, a town can only have one Mayor.' Idris repeated his early ruling.

'Then my dad should be Regent, your dad can be Mayor.'

Idris grinned. 'The ticket is Muhsonuddin-Rahardjo not Rahardjo-

Muhsonuddin, that's true, but either way around those names are yours and mine not only our fathers', that's what I know.'

'Ahhh, romantic.'

Idris no more cared about politics than she did and he took pride in being a 'natural idler' as he said. They had known each other since they were eight. He had been through many phases in that time but had never stopped being interested in her. For years he had worn a caftan before swapping it for a leather jacket and a group of rabble-rousing friends. All her phases were known to him, no doubt, with similar amusement and affection. As he was now, she was critical of the time he spent on his appearance, though she liked the results: the trimmed beard, the oiled hair, the clean fingernails – even scent.

'Idris, I've a question,' she said. 'What are all the boys doing now they've finished school?'

'Kusnadi is working for his father. Agung has gone to Jakarta to work for his uncle. A few are at home doing nothing. Surykusumo got married, as you know. You remember I proposed to you after the wedding dinner, I suppose.'

'I remember. Most of the girls are working in factories. When are you going to propose to me next?'

'Any time you like. Should we wait and see what happens with our fathers?'

'No. Propose to me before polling day.'

'All right. Here at Halal Fried Chicken?'

'Not here. And don't forget to ask my father.'

Idris made a face. In a minute they had both coloured, the talk of marriage leading them to their wedding night.

He walked her to work. She felt light on her feet again, excited by what was ahead: marriage and its thousand ramifications. The handcuffs of adulthood would not be so bad perhaps. They parted a block from her work, he going on to the mosque where he'd make third worship with his father.

From the moment she set foot in the coffee shop she was overcome with nausea and a sense of dread. Every word of Santoso's came back to her. The joy she had felt with Idris was gone. With no understanding of it, she felt weak and confused.

Masduki had the sports pages spread over the sink, darkly looking at a foreign football match report. He was one for taking a bet and usually lost.

'Did you talk to your father?' he asked over his shoulder as he heard her behind him.

'Yes,' she replied, feeling unable to say more.

He hunched his shoulders, reading on, and she ghosted back to her spot at the front, where she often stood balancing on the shutter track, her trainers squirming and deforming under her weight. She looked at the traffic and wondered why her heart had dropped into an abyss.

Basri came in, gave her rupiah notes equal to the amount he owed, sat down. She brought him tea and regarded him. He was such a wisp of a man.

'Why didn't you pay yesterday?' she asked.

'An old man's fun.'

'You don't need to keep us company today. Masduki's in a mood. I'm in a mood.' She sounded nervy to herself.

Santoso's face was suddenly there beyond the traffic, on the other side of the

road, not a hallucination, looking straight towards her, yellow and leering. Something was making his face burn, distorting his features. Then he disappeared, so the moment appeared imagined except it hadn't been. She dropped into a chair beside Basri. 'It's a normal day, today, isn't it, *bapak*? Just a normal day.' She found herself on the verge of tears.

'Has something upset you?'

'Yes.'

Masduki stood behind her. 'What is it, Karti?'

'I just saw Santoso across the road. He was staring at me like a fuck. I want to call my father.'

With jumpy hands she called but her father did not pick up.

'Please hold my hand,' she said to Basri.

He gave her his hand; she took it, a dry old man's hand, bony and soft.

'Tell me what you do in that hall.'

'We meditate, my dear. Just silly old people.'

'But why?'

'It helps us, on our journey.'

Tears were streaming from her eyes and she made no attempt to wipe them away. Santoso had done something, she knew it. She wanted to wail. She was on the verge of hysteria. Then a moped crashed in at the kerb, unseating the rider. It was Sundari, who was in tears. 'I think it's your father, Karti. I'm so sorry. He's had an accident on the hill.'

'What kind of accident?'

'The Daihatsu is off the road in a ditch. There are some farmers there.'

'And my dad?'

'I don't know. Please don't ask me. I just came.'

Karti stood up unsteadily. 'Take me then.'

Sundari righted the moped. They both climbed on and Sundari re-started the engine. Masduki threw a glass at the wall. 'All hell to this town,' he said.

On the road the bike vibrated and buzzed. Sundari's broad back and waist

were there to cling to but Karti isolated herself, gripping the holding bar at the back end of the seat for balance, her feet in the rear foot rests. Beyond Sundari's shoulders the road came on uncomprehendingly. Soon they were out of town, making up the slope of the hill, the Honda whining in high gear, Sundari driving quickly but not madly. The sun blinked in the palms and the roadside life unwound without a point of focus.

Out in the country they came on the Daihatsu. It lay tipped in a ditch with its underside showing, skid marks on the road. A handful of farmers was gathered nearby. There was a line of trees and on the other side of the ditch a long traverse of green paddies where they had been working. Sundari slowed up and stopped by the farmers. Karti dismounted. She walked past the farmers, who looked at her with uneasy faces. 'You don't want to look, *ibu*,' said one. 'It's not a nice sight. There's nothing anyone can do. The bullets did it.' Karti's legs continued to propel her. She recognised her father's car at once, ploughed there in the ditch. Broken glass was fresh on the grass. There were bullet holes in the driver's side door. Inside was her father keeled unnaturally over the steering wheel motionless and rigid. She fainted.

She was in Sundari's arms, thirty yards from the accident, on the verge under a tree. 'Take your time,' said Sundari, stroking her hair. 'Sit here for a bit.'

The farmers came to talk. They had talked amongst themselves first. One spoke for the rest. 'We want to tell you, *ibu*, in case you are a concerned person. We saw it all. A policeman on a motorbike came alongside the car and started shooting and the car skidded into the ditch. We don't know how a policeman could do such a thing but we know him. Santoso. He stopped and watched the car in the ditch then drove off towards town. We know the driver too. Rahardjo. We know you too, *ibu*, we think. You're his daughter, Sukarti, aren't you? We remember you. We are so sorry.'

'Yes, I am Karti Rahardjo.'

'Yes. We thought you were.'

‘Thank you.’

‘You’ve had a shock. Just lie there for a little bit and let this nice person look after you.’

From each direction new traffic had been arriving. As soon as one vehicle had stopped nothing could get past. People had left their cars to look. There was a hill minibus and everyone had got out of it. There were pointed hands and shocked comments. Someone came too near the Daihatsu.

Springing up and feeling like a wild animal Karti ran back to the ditch to block their way. ‘Go back,’ she screamed. ‘Don’t come near.’

‘All right, *ibu*,’ said a middle-aged man. ‘Now keep your cool. The bus driver stopped of his own accord. We’re only having a look. No harm, *ibu*.’

The bank was wet and slippery and she lost her feet, slithering to the bottom of the ditch where she was close to the car again, looking again at her father, motionless and rigid.

The first police car arrived. The officers took control of the crowd, ordered it back. They were nevertheless young men who showed little sign of knowing what to do. One went to radio from the car. Then another police car could be heard coming up from town, its siren whining. As the noise grew it became the focus of attention.

The officers who got out of this second patrol car when it arrived were the two men who had drunk cendol with Santoso. She was standing halfway up the ditch slope and they saw her and kept their distance. Face smeared with her own mucus, she stood between her father and everyone else. She made noises, wanting the crowd to think her dangerous like a snarling dog and stay back. But when a district ambulance arrived and uniformed medics came down the slope she gave way, and disappeared.

She careered down the hill on Sundari’s Honda, not used to driving and going too fast. The curve of the road forced her out to the wrong side, into the path of a minibus roaring painfully uphill. She lost control and went into the ditch, going

head over heels into a bush, ending up on her back stunned as the minibus roared past. Then up, retrieving the bike, going on, hurt or not feeling nothing.

To the police storage compound. Santoso was supposed to have a grace and favour apartment here. She arrived outside, parked, pocketed a spanner from the seat box. At the entrance a one-man guardhouse and a levered barrier, mesh fencing and tall acacia trees running the length of the street boundary.

The guard on duty was not prepared for her. She had almost walked around the barrier before he came out and called for her to stop.

‘I want to find Santoso,’ she said.

He blinked at her. He looked a family man. ‘Santoso? Wait.’ He went back in the guardhouse, picked up the internal phone and talked.

He came out. ‘No, you cannot go in,’ he said.

She ducked under the barrier. He came forward, swung his rifle and caught her behind the ear, knocking her down.

On the ground the feeling was more dizziness than pain.

‘Go home.’

His face had become bathed in sweat as he helped her up. She took a few steps

backwards, towards the compound, and when he did nothing turned and ran on.

Now she was in the compound. The drive had led to an open area occupied by vehicles, rows of muscular armoured cars and she stopped to attend to a ringing left ear, staunching a little blood with the hem of her headscarf.

There was a flagpole on a white plinth. From here she called Santoso's name five times. Her words rang and echoed among the nondescript buildings. Santoso's apartment was somewhere here.

Santoso walked out from somewhere and came towards her. He was smiling. He was smoothing down his oiled hair and rubbing it at the same time in perplexity.

'What's all the noise, Karti?'

'Murderer,' she screamed. 'Assassin. Madman.'

'Quiet now.'

She lunged at him with the spanner, her other hand reaching for his gun.

Klaxons around the compound began to sound out an alarm call.

Santoso ducked the spanner, wrenched it from her and tossed it aside. She hadn't reached his pistol. He got his arms around her and with superior weight pushed her to the ground. His breath was on her neck. 'All the trouble I took to talk to you and you haven't listened,' he said. She felt his fingertips to her temple. 'Pow, pow, pow,' he said savagely. For all her struggling she was held down fast. A vehicle swept in through the entrance and Santoso reacted by half rising. She managed to crawl free and get to her feet, running in the direction of the car, streaking past it under the barrier and out of the compound.

She drove to the lane where the frangipani trees were, in the old cemetery no one ever visited, and found a place behind the wall to lie out of sight, curling up with hands pressed over eyes, surrendering to semi-conscious oblivion.

On coming to, all she wanted to know was the peace of the place: the restfully old, stone wall enclosure, the straightforward grass, the uncomplicated trees; the blue glaze of the grave-side tiles brilliant in the sun; a beetle working its way methodically through a forest of grass.

Then when ready she went to sit on the motorcycle and hold council. Waiting at home would be Mum, Ridhaan and Agus and she longed to go to them, but it was not safe. Instead she must find the Mayor's residence, see the Mayor and his wife and demand they call Santoso off.

She drove the Honda to Kolonel Sugiono Avenue where swarms of other

motorcycles made it feel safe. Daylight was fast disappearing and the traffic was piled up getting home. The Mayor's residence was supposed to lie in the new neighbourhood where the street lights were in good repair and traffic thin. She motored slowly past hawkers using the lanes to get out of town, wearily pushing their hand-carts in silence. The residence was on a slight rise and finding it she doubled-back and stopped, intending to wash at a culvert. It was just dark now. With little clicks water flowed under the road in all simplicity. Cupping her hands she drank thirstily, washed her face and picked the grass and twigs from her clothing.

Insects quickened by dusk were in the air on the road outside the gate. Behind it, two guards smoking cigarettes, automatic weapons slung bandolier-like over their chests. She called to them and said she wanted to see the Mayor. At first they ignored her, smoking their cigarettes in the dusk. Seeing that she wouldn't go one jabbed his hand impatiently up to the house, to all the limos parked up on the rise, as if to say, can't you see there's an important reception in progress.

'My father was killed today,' Karti said. 'He is the political candidate Rahardjo.'

At this one guard walked to the intercom box shaking his head; he called up the house. After a minute the gate clicked open for her to walk in. The guards ignored her then watched her walk up the drive.

She was afraid of the large villa ahead where the drive finished up under a high portico putting a ceiling over ten or so black cars. As she came to the front door a maid her age opened it, legs constrained under a tight sarong. Karti saw a

hallway and heard talking and laughter from the interior. The maid brought her to a side room and closed the door.

Left alone, hearing people somewhere close, she longed to be comforted by someone. Instead this convocation of adult voices, talking about who knows what, began to feel scary. Did they know her father was dead? The gilt chair she was sitting on, like something in a palace, was making her feel insignificant and now she would have to speak to the Mayor, impressive as the Sultan of Yogyakarta no doubt, arrayed in gold and white, chest puffed out, just as he looked in the posters around town. Equally worrying was Sekar, Brata's part-Chinese wife. It seemed impossible that either of them would come out and talk to her.

Her father had been trespassing on all this and now here she was too. These people wanted to keep everything they had. They had conspired in the murder of her father to keep it – in this one year of public ballot due to changes instructed from Jakarta applying across Indonesia.

Very well, let these people learn she was here, learn she had come from the police compound where she had scuffled with Santoso. Let them be discomforted by her trespassing presence.

She stood up, sat down again, waited on for someone to come in.

Brata and Sekar. What did she know that could prepare her for this meeting? She knew the town respected the Atmaja name Brata bore and remembered his father still, an energetic man who had overseen large fruit estates. Brata might have let the town stagnate for ten years but it took more than one man to make Indonesia corrupt. The seething nest of public officials who stole public money had more to do with his wife, Sekar and her whole Wijiati family laying a spider's web over the whole province. It was she the town really disliked.

At last three male stewards came through the door, followed by Brata and Sekar. In person Brata was a surprise, small and balding. He wore a grasshopper green jacket and batik trousers. Sekar swept in haughtily. She wore a square-cut pant suit and heels. They brought in a tincture of the reception or whatever it was: a whiff of wine, smiling faces. In front of Karti, Brata's expression turned solemn

but not unkind. Sekar snapped at once into a cold stare. Karti got to her feet.

'My sincere condolences,' said Brata.

'We are sorry about your father, *ibu* Rahardjo,' said Sekar, 'but you put us on our guard by coming here. We do not tolerate that. What do you want?'

'You're having a nice party for my father's death,' said Karti, calm, feeling equal to the confrontation.

'This is a reception for Chinese New Year,' said Sekar.

'Santoso killed my father. The farmers saw him. Did you order it?'

'You're mad,' said Sekar. 'Does your mother know you are on this rampage or whatever you want to call it?'

The stewards looked at Karti grimly.

'Why was my father killed? Why did you order it?'

Karti, worked up now, was ready to tear into Sekar. Sekar looked like she was about to slap Karti and it was only with difficulty that Brata managed to prise his wife's attention away. He spoke to her. At first she listened then she seemed to lose patience, turning back to Karti and saying angrily, 'Do not say any more wild things or you will be thrown out. The Mayor will spend a moment with you if you are prepared to be reasonable. I have guests waiting.' So saying she whirled around and the maid had to be quick with the door, not sure afterwards whether anyone else was leaving, looking towards Brata.

'My father also died by gunshot – a vendetta,' Brata said. 'Follow me please, *ibu*, we'll have tea.'

The three stewards went out one way, Karti found herself following Brata by another door. Now she had seen Sekar much of her purpose seemed used up. Sekar was behind her father's death, she had no doubt about it.

They went up a long hall and two maids came behind them. Potted palms lined thresholds into one big room after another, each with vaulted ceilings. The sound of chattering voices was as clear as ever. She felt herself walking oddly, as if the palatial surroundings were compelling her into a more poised tread.

Brata walked ahead, the slow crabby gait of someone getting old. So this was

Brata, whose father had been machine-gunned in the hills, who still had the town's sympathy all these years later.

This was how Santoso had entered the picture. Brata had grown up alone at the old Dutch Planter's House, waited on by his father's servants, his mother having fled to Jakarta. Brata was fifteen, timid, artistic. Santoso was a security guard at the gate, an uneducated boy whose mother had thrust him forward for such work as an improvement on farming. Santoso procured pleasures for Brata which wouldn't otherwise have come his way. Dancing girls were hired. They stayed overnight and the old servants quit. A strange friendship went on for some years, Santoso rewarded with a captaincy. In the end Brata married Sekar putting an end to all that. The Wijiatis wanted his money, they procured him the mayorship.

The small procession reached its destination, Brata's day room. The maids rushed ahead, one to plump cushions, the other to draw the curtains. Brata ordered tea. The maids left. The air in the room was dry and cool. In showcases against the walls were odd things: bejewelled fighting implements, rock statuary, obsolete musical instruments. Brata took her to an alcove and they both sat down. Here, perhaps at a loss, he made a pretence of having papers to read. In different circumstances she would have laughed.

They were not alone. A figure came in through another door, a bodyguard in ceremonial clothes, sent perhaps by Sekar. He fixed his eyes on her. She turned her head towards the curtained window. She didn't know what to make of her situation now and knew that soon she would go home.

The villa went suddenly quiet. The din from the reception stopped, finished off by a single, final, cough. From pure silence, the gongings of a gamelan orchestra began. A music recital had started.

Limb by limb she felt the music relax her. Brata's face indicated the same yielding as he looked up and listened.

Willingly she shut her eyes, hungry to allow the gamelan to free her of pain by the sheer existence of its own business expressed in enchanting harmonies.

The maid with the tea arrived. Brata busied himself with it, watched it steep, intending to pour it himself. Karti left the alcove to walk to one of the display cases.

'The tea is from an estate belonging to my wife's family,' Brata said as he bent over the alcove table. 'It's up in the north. Very good. Better than anything.'

There were big teak bookcases, the books behind glass doors. Brata poured the tea. 'The cups are bone china,' he said. 'Very pretty.'

The gamelan came to a conclusion and stopped. Now there was silence in the villa. Karti resumed her seat opposite Brata. She was ten times thirstier than before. It was impossible not to go greedily at the liquid, to burn her lips and then her tongue.

'Taste the layers. Satisfy your thirst.'

She looked at Brata without anger.

'Santoso wants to kill me. Will you call him off? Will you protect my family?'

'I stand in office but my wife is the executive, you understand.'

'Isn't he your friend?'

'He's a rogue.'

'Then I will come back and burn down this villa and everyone in it.'

'Don't do that. Yes, I am Mayor. I will try to help.'

'Thank you, *bapak*, I want to go home now please.'

He nodded and said nothing more. She was escorted by the bodyguard in ceremonial clothes, silently out of the residence and right down to the gates. She wasn't sure if he had a kris dagger to thrust in her side.

Re-united with the Honda she drove back home, out of the Nadiyudan that did not belong to her with its lit streets, to the part that was familiar, to the dark market running with rats.

Sundari was waiting outside to reclaim the bike and told Karti quickly how her mother had learnt about the murder on the radio – the UMMSA radio station announced it – and ran to the police station. The body was already at the morgue. Her mother identified it, rushed to the school, took Ridhaan and Agus out and

home.

Idris was also outside, standing at a distance. Karti saw him but didn't call him over. She kissed Sundari and went in.

The family were all there waiting for her, her mother, her brothers and her grandparents. Her mother looked at her without focus and said, 'Where have you been, Karti? You've cut your face.' Her voice was unnatural. In her arms was Agus white with shock while Ridhaan was in the other chair, throwing the remote control hypnotically from one hand to the other, his face stiff. The Sukimuns were sitting on stools in the hall, just out of the room, their faces careworn. They nodded to Karti, almost bowed. Karti went to sit with Ridhaan. She prised the remote control gently from him and stroked his hair. The swamping grief in the room had already made her hair stand on end. She was its next prey and she could feel it coming for her. Her skin went cold and her breathing became restricted.

The family had to wait two weeks before the police were prepared to release Rahardjo's body for burial. In that time of grief at first nobody had any strength to continue. On the third day Karti's mother roused herself and compelled Ridhaan and Agus to start going back to school. They did not want to go but she said the old routine would help them get over what had happened. The grandparents excused themselves and left for Semarang, the provincial capital. They had an idea about petitioning the Governor for their lost farm and exposing the Nadiyudan administration. That left Karti had home with her mother.

Her mother longed for Kadek, her sister, to come. She lived in Bali and at first couldn't be contacted. So Karti sat with her mother alone in the living room filled with her father's books. Together they existed in the same depression. Neither functioned well, neither slept nor ate except fitfully. Karti did not go to work any

more.

For a time her mother was kind to her. It seemed the magnitude of her loss, hers and her brothers' was the greatest: they had lost a father, her mother only a husband. But her mother did not conceal for long that she was displeased with Karti. She did not like the idea that Karti had been to the police compound, far less to Brata's residence and it wasn't long before she said so in sudden fury. Karti had acted immodestly and irresponsibly and without permission.

Her mother's attack hurt Karti. Each retreated into silence. It seemed they were each forced to feel every atom of how they differed, now her father was gone.

In part ashamed of herself, Karti wondered why she had acted the way she had. Was she immodest, unusual, a freak? It had been open to her to remain in Sundari's arms by the roadside and then to go straight home, to participate at once in the family's grief. She couldn't explain to her mother that an inferno had burned in her to get to Santoso as she had watched his cronies take over the accident scene. Now she had been told by her mother that it had been recklessness and madness.

Having lashed out at Karti, in subsequent days her mother became reduced, more traumatised than she had let on, not answerable in grief for everything she said. She had bundled up her husband's murder and Karti's subsequent actions unfairly. And Karti, stubborn to a point, believed she had done right. Her father would not judge her unkindly. The conviction saved her from self-loathing.

When there was something to read in the newspapers, Karti read it out aloud to her mother.

The death by gunshot of a candidate for local political office gained a line in the national newspaper, *The Jakarta Post*, in the 'Around the Regencies' section. Whether this entry, by its existence, was meant to be suggestive of a politically motivated killing was not clear to Karti. Still, it was something to have her father's name in a national newspaper.

The local weekly newspaper gave its front page to her father's death, with a

photograph of the car in the ditch. The matter was reported as a road accident and the reader was left unclear if the crash or the gunshots were the cause of death. No connection was invited between the death and the victim's candidature. The online version of the same report attracted anonymous comment. Many said Rahardjo's death was an assassination and had been ordered by Brata. No one needed reminding what kind of policeman Santoso was. People railed against the state of Javanese politics, at the local and national level, and vituperated against the print version of the newspaper article for its feeble reportage. On Facebook, on the page where the local basketball team, the Nadiyudan Rabbits, ran a supporters' page – an active page among close-knit local people – many wrote personal tributes to Rahardjo as well as messages of condolence to the family left behind. Karti read some of these out to her mother too.

Sundari came regularly and brought what news she could. According to her, the alliance had fallen apart. Far from finding a moment of political opportunism in Rahardjo's death, Muhsonuddin was left at sixes and sevens. Perhaps he deemed it bad taste to continue to engage in the contest, perhaps he thought he would lose, perhaps he was being cautious about his own safety. Karti took a dim view of his survival over her father's. The students of UMMSA, who had only ever liked Rahardjo, made a high-minded withdrawal from the campaign. It was over and nobody had thought to approach the administration in Semarang and file for postponement. The door was left wide open for Brata and Santoso's re-election.

Masduki was another visitor tolerated by her mother. According to him, no one had seen or heard anything of Santoso since her father's death. He was thought to be lying low on instructions from the Mayor's office. Certainly he was not arrested. The Town Hall saw a deluge of small-time gangsters and extortionists, the usual ones and new ones who travelled in specially. All sought identical business arrangements with the front desk. Either they were discreetly handed cash envelopes or they would write up the malpractices of the administration in print.

In the middle of this, to everyone's relief, Aunt Kadek arrived, overland from Surabaya, having crossed by ferry from Bali.

She was fifty, strongly made, active, a woman with quick kind eyes. Karti and her brothers had seen little of her in childhood. For twenty years she had worked in Hong Kong, and they understood how this had left tensions in the family, with their mother and with their grandparents. Karti remembered times her mother had bemoaned the fact she'd lost her elder sister to migrant labour. For Aunt Kadek, those Hong Kong years meant missing out on marriage and children in Java. She returned a changed person, not capable of settling back in Nadiyudan, choosing to go and live in the more cosmopolitan Bali. It all happened because the Sukimuns had been in danger of losing their farm once before, when loans secured on it ran out of control, and only with Aunt Kadlec's long-drawn out sacrifice abroad had the farm been successfully saved that time.

Now Aunt Kadek brought new strength to the household. She took over the kitchen and started to provide everyone with good meals, which she insisted they eat. She cleaned and tidied, put flowers in vases, took her sister out to the market. Karti saw her mother easier in herself with her sister there to confide in. For once all the old grudges had vanished between them.

But now there were conversations between the two sisters from which Karti was excluded. They seemed to have closed ranks on her. She wondered in consternation what they talked about. Frequently Aunt Kadek left the house to make unexplained calls at the telephone exchange.

Without a companion, Karti lay on her mattress in her bedroom while her brothers were at school. She did not know how to occupy her mind. If she returned to work she would be the object of attention. Curious people would come for coffee as a pretext, wishing to look at her. There would be nothing to stop Santoso walking in again with his sidekicks. She'd try to tear him to pieces and he'd be ready with his pistol. Her mother was right, she was a liability best kept closeted. Sundari came to sit with her sometimes. Closing the door, Karti would lay her head against Sundari's chest, and the slight scent of motorcycle oil from Sundari's fingers would roil Karti with thoughts of that terrible day past. When Sundari wasn't there she tried to read foreign novels from her father's bookshelves to

distract her mind and sometimes she tried praying, but her sensation in front of the gamelan had been stronger.

One morning, a week after Aunt Kadlec's arrival, her mother called Karti into the living room where Aunt Kadek was waiting for them. The two sisters seemed on edge. When Karti came in she noticed their nervousness. Probably she herself looked poorly, her hair unkempt, her face blotchy. Her mother sat her down kindly and then looked appealingly at Aunt Kadek. Aunt Kadek began to talk, saying they were going to send her to Hong Kong, to work for an old employer of hers, a Mrs Meryl Parsons.

Karti could not believe what she was hearing. She looked beseechingly towards her mother, who would barely meet her eye. Aunt Kadek went on. Karti would first have to attend a training centre. They had one booked in Surabaya. She would live in a dormitory with other girls being prepared for housework abroad. For months on end she would be taught Cantonese, Chinese cooking and domestic tasks, and at the end of her training she would be flown to Hong Kong, probably amongst a parcel of other girls all on their way to start work as nannies. There were other points Aunt Kadek enumerated, arrangements already put in motion, the commissioning of an employment agency to organise her visa and work permit, but Karti had stopped listening.

She waited for Aunt Kadek to leave the house – for another of her overseas calls – before approaching her mother. She stole up as her mother washed rice at the sink in the kitchen. She stood motionless at her side, as she had done sometimes as a child wanting something. Without turning around, her mother spoke first.

‘You must go, Karti, for all sorts of reasons.’

‘But for how long? Twenty years? And come back like Aunt Kadek, a different person?’

‘No, not twenty years, much less.’

‘How can I go to Hong Kong? I’ve never been to Jakarta.’

‘You’ll manage it. Everybody does.’

‘But how can I? Will I have to live in a stranger’s house and work for them as a servant?’

‘Mrs Parsons is very nice. She’ll respect you. There’s nothing else to be done.’

Her mother now looked squarely at her. Tears had filled her eyes. ‘Do you want Ridhaan to skip school? Does he have to join other little boys pushing their way onto the Yogyakarta train to sell toys carriage by carriage?’

‘No, I suppose not.’

‘Karti.’ Her mother spoke very softly. ‘We’ll lose our home if we have no income. We’re vulnerable now, without your father. Somebody must take full time work and you are the eldest.’

‘What if I work in a factory here or in Surabaya?’

‘No, Karti, Hong Kong is better, safer for you.’

Karti tugged at her mother’s dress and her mother washed the rice a fourth time in her confusion. ‘You’ll be safe in Hong Kong,’ she repeated. ‘You’ll see new things. You’ll learn new things.’

‘I don’t want to see new things. How can you push me away? Ridhaan and Agus will hate you for separating us.’

‘Then tell them it’s your decision to leave, not mine. Believe me, you’ll find yourself glad to get away from this town.’

‘No.’

They looked at each other in abject misery.

‘One day I will kill Santoso,’ said Karti. ‘You know that, don’t you? I am unstable if you want to think that. It doesn’t make any difference if you send me to Hong Kong first.’

‘Maybe Santoso will be arrested. Won’t Brata make an investigation? You said he was honest.’

‘Mother, there’s going to be no investigation. Already I know this town better than you.’

That night in bed Karti made a vow to herself. Yes, she would not go after Santoso now. It would endanger all their safety. So be it, she would allow herself

to be sent to Hong Kong. But if Santoso were not investigated, if the testimony of the farmers who had seen him was not recorded and addressed, she would come back, no matter how many years it took, and she would be the agent of her father's revenge.

At last the police mortuary released the body and the funeral went ahead. Karti helped her brothers to dress, finding what she could among their clothes. Ridhaan stood before her and she buttoned a jacket on him. She saw in his eyes what she felt herself. They were unhappy survivors, fatherless creatures to be stared at, no longer the children they were.

The cemetery was a new one outside town. There were frangipani trees here too, and birdsong among the branches. Many turned up for the interment, evidently realising the loss both they and the town had suffered with the death of Rahardjo. Some stood with the main entourage, others kept a respectful distance. Masduki brought his two wives. The Sukimuns were back from Semarang for a few days. Her mother stood arm in arm with Aunt Kadek. Ridhaan carried himself like an adult and Agus whimpered pitifully. A group of UMMSA students arrived just as the service began and stopped at a distance within earshot.

Muhsonuddin read out a eulogy, standing close to her mother, tall over the grave. Karti did not listen. Whatever he had to say wasn't of interest to her, and she did not agree that he should speak. Somehow she hated him now. The varnished cherry wood coffin, set by waiting, was lowered in. Something must have been limiting her comprehension because she just stood and watched it all dumbly.

There was lunch in the visitor's room by the gates. Idris found her there.

She was the first to speak. 'Take me somewhere. I'll go anywhere with you, do you understand?—anywhere.'

'I understand and I know a place.'

'Good. Then let's go.'

It was countryside and down on the lane they caught a lift from a man on a Suzuki. They had to squash up on the seat. Karti was in the middle and the loose end of her headscarf flapped into Idris's face. To avoid it he leant forward over her shoulder while he put his hands across her ribs. The wind rushed by and there were warm parcels of air in the sunshine and cooler pockets under the trees. The motorbike was throaty and trailed smoke. The driver smelled of tobacco and hair oil. Karti's nausea left her and she accepted the lightening of grief without guilt.

After a way Idris tapped the driver to stop. The two of them jumped off. This was the outskirts of Nadiyudan. A string of dwellings bordered the rice fields. They walked down a lane at right angles to the main road. A friend of his was away in Jakarta, he said, and had taken his mother with him. They came to a row of concrete dwellings, each with a front door onto the lane. Large trees crowded overhead. Idris produced a key and they went in through a wooden door, to the main room of a cottage, cramped and dingy, with doorways leading to two small bedrooms and to a wash room.

She took off her headscarf. Men were supposed to get gratification from seeing a woman's hair, although of course half the town's girls showed theirs already. She paused to let him react, hoping he wouldn't grab it. He simply looked appreciatively at her, for a moment all manners. In silence they divested

themselves of every last stitch of clothing, making two piles on the rug in front of a cloth-covered sofa. She didn't put on a show of embarrassment; nakedness seemed nothing to her any more. They had both rushed it and had to smile at the tangle they'd made, she with her jeans, he with his shirt.

Idris began to kiss her feverishly. They had loved each other all these years and she yielded to everything. They moved to a bedroom and lay down. He had to fiddle with a condom packet and she laughed at his frantic clumsiness which touched and flattered her. Then she closed her eyes and zoned in for a second on the sound of a bird scratching about on the roof. The sex that followed stung, finished almost before it started. She felt detachment of her mind but gladness that it was done. It was hopeless to mince around a virgin any longer. That adulthood she'd been avoiding had already come.

She went to the bathroom in search of a dressing gown and found one behind the door.

'Ok?' said Idris.

'Yes, ok. How long can we stay here?'

'All day.'

Idris lay with a sheet up to his waist, his man's body brown-skinned and wide at the chest.

'You've got moles on your body,' she observed.

'Yes. Do you want to count them?'

She sat on the bed, awkwardly, not practised in post-coital intercourse. There was little joy in Idris's face. It was all spoilt between them. This act should have been reserved for the first night of their marriage, at the commencement of a shared, respectable life.

'My mother says I'm not modest,' said Karti. 'She's right, Idris. You know that tomorrow I have to go to a boot camp for domestics in Surabaya? I have to go and work in Hong Kong, to be the financial foundation of the family.'

'I know, Karti. Did you really storm in on Santoso, and Brata? I heard something like that.'

‘Can we not talk about it. It would do no good to talk about it.’

‘I want to marry you, Karti.’

‘I wanted to marry you too. Now we can’t think of it. I’ve lost a father and a future husband in almost the same blow.’

‘I’ll wait. We’ll get married when you come back.’

‘How can you wait? Ridhaan has five years more schooling before he can work. I won’t be back.’

‘I don’t know how. I want to wait.’

‘Don’t, Idris. You’ll find someone else.’

‘There’s no one else, only you. You won’t find Indonesian men in Hong Kong.’

‘Then I’ll be a lesbi.’

‘I hear that happens.’

‘Keep an eye on my mother will you? She has her sister now, but she’s unstable.’

‘Yes, I will, and father will too.’

Karti did not care for that remark and stiffened. Idris looked at her. Usually they joked about Idris’s father but he wasn’t funny any more. It was simple, if the alliance had been such a threat, Muhsonuddin should have been killed. He was left without a scratch while her father was dead.

‘He feels guilty. They got into politics together.’

‘I don’t think I can bear to talk about it.’

She got off the bed to re-tie her dressing gown cord, doing so by the window. She said over her shoulder, ‘You’ll be fine, Idris. But God knows what’s coming my way now.’

‘Don’t underestimate yourself, Karti. What you did was wonderful. You’re strong enough for anything. Hong Kong will make you, I feel it.’

‘I don’t want Hong Kong to make me. My mother and Aunt Kadek just want to get rid of me.’ Karti couldn’t resist overstating her complaint, getting a sour pleasure out of it.

‘Yes, Karti, it’s hard on you. And my life in Nadiyudan will be meaningless now.’

They fell quiet and Karti looked out of the small dirty window facing the fields, thinking she would be gloomy before deciding no, this final afternoon was something to enjoy and wouldn’t come round again. Then she stood and thought what they had just done, having sex fully naked together, and she couldn’t help smiling. How unlike anything else it was. Idris had handled himself well, impressively virile and no doubt her mother was correct, men normally got some practice before marriage. Idris was looking at her for the next prompt and seeing her smile he pulled her onto the bed where she let herself be rolled around and tickled. The horseplay led on. Idris pulled out another condom and Karti turned the box over in her hands curiously. Later they scavenged the cottage for food, eating ravenously in naked intimacy and tasted a fleeting sensation of the newly printed happiness of the honeymooning couple.

At dusk they left the cottage. The sense of her condemned situation returned to Karti. Was she weak and cowardly in doing nothing more about Santoso and allowing herself to be packaged away to Hong Kong, or was her compliance the best thing for her fragile mother? All she knew was she had lost her father and part of her heart was now hollow and frigid. They caught a minivan, drove into town and said goodbye on the pavement outside Halal Fried Chicken. It seemed they were not to be husband and wife after all. Probably Idris would get married to someone else after just a brief period of loneliness.

HONG KONG

As the Air Garuda flight bounced through a thunderstorm above the Pearl River Delta, the first-time flyers in various parts of the plane shrieked and Karti gripped her arm rest, brushing the hand of an American she had watched sinking four vodka and tonics during the flight. It was a moment she would remember well, along with every part of her first day in Hong Kong. In that last part of the flight the turbulence had suddenly ended, the veil of clouds opened and there they were: the waters of Hong Kong – blue and ribbed, spotted with big uninhabited islands ringed by sand and tiny black freighters at anchor. Then as the plane wheeled around for landing she saw green hillsides and a mass of apartment buildings thrusting up into the sky. For a moment the famous Hong Kong waterfront came into view between sea and hill, pretty and fantastical in a way no other city in the world quite matched. Taken aback Karti had relaxed. It would be all right. Everything had been done properly. Aunt Kadek had said Mrs Parsons – that strange name on her two-year contractual paperwork – would be there to meet her, the most reliable of elderly English ladies.

In the airport terminal the nerves of the queue of fledgling domestic helpers at Immigration became her own. Girls were being directed to cubicles where Hong Kong Chinese officers were waiting. Until called, Karti stood with her paperwork tight in her hands, the standard-form employment contract whose title read, *EMPLOYMENT CONTRACT (For a Domestic Helper recruited from abroad).* On her turn she sat in front of a young, clean-faced Chinese man. First he arranged all

her papers on his desk as if for an elaborate game of patience while the simple sight of his white laundered shirt gave her pleasure, the cleanest thing she had seen for two months, after that dismal, sordid, training centre in Surabaya. At length he stamped her passport, returned her papers and sent her on her way with a friendly smile.

She picked up her checked luggage, went out to the Arrivals Hall and found Mrs Parsons without difficulty. Photographs had been exchanged in advance. Mrs Parsons stood straight, her hair was tidy and she wore pearls. She was a lady of seventy-five. She had deep-set eyes which were almost painfully hollow but they were bright and intelligent. She was also quick to pick Karti out. 'Karti? I'm Meryl Parsons.' She spoke in a clear, friendly voice.

'Very pleased to meet you, Mrs Parsons.' Karti replied in a rehearsed phrase. They shook hands. She felt herself prickle at the difficulty of speaking English. She was not nervous but she was anxious to make a good impression.

'Call me, Meryl. Shall we go? We'll take a taxi.'

The suitcase was a new one with wheels, a present from Aunt Kadek. Once outside, they went down a ramp to the taxi ranks. The air was warm and humid, reeking slightly of aviation fuel and tropical undergrowth, not unlike the smell at recently vacated Surabaya airport.

'Now we'll have to wait in the queue and bake, then freeze in the taxi,' said Meryl.

Karti had not fully understood the remark.

'How is your Aunt Kadek?' said Meryl.

'Good. Kadek say hello.'

'You know she took care of my husband and me for ten years, don't you?'

'Yes.'

'How nice that your English is so good.'

Karti screwed her face up. 'Kadek help me talk when I young, when I stay in Bali.'

'Isn't she wonderful?'

‘Yes.’

‘Good. She must be a blessing to your mother at this awful time.’

Karti bowed her head.

‘We have to rush back because Eddie’s waiting for his meal. I don’t think they like dogs at the airport. He may be a little frantic now.’

‘Dog, I like.’

The driver was a nervous old man in shirtsleeves. He eyed Karti narrowly through the rear-view mirror for a moment then set to fiddling with the radio. She wondered if Meryl would start to chat to him in Cantonese but she did not. The inside of the taxi was freezing. The driver began to drive in spurts of pace, kneading the accelerator pedal. He was not a smoker, which surprised her as so many old men in Java were. They took to a motorway which followed the coast at high speed, the tideway milky and expansive off left. Without slowing the taxi went across a modern bridge with commercial boats in the channel a hundred feet below, then onto a section of raised highway, the container port one side, apartment complexes with air-conditioning boxes outside the windows the other.

‘You must be tired,’ said Meryl. ‘Travel is exhausting.’

‘No.’

‘It will be nice to have someone young in the flat.’

‘I learn everything about cleaning and folding clothes,’ said Karti. She felt like talking, in any language, and didn’t feel in the least tired.

‘How nice. Still, there’s a very good dry-cleaner’s down the road.’

‘I can cook many Chinese food and clean vegetables. I learn in training centre.’

‘Yes, that *will* be useful,’ said Meryl, not hiding a doubtful smile.

‘I will speak Cantonese at the market. Bargain on price of a fish.’

Now Karti was really laying on the enthusiasm. ‘Inside the market I can make many, many good bargain.’

‘I wish I could,’ said Meryl. ‘I’m ashamed to say I don’t speak more than a few words of Cantonese, and I’ve lived here most of my life.’

Karti nodded. And she herself wasn't finished. 'I can convert centimetre to inch, imperial to kilo.'

'Your skills are obviously endless.'

'I can talk English, but only small one.'

'Enthusiasm and humour, what an enchanting combination.'

They exchanged smiles. They were getting along just fine.

The taxi continued to speed along for some time, through cuttings and over raised highways until it reached a sudden queue of jostling vehicles at a toll-way. The driver pulled currency from his top-pocket and paid and drove on into a twilight tunnel. Beyond it was a spaghetti junction and Karti lost what bearings she thought she had. Meryl said they were on Hong Kong island now. There was a steep drive up an aging city road crossed by tramlines and side roads and at the top, where the greenery of the hill predominated, the taxi turned into a driveway of a residential building calling itself Po Shan Heights.

Meryl's apartment was on the eighteenth floor. At the door, Eddie the dog did revolutions, making the impression of being four dogs at once. The living room was laid out with large sofas and rugs. Light came in between long curtains either side of balcony doors. The adjoining kitchen was also open to the balcony. Left alone for a moment, Karti's mind whirled before so many nobs and gleaming surfaces. This capsule seemed capable of landing on the moon, never mind being used to fry an egg. Meryl came back and showed her to the room that was to be her bedroom. Left alone, Karti took her headscarf off. The window faced another apartment building across a tropical grove. The clothes in her suitcase looked unexpectedly colourless and she did not want to unpack yet.

On the balcony, which had plenty of room for a table and chairs and potted plants in the corners, Meryl complimented her on her long hair. The long view showed the foreshortened high rise buildings down below, ferries at a row of piers on the waterfront, Kowloon opposite the water.

'All rather hazy when you get to Kowloon,' said Meryl. 'Perhaps you have a view where you live too?'

‘No. Wall of warehouse and tree with ghost.’

‘You’ll have to tell me all about that. You might enjoy the view here, people do. I’m a little tired of it unless it’s a really clear day.’

Eddie came to join them on the balcony and Karti sat on her heels to meet him properly, cupping his face in both hands. In Islam, dogs were not regarded as clean and one straying near a mosque might find stones flung its way. But what were you to do if your employer had a dog? Anyway, Karti had an immediate sense that Eddie was clean, in the normal sense of the word.

‘He was my late husband’s and now he’s got very old, seven dog years, fifty human, a West Highland Terrier but not pure-bred. It would be a blessing if you could take him out for walks. I’m just too old for it.’

Locked in her grip, Eddie whined. Karti gave him a brusque tickle and pushed him away.

The sun was setting. Meryl showed her the rest of the apartment then prepared something to eat. ‘We’ll have *your* Chinese food next time,’ she said with a twinkle in her eye. Obviously Meryl had some idea what a girl from Java liked to eat as the meal included rice, which came with tasteless chicken pieces in white sauce and peas. Meryl retired to watch television in the living room. ‘Your time is your own now, Karti,’ she said. ‘I can’t miss an episode of *Game of Thrones*. We’ll talk more in the morning. Call your mother if you like. There’s a telephone in the hall outside your bedroom.’

Karti’s phone call home was brief, constrained by distance and the unfamiliarity of the situation, then she turned to her unpacking listlessly. Meryl had retired to her room in the meantime and Karti went lightly through the kitchen, excited by the thought of piloting this moon-ship through use of its buttons and knobs, and out to the balcony where Eddie was in his basket. There was a warm night wind and she stood there a moment before a shining night metropolis that seemed unreal. Then she went in to her bedroom, put two articles of her mother’s clothing she had brought with her inside her pillowcase as was Javanese custom, and got into bed.

The next morning Karti learned to cook English breakfast. To be served breakfast in bed at nine o'clock with the South China Morning Post and her pills would be a tremendous treat, Meryl said. She showed Karti how she liked her eggs, fried in a small throw of olive oil and served hot on buttered toast and went to some length to tell her something she'd once drummed into Aunt Kadek, the imperative for cooked things to come straight to table not to sit and cool. Her pills belonged on the kitchen counter in easy reach and after meals she was supposed to have one from each of six bottles. Karti learnt that Meryl had two friends in Po Shan Heights, Mrs Johns and Mrs Woods, whom she visited at lunch times, taking Eddie with her. Otherwise she was alone in Hong Kong, her children married and living elsewhere: a daughter in England with a family of her own, a son in Australia, also married with a family.

On afternoons Meryl would lie down in her bedroom and ask Karti to massage her. The room was on the hill side of the apartment and the thick, evergreen bank of vegetation was only fifty yards away, climbing skywards towards Victoria Peak. These were peaceful afternoons: the air-conditioning hummed and Eddie lay companionably on the rug. Meryl said she was glad to have new company, somebody to natter to. Karti, who had never strayed from Nadiyudan far less been overseas, was glad of the informative Hong Kong stories Meryl served up while Karti massaged her. Also, these stories took her away from herself and eased her homesickness and bereavement.

'You mustn't think we were rich,' Meryl said, beginning one story. 'My husband was only a government chemist and for years we had been living in a small flat in Pokfulam. But a terrible thing happened here. After months of heavy rain there was a landslide. This was 1972 and I remember how the newspapers were full of it the next day. In the slide an apartment building had tumbled down the hill taking the corner off a neighbouring block before collapsing, killing many people. Well, my husband was a bit of a gambler and we'd been looking for somewhere bigger to live. After the landslide no one wanted to live on Po Shan Road, not for love or money. Apartments were changing hands for peanuts and we

bought one. Then we lived for years in terror. In thunder and lightening your Aunt Kadek and I fled to a safe hotel while my husband just laughed and stayed put. But don't worry, government engineers have had decades to fix the hill. You've seen the cement underneath the trees, shotcreting they call it, and there's special fencing up there supposed to be capable of keeping half a mountain back.'

Aunt Kadek had been with the Parsons for ten years, at the end helping nurse Mr Parsons through cancer. It had been a long, humiliating battle and after he died both she and Meryl were reduced and worn out. For Aunt Kadek, that had been the time to stop, leave Hong Kong, and go and live in Bali quietly on her savings, and Meryl did not blame her for it.

Another time Meryl asked Karti what she knew of Hong Kong. Karti said she knew nothing.

'Let me see what I can tell you,' Meryl said. Karti was pressing the spaces between the vertebrae of her back, quite a handy masseur now. 'I have an old friend who's an amateur historian so I know a thing or two. I don't think many places have a more interesting history than Hong Kong. If you go back a bit these islands had always been part of China. In those early dynasties there really was pearl diving in the Pearl River Delta, alongside salt panning and fishing. The Portuguese were the first Europeans, not the British. They had a fort on Kowloon until the Chinese destroyed it. We came in the nineteenth century, the British that is. We were great sailors and traders. Foreigners were not allowed on the mainland in those days. If you were a foreigner and learnt Chinese they chopped your head off. We wanted our own trading post to administer as we pleased and chose Hong Kong. You know, in those days your part of the world was called the Dutch East Indies. I'm sorry, we Europeans were simply everywhere.

'Then there was the Second World War, when the Japanese occupied Hong Kong. I was five years old. Everybody was interned and began to starve. If you looked at a Japanese officer the wrong way he'd take out his sword and behead you on the spot. Both my parents died in the internment camps and after the war I was brought up by Canossa, the Christian charity. And to me it seems only

yesterday when Prince Charles handed Hong Kong back to the Chinese. Chris Patten was the last Governor and the marines sailed off for good. People have a lot to say about how Hong Kong has changed and keeps on changing. I'm seventy-five so I don't suppose my view counts for much among young people. Still, we have our opinions, Mrs Johns, Mrs Woods and I.'

'Why Chinese cut your head off for learn Chinese?' said Karti, this one thing sticking in her mind.

'Oh well, I don't know. Perhaps I got that bit wrong.'

'If you laugh, cannot massage,' said Karti

'Sorry. But you're right, it does seem odd.'

To walk Eddie properly, fatiguing hikes and rambles seemed called for, particularly since, above Po Shan Road where the apartment was situated, there was an entire hillside of trails and walks to discover. Meryl made no demands but she did say Karti might find tranquillity in the hills, while alluding no further to Karti's circumstances, which of course she understood intimately from all those telephone conversations with Aunt Kadek. Karti could hardly complain as here lay her one substantial service to Meryl, apart from the little bit of cooking and cleaning she did. Eddie quickly learned to get excited whenever he saw Karti anywhere near the hallway door. He marched up with his lead in his mouth, his tail stiffly wagging, and he only really settled at heel when they were far out in the hills.

Po Shan Road was almost free from traffic and came to a sylvan dead-end after the last apartment building. Taxi-drivers drove up here to take a nap or listen to the afternoon race at Tai Po, or just to sweep the passenger carpets. Dog walkers

could take the middle of the road without worrying about cars and the over-arching trees and green hillside gave a suggestion of country life. At the dead-end there were two ways on foot, one an ancient lane going downhill, the other a path into the undergrowth opened up by engineers for their defensive work, where some yards on Karti had found the fencing Meryl had mentioned like something out of *Jurassic Park*. The domestic helpers who walked dogs on Po Shan Road were predominantly Filipinas. They wore flip-flops and tracksuit bottoms with draggle-tailed hems and walked in an open stance, feet pointing left and right. In particular there was a gang of Filipinas who collected at the end of the road at dusk, letting the dogs in their charge mingle and get into fights. As the weeks passed Karti became familiar with this gang. They would sometimes pet Eddie and exchange a word of English with her, but only for a moment, resuming voluble conversation in their own Tagalog language, obviously needing to let off steam after long hours of confinement indoors among English-speaking or Cantonese-speaking employers. Their screams of laughter would follow her long after she had passed them.

When she and Eddie embarked on a long walk, it began with the uphill path that branched off Po Shan Road towards Victoria Peak, and their first stopping place was a terrace among the woodland built long ago for fixed artillery pieces. While she sat down on the iron bench facing the football-pitch sized lawn, Eddie went to sniff around in the derelict living-quarters, roofless and overtaken by vines. Then it was on and up to the summit of the Peak, where various paths ran on a single level. Here they had their first panoramic views of the other side of the island, virgin green hills running down to the sea, container ships sliding past offshore. Tourists came up here too, by bus or funicular tram, and there was a Visitor Centre and mall. There were lovely trees everywhere—flame trees, yellow oleanders, bauhinias—and something was always in bloom. The wild hills however were a signature green, the same as Kowloon and the New Territories across the water as seen from Meryl's balcony, unvarying all year round. After sharing these busy pathways for a bit, Karti and Eddie would slip down the steep north slope by the main path or a track called Lady Clementi's Ride.

At first it was irksome for Karti to be alone in the hills where the solitude only invited her to dwell on her ill-fated life. Eddie was not much of a companion. She could not talk to him and he could not prevent her from being dragged into her own thoughts. Sometimes he was just a nuisance to trip over. In such a mood she put music on headphones, became blind to her surroundings and let herself be carried away by Indonesian rock music, songs which rang the changes of young life in raw emotion. Only when they were caught one afternoon in a rainstorm did this change.

As the first drops of rain fell, they found themselves on a storm drain somewhere in the hills to the north. These storm drains, bone dry most of the year, were all over the hills and provided good footpaths, following the contours, handrails making them safe for people who in fact rarely used them. When a large rain drop fell on her nose Karti stopped and pulled off her headphones. A quick calculation said it was at least thirty minutes to shelter in either direction so there was no point running for it. They were caught fair and square in whatever was coming. As guitars and drums vanished, the drumming rain on the fronds of the banana leaves, guavas and bamboo was unexpectedly transfixing, a natural sound directly from home.

Ahead was a small waterfall that barely wetted the face of a rock wall, and below it was both the storm drain and some additional water catchment ground work. Here was the best place for shelter. Dropping off the path, Karti found space under a little flying arch for herself and Eddie.

The storm arrived. Trees whipped back and forth and spray bounced up and sideways. As the water started to find them, Karti transferred her phone to the waistband of her pants and put both hands over it.

Above them the waterfall gained in volume and power, water filled the chamber and eased down the storm drain. The tonnage of cement here and elsewhere in the hills made Karti take stock for the first time. Thinking of the whole system taming the tropical storm gave her a sudden respect for Hong Hong. In its way it was just as fine as the water dispersion arrangements of the

Nadiyudan hill farmers like her grandparents. But here it was almost something secret and Karti took it to her heart.

After ten minutes the downpour stopped. They had not got too wet and anyway her sandals were comfortable wet or dry. Eddie walked around dubiously as if not sure how much he liked the soaked path.

'That was something wasn't it, Eddie?' Karti said, scrambling up to watch the last of the storm water rushing away. 'That was fun.'

Eddie stopped and looked at her, apparently aware he was being talked at. She sat on her heels and played with his face. 'Yes, I'm talking to you. You're the dog who doesn't understand and I'm the loopy girl talking to you. Mum has Aunt Kadek to talk to and what I've got is you. I'm going to talk to you and you'd better pretend to understand.'

From then on she talked to Eddie a great deal and listened to music less often.

With the benefit of a few more weeks together, Eddie didn't need a lead at all, not even in the proximity of the Visitor Centre. Walking side by side, with not a care for anybody else, they promenaded on the main paths like so many other dog-and-owner couples. For eats she carried a packet of the hard, dry biscuits that kids snacked on in Nadiyudan, which were obtainable in Hong Kong. Eddie was agile enough to catch these satisfying objects in his mouth but when the public was behind them he was all of his fifty dog years, ranging about solemnly in his own world of smells. He had a way of following and leading simultaneously, going off-path a few metres to root in the leaves before returning to her feet as if to ask, 'Still this way, is it?' And she would put her hands on her hips, look at him and say, 'Yes, old man, keep going.' Then she would begin one of her stories, stories that gave Eddie the opportunity to know she had been affianced until circumstances had ripped her and her boyfriend apart, and to know one day—not now, the moment was too soon—she would bring down hell on a policeman named Santoso. There was also the name Muhsonuddin, somehow mistrusted. Eddie must have understood something as he learned to bark at both names. This often prompted her to take Eddie in her arms where he offered her his full dog-

love in a series of yelping face licks that were some consolation.

In town, libraries were a place to stop and kill time when Karti was alone. A couple were equally near, cool comfortable places with internet access. The mood was either snoozy as senior citizens sat in soft chairs letting time drift forward or, at exam time, one of quivering stress as students made a forced invasion, every horizontal surface staked out with textbooks. At first she went online, visiting the webpage of the Nadiyudan Rabbits' basketball team, reading up on the latest games and looked at threads on the discussion forum, one still running on her father. Later she avoided the web, feeling it made her unhappy, and just became a people watcher in the library, wandering from floor to floor.

A bookshelf on the third floor at the Causeway Bay library was devoted to Indonesia, to books written in English by people who didn't have Indonesian names. She took one down, *The Fall of Sukarno*, and began to read it, but English was hard work and when a toddler started yelling in the atrium she went to lean over the balcony and watch it and so she lost her place, later returning the book to the shelves without regret.

Walking around the streets of Mid-levels without purpose she discovered Jamia Mosque. Close to the escalators, it stood on land enclosed by a very old stone wall amidst the peace of mature trees. A half-naked bearded Indian kept the gardens, sometimes springing out on visitors. If left alone, Karti let all her home-sickness unravel here sometimes.

One time, badly needing to eat Indonesian food, she found a dingy mall in Central. Here Indonesian and Filipina permanent residents who had gained proper employment rights through marriage ran shops and eating places. You could have spicy beef rendang, stewed cassava leaf, chili fried chicken and sweetcorn fritters. Consumption of such a meal was as good as an intravenous shot of adrenalin. After eating she got up from her stool, looked around the frowsty mall, imagined the rats running around after dark and proclaimed to herself – In the name of Pangeran Diponegoro, I'm bored!

Telephone calls to and from her mother at home were frequent. She liked to

complain about the unhappiness and boredom she felt – all her mother's doing by exiling her to Hong Kong – and her mother would allow the criticism to pass and start to cry until Karti relented. They talked about the boys. Ridhaan had developed an interest in *silat*, the Indonesian martial art, and brought home hobbyist magazines on small arms weaponry; his twenty press-ups every morning before breakfast was strange behaviour for a ten-year-old. By comparison quiet Agus was less of a worry. The great thing was that Aunt Kadek had been around a lot. Her mother never forgot to thank Karti for the remittances from Hong Kong, which were making so much difference to them all at home.

Then Aunt Kadek returned to her own home in Bali and from that moment on her mother did not do so well. The number of text messages Karti received increased, about the rent in Nadiyudan, about the price of washing-up liquid, about the Hong Kong dollar foreign exchange rate for Indonesian rupiah – about nothing really, and these messages increasingly became jumbled up in their content, as if her mother was unable to solve the simplest housekeeping decisions. Feeling horrible unease, Karti debated whether she should return home, knowing her mother needed her, whether from the weight of widowhood or some nasty vortex of thought brought on by loneliness and fright. Karti wanted to help and dealing with such a matter at long distance was tortuous and hopeless. But she was also obliged to see through her time with Meryl in Hong Kong. As it was, a combined effort with Aunt Kadek, each telephoning long distance in three-way conversations, helped guide her mother through her crisis and Karti was able to remain.

One thing that helped Karti's mother was the return of her own parents from Semarang after their failed bid to petition the Governor. They were not in particularly good shape and, in caring for them, she forgot to worry about herself.

The days started to pass in easy routine. Karti's first day in Hong Kong had seemed a year, now a month passed and seemed a day. One pay cheque led to another, making money-saving a reality. Still, every so often, the quiet stride was disturbed by an incident of some nature of another. This happened one day when Meryl, who had been out for a doctor's appointment, returned home to declare she'd had a furious row with a policeman.

Karti had been sitting crossed-legged in the middle of the living-room pursuing a tiresome text message discussion with her mother about supermarket prices and simultaneously grooming Eddie with his dog comb. She got up and put the kettle on. English ladies need their afternoon tea. That had been Meryl's first lesson.

'Look at me, I'm flustered,' said Meryl finding her in the kitchen. She showed Karti her hands which trembled slightly. 'I'll tell you what happened. I was

crossing Gilman Street and a car very nearly hit me. It had two number plates, one for Hong Kong one for China, and blackened windows. It gave me a terrible fright and it was going the wrong way, you see. A young policeman saw the whole thing.'

Meryl sat down and sipped her tea. 'Isn't that funny? Such a fright, I can tell you. Of course I should have got the number plate, shouldn't I?—one of them.' Meryl laughed. 'They usually manage to on *CSI Miami*.'

Karti saw that Meryl had if anything been revived by the near-accident.

'I reminded the policeman—a courteous young man and he was rather patient with me—that here in Hong Kong the rules of the road still applied. They may do things differently over the border—you read awful things in the newspapers—but that's China's business. You have learnt to make tea beautifully, Karti, many can't. I think I might have to lie down. I'm in a flutter.'

'I think you fine,' said Karti archly.

'Am I? Oh well, perhaps I have survived.'

'Of course I realise people are the devil behind the steering wheel of a car,' Meryl went on. 'My husband could be a terrible prima donna. But I'm right, of course. Policemen must not stand by and let the rich and powerful flout the law. He knew it as well, that young man, I'm glad of that. Oh well, when you're my age you can only watch. It's for this generation of Hong Kong Chinese to keep the law or let it go to ruin.'

Karti listened, poured more tea and when Meryl was finished cleared the tea things. She understood well enough what Meryl was saying but in Indonesia subjects like the law were left well alone. Meryl noticed her relative silence. 'Tell me what you think, Karti. I'm interested to hear your opinion.'

'My opinion? No one ask my opinion before.'

'No? Well, I'm asking it now.'

'I know one policeman. His name Santoso. He the one who killed my father.'

'I heard that name from your aunt. Are there many policemen like him in Indonesia?'

‘I don’t know how many.’

‘I can’t understand that at all from a policeman.’

‘Policeman have gun, do what want. It not what we like, but we accept too much.’

‘I see.’

‘I agree you Meryl. You are brave to speak policeman like that. Everybody know that right.’

‘I don’t understand a thing about Indonesia,’ said Meryl, ‘and it’s too late for me to learn. I hardly understand Hong Kong anymore. But there’s no reason why you can’t learn, Karti. You’re young. I wish you’d read about Hong Kong and read about Indonesia. Spend as much time as you like in the libraries. Read books and newspapers. I would be so pleased if you did.’

Karti let her eyelids fall. ‘I hate book,’ she said. ‘Book kill me. I don’t like think.’

At that, they both smiled.

‘But with everything that’s happened to you, you might try,’ said Meryl. ‘Self-education would serve you well. Like it or not, Karti, your eyes are already open.’

Eddie, who had been with the television next door, chose that moment to come in, probably hoping for a pre-dinner dog biscuit. Meryl gave him one gladly from the jar. ‘We shall see what Karti makes of herself, won’t we, Eddie?’

Eddie looked up from among the crumbs. Karti said nothing, unable to disagree with what Meryl had said.

She responded to Meryl’s advocacy by having another crack at *The Fall of Sukarno* in the library and by googling some of the serious topics treated in that book, such as the anti-communist purge of 1965 which had killed her grandfather. There was no doubt that standing away from it, from the distant shore of Hong Kong, Indonesia looked different—bitter and fascinating. Was she, only lately a daffy school-leaver, to see herself as the third generation whose life was to be determined by politics at home? In a way, yes, Karti thought.

Picking up other books, she met the perspective of scholarly, non-political

foreigners towards Indonesia. Some were interested in the religions of Java and in how Islam operated in a secular country and in the extent to which other belief systems co-existed among people who nominally belonged to a single faith. Others were fascinated by the bygone culture of Java's sultanate courts, the music and the dancing, and they published coffee-table books in which Yogyakarta and Bali were extensively photographed.

What was the reality of contemporary Javanese life, she asked herself. Certainly it had little to do with those illustrated books. Local arts and crafts played a diminishing part in life and the Java of thick jungle, sorcery and superstition was a thing of the past too. For ordinary people life was surely about the mundane things, the sweat of making a living and getting by, of giving children a decent start in life. A large part of life was Western, the smart phones and new media that people enjoyed, the malls, the computer games and the movies. The one thing students wanted to do was to travel, to get themselves placed in international companies, to have the opportunity to work abroad.

Not only did Karti receive the monthly pay cheques from Meryl but Meryl gave her the odd bonus too when she was in the mood, or when her stocks and shares had gone up. Karti sent presents home: a jacket and roller-skates each for her brothers, extra money for her mother. And money for her grandparents, who were now sleeping with her brothers in her old space—she was glad of that. She wanted to buy new clothes for herself but decided to wait until she was sure of her choice.

Having missed it the previous year, with Meryl's permission Karti observed Ramadan, fasting for a month, not eating until sundown. Meryl tried it too but missed her breakfast eggs too much. 'We Javanese like fast,' said Karti. 'It make us relax. Our spirit go calm.' On visits to the mosque she started again to wear a shawl over her hair, which had now been cut short. To practice as a good Muslim made her feel good, but having let Islam drop once out of her life, as so many arriving Indonesian domestic helper's had, leaving their headscarves behind at the airport, she found she could not return to it with any conviction. After a while,

feeling something of a fake, she ceased her visits of worship to the Jamia mosque though she still liked to walk around the grounds.

Time swept along. No real trouble had come Karti's way for some time. Then it did, just when Meryl was on her summer holidays in Australia and Karti was house-sitting the apartment.

When an employer is abroad and a domestic helper is left behind, she is at her most free but also at her most bored. A hundred-thousand households in Hong Kong may tell this tale. For Karti, her routine in these time-slowed intermissions was to sleep late and over-feed Eddie. Cross with life, she would tell herself with acidic self-pity that such was her existence, supporting her mother and two younger brothers in Indonesia while living in limbo herself. There was a sour pleasure to be taken in the lassitude she figured she was entitled to, all the fault of a selfish mother. Eddie did not get a long walk, just the short circuit from Po Shan Road to the road below and often she'd parcel him out to Mrs Johns or Mrs Woods

for the day, while she consumed Meryl's DVD box sets in single sittings, lying on the floor with her back against the sofa. If she had Eddie, she'd bounce a ball through the quarter-open french doors for him to chase out to the balcony and she'd lie supine on the carpet listening to music through headphones. Or she'd walk on hands and knees to the balcony, too lazy to stand up, and stare down at gilt-edged Victoria Harbour, diamanté at night, and feel life was passing her by, and if her mother telephoned she'd think hard whether to pick up or not.

Indeed, the two-year contract with Meryl was nearly up, and at back of Karti's mind was the question whether Meryl would wish her to stay another two years. Without admitting it, this was making her unhappy. Of course it would not be so bad to remain here on a second identical contract, and Meryl was fast reaching the age when taking a domestic helper would be more need than favour. Still, the latter had so far applied. Simply because her old domestic helper, Aunt Kadek, had asked her, Meryl had taken Karti in, allowing her to get out of Indonesia and be a *tumpuan keluarga*, a financial foundation, for her family. So if Meryl wanted her to stay two more years Karti would not say no – could not. The ingratitude would be impossible. Yet life was passing her by and it wasn't just her Nadiyudan life either. Even this unasked for life in Hong Kong was passing in a comfortable dream.

On one of these mornings when everything was on her nerves, for something to do Karti decided to take the green-roofed minibus to Central and buy jack-fruit curry, fried salted fish, sambal and rice for lunch. Eddie was already at Mrs Johns. Karti went out and passed through the reception. She had not achieved a great rapport with the staff in the building, blue-collar Chinese not as a rule inclined to notice domestic helpers, a fact compounded by the language barrier, but the best of them were unpresuming people, regarding themselves as workers like herself. Two in lounge suits manned the front desk, with little more to do than nod at everyone who came in and out, and call for taxis when asked to do so. A plaque on their desk promised they would NEVER SAY NO but the reverse side could as honestly have read RARELY SAY YES, especially when they had to communicate in the

English language.

Passing outside, Karti had to walk by a young South Asian washing a white Honda Alphard on the forecourt. She paid him little attention but knew him to be Mustafa, one of the few male migrant workers here. The point of washing the car on the forecourt was probably to put him in the path of every young nanny leaving or entering the residence. There were, conceivably, many nannies in Po Shan Road who had their moments of sharp want for a man and Mustafa was the local fox among the chickens. Karti had long decided she didn't want anything to do with him. Of slight interest, though, was the running battle he was having with the Chinese men in lounge suits inside, who took the view that the forecourt must be left clear and was no place for car washing. She had witnessed their remonstrations with Mustafa more than once and had to admit he was clever, somehow able to side-step their demands, winning the war. All of this was, at best, of only slight interest to Karti but Mustafa must have been taking an interest of his own in her because on this day he said to her, 'Hello, lesbi,' while grinning cheerfully.

Caught off guard, Karti didn't stop. She walked down the winding drive to the road and stood at the bus stop, more surprised than angry. In the bus she found herself smiling. Mustafa's charm may have lain no thicker than a day's dust, but he had at least succeeded in saying something funny. When she returned with her lunch, which sat at the bottom of a paper carrier bag, she waved it at Mustafa, still there washing his employer's car, and said in explanation, 'Lesbi food. Lesbi lunch.'

Two days later the consequence of this exchange followed.

Home alone again, deep in boredom, in her habitual place on the living room floor and three hours into the second series of *Downton Abbey,* there was a knock on the door. Putting the DVD on pause, freeze-framing the sour white face of Maggie Smith, Karti's own head full of English country houses and servant girls in white blouses carrying teapots on silver trays, she went to see who was there. It was Mustafa, resting his head against the door jamb, looking at her with sleepy eyes and smiling. Face to face Mustafa was taller than he'd appeared before. She

regretted opening the door so readily. Without invitation he walked in.

‘You like it hot, don’t you?’ he said, referring to the fact Karti did not have the aircon on. ‘Has Mrs Parsons’s apartment become the Republic of Indonesia for a month?’

In an instant she recognised the same arrogance she had encountered in Santoso. Better remain relaxed, she told herself. If this were to get out of hand the consequences would be no good for anybody.

‘I know you’re not soft on me,’ he said, ‘but I want you anyway.’

Mustafa walked confidently to the middle of the living room. ‘I see you outside, Karti. You are not one of the modest ones. You don’t wear a headscarf.’

‘That means nothing.’

‘How about we sit down?’ He sat on the sofa and put a hand out. ‘Sit with me.’

‘I don’t think so, Mustafa.’

‘Come now.’

‘No.’

‘When a woman says no she sometimes means yes.’

‘I mean no.’

‘Little *hareem*, we’re in Hong Kong, so your family would never know.’

‘Don’t call me *hareem*.’

She was prepared to keep her sense of humour just a little longer. ‘Didn’t you call me a lesbi?’ she said.

‘Show me you’re not.’

‘No. Just get up and go.’

‘I’m comfortable here.’

She had an idea. ‘Come to the balcony, Mustafa,’ she said. She went through to the balcony and left him to follow. Then she went to the kitchen and from there to the living room. By now Mustafa was on the balcony like a fool.

‘Goodbye,’ she laughed, exiting through the front door and running down the corridor.

Now she asked the concierge's desk to take up her laundry. The flat was unlocked, she said. Could the girl drop the catch on leaving? The concierge agreed. Whoever was sent up would be bound to find Mustafa in the apartment if he hadn't already left, forcing him into an embarrassing departure.

She decided to be clear of the residence for a bit and on Po Shan Road her phone rang.

'You're clever, Karti. I'm out of the apartment now but we're not finished.'

'How did you get my number?'

'Present of my visit.'

'Don't ring me again. Stop this now, Mustafa.'

'You need the back of a man's hand.'

'Not yours.'

'Next time I will take a different present, your virginity, if you still have it.'

Having hung up she went down to Central to change her phone number, very angry with Mustafa for getting her number, which he'd probably found in Meryl's address book in the hall next to the telephone.

Feeling a mix of emotions but chief among them now caution, Karti avoided going out to the forecourt again. She saw Mustafa from the window. His employers in the residence were the Chans and he took them to their workplaces each morning and their children to school, then returned them all in the evening. Otherwise he lived out in a cheaper part of Hong Kong somewhere. She didn't know if he was an Afghan or a Pakistani but he was clearly Muslim. She would have to deal with his pride again, she suspected. At the library she began to browse books on self-defence.

Involuntarily she began to notice the chauffeurs around town, hitherto invisible to her. They often parked their vehicles in lay-bys and on yellow-lines on entry roads to the town centre, waiting for long hours for their next moment of service. Almost to a man they had clipped moustaches, Bluetooth devices in their ears and sunglasses. The odd one had a hennaed beard and skull cap. They were all from the Asian sub-continent or from the Philippines. So many of the chauffeur's

cars were Alphards and Karti began to notice these Alphards double-parked outside expensive shops too.

A few days later Mustafa attacked her on the rarely used side-path to the residence she had been using to avoid him. He must have followed her. His arms were suddenly over her shoulders from behind and he was pushing her towards a gap in the trees. With a bend at the knees and a twist she managed to get out of his grip as some sharp object raked her chin. Delivering a copy-book kick in the groin, she was pleased to see Mustafa crumple.

'Don't ever touch me again,' she screamed.

Engrossed in pain he turned away and she left him there.

At the library in Kennedy Town she found a quiet corner and called her mother.

'Don't hate men, Karti.'

'I didn't do anything wrong. Why does he think he can insult me like that?'

'Of course men are idiotic. Did you really kick his testicles?'

'Yes.'

'I shouldn't be surprised, not with your temper.'

'You can't call that temper. He tried to rape me.'

'Yes, all right, not temper. Do these Afghan men follow Islam?'

'Yes. I might as well tell you, Idris and I did it. I'm not a virgin anymore.'

'I knew it. He goes out with a girl from Yogyakarta now, Ernawati's her name.'

'Why shouldn't he, it's been two years?'

Karti went to the surgery on Queen's Road where, after a prolonged wait, she was given two stitches in her chin. She felt very wretched, especially at the news about Idris.

Now she was not afraid to show herself in the lobby. The men in lounge suits looked at her with particular interest. The next morning Mustafa came up from the basement car park and met her on the forecourt. He knelt at her feet. 'Please forgive me,' he said.

‘I forgive you. Now get up.’

‘Don’t report me, please. I will lose my job.’

‘I won’t. Leave me alone.’

‘Yes, I will.’

Karti went on down the drive, leaving Mustafa to get up. She felt little in the way of triumph, more that the whole experience had soiled her.

A couple of days passed. Karti began to feel that stories were being whispered in the corridors of the residence. Was it paranoia or were all the Filipina domestic helpers in the know, and what story did they believe? What had popular Mustafa told them to keep face? Being talked about was not a pleasant idea, whatever was said. Karti remained inside, standing on her dignity.

Then Meryl flew back and Karti went to collect her. Meryl was tired by travel but otherwise sun-tanned and spruce. She asked how Karti had got the cut under her chin and in the taxi on the way back Karti told her. Back at the apartment Meryl went to reunite with her friends, Mrs Johns and Mrs Mills and returned quite downcast. Karti could guess why. The uncharitable English ladies had conveyed to Meryl all the stories about Karti, finding fault with her for letting Mustafa into the apartment.

‘Oh Karti, people are spiteful,’ said Meryl and took to bed. Karti called the doctor, who came after surgery hours, a brisk, middle-aged Chinese. He said she just needed a good rest after her travels.

The next morning Karti made breakfast and served it as usual at Meryl’s bedside. Meryl was better. She sat up in bed.

‘People are awful gossips,’ she said.

‘That I know,’ said Karti. They said no more. They had confidence in each other. But things were spoiled somehow.

Later Meryl went to visit her husband’s grave. When she returned she told Karti there was something she wanted to talk to her about and she would take her to dinner in Stanley, a little beach town on the north side of the island.

They each dressed up for the occasion and Meryl ordered a taxi. They sat self-

consciously in the lobby in the company of the men in lounge suits behind the desk, until the taxi arrived. The journey was thirty minutes long and began in silence, but once the taxi had passed through the Aberdeen Tunnel to the north side, following the lovely coastal road with views of the bays and the sea Meryl said, 'Always so French Riviera. I do miss this part of Hong Kong when I'm away,' and they pointed out sights to each other.

At the restaurant they were seated at a terrace table laid with a white table-cloth. It was seven pm and the place was already busy.

'I always forget how noisy restaurants can be,' said Meryl, who started by ordering a bottle of white wine and two glasses. They looked at their menu cards and ordered.

Karti knew they would talk about the two-year contract and, as Meryl talked about her grandchildren in Adelaide and her daughter in England, had a sense her employer was procrastinating. Meryl began explaining how she felt pressure to sell up and distribute money. Then she switched subject and began to talk about her visit to her husband's grave at the Chinese Christian Cemetery on Pokfulam Hill. Time there always allowed her to shrug off her little worries, she said. She got a boost of companionship in that terraced cemetery that ran around the slope of the hill like an amphitheatre. She hoped to join him one day there. Then she stopped talking for a moment.

'What a nice tête-à-tête, Karti,' she said. 'I can't think of a person I'd rather have one with. But you ought to have a nice young man opposite you.'

'Young man like Mustafa you mean?'

They both smiled but Meryl coughed on a small disc of cucumber and Karti had to be handy with a napkin.

'I prefer you,' said Karti. 'Many man not good manner.'

'Yes, Po Shan Heights has turned a bit sour for us, hasn't it, after this Mustafa affair. Well, as a matter of a fact I made a decision while I was in Australia, to close up the apartment—not sell it quite yet—and try living in England. Forgive me if I've not told you. Eddie will come with me or I'll leave him with Mrs Johns.

That's one of a hundred details to decide. But for you something new is going to start. I've seen you sit on the balcony and look down at the city. It's time you mixed in and found some better company than an old lady and her dog.'

'You terminate me?'

'Yes, but in a nice way.'

They both laughed.

'You sure you want live in England?' Karti said doubtfully.

'I'm not sure, but I'm going to try. My daughter's family is waiting for me with open arms. I can always come back. Will you stay working in Hong Kong or go back home do you think?'

'Have to stay. Ridhaan have three more year school.'

'Yes, I see. I'm sure you will do very well. Let's say we're friends now, Karti. I haven't had a new friend for a long time. What do you think?'

'Yes, if you have WhatsApp or Facebook in England.'

'Oh goodness, I don't understand those things.'

They took their time over coffee. Karti was panicking slightly, drinking too quickly, thinking she would have to get herself hired by a new employer. At the same time she was excited. She put her arms around Meryl and said, 'You the most wonderful old lady I ever met. My family, I, we all thank you so much for helping us.'

'My pleasure,' said Meryl. 'It's always been my pleasure. I'll write you a nice reference and when you have a new job we'll keep in touch.'

Three weeks later Meryl had gone to England.

KOWLOON

On the job trail, Karti was going to Kwai Hing to interview with a Chinese family, the Hos. It was a quarter to eleven and the interview was for eleven. The train came in and Karti made her way through the mall to the street. The pavements were wet, smelling of a tropical city after rain. There was little traffic. There was a small park fringed by acacias. Kwai Hing felt a little villagey.

The residential estate of six towers in modest gardens in which the Hos had an apartment was a few blocks away. The towers, each twenty storeys, were clad in the small grouted square tiles used for bathroom walls and it seemed the builders had equated Hong Kong with a large wet-room. Rusting Hitachi air-conditioning boxes hung from windows floor by floor besides rigs for hanging washing.

She was buzzed in and on the twelfth floor found an airless landing smelling of boiled vegetables. The Hos were in apartment D and she knocked, feeling positive. On the door was a pretty red card with gold Chinese wording surely spelling out some homely benediction.

The interview was done in the living room, a place of no great size, especially when filled by five people. Mr Ho, whose first name was Kent, was a Hong Kong Chinese man in his mid-thirties, who met her at the door in a polo shirt, a pair of shorts and a pair of bare feet, every bit the working dad at home on Saturday. He invited her to sit on the sofa and joined her there. His wife, Connie, was of a similar age to her husband. She had short, neat hair and was also Hong Kong Chinese. They were both good looking people, with clear, pale complexions, friendly smiles and athletic limbs. Connie was sitting at the table cutting out coupons from the newspaper. A two-litre bottle of lemon bleach was going at

ParknShop for HKD 11.80. On the floor were two children.

‘This one is Tang Yuen, which means Jump over a Pond,’ said Kent, speaking in English and pointing with a toe. ‘For some reason we call him Bob. It seems to fit.’ Bob was two-and-a-half years old. He was reading a picture book and he looked shyly up at Karti.

‘This one is Kin Fan, Aura of Health. She loves to sleep.’ Kin Fan was motionless in a carrier on the floor next to her brother. She was one year old.

‘We speak English and Cantonese,’ said Kent, ‘but not your language, Bahasa isn’t it?’

‘Yes. English I know quite well,’ said Karti. ‘Even some Cantonese from training centre in Surabaya.’

‘Let’s have some tea,’ said Connie. The kitchen was one step away through an open doorway. ‘Tell Karti who we are, Kent.’

Kent did so while Connie added the occasional remark from the kitchen. Further detail Karti learnt later, after she was installed with them. Both their parentage was Chinese but Connie had been raised in Vancouver where her family had moved after the 1997 handover and her life would have remained a Canadian one were it not for the fact her parents had decided suddenly to return to Hong Kong, answering the siren call home that had always nagged them. Connie, then a graduate, came along while keeping her options open. She hoped a dose of Hong Kong might help her decide what she was going to do with her life and while there met Kent at the Dragon Boat Festival. Within twelve months they were married. As they settled down her parents returned to Vancouver, deciding they liked it better there after all. Kent, on the other hand, was born and raised on mainland China, in Guangzhou at the head of the Pearl River Delta. He spent five years at university in England, graduating then staying for a Masters. Now he worked in finance for an international bank, a job which didn’t yet pay much. His own parents had also moved from Guangzhou to Hong Kong, to Cheung Chau, one of the outlying islands and regularly visited their grandchildren. Connie wanted to return to part-time work as soon she had found a domestic helper.

‘It’s back to work for Connie,’ Kent said. ‘Otherwise we’ll never climb out of Kwai Hing.’

‘You see how tiny this place is?’ said Connie, returning with tea things on a tray. ‘We don’t have a room to give a maid. It would mean either sleeping with the kids or sleeping here in the living room.’

‘That ok,’ said Karti. ‘In Java sleep in same room. I sleep with brother many time.’

Connie poured jasmine tea, clean crisp yellow, into the white porcelain cups she’d bought on the tray.

‘If only I had a rich husband,’ she said. ‘But honestly, I do want to go back to work for a bit.’

‘Just you wait,’ said Kent. ‘Perhaps if my wife was thriftier, instead of pretending.’

It seemed, now she was living in Hong Kong, Connie aspired to be the sort of housewife who knew how to save money on the weekly shop but with her Canadian upbringing the business of thrift was not yet second nature to her. But she was trying, cutting coupons, though most of them expired un-used in the basket above the fridge.

‘I recommended Alibaba at fourteen dollars but did he buy?’ she said, ‘Oh, no, he didn’t, and look at them now.’

‘We’re quite Western,’ Connie added. ‘Your employer is English isn’t she? She gives you a lovely reference. Kent’s parents are more of the traditional sort. If the chicken is dry in a restaurant we complain like Americans but his parents clam up.’

Now they wanted to hear about Karti ‘Tell us something about yourself,’ said Kent. ‘How do you come to be in Hong Kong?’

‘We will go on feel more than anything,’ said Connie, ‘there’s no right and wrong.’

‘My father dead,’ Karti began. ‘My mother and aunt send me here. I come from Central Java. My two brother at school. Ridhaan not leave school for three

year so I have to work Hong Kong three more year.'

Connie and Kent both nodded. Connie said, 'Kent and I both had nannies when we were kids but having our own will be new. We'll probably make lots of mistakes. What we worry about is the safety of our babies. Kin Fan wriggles so much it's easy to drop her. I know, I've nearly done it. They're always trying to eat things they shouldn't, stick their hands where they shouldn't. Do you know?'

'And Bob will simply vanish if you take your eye off him,' said Kent.

'I think know,' said Karti. 'I help my brothers grow up.'

'Of course accidents happen,' said Kent. 'We just want someone who is intelligent and responsible, whom we can trust, and who fits in with us. Anything else is a bonus.'

'We're not asking a stranger to love our children. Just to help take care of them,' said Connie.

'I think I can do good job,' said Karti. 'I like children. I like be busy. Now I too boring. Just walk dog.'

Until now Bob had been reading his picture book quietly, a little plastic face and a head of messy hair. He got to his feet, approached Karti then ran away. Karti saw personality and energy in his Chinese face and thought there could be nothing impersonal about being a nanny. 'Your child beautiful,' she said.

'At the moment he loves vending machines and commanding Kin Fan's push-chair about equally,' said Connie.

The sun, in and out of the clouds, relit the room and Kin Fan, still asleep, twitched. Karti knelt on the floor over the carry-cot and shaded the infant's face with a hand. Yes, this was a good stratagem towards getting picked for the job and she liked Kent and Connie already, but mostly it was an uncalculated impulse. Connie drew the curtain half-closed and joined her. Karti thought, a Chinese baby, Chinese eyes, a face as round as any Javanese baby's, the skin whiter, a little snub nose.

'She just sleeps,' said Connie, 'all the time.'

'We're afraid she will be too passive to stand any chance when it comes to

school,' said Kent.

'We're not,' protested Connie. 'I'm still Canadian, don't you forget that, husband of mine. Don't thrust the worst of Hong Kong in their faces from day one—we've agreed.'

'Yes, but the interview season for young Bob's pre-kindergarten starts soon, there's no escaping that, wife of mine.'

Connie said to Karti, 'Maybe Indonesia is like Canada. Here everything's so competitive. You have to jockey with other parents for the good schools when they are only three, for fear of them getting left behind forever.'

'We don't want junior to have any gaps in his résumé,' said Kent with a smug smile. 'Both better get set for hard, competitive lives.'

Meanwhile Bob was looking at Karti again, curiously and with increasing confidence. Now he began a steeple-chase, bouncing first over Connie, then Kent, then Karti, and making a motoring noise through his mouth while doing so.

So Karti started with the Hos. She grew accustomed to dealing with Bob and Kin Fan's meals, to bathing them, to taking them down to the park: to each numberless task that came up in the care of two young children, at first with Connie's help then solo.

One afternoon, a week after she'd moved in, Connie and Kent were at work and Bob and Kin Fan were playing on the floor in the living room. Karti heard sobbing in the corridor outside, opened the apartment door and went out to look. It was Charity, the Filipina nanny from next door, standing outside the B flat and crying into her hands. Karti couldn't see what to do but bring Charity in. The children were shy of this intruder but continued as they were. Then Karti's phone rang. It was her mother, whose calls Karti had been avoiding for days, and Karti decided she needed to take it.

'Charity, could you watch the kids for a minute?'

'Oh, yes,' said Charity, who immediately sat down on the floor and asked whether Bob would let her in on his game.

Conscious of breaking two rules, Karti went into the bedroom she shared with the children. In the first place, she had brought Charity into the Hos' apartment without the Hos' permission, and now, rather than calling Connie to check if she minded, she was breaking another rule by taking a personal call from her mother when she ought to be minding the children.

'Mum, this is a bad time.'

'You've answered for once, Karti. What's happening? Why haven't you been answering my calls?'

'I've been busy. I told you I wouldn't be able to talk so frequently. I'm not supposed to take calls in the daytime.'

There were two bones of contention now between mother and daughter. In what couldn't have been worse timing, the weekend Karti had moved in with the Hos, Ridhaan had been circumcised in Nadiyudan. For a year Ridhaan had been clamouring for this rite into manhood and he'd wanted his sister there. They had organised a Skype call from the anteroom of the mosque to allow Karti an eye on the rite. Everyone was supposed to chat with her during the *slamatan* that followed but she had missed the whole thing, not by choice but because she'd been rushing to get her papers processed at Employment Tower for the new job. Now everyone at home in Nadiyudan was slightly bruised, recriminations were in the air and Karti was riled too. Above that, she hadn't flow home when she could have done, in the window of a few weeks between finishing with Meryl and starting here. When asked the reason by her mother, she had given various fabrications why it had been impossible to do so. Her mother, unable to unpick fact from fiction where Hong Kong's employment regulations were concerned, had to bite her tongue, though she did not conceal her feeling that something was amiss.

Now, though it was a bad time, Karti decided it was best to clear the air. 'Mum, tell me whatever you have to say. I'm listening.'

Her mother at once spoke of Karti's selfishness and lack of feeling. Everyone at home was unhappy. Karti seemed to have changed for the worse.

Karti countered. 'Aunt Kadek had to go to Hong Kong when you were young.

Now I'm in Hong Kong for you. Why can't you be satisfied with that?'

Karti added, 'It's Nadiyudan, Mum. I didn't come home because I didn't want people looking at me and thinking, there's the girl whose father was shot, and the killer walks free.'

This stunned her mother into a moment's silence before she responded by raising the stakes. Ridhaan had been in trouble, she said. He had struck a boy in the playground.

Distracted listening out for Charity and the children next door, Karti didn't respond at once.

'All right,' her mother sighed. 'Obviously you're changing—I don't understand how.'

'I'll come home if you ask,' said Karti. 'Should I?'

'I don't know, Karti. Perhaps you're right to stay away. And the money is needed.'

After the call, without moving from among the mattresses, Karti rang Connie at the law firm where she now did a four-day week. Karti had a dedicated cell phone to communicate with Connie, bought and paid for by the Hos to ensure contact was always possible. Karti asked if it would be ok if Charity, the domestic helper from next door, upset about something, stayed for a few minutes. Connie said yes and asked no questions, sounding busy at work. Karti returned to the living room.

'Charity, I checked with my employer and you can stay a bit.'

'Just until four, when Mr Lee's granddaughter leaves,' said Charity.

Karti had met Charity already in the lift. Charity was a talkative, nervous women in her late thirties, a strongly-made woman with long black hair. Her English was excellent. Karti was glad to meet this fellow help living across the corridor, someone who knew the nuts and bolts of the estate. Charity looked after a widowed elderly Chinese man who lived with his son and his son's wife, themselves a working couple. They were the Lee family whose children had grown up and left the nest. Mr Lee senior was alone in the apartment in the day and

Charity was his carer. Years of osteoporosis had left him debilitated and immobile. Charity helped him rise and dress, wash and use the toilet.

Karti had then encountered Charity and the old man in the park. Lee was a big-eared man with liver spots all over his silvery, anaemic face. Charity was pushing him in his wheelchair under the acacias. Karti came toward them but Lee stared her out and motioned Charity to keep moving, not willing to allow a second's chatter between Charity and another domestic. 'He just thinks of me as a two-stroke engine,' Charity said, when next they met, outside Welcome supermarket, where Charity was sitting by herself on a bench. 'I just take him where he wants to go, left foot, right foot.' That Lee was a haughty Chinese curmudgeon Karti had seen for herself in the park, but there was more. He showed his nasty side when his granddaughter came to visit on Wednesdays. For the duration of her visit Charity wasn't needed and Lee sent her outside. 'I'm put out like the rubbish,' Charity said. 'You're going to hear me as I can't help getting upset.'

With her mind still occupied with her mother, Karti joined the others in the living room. It was an orderly scene. Charity was cross-legged on the floor where Bob was allowing her to share his game, rolling coloured plastic balls for his sister to yelp at and crawl after and try to eat.

'It's lovely to take care of young children,' Charity said to Karti. 'It's only when they get older that they become disrespectful, if it's that sort of family, if parents don't teach them manners. I know, but that's another story. Your two are too young to know what a domestic helper is. They don't even know we are not Chinese, do they?'

'Charity, if next Wednesday's the same, come straight in here.'

Charity gave her a grateful look. 'Is your off day Sunday?'

'Yes, I think so.'

'What will you do? I go to St Joseph's on Garden Road. The American priest is a very good man.'

'I'm going to get a tattoo.'

‘Really? A tattoo. Well, you Indonesians do your things, we Filipinas do ours.’

‘We have a martial art called *silat*. The tattoo’s going to be a *silat* one.’

After just these few days, Karti found herself so immersed in the Ho family that it felt like weeks. But she did not meet any of the grandparents until a *dim sum* lunch on the Saturday.

At noon they all gathered in the living room to leave. Connie had found a valid five per cent dining coupon among her collection in the bowl above the fridge and waved it triumphantly at Kent. She had every chance of feeling a proper Chinese housewife in front of her mother-in-law. They left the apartment and walked to the MTR station. Kent's parents and Derek, one of his younger brothers, were taking the ferry from Cheung Chau, so would be twenty minutes behind or ahead at table, depending on which ferry they caught.

The restaurant amused Karti. It was in the basement of the Macau ferry-terminal building. Not only were there queues outside but inside it was something of a banqueting hall—only bigger—a sea of Chinese at table. Waitresses barrelled along aisles carrying trays stacked with bamboo steamer baskets. The large circular table tops were miniature cities of teapots, china and the odd beer bottle.

Karti picked out the attendant nannies easily enough, hands full with children, encouraging one to eat, chasing another over the floor. When they had waded through to their table they found the others had got there first. Bob released himself from Kent and threw himself at *Ye Ye* and *Ma Ma*, as he called this grandparents.

The grandparents, Ka Wor and Chen Ling, were a couple in their mid-sixties. They were dressed ordinarily, their hair was neat and their constitutions iron-looking. They had just come back from an extended visit to Guangzhou to care for Chen Ling's sick sister. Hitherto they had been almost daily visitors at Kwai Hing to see their grandchildren.

This latter fact had been brought home to Karti by Connie already, as well as a few other sensitive bits of family background. When Connie and Kent were first married they had every intention of buying an apartment next to Kent's parents in Cheung Chau, but it was thirty minutes by sea from Central and ferry rides made Connie sick, so they had opted for Kwai Hing instead – with the grandparents' blessing. Karti's recent introduction as a domestic helper, on the other hand, had not been discussed and she was not anointed by them. Her presence was a new element, Kent and Connie's decision alone, and the grandparents might be thinking the decision hurried, underhand and be hurt. Kent had given his parents the best excuse he could on the phone, but they really deserved an explanation from Connie, who was the driving force behind the decision. It was not just that Connie wanted to start part-time work, she privately needed a buffer to her in-laws. She found it difficult to dovetail with them in anything like the way she did with her own Vancouver relatives. Hong Kong apartments were so small and Kent's parents were mainlanders with different ways of seeing and doing things. A permanent arrangement of childcare by them terrified Connie. The introduction of Karti gave her manoeuvring room; she could breathe with more ease in her own home. Accordingly, Karti had understood from the first that she and Connie were to be staunch allies. At the same time, Connie was not deficient in her obligations to Kent's parents and she made it known to Karti that she should treat them with

respect and carry out their wishes as if they too were Karti's employers.

Kent's younger brother, Derek, was also at table. He was a student at the University in California, home for a fortnight. He was a tall, gangly young man and when Karti saw him (she was not introduced) she smiled inwardly, thinking he looked comic. He must have shot a look at her too as he remarked to his father in Cantonese that she was dark like a Mexican. Karti picked up this remark well enough, also Ka Wor's impatient reply that no, the girl came from Java. It seemed as if Ka Wor, a dentist until retiring to Hong Kong, earlier a government official of some kind—so Connie had said—was the kind of patriarch who corrected every word made by a son. Something in Derek's woebegone face confirmed this.

The table was already set and a waitress made an appearance with a pot of tea, a pot of hot water and a large bowl. Connie gathered up her father-in-law's crockery, poured boiling water into the communal bowl and proceeded to wash his chopsticks, cup, ceramic spoon and plate, dipping each thing into the hot water. The large bowl was for waste water. Then she re-laid Ka Wor's setting.

'Let her do it,' said Chen Ling, the grandmother, whose character Karti had not had a chance to assess. So the others began passing their settings to Karti to wash as Connie had done. Karti took the job seriously, neither intimidated nor casual. For a moment her actions were the table's focus of attention. She must have been reasonably quick and deft as, once she'd done Chen Ling's, the family began talking among themselves. Of course in Java people ate what they could with their fingers but here in Hong Kong not only was there a forest of crockery but evidently this washing step had to be performed, even though the tableware must have passed through the dishwasher in the kitchen.

That was about the extent of her interaction with the grandparents, who were the most important people at the table. If they liked her that would be good but when she once caught Ka Wor's stare it seemed both blank and calculating and she quickly looked elsewhere.

Filling out the order sheets, the family entered busy negotiations on what they would eat, and she, sitting on the edge of her chair a foot from the table, settled

Kin Fan in her pushchair.

All ordering done, Kent spoke to Derek.

'How's America, younger brother?'

'The dim sum is better in Hong Kong.'

'Any serious girls in your life yet?'

'Didn't Confucius say, a student doesn't have time for both study and love?'

'What about that girl who appears on your Facebook page so much? Winnie something.'

'She's an engineer.'

'Anything going on?'

'She's very intelligent. Her mother's a Chinese Tiger Mother.'

'Anyone else? Don't tell me you're going out with an American.'

'American girls scare me as much as Chinese Tiger Mothers.'

They proceeded to talk about their other brothers, one who was studying in London, the other in Paris, and Kent passed him a money envelope across the table, elder brother to younger.

On the other side of the table, Connie was sitting next to Chen Ling, with Karti at her side. Now Connie and Chen Ling made conversation haltingly in Cantonese. Karti better understood what Connie said, in her bad Cantonese, than Chen Ling in her fluent Cantonese.

'I see Bob has new shoes,' said Chen Ling.

'Yes, *Ah Ma*. Now I am working again I have a new… *addiction* (Connie used an English word). I'm compelled to put my face in every children's shop. I know every one in Hong Kong.'

Chen Ling smiled, seeming to understand.

'Bob misses you,' Connie went on. 'He always asks, where is *Ye Ye*, where is *Ma Ma*? He was so used to seeing you.'

'Is Kin Fan still taking Friso?'

'Yes.'

'That's good. You can trust Hong Kong.'

They nodded in agreement. Friso was the baby milk formula imported from Holland, which mainlanders crossed the border to obtain in favour of anything on sale there.

'How's your sister?'

Chen Ling talked about her sister, the one in Guangzhou who had had a stroke. She was impaired on one side but coping. Another hard nut from China, perhaps. When it was time to pay the bill, Connie flourished her coupon, but in all the commotion of departure Karti was not sure whether Chen Ling had credited her daughter-in-law on her thrift.

Throughout the meal Karti had been growing hungrier and hungrier. She saw the nanny at the next-door table did not eat, not until her family had risen to leave, whereupon she gulped down a few hasty spoonfuls of rice. But Karti did not lack encouragement from Connie to eat. Karti's target became a group of spring rolls that remained unclaimed. She kept an eye on them and when the Hos had completely stopped using their chopsticks, appetites met, her chance arrived. She pincered a spring roll with her chopsticks, hoping it wouldn't fall off, dipped it in the piquant sauce that lay in a shallow dish on the table and bundled the prize into her mouth. She had not tasted anything so madly delicious and quickly dispatched the others in similar fashion.

Ka Wor had not said much during the meal, as if most kinds of family chatter were little to his liking, particularly those involving baby powder. Because of his withering view of his sons, he couldn't take any enjoyment in their conversation. Patriarchs of his age perhaps were entitled to their troughs of silence. She felt he had noticed her uncertainty over whether she was supposed to eat or not, a quandary she had first solved by being over-attentive to Kin Fan. She was aware of his staring at her now and again.

On Karti's first Sunday off, Connie and Kent were at home to look after the children. She helped with the kid's breakfast until Connie said, 'Off you go, Karti, don't worry about us,' and Kent added, 'Don't do anything we wouldn't.'

Karti changed into her new Sunday clothes. About the apartment she wore flip flops, track suit bottoms and a T-shirt. Now it was a sports bra, a man's casual shirt – sleeves rolled up and the two top buttons undone – a pair of baggy ghetto-style shorts and trainers. Outside in the estate gardens the weather was entirely Javanese, hot and steamy. She had one purpose, to get a tattoo. Why, she had been asking herself. Well, she admired them on others. She wanted her skin decorated with some mark of her personality. And it would be something to help keep people like Mustafa away. Weren't tattoos, after all, sublimated warnings of a readiness to get physical?

She had been neglecting Ridhaan and rang him as she walked to the MTR.

'I'm sorry I wasn't there.'

‘It’s ok, Karti. I understand.’

‘How’s your thing?’

‘Still sore.’

‘But you’re the man of the house now.’

‘Well, kinda. Muhsonuddin keeps coming round.’

‘What for?’

‘I don’t know. He makes mum giggle. I go out with granny and grandad. They’re farming some paddies now outside town.’

‘I’m proud of you.’

‘Thanks, sis. You stay in Hong Kong. That’s good for you, I think.’

‘For now, yes, but I’ll be back.’ She could hear herself sounding like *Terminator*.

She took the MTR train to Kowloon Park. Once there it didn’t take long to spot a tattoo shingle, one on the fourth floor of an old Chinese walk-up.

The tattooist’s shop was dim and dusty and not in any way less hot and sweaty than the street. The tattooist, a Chinaman with the build of a bantam-weight gone to seed, without a shirt, his torso a catalogue of tattoos, was working under a bright light. In the chair, which was set flat like a surgeon’s table, a girl lay on her stomach with her back bared and part of her bosom swelling out of its unstrapped bra. Her headscarf and bronze skin suggested she was Indonesian. Karti sat on the bench and watched.

On the girl’s ample back a large, flower-like emblem covered half her spine and shoulders. The Chinaman was working with a buzzing hand instrument. The girl looked at Karti and gave a rueful grin. She had prominent eye-teeth.

They exchanged names and began to chat. She was called Astuti and was from Jepara, a fishing village east of Semarang in Indonesia. She lived with a Chinese family in Kowloon and took care of a five-year-old and a seven-year-old. Her sisters in Jepara were all married. She was the youngest and they had pushed her to Hong Kong to work, but she didn’t really mind.

‘This is some sweat box,’ said Karti. ‘Any music, father?’ she said in

Cantonese to the man.

'No music.' The tattoo artist stared at Karti. He had village teeth.

'He doesn't like my dark skin,' said Karti in Bahasa. 'My father always said I had the colour of a langsat fruit.'

'You're not dark,' said Astuti. 'My family in Jepara are dark. They're coffee beans, practically chocolate beans. I'm latte.'

'Where I come from we're langsat-coloured,' said Karti. 'In Hong Kong we look too black. Chinese girls are superior, in the shopping malls—so white. Still, in sunshine they are washed-out and we are better.'

When the tattooist was finished with Astuti it was Karti's turn and Astuti waited. On her upper arm Karti wanted *kris* daggers under an arch of arabesque lettering. The tattooist did a faithful job from an internet design Karti had brought along. It hurt like hell. They left together, agreeing to have something to eat around Chungking Mansions. Steeped in adrenalin Karti felt elated. In one blow she had a tattoo and a new friend.

At Chungking Mansions they found a café in a back street, ordered fried rice and helped themselves to sweet lemon tea from the fridge. There were Chinese people eating here and one Westerner eating a bowl of noodles while reading a newspaper.

Astuti wanted to know what Nadiyudan was like. Karti said the roads were infested with Suzuki and Honda motorcycles, the buildings were mildewed and damp apart from the administration buildings, but for all that the town was all right, surrounded by green hills and a homely volcano.

The fried rice was good and there was chili sauce on the table, a condiment to which the Javanese palate was a full international signatory. Astuti, a dainty eater for a big girl, leaned away from the booth to protect her sore back. It was past lunchtime and there was no rush for tables. The waitress didn't bother them.

They reminisced on Javanese drinks. Masduki used to concoct Karti a three-layer one in a tall glass. 'Nobody but Java has our drinks,' Karti said, sucking on her sweet lemon tea. Astuti said she had been an addict to vending-machine coffee,

the ice-cold cans that fell out of the machine on the seafront at Jepara. Java produced fine coffee sold all over the world but Indonesians drank nothing but sweet ready-mixed crap. Half the adverts on television were for coffee sachets, ridiculous in their grandiosity.

'How did we get to that? Why do we fall for it?' said Astuti.

'We have a sweet tooth, that's why.'

They walked back up Nathan Road, and Astuti described Jepara. 'Windy,' she said. 'Cement and iron shacks, mangroves, flaking paint, fish scales, old nets. Everything smelling of fish.' But she had spent much of her childhood in Jakarta, brought up by an aunt, wondering if she was illegitimate. Her mother loved her but her father never had and her five sisters always treated her as an inferior.

'That's too crusty,' said Karti.

'No, it's all right.' Astuti laughed it off.

In Kowloon Park clusters of girls, many wearing hijab, were picnicking on the broad avenue. Beyond a thicket of saplings was the side of the Kowloon Mosque, green-faced with crenelated battlements. 'Built by the Indians who came with the British,' said Karti with a certain pride of knowledge. 'I read it in a book.'

They wandered through an English rose garden. Karti took the arm of her new friend. They watched the swimming at the lido where the staff were calling in the last swimmers. Along the eastern side of the park the tall apartment buildings and offices took the last of the sun full-on. Astuti had no telephone calls so Karti didn't ring Nadiyudan either. Instead they kept each other company until it was time to go back to work.

During the week that followed, Karti's heart was easy. She had a new friend. And Sunday could not come soon enough.

They met at Oi Kwan Road, outside the mosque there, because Astuti wanted to attend midday worship. The mosque was an unremarkable building containing several floors of meeting rooms, a canteen and a small library, as well as the worshipping hall.

Karti thought remaining outside a better option. Washed in sunlight, the residential street was in its Sunday morning quiet and she took a seat on the lip of the pavement opposite. Sikh families came by – their temple was near – sauntering groups dressed up for worship on their way to lunch.

Wearing a singlet, Karti's tattoo on her upper arm was visible for the world to see. It was no longer red or sore. Astuti had already complimented her on it. Karti was satisfied. The colour was good, the *kris* daggers well-shaped. All week she'd been going into the bathroom to admire herself. A tattoo on a Javanese Muslim girl! That broke the rules – but already she wanted a second. The tattoo said she

was a transgressive not a mainstreamer. Her life had gone off the usual centre-line. She wasn't Bugs Bunny anymore, she was someone else.

Astuti came out of the mosque and crossed the road, pleasure on her face. She said she had farted during the second prostration which may have invalidated it.

Karti put a hand around her friend's wide shoulders. 'God is in you?'

'Yes, he is.'

'I like it that you are more devout than I am. Really, it's a good thing.' And she meant it.

They decided on lunch at Victoria Park which Astuti had already claimed to be the focal point of Indonesian life on Sundays. When they were in the vicinity she took Karti by the hand and led her down a side-street milling with maids where they were able to buy a take-away Indonesian lunch not one jot different from home except wrapped in oiled paper not banana leaf. Karti looked at Astuti in glee: so many Indonesian girls of their age swarming the streets wearing happy faces on their day off.

At the park entrance numbers were greater, Indonesians in different groups, some chastely clad in hijab, others in short trousers and spiked hair. Karti and Astuti walked a while in the park, down an avenue, across a lawn and on to a basketball hard court where they found a free space on the edge, sat down, unwrapped their oil papers and began to eat the chicken, rice and bitter melon inside with their fingers.

They had ended up among a fractured group of girls taking the shade of an oasis of dwarf date palms, each group installed on its own white plastic sheeting. The girls immediately in front of them had a cool-box and a portable DVD and they were practising a dance. In startling contrast with her brown Indonesian face one was blonde, and this girl, boyish and leggy at once, did a little dancer's twist as she picked something off the ground that Karti happened to watch. Nobody else had seen it and it was just a dancer's movement, something this girl might just as easily have done alone in her employer's kitchen, turning from the stove to the fridge. Karti found herself attracted to this blonde.

A DVD started playing and this ensemble of three began to dance with the blonde in the middle. They had roughly the same idea what they were doing but were clearly in need of practice. It seemed the choreography was all about marking out territory and claiming space. In a tough, asexual way, the dancers hopped a pace back and then a pace forward, in time to the music. They swung their arms and folded one shin behind the other. The blonde's movements were particularly smooth. After a while they stopped, broke up and each wandered off to chat with their own friends.

Next, a group of six Filipinas, throwing a basketball between them, walked by, tall and square-jawed. They were talking their own language and Karti was reminded of the eardrum-bursting merriment she used to hear from the gang on Po Shan Road. A round-faced Indonesian stood up. 'Go bounce your ball off a cliff,' she shouted at them.

'Go wash your armpits,' one of the Filipinas shouted back.

There was much laughter among everyone after this exchange.

Karti and Astuti got up to see more of the park. Having walked around a bit they found a footbridge over a six-lane coastal road. Across the footway and down the stairs the waterfront was before them. There was the hint of a breeze. This was the commercial waterfront of Causeway Bay Typhoon Shelter. Standing at the railing, they viewed the spectacle of Hong Kong's boating life. A small motorised sampan with a square bow went by in the free water between the yachts, a boat taxi carrying three people and a pile of boxes, with an elderly female driver steering grimly at the stern. For Astuti, there was enough of a common molecule in the harbour smell to remind her of Jepara and she said so. Karti liked the place too.

Where they stood, there was a badminton-court sized piece of ground. Behind it was a tiered cement wall barring the traffic, making a shelf to lie or sit on. Here an Indonesian girl was playing the guitar to another girl. She did not play very well or have a good voice. She had a thin neck, pitted cheeks and was dressed in the dark colours of the angst-ridden teenager, although she must have been in her mid-twenties. The gut-string guitar had lost much of its varnish and was patched up

with stickers but with it she was succeeding in a fashion in serenading the other girl, who was, however, paying her no attention, looking at her phone, tapping messages on it with her painted nails. This other girl was wearing a red polo top and jeans and had a good figure. When the song came to an end she didn't bother to applaud, then looked up and said, 'I like a song with more sugar. Learn something else, will you?'

Karti and Astuti had gone to sit on the cement shelf so heard this remark. For some reason Karti was feeling a little overwhelmed—perhaps the food had made her homesick. She and Astuti went to sleep there side by side.

After napping for twenty minutes Karti felt refreshed and without homesickness. The other girls were still there. In the water the foreign racing yachts floated between their buoys and in the free water the blunt sampan went back and forth. Some Indonesians were cooking under the footbridge where they had rigged an awning. Their gas cooker was on two bricks in front of a row of yellowish cooking liquids.

Karti sat up, went to the railings and stood with her back to the water, facing the cement shelf. 'This place needs a couple of trees,' she said, since there was no tree for shade.

Astuti opened an eye and moved onto her side, propping up her head with an elbow. She looked exactly like a big cat. The other two girls looked Karti's way. Karti wanted to be looked at and knew she looked good. 'Which office can we write to?' she said.

'Who minds the sun, we're Indonesian?' said the girl with the guitar. 'It can't burn us.'

They exchanged names. The one with the guitar was Ink and the one with the nail polish, Nurjanah.

'The footbridge casts a shadow later,' said Nurjanah.

'You've got a round-the-corner sort of place here,' said Karti. 'I like it.'

'We're off-park,' said Ink. 'We don't get any hassle from the keepers.'

'It's Victoria Park's secret,' said Nurjanah.

‘What’s Victoria’s Secret? said Ink.

‘Her pussy.’

‘Who is Victoria anyway?’

‘A British queen,’ said Karti.

‘Then she must have more secrets than her pussy,’ said Nurjanah.

They talked for a while and Karti was thinking she wanted to make this place theirs too. Nurjanah took a phone call and drifted away. Astuti said she had to go and collect a shipment in Kowloon—dried fish freighted over by her father—and take it to Mong Kok to sell at a fishery company there. Karti walked Astuti back to the MTR station, feeling that Astuti was concealing a swoop of sadness.

‘No need to come further,’ Astuti said when they reached the round pond.

‘All right. Let’s come back here next week. Did you like that place?

‘Yes, I liked it.’

‘Me too. Let’s make that place our hanging out place.’

‘Ok.’

They grinned and said goodbye.

Karti went to watch the blonde dancing again. The three dancers were still there and she watched from afar. There were more people than before around them. They danced smoothly for several minutes, perceptibly better.

Karti couldn’t hear the music but she had her eyes fixed on the blonde. She sat on a flower bed border wall and became dreamy.

Then she was caught by surprise as the blonde walked right past her. They looked at each other. The blonde looked at her with a tiny casting of eyes as if to put her in focus, a friendly act of registration or recognition. Her skin was glowing from dancing. Karti was caught off guard and blushed.

‘Come and watch us next week, there’s a competition,’ the blonde said two minutes later, passing back towards her friends. ‘I’m Tari,’ she said over her shoulder.

‘All right. Where?’

‘Banyanihan Centre. Six o’clock. You can take me out afterwards.’

She walked away swinging her hips.

The next week they went back to the tattoo parlour. The Chinaman was watching television and smoking a cigarette. He worked on Astuti for an hour then Karti let him have a look at her tattoo. Karti mentioned she might want another tattoo. After that they ate in the same place as before, then travelled to Victoria Park, going straight through it, over the footbridge and down to the waterfront.

Ink was there without her guitar, in corps boots, black trousers and a T-shirt with a pair of braces hanging behind her trousers. She was sitting with her legs up, hiding behind her own knees, seeming unhappy, eyes fixed, eyebrows knit. After glancing uneasily at them, she shifted over and started talking about her cousin, Marliyah.

She had just been to the police station, she told them, with the purpose of complaining about her cousin's employers, a Chinese couple in their fifties who were working Marliyah around the clock, keeping her seven days a week and slapping her about when she made the smallest error. 'The Chinese woman's an old spider,' Ink said, 'and her husband's a withered old ghost.' The desk sergeant

had taken no interest in her case and waved her away telling her to speak to an employment agency. But employment agencies cared only about taking in fees, not about anyone's welfare.

Karti listened carefully. It was apparent Ink possessed an element of hard-headed sanity despite her punkish look. She had to, to hold down a nannying job of her own.

Ink seemed to be better for talking. She straightened her legs. 'Marliyah's been unlucky,' she said. 'My employers are not great but she's got abusers. And you know how it is. I can't tell the family in Surabaya what's going on, they'd be too upset. And Marliyah can't run away because her family would never be able to repay the loans without her salary.'

Nurjanah turned up in gold sandals, from the salon where her hair and nails were done every Sunday morning. As soon as she heard the line of conversation she said her piece. 'Your cousin's situation tears me up, Ink, but Hong Kong's rough. Marliyah has to be strong and ride things out, wait for better times. That's what we all do, isn't it?' Evidently in a good mood she went on, 'We are as crazy as the Chinese anyway. You all know what I'm talking about. Spells, little things we put in our employer's food, our Indonesian superstitions and tricks.' She smiled and looked around for confirmation.

'I do extra for my employer's husband,' said Karti gamely, 'if that counts.'

'Oh yes, that counts.'

The afternoon passed. Nurjanah was from Yogyakarta and she had a little boy at home. She was divorced and could never go back. Karti gave away nothing except that she was from a quiet predominantly Muslim town in Central Java by the name of Nadiyudan.

Nurjanah suggested they all go to a bar in Wanchai and she wanted Astuti to take off her headscarf first.

Ink seized on this. 'What do you want with that thing?' she said crossly to Astuti. 'We lost ours years ago.'

'No one cares if you wear hijab or not,' retorted Astuti. 'It's your choice.'

‘The only happy Muslims are Muslims in American, Germany, England,’ said Ink. ‘Not Pakistan, Iraq, Afghanistan.’

‘Well, I’m happy, I’m Muslim and I’m working in Hong Kong.’

‘You have a tattoo, you can’t be so devout.’

‘Victoria has her secret. That’s my secret.’

‘I love Islam,’ said Nurjanah. ‘If I ever go back to Indonesia I want to be a perfect Muslim once more and wear hijab.’

‘That will never happen,’ said Ink sourly.

Remembering her date with Tari, Karti said goodbye and took Astuti away. They walked to the park entrance.

‘Do you like them?’ Karti asked.

‘Ink’s a scrawny lesbi but at least she worries about her cousin,’ said Astuti. ‘Nurjanah I like. She’s not following God but I don’t think she’s a bad person.’

‘So they’re our new friends?’

‘Yes.’

They parted. Astuti had to go and pick up another of her father’s shipments. Karti was too embarrassed to admit she was going to meet Tari, said nothing and took the tram. She fell asleep on the upper deck and woke when the driver called the terminus at Kennedy Town. One of the libraries she had once visited was here and she remembered being given a flyer for a Filipina beauty contest outside the Banyanihan Centre, now her destination.

She was late and found the competition already over. People connected to the performances were hanging around in the wings and others were leaving. The stage was dressed with banners and plastic tubs of flowers but the show was over, a technician coiling up wiring. Tari and her troupe were near one of the exits.

‘Sorry I’m late. You all look amazing,’ Karti said. The three of them wore matching black trousers, tartan side pockets zipped and lanyarded.

Tari’s friends seemed more thrilled than Tari at having performed. They hadn’t won. They stood and talked for a minute then Karti and Tari were left alone. ‘I feel shamed about not winning,’ Tari said. ‘I’ve won shows back home.’ Karti took her

hand. There wasn't much time before the eight o'clock curfew. They went into the park, sat on a bench, put their bags down.

'I've been thinking of you all week, Karti Rahardjo.'

'Have you?'

'Specifically, lying my head on your shoulder.'

'Go ahead then.'

The press of Tari's head woke in Karti a physical longing for her brothers, who had always cuddled up to her in front of the TV. This ache made Tari's presence feel alien, until Tari turned her face up and asked, 'OK?' which touched Karti with its uncertainty. Perhaps Tari was also missing the rough and tumble of physical contact back home.

'Yes, all right.'

Tari asked what Karti had been doing. Karti talked about the waterfront and about Marliyah.

'Are you all going to do anything?' said Tari.

'I don't know,' said Karti.

'One word of advice,' Tari said. 'Chinese employers don't like their helpers getting involved in other nannies' problems.'

They had time to walk a bit. There was a turning place for the trams. With no sea wall, only a vehicle barrier, the road came within a foot of the dark plopping water. The seaway was wide and open. Further up stood an uncovered bus terminus and commercial buildings and jetties closed off by fencing. They walked all the way to the fencing. There was a hum of machinery from inside a building. At the water's edge a Chinese man was tending a fishing rod and smoking a cigarette. The water surface was black and sparkled with reflections of light. A ferry went by and its wash rode along the wall. The evening was warm and probably it didn't matter to the fisherman if he caught a harbour fish or not. They watched him.

'Ever kissed a girl?' said Tari.

'No.'

‘How about now?’

Karti let Tari take her by the arm, move in and kiss her. Karti was the first to disengage. The kiss felt experimental but doused in sensuality. She felt heavier on her feet afterwards, aware of how far she had travelled from Nadiyudan.

‘We’re both serious kissers,’ said Tari.

‘My life’s being led in new directions.’

‘I was more into it than you.’

‘Don’t be too sure about that.’

In the week Ink formed a WhatsApp group and invited Nurjanah, Karti and Astuti to join. A plan was needed to help Marliyah, who was no longer contactable by phone – her employers must have confiscated it. Using this WhatsApp group they came to a decision that they would knock on the employers' door the next Sunday and try to talk reason. Ink wrote that Marliyah had been a trusting dope as a child and was trusting and pliable now, a young adult in Hong Kong with no defence against ill-use.

Marliyah's predicament dominated Karti's thoughts as she took care of her domestic duties at the Hos. She felt a victim too. In Nadiyudan her father had been stolen from her and her family: a wrong yet to be righted. Though it stirred up uncomfortable feelings, involvement in Marliyah's problems felt right. It wasn't for Karti to spend her days in Hong Kong passively or frivolously. Still, she was uncertain if she was smart enough to be of help or more likely a loose cannon no good for herself or others. One moment she was confidently resolved, the next vacillating and by midweek she was worn out and called her mother.

‘Mum, tell me, am I really wild?

‘Why do you ask that?’

‘I don’t know. Sometimes I think we have a self-destructive gene in our family and I have it. Look at what happened to dad, and to his dad. I sometimes feel I will be the same.’

‘Yes, you’re like your father. But don’t think like that, Karti. You’re also a different sort of person.’

‘But you said I was immodest and out of control.’

‘Did I say that, Karti?’ Her mother’s voice dropped and Karti knew it was at the memory of those miserable days in each other’s company immediately after her father’s death. ‘Don’t always listen to me, Karti. What happened to your father should never have happened and it won’t happen to you. Your dad’s life wasn’t all bad luck either and nor will yours be.’

‘All right, Mum.’

‘What’s going on?’

‘Nothing.’

This helped. In a calm frame of mind, Karti began to think of the issue between Marliyah and her employers as a contractual one. She had no experience of law but Meryl had told her the rule of law functioned quite well in Hong Kong. Karti read her copy of the standard-form domestic helper employment contract over a few times.

As Sundays in Victoria Park were on Java's clock, lenient to unpunctuality, the mustering at the waterfront took some time. Karti was there first. As the others arrived one by one they seemed rueful of the sacrifice ahead of them, the exchange of a lazy day at the waterfront for a scheme of altruistic sister action. When everyone was there she made a stab at energising gusto. 'Right, friends, let's see what's doing with Marliyah.'

'Good, we have a leader,' said Nurjanah. 'It won't be me.'

They took the MTR to Yau Ma Tei and turned away from Nathan road into Hamilton Street, finding the address they were looking to be an old six-storey building divided between commercial lots and residential apartments.

'Is this really a good idea?' said Astuti as they entered the ground-floor corridor that resembled a derelict public hospital.

'I'm strictly a bystander,' commented Nurjanah.

The lift was not worth waiting for and they turned up the staircase. On the first landing a young Chinese man moved aside for them. He was standing reading a

comic book at the foot of a short, red-lit corridor. There were four painted doors; surveillance cameras pointed down from each lintel; he was apparently waiting his turn to go inside one of the rooms.

'Well, that's his Sunday treat,' whispered Nurjanah to Ink.

On the third landing they found the door of 3A had a metal-frame cage around it.

'Not very friendly, is it?' said Ink, who'd got this far once before.

Astuti rattled the cage. 'It's not so strong,' she said, showing a more positive attitude.

'Do we really want to do this?' said Nurjanah. 'These are Chinese in their own country.'

'We're just going to try and talk,' said Karti. She reached through the cage to knock. Everyone stood dead to listen for noise, wondering who was at home. Perhaps someone was peering through the spyhole at them. Well, there were four young Indonesian women at the door.

When there was no answer, Karti knocked with more force and called out hello. This time the inner door swung open and a Chinese man in his late fifties showed himself. He was white-skinned, stooping, with a bald crown and he looked at them with quick eyes. He wore shirt-sleeves, old cotton track-suit bottoms and carpet slippers. He said nothing and showed no interest in the visitors once he'd looked at them.

Now was the moment for Karti to test her Cantonese. 'Mr Ling. We friends Marliyah. We come see her.'

'No visitor!' Mr Ling shut the door.

'Marliyah!' Ink shouted her cousin's name. Her voice was amplified by the small landing. Would Marliyah answer inside? They waited but heard nothing.

Karti began to knock again, moderately but insistently, again reaching in past the cage frame.

The inner door swung wide open a second time and Mrs Ling was there this time with her husband behind her.

‘*Ayah*! You want police here?’ she said. Mrs Ling was smaller than her husband, also in her fifties, or even sixties. She wore carpet slippers too, a pair of pink puff-ball ones. Her long hair was neatly pinned and woven with grey strands. She had a strong sharp voice.

‘Today is off day for nanny,’ said Karti. ‘Excuse me to let Marliyah come out.’

‘No, she’s not here. Who are you?’

‘We are Marliyah friend, family. We care her.’

‘You are nannies. How dare you come here? A group of four Indonesians. What a cheek. Do you think your employers would like to hear about this?’

‘Look at contract,’ said Karti. She pushed it through the bars towards Mrs Ling. Mrs Ling folded her hands. Karti withdrew it and began to read, in English: ‘The Helper shall be entitled to all rest days, statutory holidays and paid annual leave as specified in the Employment Ordinance, Chapter 57 –’

‘– Don’t read me that,’ said Mrs Ling tightly. ‘That’s not Marliyah’s contract, that’s your contract.’

‘It the same.’

‘No, it’s not the same. She’s on a Chinese contract with a different schedule.’

‘Holiday the same all nanny, not need be on schedule,’ insisted Karti.

Mrs Ling spoke angrily. ‘Leave now, all of you, or I’ll call the police.’

She looked past Karti and saw Ink. ‘I know you, troublemaker. I told you never to come back.’

‘Fascist,’ hissed Ink. ‘Old spider.’

‘Yes, we go,’ said Karti, trying to be appeasing, ‘but we come back next week. Or we call Labour Department, twenty-four hour hotline. Nobody want police, not you, not me. Just give Marliyah day off next week, it ok.’

‘Don’t touch her,’ Ink shouted. ‘My cousin’s a good girl.’ Ink’s Cantonese was accomplished. Mrs Ling slammed the door.

‘I told you she was an old spider,’ said Ink.

‘Well done,’ Astuti congratulated Karti. ‘You kept your temper and were clever to bring the employment contract.’

‘We’ve seen them and they’ve seen us, that’s something,’ said Karti. ‘Even if we haven’t helped Marliyah yet we’re not finished.’

On the first-floor landing the young man had disappeared. Nurjanah crept up the red-lit corridor and inspected the doors, each with a bikini studio photograph. ‘Mei Mei. Winnie. Happy – interesting names,’ she whispered. She put an ear to one of the doors. ‘Our comic-book friend is having a great time in there.’ She ran back laughing.

‘A dream job for you,’ said Ink bitterly. ‘Why don’t you move in?’

‘It would be. I heard about these places but I never saw one.’

They came back the next Sunday, or Karti, Astuti and Ink did. Nurjanah texted her apologies. She was *In bed with Andre*—her German boyfriend.

They returned to the landing on the third floor. Knocking yielded nothing. No one came to the door and there was no sound inside. 'I don't think anyone's there,' said Astuti. Karti agreed. Possibly the Lings had made a strategic move to vacate the apartment for the day, taking Marliyah with them.

Ink left a note jammed into the door. *Stay strong, Marliyah. We won't forget you*. It wouldn't matter who got to it first, Marliyah or the Lings, it would serve a purpose in either case.

'Now what?' said Astuti.

'Maybe Marliyah's working at Mr Ling's lock-up,' said Ink. 'I've no idea where it is but we could try finding it.' Mr Ling was in the fake French wine business and one of the jobs Marliyah had to do was work in his lock-up. She was there every afternoon and Ink knew Mr Ling locked her in, in spite of there being no ventilation.

Back on the pavement they felt a welcome strike of billowing heat and sunlight after the musty corridors. Karti didn't hold out much hope of finding the lock-up but had no objection to wandering around for a bit with the others. It was still early and the whole day was yet ahead. Astuti and Ink evinced a similar readiness for futile exploration. In a way, what better than a lazy saunter through unfamiliar streets, seeing what they might see and enjoying each other's company?

The buildings around here were predominantly the old sort, facades aging, run over with piping and ventilators, the mix of commercial and residential property conveying the characteristic note of sixties Hong Kong. On rooftops, glimpses of potted plants; TV aerials and shacks; places to keep old refrigerators and bicycles; to perform *tai chi* or let children play safe from the traffic below.

'I like this area. Nurjanah doesn't know what she's missing,' said Karti, for something to say.

'We don't know what *we're* missing,' said Astuti.

On the pavement four-wheeled trolleys occasionally rattled by, their sharp-corners always threatening the shins of unwary pedestrians. A sexagenarian ran one by and caught Ink, who swore out in pain. The runner looked back as he pushed the trolley on. 'Monkey,' he said, irritation on his face, not stopping.

'Old ghost. Fucking old rat.'

'Orang-utan. Scrubber.'

'Hooligan. Chinese wanker.'

The man and his trolley turned the corner

'What an old ghoul,' Ink said muttering angrily, rubbing her shin.

'Right of way,' said Astuti, unsympathetic.

'Right of nothing.'

'Spikey aren't we?' said Astuti, paying Ink back for that past attack on her headscarf.

There was a sitting-out area too small to be called a park. Drowsy local men occupied the benches in the shade of Chinese fan palms and gave the impression of waiting for something, perhaps lunch. It could have been Indonesia.

At the end of a long road they investigated an alley. There was a *Cha Chaan Teng* restaurant on the corner and they stepped past a woman doing the washing up outside. The alley floor was strewn with discarded cabling and trash, wet where water dripped from AC boxes attached to the backs of buildings two or three floors up. Halfway along the alley they found a particularly shiny steel door.

‘This is exactly what I imagine for the lock-up,’ said Ink. She banged on it a few times.

‘Who’s coming back tomorrow?’ said Karti.

No one. They couldn’t get off work. But Karti thought she could.

The next morning Karti took the bus to Yau Ma Tei, under a cloud for displeasing Connie, whose voice on the phone from work had been unmistakeably cold. Not that Karti hadn't done all the chores, or that the grandparents weren't present: they were and could look after Bob and Kin Fan. She knew Connie was displeased for the simple reason that if Karti wasn't indispensable at Kwai Hing on a Monday morning then it begged the question why was she employed at all. The two of them were supposed to be in an alliance, Karti being Connie's buffer against the grandparents. Instead Karti had put her usefulness starkly in question. Unfortunately her mission to find Marliyah was too pressing, so all she could do on the bus journey was let out a few sighs.

The grandparents had been coming three or four mornings a week and Karti had been doing her best to fall in with them. From the beginning it was clear they expected her to subordinate herself while they took charge of child-minding. This subordination was all in a nanny's lot, Karti realised, and of course Connie had asked her to obey the grandparents as employers. So when the grandparents were

there, life for Karti involved killing her own initiative and running around at their beck and call. As for Bob and Fan Kin, they were very attached to their grandparents, which was a pleasure to watch, but sometimes they wanted Karti, impulsive as kids will be, and this was embarrassing when it happened.

Oh well! The bus arrived and Karti walked through Yau Ma Te to Hamilton Street and then into the Lings' building. On the first landing, in that red-lit corridor, all four doors were wide open. An Indonesian girl came out of a door holding a pile of bed linen to her chest. She cast a glance at Karti then went into another room, quick in her movements. If it was Marliyah she looked more a teenager than a twenty-two-year-old. She was small and underweight, with expressive eyes, one of them bruised, and flat hair clipped either side of a smooth forehead.

Karti went down the corridor. At the foot of each door were Chinese House Gods framed in red boxes, joss sticks and grapefruit. On the doors were the studio bikini shots, in the rooms, lingering cheap perfume, queen-sized beds, white walls, shower cubicles in the corner, and beside each bed a large bowl of condoms.

'Marliyah?'

In one room, the girl was stripping a bed and didn't turn around.

'My name's Karti. I'm a friend of your cousin, Ink.'

The girl kept on dealing with the bedding.

'Marliyah, please stop a minute.'

Karti sat down in the chair opposite the bed. Marliyah piled the sheets on the floor, threw on some towels and began to uncase the pillows. Karti decided to pick up the heap of linen. Marliyah couldn't very well ignore her now.

'Are you a friend of Ink's?' she said, stopping.

'Yes. We came to see you yesterday. Marliyah?'

'Yes, I'm Marliyah. I know.' She pulled the note out of her pocket and showed it to Karti. Creases formed on her brown forehead.

'How are you, Marliyah?'

Their conversation was interrupted as they both heard someone come out of a

door upstairs.

‘My employer’s coming,’ Marliyah said in alarm.

Karti gave Marliyah the bundle and hid in the next room. Someone arrived and she recognised Mrs Ling’s sharp voice. Some instructions in Cantonese, then ‘*Meng-ng-meng-a*?’ – do you understand? – and Marliyah replying, ‘*Hiyah*’ – yes. Then Mrs Ling went on down the staircase to the ground floor.

‘She’s gone to Hang Seng bank,’ said Marliyah. ‘She looks at the stock market prices. She’ll be back in thirty minutes.’

‘Let me help you,’ said Karti. ‘We’ll do everything at double speed and buy fifteen minutes to ourselves.’

‘Ok.’

There were two more rooms to do. Together they stripping the beds, remade them with sheets from the cupboards, restocked the towels, cleaned the floors, cleaned the showers and gave other surfaces a dusting.

‘Do you have a tattoo?’ said Marliyah as they worked.

‘Yes, here. I only show it on Sundays.’

‘I want a tattoo of a spaceship and another of an alien with a big head and a single eye.’

After dropping two laundry bags at the hole-in-the-wall dry cleaners in the street they went to the McDonalds on Nathan Road and got themselves two chocolate McFlurrys.

‘What other flavour ice-cream do you like?’ said Marliyah. ‘I like green-flavoured and pink-flavoured.’

‘But that’s not flavour, that’s colour.’

‘No, it’s flavour.’

‘All right. Red flavour.’

‘Red is good but blue is tastier.’

Karti wanted to speak of the situation. She wasn’t sure how to do this. Marliyah seemed to have her head in the clouds – perhaps as an act of self-protection. Then Marliyah made it easy by speaking about Mrs Ling herself. ‘She’s

a control-freak,' she said simply, 'and she gets angry so quickly. If there's a crease in the ironing she messes everything I've ironed up and I have to start again. Any dust on surfaces and she slaps me. If she doesn't like what I've cooked she throws it on the floor. She's crazy. She also hits Mr Ling and he pinches me sometimes.'

'What a nightmare,' said Karti.

'I sing to myself when she hits me,' said Marliyah. 'It drives her crazy but the neighbours bang on the walls if she screams too much.'

'You poor thing. If it gets too bad we'll try and take you away.'

As they walked back Marliyah took Karti's hand. 'I don't come from Surabaya you know, I come from the moon. I was born in a crater. Ink comes from the rings of Saturn. Where do you come from?'

'Only from Java.'

'Do you know anyone born on Planet Hollywood?'

'No, why?'

'I want to eat Planet Hollywood chicken wings.'

'What a funny notion. Will you have a chicken wing with me sometime?'

'Yes.'

'That's a date then.'

At the entrance on Hamilton Street they hugged and Marliyah dashed upstairs.

Later in the week, Connie asked Karti to take the children to Cheung Chau to stay with the grandparents. She was to stay one night then come back, Connie and Kent would join for the weekend. With some excitement, Karti and the kids took an almost empty ferry. Inside were rows of high-backed double seats and air-conditioning. Bob and Kin Fan watched the commercial coastline of Hong Kong through the sealed windows, the barges and cargo ships.

At Cheung Chau, they were met with a reek of fish. There were rows of fishing boats and a town promenade. Holding hands with Bob and pushing Kin Fan in the pushchair Karti made her way along little streets devoid of cars. The housing was crowded and undistinguished. Alleys followed the contours of the uneven ground, quiet paths followed rain-etched gullies. The Hos house was in a line of pretty two-room dwellings: brick-fronted and tile-roofed, in which half the furniture was outside either under an awning at the front or a shack-extension at the back. These houses stood along a lane which sloped towards a sandy cove.

The grandparents were all smiles, greeting Karti with new cordiality. Bob and

Fan Kin, who knew the house, began to run about, Kin Fan trying to follow every twist and turn of her brother's while Ka Wor watched, anchored in his deck shoes. Karti liked the feel of the island and saw that *Ye Ye* and *Ma Ma* were much more themselves within their own walls. She had already told herself to present a smiling face here, jump when asked to, and otherwise keep in the background.

At noon they all went to the beach. Chen Ling carried the rug, Karti the food box. Ka Wor picked a tree in the sand to set up camp. At lunch Chen Ling served her husband in an old-fashioned way, seeing he had everything he wanted while not eating herself. After lunch, Chen Ling took Kin Fan to play at an abandoned sandcastle near the water's edge. Happy in her work, Kin Fan set about filling the moat using her plastic teapot and making trips back and forth to the sea, barefooted and with a tottering step. Ka Wor wanted Bob in the water with Karti. She rolled up her trousers, took Bob's hand and they went in. This was the first time she had been in the sea. No one had ever taught her to swim. She felt an unpleasant undercurrent sucking stones between her toes. She feared for her own and for Bob's footing, even though the sea lay like a mill pond under the hot tranquil sky. The breaking waves were miniature things that others took no notice of, throwing balls to each other, floating on lilos, not even frolicking in. It was silly perhaps that Karti was uncomfortable and Bob uncertain. Ka Wor stood in the sand encouraging them to go deeper. He wanted his grandson to grow up bold and strong.

Back at the house a nap was taken, then everyone had to get ready to go out for supper. Ka Wor, the main figure of the evening, came down with gel in his grey hair, a gold watch on his wrist and a Dunhill sweater around his shoulders. They mustered outside and wearing a boyish smile he locked up. The lane lay in deep peace, the stars were sharp and bright overhead and Karti and Cheng Ling smiled at each other.

Ka Wor talked to the uncomprehending Bob as they walked. 'This porch is an illegal structure. You see, all our neighbours have them. That's because the local councillors in Cheung Chau are zombies. They walk like this.' Ka Wor began to

imitate a zombie. Bob laughed and imitated his granddad. They had a lot of fun with it. Chen Ling and Karti watched and laughed ungrudgingly.

In a wider lane leading towards the harbour promenade they came on market stalls and restaurants. ‘Restaurant for foreigners, Bob,’ said Ka Wor, sounding in a fine mood. ‘One hundred and fifty Hong Kong dollars just for noodles.’ Then, at the line of fishing boats against the sea wall, ‘Smell, Bob. Mother Sea.’

Fish restaurants ran all the way down the promenade and for extra seating open-sided tents were pitched on the quay. Ka Wor picked a place and they sat around a flimsy table. The man who took their order knew Ka Wor and they spoke in Mandarin. It seemed their careers in Guangzhou had coincided. Karti had the impression some vulgar remark was made about her by one of them. A complementary dish of prawn crackers was put on the table by a fawning waiter.

Kent and his brothers had talked about their father on the telephone sometimes, and these conversation ran on afterwards between Connie and Kent, conducted in Karti’s hearing. The sons loved to exchange extravagant ideas about their father’s past. Their father had never revealed any of his early life, possibly erasing it from his memory in the way a regime erases unsuitable parts of its history from textbooks. He was distant in some ways, even from them. They knew his late career was as a dentist in Hong Kong, though his credentials to practise were suspect. Earlier, he was some sort of government official in Guangzhou, participating in a big windfall on an investment scheme, something to do with land development. Only Ka Wor had the particulars, and he didn’t share them, leaving his sons to this brotherly speculation and private hypotheses. They never doubted the shady element, if not the downright crooked one, of the land deal. For Karti, the information that Ka Wor had been a government official was enough. She assumed China and Indonesia were alike in their civil services.

At table Ka Wor’s mood blossomed further. He drank beer and tried to teach Bob how to eat shellfish. ‘General Xia ate crab every day of his life,’ he counselled, but it was impossible for a three-year-old to deal with any part of a crab except the soft parts inside the carapace.

Karti wasn't surprised when he turned his attention on her. He spoke in English, which he did badly putting words together like a robot.

'Domestic helper from Java, afraid of water, never learn swim.'

The insinuation in using English was that her Cantonese was worse than his English. She was minded to answer in Cantonese. But it was a nice evening and it was not her job to play games with Ka Wor. That was Chen Ling's affair. 'You want swimming race, Mr Ho?' she replied, also in English. She was ready to bet he didn't swim either.

Ka Wor replied in Cantonese. 'Domestic helpers should inform their employers if they cannot swim, otherwise it's dangerous, don't you see? Would you like lessons? I think it is you who needs to learn to swim, not I.' He said all this with a teasing smile, but for Karti there was no geniality behind it.

On the walk home Ka Wor admitted to Chen Ling he had drunk too much, and accepted a rebuke.

In the night Karti slept downstairs, taking the couch in the main room where the occasional hum of the fridge was company; the others slept in the small bedrooms upstairs. During the night she opened her eyes to find Ka Wor standing over her. It was dark but there was enough light to show him looking at her. Without moving she stared up at him. He held a glass of water in his hand. 'Glass water, too much alcohol for *Ye Ye*,' he said, in English again, grinning. He made his way up the creaking staircase. Unbothered by him, she went back to sleep.

The ride back alone on the eleven o'clock ferry was pleasant, watching the slow container ships, the wave-skimming service to Macau, the barges and dredgers. On the more cluttered Kowloon side were the docks, the suspension bridge from Stonecutter's Island, the green hills close behind, but it was all obscured slightly by the South China industrial haze. Then Karti's phone rang. It was her mother.

'Mum, where are you? what are you doing?' she answered, feeling glad to hear her voice.

'I'm sitting at home making a dress. Ridhaan and Agus are at school. How are you, Karti?'

'Not so bad. I'm meeting new people.'

'The new Chinese family?'

'Yes. They're nice. Just a couple of funny things.'

'Oh?'

'Nothing really . . .'

'Listen, Karti, I want to tell you something. Muhsonuddin has started calling

on me. I'm supposed to call him Augustaf now.'

'Mum, you're not serious? Tell me he's not thinking of marrying you?'

'It would make a lot of sense. You could come home, Karti. Augustaf has room for us all – if his wife, Hashanah, doesn't mind. What do you think?'

'Oh, Mum, I don't know.'

Karti's moment of joy had gone. What did that man want with her mother? There must be some advantage in it for him, she thought. Did he hope to curry favour with those still loyal to her dad's side of the coalition?

'Do you actually like him?' Karti said.

'He's rather nice. I'm knocked flat by his charm sometimes, when he sits next to me and talks. He talks about your father very nicely.'

'I'm sure he does. Isn't there anyone else you can marry?'

'In this town, no.'

It was on her lips to say that Muhsonuddin was not their sort, except could she really say that anymore, to her mother, who now lived as a widow? Her mother was a young-looking forty-eight. Two years had passed. Maybe her mother wanted different things now, in a second husband, to those she'd wanted before in Karti's father. Anyway, no one could blame her mother for wanting new male companionship. And how could her mother resist if Muhsonuddin was handing his heart to her and putting his happiness at her mercy, if that was what was happening? Despite herself, Karti understood a little.

'Karti, would you come home if we married?'

'I don't know. The timing might be wrong.'

'Don't say anything. Your brothers don't know. Ridhaan is a handful at the moment. Augustaf and I are being very careful. We want to maintain family harmony above all.'

'Then don't marry him.'

'Augustaf tells me Idris and Ernawati are having a baby,' her mother said, clearly to cut back. 'They got married.'

'Mum, I don't want to know. If I had wanted Idris I could have had him. Now

I've lost him. Instead you are taking his father. My life really is a joke.'

After the telephone call Karti set her gaze dead ahead. After a period of thought she began noticing pictograms of Chinese graffiti on the back of the seat she was looking at. Determined to add her own she took a pen and wrote, *Javanese women obey dick*. Then she photographed her work and circulated it to her friends, feeling marginally better.

With all the family in Cheung Chau Karti was free and the next day, waking up alone in the apartment, she decided to pay a visit to the offices of the Indonesian Migrant Workers' Union.

The Union's rooms were on the nineteenth floor of an old tower rising above a mall, two blocks south of the Mongkok MTR station. The lift doors opened to a warm, dust-smelling lobby. At reception a Chinese woman was reading a computer screen with such thoroughness, ignoring the bell of the lift, that Karti didn't dare disturb her. There was a cluttered, low-ceilinged warren of rooms connected by open doorways, the lintel of one reading 'Federation of Hong Kong Trade Unions' and the place was unified by a reception area containing a miscellany of ancient office chairs and a large, modern fridge.

A young Chinese left his cubicle when he spotted her. She told him she wanted to report the case of a nanny whose employers were breaching numerous points of employment law. To this the man said he'd try to find the correct officer, but he thought she might have nipped out. Waiting, Karti couldn't help being

aware of activity at the glorious, double-doored glass-fronted fridge, packed with lunch boxes. A woman took away three salad containers, then someone came up in the stairs and spent several minutes deciding where to leave a pastry box, juggling a number of Tupperware containers. A bottle of lemon tea was claimed, a litre of Pepsi put in. Whatever else its business, the union's employees were clearly on top of their drinks and snacks.

A distracted Chinese woman with a squint came out. She said the Union did not deal with walk-ins but that an organisation belonging to the Anglican Church was bound to listen – Helpers for Domestic Helpers, otherwise known as HDH.

Karti was sceptical, unwilling to leave.

'Does your friend need political help or practical help?' asked the woman.

'Practical help.'

'Then go to St John's.'

This Anglican cathedral was back on Hong Kong Island, on the first slope of the hill. Karti made the journey by MTR and then by foot, taking a pedestrian lane of tropical peace from the busy main road up to the limestone cathedral, and she immediately felt a Muslim intruder who oughtn't to be there.

HDH was down in the basement of a precinct building, its welcoming row of plastic seats giving the impression of a doctor's waiting room. 'Call me Roseline,' said the Director, inviting Karti into her office. She was mid-thirties, dressed in jeans and a polo shirt and Karti took an immediate liking to her. She congratulated Karti on the timing of her arrival when the place was so quiet. It was not always so, she said.

Karti explained about Marliyah and having taken some notes Roseline looked up and said a solicitor's letter was called for. This would remind the Lings that their domestic helper could not be put to commercial work but was entitled to a weekly day-off. The 'Chinese contract' Mrs Ling had told Karti existed must be a fiction as all employers were bound by the same standard contract of whose schedule only certain details were variable. The letter would tell the Lings if they didn't change their ways they would get a summons to the Work Tribunal or a visit

from the police – so they'd better comply.

'If the letter doesn't work come back and we'll talk more,' Roseline said.

'You sure it ok?' said Karti. 'Marliyah not Christian. I not also.'

'Don't worry. We're funded by the cathedral but our doors are open to all.'

After the interview Karti regained ground level. She liked Roseline Mills. It was uplifting to know this organisation existed. It gave substance to her feeling that Marliyah's situation could be improved. She felt pleased with her own efforts and hungry now. People from neighbouring offices were having their lunch boxes on the benches around the lawn. A choir was singing in a hall whose windows were open. The music was very odd to Karti and arrested her – strange Christian church music like a horror movie soundtrack. Yet the atmosphere in the cathedral grounds couldn't have been pleasanter, with the same sense of benevolence and sanctuary she had felt at Jamia Mosque. She walked up to the front of the cathedral. Its doors were open and the space inside was not plain like a mosque but highly decorated, the pillars and arches carved, the windows of stained-glass. A porcelain figurine stood on a stone plinth, a young woman in blue and white robes holding a child, surely Mary and the infant Jesus, figures in Islam too though it was idolatrous to make any likeness of God. Karti would have taken a pace or two inside if she had not been afraid of committing some religious mis-step, either to her own religion or this one.

Once back home she rang Ink and gave her a progress report. Ink didn't at once get the idea of the solicitor's letter. Perhaps Karti couldn't explain it properly. Later Karti received a call of her own from the lawyer acting for HDH, who wanted to go over a few points of the draft. He called himself Andrew Weller and spoke with a lively accented voice. 'We're only concerned with getting Marliyah her holidays, is that right?' he said.

'Yes, I think. Better not ask too much. Roseline agree me.'

'Are they paying her what they should?'

'Only half.'

'Let me guess, you want to say nothing about that either?'

‘Yes. Not yet.’

‘OK, I’ll have the letter with Roseline’s team tonight for mailing tomorrow, so the Lings will have it shortly after that if your Hong Kong mail is functioning normally. I’m in Sydney, by the way. Nice to talk to you, Karti. How do you expect the Lings to react?’

‘I don’t know. They stubborn old people. Not educated.’

‘Fingers crossed then. I’m sure we can trust Roseline to get a result.’

Karti had a question of her own. ‘One letter like this, worth how many people?’

‘I don’t follow you.’

‘The Lings only two people. We four friends. Now we send letter. So letter like how many more people on our side?’

‘I get you. Well, my law firm has more than a hundred employees. And you can add all HDH’s firepower.’

‘Good. So we got better chance success.’

‘Yes, I would say you’ve at least doubled it.’

After the conversation Karti began to wonder if the Lings would read the letter when it arrived, and, if they read it, whether they would disregard it. She thought they might very well read the letter and ignore it. Another visit to Hamilton Street was not a bad idea, to keep the pressure up. It would be useful to learn where Mr Ling’s lock-up was too. As a site of illegal commercial activity, this must be a place where Mr Ling would feel vulnerable before hostile parties. She was slightly fed up with Yau Ma Tei but who else would go? Ink’s employers and Astuti’s kept them tied up six days out of seven and Nurjanah was strictly a weekend girl, her life otherwise a closed book. With a certain reluctance Karti set off. On arrival at Yau Ma Tei she stood outside the building on Hamilton Street and waited. She hoped at some point Mr Ling would come out with Marliyah.

After an hour she saw Mr Ling come round a corner and walk into the Hamilton Street entrance. He had not seen her. A little while later he came out with Marliyah. She tailed them for two blocks to an alley not dissimilar to the one Ink,

Astuti and herself had explored. As Ling stood unlocking a door in the wall Karti showed her face. Ling was wearing a wine-stained vest hardly fit for street or alley.

'Hello, Mr Ling.'

He smiled, not put out by her sudden appearance. 'Come to help?' he said. 'No army today?'

'Excuse me, I got chores in Kwai Hing already,' she said. 'So here Marliyah work, is it?'

He didn't answer, wrestling with the padlock. Marliyah stood against the wall and did not look up. Karti went and gave her a hug. Marliyah returned a brave smile.

Perhaps Mr Ling was not all that bad, something told Karti. 'We send letter in post, lawyer letter, arrive tomorrow for you. We pick Marliyah up Sunday, her holiday. Yes or no?'

'What letter? It will be my wife who reads a letter, not me.'

'We not talk she do three job for you, domestic helper job, downstairs cleaning job, lock-up job, or you only pay half pay. Just give holiday, everybody happy.'

Ushering Marliyah in first, Ling entered the lock-up.

'Show me inside?' said Karti.

'Workers only,' said Ling.

'I stand two hour in front building wait you.'

'Good for you.' Ling closed the door.

'See you later, Marliyah,' Karti shouted. 'Good bye.'

That night the Hos returned from Cheung Chau, bronzed happy islanders.

The next Sunday, Ink and Astuti were going to Hamilton Street to see what effect the solicitor's letter had had, while Karti was going to meet Nurjanah and her German boyfriend, Andre, at a bar. They'd all meet at Victoria Park later, bringing Marliyah if possible.

The bar was on the fringes of Wanchai, a basement nightclub gained down a coal-chute of stairs. With each step down, the natural light of the street faded for artificial light and gaudy plastic facings, and at the foot of the stairs, the revolving lights, the music, the subterranean privacy, made Karti feel instantly delighted. She looked about for Nurjanah.

A handful of Indonesian nannies had the dance floor to themselves. There were mirrored pillars and some of the girls were dancing watching themselves. Perhaps because it was only eleven in the morning there was sobriety in their movements. A young guy of Indonesian appearance worked in the DJ booth in the corner next to the house-band's stage, where the drum kit and amplifiers sat in darkness.

Karti found Nurjanah deep in the club where there was a row of booth seats retreating into an alcove. At the first booth table a young Indonesian girl had her cheek on the table among beer glasses and bottles. She was asleep. At the next banquette, Nurjanah was sat upright and awake, elegant, drinking a bottle of beer, her eyes on the dancing. Karti slid in beside her. It was slightly too loud to talk.

'Andre's thing's as hard as teak,' said Nurjanah.

Was Nurjanah a little tipsy?

'Let's order you something,' said Nurjanah. 'But nothing complicated. Tommy gets all the orders wrong. With one drink we should be safe.'

Tommy was the barman. Karti was going to have a non-alcoholic cocktail and then changed her mind and ordered a beer. Drinking alcohol was not unknown among Muslims, though of course forbidden. Karti had got used to drinking a little with Mrs Parsons. When she had her drink, Nurjanah said, 'Well, girl, here we are in Hong Kong, dislocated from our homeland, exiles.'

'Yes, but I don't know if I could be happy in Indonesia again.'

'You're right, we do ok here. But Hong Kong doesn't want us.'

She told Karti she was thinking of her son, a twelve-year-old she'd not seen since he was five. It was making her miserable to think about it. She had been trapped in a life in Yogyakarta she could not bear and ran, unable to take him with her. Since then, from Hong Kong, she had fought for a divorce. She was condemned by her family in Yogyakarta as a wayward person and had no further access to her son. 'I'm truly a bad person,' she said. 'Ask anyone in Yogyakarta.' She toasted Karti then sat very still, as before watching the dancing.

She was beautiful, Karti thought. She wanted to perk Nurjanah up. She told her about her visit to the Union offices, where the fridge was God. She talked about the Christian cathedral and the charity Helping Domestic Helpers. Nurjanah said she loved the name. Karti exaggerated her terror outside the cathedral and managed to raise a smile. She felt she had a crush on Nurjanah, who kept herself well and seemed a tower of strength and maturity. The trouble was it was really too loud to talk.

‘Andre’s a Lutheran or something,’ Nurjanah said.

Andre joined them. He had been on the dance floor and Nurjanah had been watching him. He had clean white skin with freckles around his eyes. The bridge of his nose was strong. He wore a T-shirt and was in a slight sweat. His sweat seemed appealing to Karti. He didn’t kiss or touch Nurjanah, who continued to sit very still but her mascaraed eyes played on him.

‘Another wonderful nanny?’ Andre said to Karti, shouting to be heard.

‘Not wonderful. Just wonder a lot what I’m doing,’ said Karti.

‘Yes, Karti is wonderful,’ said Nurjanah. ‘She’s our new gang leader.’

They were speaking in English.

‘A gang? How great.’

‘A real one. And Karti has only just got started.’

Then, in Bahasa, Nurjanah asked Karti if she thought Andre loved her and Karti said, yes, he must do.

‘Ask him if he’s going to take me to America.’

‘Are you going to take Nurjanah to America?’ Karti asked Andre.

‘Yes, but it may be difficult because I’m German. I work for an American bank but I’m German. Tell her that.’

‘He’s German.’

‘German, American, what’s the difference? It’s all Western,’ said Nurjanah.

They kept drinking and half way through her beer Karti began to feel tipsy. Nurjanah spoke to her in Bahasa again. ‘If he wants to marry me and take me to America I won’t say no. I can be an exile there instead of here, but probably he’ll dump me.’

‘Be nice to him. He won’t dump you. You might dump him.’

‘Should I?’

‘No, you shouldn’t.’

A new song came on and they all went to the dance floor. The track brought twenty other girls to their feet. Even the one slumped at the table sat up. The DJ’s face in the corner glowed in his yellow light. There was a glitter ball and Andre

danced facing Nurjanah and Karti. Purple, yellow and green lights flashed on his face.

The music was so loud that the low notes shook the drinks on the tables. The music seemed to have worked up Karti's backbone into her brain and cleared it of every stress point. She felt exuberant, ready to let her limbs go and engage with the beat of this high wattage attack, to give in to it and mash with it. Nurjanah, who did not move with particular energy –she was wearing heels –incorporated an occasional movement of the Javanese ballet into her arms and hands. Andre was light on his toes, short-haired, square-chested, athletic. He paid great attention to Nurjanah, picking up her movements and copying them, even the Javanese ones. The next track was to a lively dance rhythm with touches of Indonesian colour in the instrumentation and Karti felt there was nothing at all in the whole world better than this kaleidoscopic dance floor steeped in rhythm.

Outside, Nurjanah and Andre hailed a taxi. Would Karti come? They were going back to Andre's apartment. Karti didn't want to be in the way and said no. The sun was shining hard. Karti didn't feel well.

She walked a bit and passed a corner bar packed with Westerners drinking beer and watching football on television, to much excitement and braying. Then she heard shouting up the road and staggered over to investigate. A crowd had gathered outside a first-floor club, Filipinas, Indonesians and Western men crowding the pavement. There was laughter and back-talk in Bahasa and Tagalog. A tall Filipina with long shiny hair and a voice that gave the impression it could easily penetrate two blocks of Manila shanty town was having an argument with a shorter Indonesian girl, tousle-haired and dark-eyed. They shared only one language, English.

'Hands off, forest woman,' the Indonesian shouted.

'You cut in, not me,' bellowed the Filipina.

The object of the argument was a young Western guy who was leaning against the wall, intoxicated.

'He's *my* good friend,' said the Indonesian.

‘For how many hours?’

‘You English so good you think you can take all the man?’

‘We’re educated, get over it.’

‘But not educate in manner, just know how make baby, seven, eight, nine, ten, just know how wear big padded bra.’

‘Anything else you’d like to say?’ The Filipina appeared wholly unexercised by the Indonesian.

‘—Filipinas love white people and serving white God.’

Karti said this. She didn’t know why but she said it.

‘You’re equal are you, to the God of the Arabs?’ the Filipina said to Karti.

‘Yes, Islam not racist religion. Christian maybe.’ Karti delivered this verdict on unsteady feet.

The small Indonesian had taken the opportunity to pick up the Western boy from the pavement, putting her arms around him and berating him at the same time. People didn’t know which Indonesian was funnier to watch and the argument evaporated.

‘Who are you?’ said the Filipina.

‘Karti. Who are you?’

‘Cherisha.’

‘Perhaps I’ll see you again.’

‘Perhaps.’

Cherisha and a group of seven Filipina domestic helpers moved off. Judging from their dress they were a basketball team. Karti found an alley, lay on a bench outside a kitchen door and fell asleep, not caring about the early afternoon sun on her face.

When she came too somebody was rocking her body. It was the small feisty Indonesian who had been in the fracas. ‘Wake up, you don’t want to sleep too long like that,’ she said. She volunteered her name, Sringatin, and offered Karti a bottle of water. Parched, Karti took a drink. It was four o’clock. There were messages from both Ink and Astuti on WhatsApp. Come, they both said. Don’t ask

questions, just come, to the waterfront, as soon as you can.

Karti got up, walked to the head of the alley and texted that she was on her way. She didn't feel too bad. She was aware of Sringatin looking at her. She wasn't sure she liked Sringatin. 'I'm going to Victoria Park. You can join if you want.'

Without hesitation Sringatin fell into by her side.

Victoria Park was eight blocks away. Karti was hungry and they ate something on the parkside road where nannies could make a few Sunday dollars selling prepared lunch boxes and three-colour drinks. Karti took a box of chicken wings to go. Coming into the park through the playing courts they found themselves looking at a basketball game in progress. Cherisha and her Filipina team were playing.

'That's the girl again,' said Sringatin. 'Filipinas get everywhere, like cockroaches.'

Inside the park the grass was higher than before and dragonflies were flying around at thigh-height. A stage had been built and some sort of beauty pageant was going on, sponsored by an Arabian airline. Front of stage a lady compere addressed a small audience roped-off at ten paces. True to universal human law the broadcasting system was turned up to max, stupefying those close by. In the wings stood marketing tents for telecommunications and healthcare companies while unconnected volunteers wearing the T-shirts of ICA – the International Christian Assembly – walked around handing out leaflets.

Karti wanted to find Tari first. She and her two dance partners were close to the main boulevard this time, their stuff occupying a bench in an open circle among trees at the conjunction of four paths. The DVD was playing and they were dancing, Tari in the middle, and Wahyuni, who at the competition had been green-haired, now red-haired. Karti and Sringatin sat down to watch. Nearby, at the bin area of the pot-noodle cafeteria, a group of girls dressed all in yellow were banging on drums to a different rhythm. Seeing Karti, Tari stopped the music and came to say hello.

'I'll take you to Star Bar and watch you dance there,' said Karti.

‘You do that, my girl,’ said Tari, who had also been waiting for Karti for some time.

‘We’re going to meet Ink and Astuti. Want to come?’ said Karti.

‘Why not?’

Tari put an arm around Karti’s shoulder. ‘I want to meet this gang of yours.’

Tari and her friends gathered up their things. They were all coming.

Karti and Tari walked side by side.

‘Who’s that then?’ Tari said, looking at Sringatin.

‘Who are you, again?’ said Karti to Sringatin.

‘I get it. If you can’t tease me you can’t tolerate me,’ said Sringatin. Then she looked at Tari. ‘I’m Sringatin. We’re all in the same war against the Filipinas.’

‘There’s a war is there?’

‘You bet.’

They took a path lined with queen palms and bauhinias. At the old gun-emplacement on the knoll were a group of veiled women sitting in a half-circle, a man in a kopiah hat singing before them, they singing the responses effortlessly and melodiously. On the lower tier a young girl was being beautified by her friend, to be something out of the epoch of the Javanese Royal Houses, like a fabulous bird of paradise. Perhaps this was a last throw for the fancy-dress circus in the field, whose Tannoy was still fully audible.

Outside the park border was the busy carriageway and the familiar footbridge served by lifts. All five went in, the doors closed and the recorded announcement in Cantonese played with its ascent.

‘Ladies and gentleman, you will be rising to an altitude of eight metres,’ said Wahyuni, Tari’s aunt-like friend.

‘Welcome to Air Garuda,’ said Mahmudan, her second aunt-like friend.

‘It’s too fast,’ whispered Tari, cheek to cheek with Karti.

‘It’s only going up one level, let it enjoy itself,’ said Karti.

‘Is this a lift or a toilet because it stinks,’ said Sringatin.

As the lift doors opened, waiting to greet them was Marliyah. Ink was there

too with her hands on her cousin's shoulders. In a group they poured over the footbridge and down the staircase to Astuti waiting below.

'You said you liked chicken wings,' Karti said, offering the open box to Marliyah. Marliyah took one and started to eat.

'Get yourself nice and fat now,' said Mahmudan.

'You're too skinny,' said Wahyuni.

Mahmudan and red-haired Wahyuni were like Tari's two aunts.

Between mouthfuls Marliyah explained. 'A letter came from a spaceship and Mr and Mrs Ling talked about it and they argued. They argued so long. Mrs Ling hit her husband and Mr Ling got a black eye. Then he pushed her and she banged her head on the cupboard. Then they stopped fighting. Today Ink knocked on the door and they let me go.'

'Have another chicken wing,' said Karti.

Were the chicken wings delicious? Everyone wanted to hear Marliyah say they were delicious. They were the best ever, Marliyah said as she began her third. It did everyone's heart good to watch Marliyah eating so readily.

Astuti took Karti in her arms and twirled her around, she was that happy.

After a bit Karti and Tari went to stand at the waterfront railings. There were balloon ends tied to the uprights. Someone must have had a party. They watched the harbour together. Behind them Sringatin and Ink were rapping.

'*Don't exploit an Indonesian,*

You Chinese hoodlum.'

'*Don't abuse our sisters,*

You're not our betters.'

The arc lights along the waterfront went on. Colours gathered in the sky. Marliyah commenced a long phone call to Surabaya. She talked to her mother and then, it seemed, to every sibling and cousin she possessed. Those in Java knew nothing of her troubles, only that for months little Marliyah had not answered her phone. Too busy to speak perhaps, they imagined, in far off, glamorous Hong Kong. And after the phone call they still knew nothing, only a lie as to why

Marliyah had not been able to remit money and some excuse why she had been always incommunicado. Perhaps her mother would examine her words closely later on, but not then in the happiness of that telephone call.

When curfew time came Marliyah asked if Karti would be the one to take her home. On the MTR, Marliyah's face began to crumple. 'I wish we were travelling to the moon, not Yau Ma Tei,' she said. 'Can we go there instead?'

'We'll keep talking to the Lings. We'll take it step by step, we'll get there,' said Karti.

'All right.'

'You're brave, Marliyah. I'm proud of you.'

In Hamilton House Mrs Ling was there to grab Marliyah back.

Karti started to walk through the back streets towards Kwai Hing. She felt how fortunate she was with her own employers. In a quiet alley she stopped, having the impulse to call Aunt Kadek.

'Aunt Kadek, it's Karti.'

'Finally, you call me.'

'You know Hong Kong, so busy.'

'I know.'

'We can talk for ages now. How are you, Aunt Kadek? Every step I take in Hong Kong I think, Aunt Kadek.'

'Oh, Hong Kong doesn't remember me.' Aunt Kadek was laughing.

'How is Bali?' Karti said.

'Do you know I have three bantam chickens now? They give me pleasure.'

Aunt Kadek's place was a shack in a field of shacks, as Karti knew from many girlhood visits. There was a tribe of kids for whom the field was their place of upbringing and youth. The sea was over the brow of the hill, the coastal road cutting into the incline, a rocky coastline meeting the sea in a strip of sand where locals worked the bay for seafood. And Aunt Kadek, retired domestic helper that she was, lived with a cat, a television and some potted plants, and now three bantam chickens.

‘Do the bad kids go to school yet?’ asked Karti.

‘Some do, others are wilder. We’ve a problem with petty thievery.’

‘I love your shack, Aunt Kadek. I remember your English lessons. Dad was so glad you were teaching me. But I’m still lazy in English, even after two years in Hong Kong.’

‘I remember. You hated every word I taught you but your mind was a sponge.’

‘Yes, I hated being separated from my parents. But I loved you, Aunt Kadek.’

‘Yes, you did.’

‘Can I come and live with you again? We would understand each other now like no one in Nadiyudan.’

‘Nothing would make me happier, but that’s probably not what’s best for you.’

Then Aunt Kadek talked about Karti’s mother’s impending wedding to Muhsonuddin. The Mayor and his wife would attend the ceremony.

‘But why?’ wailed Karti.

‘I don’t know. Muhsonuddin persuaded your mother it’s right to invite the Mayor. He has business interests in common with him. You know Halal Fried Chicken has been knocked down. A new mall’s going up. Brata is one of the financiers and Muhsonuddin has some part in it.’

‘But Santoso is not coming to the wedding.’

‘No, not Santoso.’

‘Poor Halal Fried Chicken. But I’m glad there’s going to be a mall.’

‘You don’t have to go to the wedding. Just give an excuse. Anything will do.’

Karti was silent, thinking about this.

‘Why does my mother have to marry Muhsonuddin?’ Karti then said.

‘I don’t like it either,’ said Aunt Kadek. ‘It’s our tough luck. But your mother has to be allowed to be her own woman. She sees something in Muhsonuddin we don’t – I can never get used to calling him Augustaf. He has even got his first wife, Hashanah, to agree to it. Now, tell me where in Hong Kong are you, Karti, so I can picture it?’

‘Yau Ma Tei.’

‘Dirty Yau Ma Tei. What are you doing there?’

‘It’s a long story.’

‘I’m sorry you are in Hong Kong, Karti, just as I was.’ Kadek’s sigh went down the line. ‘But there it is. I suppose Hong Kong has changed seventy times over since my day.’

‘I don’t know. It’s not so bad. You can guess what my life is like, Aunt Kadek. Of course you know. You were in Hong Kong so long.’

‘Yes, I can guess. You’re right, in a way we’re the only ones in the family who might understand each other.’

‘I was angry with you, Aunt Kadek. In my heart I blamed you for mother’s decision to send me to Hong Kong. But I understand now. And I know it happened to you too. You had to give up your life in Java to help your family.’

‘Yes. My remittances saved the farm, though it’s lost now.’

‘We are dislocated. My friend said a word like that today.’

‘Dislocated is true. There are plenty of retired domestic helpers in Bali who are dislocated. You know, I take the bus to town once a week to draw money. I like mixing with cosmopolitan Bali people, even if that only goes so far as walking along the same pavements as they do. Bali works for Javanese, those of us who got used to Hong Kong or some other foreign place.’

Karti walked all the way back to Kwai Hing. She was glad that she had reconciled herself with Aunt Kadek, whose influence on her mother she had resented. Next time they talked, she would be ready to swap stories with Aunt Kadek about the one subject they’d both avoided, Po Shan Heights and their friend in common, Meryl Parsons.

When Kar Wor and Chen Lin were there, the first thing Karti did was serve them tea in the living room as they liked. And once Bob had seen her take the empty cups into the kitchen he took his cue to tug his grandfather's hand – time to go to the park!

Ka Wor's view of Bob was that with his vigour Bob should go to the military academy on the mainland. After all, he said, when Bob was twenty Hong Kong would just be an ordinary Chinese city like any other. Chen Ling liked to think of Bob as a future doctor. Neither grandparent ever said much about Kin Fan's future and Connie had often rounded on Kent in private, telling him his parents had creaky mainland-Chinese minds, valuing their male grandchild far above their female one.

It turned out Ka Wor's next little stunt – and Karti knew there would be one – involved Charity, the unfortunate Filipina domestic helper next-door. Ka Wor had always shown an interest in Charity. He knew Charity had been inside the Ho

apartment, on that occasion when Karti had felt sorry for her. And further he had been party to the family discussions afterwards. Connie and Kent were both non-judgemental. They appreciated that when an invalid elderly parent such as Mr Lee needed a full-time carer, frustration would be bound to spill out from time to time. When the grand-daughter visited the old curmudgeon, that was obviously his opportunity to turn the tables on the Filipina, who otherwise he couldn't do without. It can't have been a great life for the old man, in bad physical condition and with only a Filipina for company six days out of seven. Ka Wor kept his own counsel on such opinions but in the park, Karti had watched him go off to chat with the wheel-chair bound man, while Charity, the two-stroke engine, was waved off to stand out of earshot. Ka Wor had also quizzed Karti about Charity, wanting to know if the incident in the corridor had reoccurred. He seemed specially to want Karti to be forced to deliver embarrassing details. At the same time, he said nothing to her about his vampirish behaviour in Cheung Chau, standing over her in the dark as if about to bite her in the neck. Her stance was to ignore Ka Wor as best she could, and if that was the recipe for making his considerable ego sore, then bad luck to him. She felt he didn't like to be ignored.

That Wednesday, the same day Mr Lee's granddaughter was making her weekly visit next-door, Ka Wor and Chin Ling were there. Karti was playing with the children on the living room floor. When there was a sound in the corridor, Ka Wor was first to hear it. 'Will you have a look?' he said to his wife. 'I think that girl, Charity, may be outside again.'

Chen Ling did as asked.

'The girl is standing there in her underclothes,' she reported.

'Well, we'd better bring her in then. Karti, will you fetch her?'

He looked very pleased with himself. She frowned and looked at him hard. She suspected at once that he and Mr Lee were in this together.

Charity was already at the door. She did not seem to be very upset. There was a stain, fruit juice of some variety, on the front of her panties.

'Those are not very clean are they, Charity?' said Ka Wor in English. 'Karti,

you give Charity a clean pair of knickers. No, give her a bath.'

'And I suppose you help,' Karti said. 'Charity, you better in the corridor.'

The position in which Charity found herself made her giggle and Karti wore half a smile herself. 'Charity, these old men harmless. They are just having bad joke.'

Chen Ling said nothing, as if she knew better than to interfere in her husband's pleasures.

Ka Wor laughed. 'No joke,' he said. 'I try be helpful. But if you want Charity in the corridor with no clothes, ok, nothing to me.'

'Yes, of course, you just want help,' said Karti in sarcasm.

There was a definite twinkle in Ka Wor's eyes. He seemed very satisfied. Karti couldn't suppress a smile.

'Off you go,' Karti said to Charity, who went obediently back into the corridor. 'I hope I'm not there long,' she giggled.

'I know I shouldn't laugh,' said Karti joining her and they stood together until the granddaughter came out and Charity was let back in.

Two things came up. For one, Karti learnt she would soon be needed less than ever by the Hos, who were set for a fortnight's vacation in Vancouver with Connie's parents. Connie wanted to take Karti but the cost of an additional ticket and the trouble of getting the necessary holiday visa for her was too prohibitive. They would fly on Saturday while Karti stayed and kept the apartment. The other thing was her mother's marriage to Muhsonuddin was fixed, to become his second wife. Ridhaan had called her, distressed and angered by what was going on. 'Now we'll have to move to Muhsonuddin's place. I don't want to live there. Probably we'll have to go to the mosque all the time.'

'Keep an easy mind, Ridhaan,' Karti said. 'Promise me you'll try and get along with Muhsonuddin.'

Ridhaan promised, although he didn't see why he had to.

Karti decided to keep an easy mind too. Her mother had no clue what Karti was doing in Hong Kong, and it was not for Karti to interfere in her mother's life in Nadiyudan. It was sad but that was it. That was the advice for Ridhaan. That

was the advice for herself.

When she spoke to her mother she said, ‘Mum, I can’t come. I asked the Hos but they said no, they can’t spare me, even for a weekend.’

‘Shall we postpone the wedding? Do you want me to put off Augustaf?’

‘No, Mum, if you love Muhsonuddin I suppose you’ll have to marry him. It’s just that I can’t be there.’

‘We will all be thinking of you on the day then.’

‘Yes, Mum, my congratulations to you both.’

As for future living arrangements in Nadiyudan, her mother, Ridhaan and Agus would move in with Muhsonuddin and his first wife, Hashanah. The grandparents, the Sukimuns, would also transfer. Idris and his wife Ernawati were there, having built a wing for themselves after their marriage. Muhsonuddin was in the process of building another wing for the Rahardjos. All three wings of the simple bungalow complex would be joined, clustering around a central dirt patch and surrounded by the usual fabulous Javanese foliage.

About inviting the Mayor to the wedding, her mother said this to Karti. ‘Muhsonuddin says it’s a game. He says the game must be played by its own rules. That’s why we must be friendly to Brata and Sekar. “Keep your rivals close,” he says.’

Karti wondered where Muhsonuddin’s ambition came from. How much did he care about money and was he really any different from Brata and Sekar?

‘He’s a brilliant, warm-hearted man,’ her mother said.

‘Keep me away from his charisma, I don’t want it,’ Karti flashed back.

So, in Java, the wedding took place and in Hong Kong the Hos flew to Vancouver.

Returning to the apartment alone from the airport, Karti put her feet up on the sofa in the living room without any pleasure. With the Hos gone the apartment felt dead. She felt useless in it. She walked from room to room. So, family life in Nadiyudan had gone in a new direction without her and her relationship with mother had gone from bad to worse, irreparable over the phone. Even as bread

winner she was no longer of use now Muhsonuddin had the family under his wing. Her part in helping Marliyah seemed as if nothing and as usual her father's unavenged death gnawed away at her. To go home now, having failed to attend her mother's marriage, was impossible, but what exactly was her purpose in Hong Kong? Her former sense of purpose and optimism gone, she had two weeks to look this question squarely in the face, stuck alone in an apartment that seemed to have become a vacuum flask.

She was determined to finish her contract with the Hos having started it. And since her life was being wasted she decided to do it wilfully. It was like those days in Po Sham Road all over again when Meryl was on holiday, but this time Karti would spend a fortnight in Star Bar, the bar where she had met Nurjanah and Andre. She would embrace the seedy life of Wanchai, its kaleidoscopic dark corners and escape in a sea of music, taking her place as the displaced Muslim, the lone Indonesian. And one day all this would end – Hong Kong – and she'd go back and avenge her father.

For the first time in more than two years, Idris called. She was alone in the apartment and drifted from the kitchen to the living room and then back to the sofa, noticing what a gentle talker he was.

'Idris, don't even talk to me about your father and my mother.' She liked the cranky way she was talking.

Idris told her that he and Ernawati had had their first child, a boy named Dika. 'We'd both love you to see him,' he said.

'All right, I will. You want my address?'

'I'm building your brothers' bedrooms,' Idris whispered. 'Karti, I still think about you, often.'

It was a surprising but not an unwelcome declaration.

'Why can't my mother resist your father? That's what I want to know.'

She heard Idris laugh.

'I hanker after you, Karti.'

'I'm in love with my employer, a Chinese guy named Kent, sorry.'

‘When are you coming back, Karti?’

‘I don’t know. Don’t ask me questions.’

A small idea in which to put big enthusiasm: take all the girls to Star Bar and start this lonely fortnight with a party. In her enthusiasm Karti even invited the belligerent Sringatin. Rendezvous, the waterfront, Sunday.

On the day, Karti entered the park via the pelican crossing at Gloucester Road, which, on the green light, milled with Indonesian girls—cars came fast here, not expecting the crowds on the pavements. Karti had been shopping and was feeling more herself: new shoes, new shorts, plus the T-shirt Connie had given her. On its front was a black-and-white photograph of a dog in space and the words, *I did it, I'm the first beagle on the moon*. Karti liked it, it made her think of Eddie. And for jewellery she wore black ear-rings and a slim silver necklace. Crossing the road, she had a stray thought. If Muhsonuddin could see her now in her shorts and free hair would he condemn her? And if she saw him would she put two fingers up to him? Yes. Yes.

It was eleven o'clock and the park was hot and steamy, just the way Indonesians liked it. Everywhere a picnic. With the Hos away, admittedly the

feeling of Sunday ease was intensified: no piles of washing in sight, no early rises. But was she imagining it, because people seemed to be looking at her? A passing Indonesian cast a sudden glance her way and smiled. Another did a double take, looked at her and blushed. A lady in her fifties, sitting with a group of others, looked at Karti knowingly and turned to say something to her friends, and as she passed them Karti felt obliged to wear a smile, not knowing why. Among the royal palms on the slope of the knoll, where picnickers were proprietorial towards their own little patches under the trees, a girl got to her feet and asked Karti for a photograph, the two of them arm in arm.

'Photo me?' said Karti.

'Yes. We've seen your picture. And we know what you did for Marliyah. It's all around. You and your gang. Everybody's whispering it under the tree-tops.'

'Gang?'

'Yes, of course. SGG. Super Girl Gang.'

Astuti was waiting at the waterfront. She was wearing a XXL Harlem Globetrotters singlet over black levis that fitted tightly round her strong thighs, and a baseball cap. Without a word she handed Karti her phone. The photograph of Karti with the girl in the woods was already there, on a Facebook page called SGG.

'Looks like you're the new "it" girl,' said Astuti.

'Then you must be one of the Super Girls too.'

'I am that.'

They posted their own picture, Karti and Astuti head to head. 'What shall we say?' said Astuti.

'Say, "Love from SGG".'

Comments and replies started to beep into the already-long discussion thread.

'Turn it off,' said Karti, 'We're not pop stars are we? Who came up with SGG? It's a bit crusty, isn't it?'

'Wahyuni, I think.'

'I guess it's ok, for fun.'

Astuti explained. ‘I told two or three girls about Marliyah but I don’t think any of them went wild about it. But Wahyuni has been blogging. She took several snaps of Marliyah last week, just before it got dark; do you remember she photographed you two together? She made the SGG Facebook page. Also there’s been stuff on WhatsApp and Twitter.’

Karti got it. Not many audiences were as receptive to participating in a multimedia blizzard as her fellow Indonesian nannies. They all had a phone and lulls in the day to fill: waiting for the dryer to finish its cycle, standing outside the school entrance waiting for the kids, queuing at the supermarket till. Karti was proud of her own skills, her own 4G dexterity. They were all adepts at jumping on and off the web, at flitting at high speed among the pictures, news flashes and jokes of the diaspora.

The cousins, Ink and Marliyah, arrived. ‘I had to rattle the cage a few times before they let Marliyah out,’ said Ink. Marliyah was shy and happy.

Then Tari, Wahyuni and Mahmudan arrived.

‘Our new folk hero,’ said Tari and gave Karti a peck on the cheek.

Somehow, when Wahyuni and Mahmudan were there, conversation always seemed to gather around them. They really were like two aunts, Karti thought with pleasure. Wahyuni’s hair was still red from the week before. Both were in their mid-thirties, neither great looking, but they made the best of themselves, without trying too hard; there was a certain elegance and confidence about them. She thought there must be times when Tari, Wahyuni and Mahmudan, in lulls in their dancing, were very grown up.

Sringatin turned up with two friends. She had brought Indonesian flags printed on synthetic cloth. She persuaded the others to take one each. Everybody there, it was time to go to Star Bar and they crossed the footbridge. Carrying the flags, the band attracted attention as it walked through the park. There was an ever increasing gathering of Indonesian nannies in the path ahead of them.

‘What do they believe we did?’ Karti asked Tari.

‘There’s one story that you climbed in the window to save Marliyah but the

employer came and you had to hide in the next room. You overheard the employer insulting Marliyah, calling her a stupid monkey, you jumped out and the employer had a heart attack.'

'Almost true.'

At the border of the park an emotional crowd surrounded them, or so it felt at that same pelican crossing where numbers were large anyway. Friends expressed their excitement to one another, many clapped, everybody was smiling.

'Now that was nice,' said Astuti as they left Victoria Park behind.

On Hennessey Road, Cherisha and her Filipina basketball team came up from the other direction.

'Hello Karti. Is this your team? Play basketball?'

'We're the Filipina kick-boxing team,' said Sringatin.

'Thai boxing you mean.'

'No, we kick Filipinas.'

'We're going to Star Bar. Want to come?' said Karti.

'No, we gotta do our nails.'

Cherisha and her friends crossed the road.

'You know why Filipinas have such long hair?' said Sringatin. 'To save on paying for haircuts.' She spat.

Nurjanah and Andre were already in Star Bar. Tommy was tending the bar and they ordered drinks. They went to sit in the booths. The order was only half right but no one minded: some got pineapple juice and vodka, others whisky and cola, others beer. Those not used to drinking would all be very happy and then very sick.

Sringatin was the first to get drunk. 'You like the name, SGG? Hong Kong knows all about our battle with the Filipina gang in Wanchai. They know the Indonesians have a gang now and Karti is the leader.'

'If that's so, here's to SGG then,' said Nurjanah. Apparently she thought the name was ok.

Encouraged, Sringatin got back on the subject of the Filipinas. 'There are too many of them. We don't like their ugly Tagalog language and their cooking smells.

We don’t want them in Victoria Park.’

‘I don’t like their bras,’ said Nurjanah. ‘If you see a Philippine Islander with big boobs don’t believe it. It’s all B-cup in a D-cup. There’s some kind of boob arms race going on. They can’t all be that big.’

‘Person for person the Filipinas are older than us,’ said Mahmudan. ‘So many are mothers with children back home.’

‘We’re not so different from them,’ said Ink. ‘We’re all slaves in Hong Kong.’

‘Try and like them, Sringatin. After all, our countries have had good diplomatic relations for fifty years,’ said Wahyuni.

‘Only because we have the same kind of politician,’ said Karti.

Everyone toasted Karti, just for speaking.

‘My employer says it’s impossible to get any sense out of a Filipina. That’s why she had to switch to an Indonesian,’ said Tari.

‘They are a proud lot, that’s for certain. They love looking down their noses at people,’ said Mahmudan.

‘Stupid proud,’ said Sringatin.

The Indonesian DJ started his session. To a woman they crowded the dance floor, all except Karti who wanted to sit and watch. The club had filled and there was little space. In a tight pack of heads it was difficult to know if Tari was a good dancer. After a while the floor opened up and Tari, Mahmudan and Wahyuni, the dance troupe, coalesced and shaped some of their moves to the beat, the loping steps back and forth, the synchronised head jerks as if punches were being taken and shrugged of. It wasn’t a full performance and Ink and Sringatin, Andre and Nurjanah, joined in. For a moment the dance troupe became a whole uproarious chorus of seven.

Karti rose, changed from pyjamas into knickers and a long T-shirt and stood in the kitchen eating a bowl of Bob's cornflakes. She had a pleasant sense of freedom and intended to do the housework. The Hos would be back soon but in the meantime she was pleased with the idea of being the constant presence here. Even mere house-sitting was of some measureable use; she could say she was something in the family's lives even in their absence. With windows open, air-conditioning off, radio on, she stripped beds, scrubbed floors, ran the washing machine twice and did a heap of ironing. Then she sat down to clip a few coupons for Connie. Finally she took the pail from under the kitchen sink to do her own laundry. Chores completed, Karti stood before the mirror in the big bedroom, took her T-shirt off and squared up tattooed shoulder foremost. She admired herself, light and shadow doing all sorts of artistic things with nudity. She'd gained strength, no longer a beanpole.

She dressed. These days the baggy shorts and other big statements of urban cool were a thing of the past; she preferred sports clothing. She dropped onto the

sofa in the living room and started looking through Agus's Facebook page, a ten-year-old boy with suitably kooky ten-year-old Facebook friends, the shared obsessions, the zombie-gaming clubs. This was interrupted when the doorbell rang. It was Ka Wor; she let him in. The way his eyes darted about the living room, she could tell he was looking for something to castigate her for, something to seize on and shame her with. But she was not in bed or hosting a party. He found instead the ironing board set up in the middle of the living room, the washing hanging on the drying frame, and every room clean and tidy.

'I've lost my watch,' he said. 'I thought it might be here.'

'But you wearing you watch.'

'No, another one.'

'Oh, another one. I not find any watch here.'

The charade of helping Ka Wor find the non-existent watch had then to be engaged in, every cupboard further testament to the orderliness of the apartment. He left after five minutes, claiming some other appointment, instructing her to keep looking. When he was gone she turned up the radio, started dancing and extemporised to a Cantopop song, thoroughly delighted, until the downstairs neighbour started banging on the ceiling.

For the afternoon, Karti planned another visit to check on Ling and Marliyah at the lock-up. This time Ling showed her inside, almost like an old friend. To her it was not much but to Ling it was everything, he was proud of his business, he was finally getting one up on the world. But not all was well with Ling. He had a black eye, which reminded Karti to thank him for releasing Marliyah on two Sundays in succession. From among the bottles, Marliyah smiled brightly. Karti joined her and began to help. There were vats of condemned wine that needed pouring into bottles with false French labels and to be corked.

Karti wanted to talk to Ling about Marliyah's remuneration. The Lings had been paying Marliyah half her salary, having told her from the beginning that her inexperience counted against her receiving more. But employment law in Hong Kong authorised no such deduction and Marliyah was entitled to the full domestic

helper's wage, a small enough amount to start with. Karti confronted Mr Ling gently. 'Marliyah is domestic helper and work at lock-up for you, so it fair she get full salary, no?'

Instead of ducking her question, Ling replied readily. 'My wife and I cannot afford the domestic helper's salary and we don't need a domestic helper. It's just the two of us in a small apartment. If Marliyah doesn't work for my business then she's no good to us. You understand?'

Karti had to nod.

'Many people do the same,' he went on. 'They take cheap overseas labour, to work in the office, the warehouse, the shop. The category is domestic helper but it's not domestic helper.'

'I understand. But your business doing well now.'

'Yes, it is.' Ling was not going to deny it.

'So you can pay more.'

'I'll give Marliyah public holidays as well as Sundays. That's more holidays than I take.'

'Well, all right. But soon, Mr Ling, you have to pay Marliyah four thousand every month, like contract, otherwise we take her away, she get new job.'

Ling smiled. 'Later, later.'

Karti walked away down the alley. She was thinking, as long as conditions were improving for Marliyah it was right to be patient. One day her two years would be up. The alternative, starting again prematurely would involve a new round of agency and visa costs, even assuming Marliyah could land a new job. Sometimes it was better the devil you knew than the devil you didn't. Karti called Ink and reported what had been said, including Ling's small concession to give Marliyah public holidays. Ink grumbled, saying Karti ought to have pressed Ling harder, but she agreed to hold her peace. Karti felt that Ink's mind was too fixed on the fact the Lings ought to pay Marliyah more. For Karti the main imperative was that Marliyah keep her job. They must be cautious about driving the Lings into a corner.

At last the day came for the Hos' return. They were due on the midnight flight. Karti spent the day stocking the fridge and she cleaned the apartment once again, doing all her tasks in a happy frame of mind. In the early evening she went to drink with Nurjanah in Star Bar, intending to go on to the airport afterwards.

They sat at the bar.

'It's good to be out,' said Nurjanah. 'My employer's in Singapore and I've sat on the couch all day.'

They drank tequila shots, two each, then slowed down with a beer each.

'Here's to us,' said Nurjanah. 'And don't forget, sooner or later everything turns to shit.'

Cherisha and two Filipinas came in, saw and acknowledged them, moved across the dance floor to one of the booth tables laid for diner. The club began to get busy and lines of vision closed up. Karti and Nurjanah decided to eat at a booth table too. They ate and talked about Andre. Cherisha and her friends came to their table. Close up her friends were extraordinary, one a large girl with three rolls of

fat of exactly equal size for breasts, abdomen and waist ill-concealed by a tight T-shirt, the other so skinny she could have used some of the other's excess.

'You hear what happened in Victoria Park this week?' Cherisha said to Karti.

'No.'

'There was a Filipina and Indonesian girl fight.'

'No, I didn't hear.'

'Your sparky friend Sringatin was making all the trouble.'

'Nothing to do with me.'

'Somebody buying you presents?' said the big Filipina, sneering at the jewellery box on the table. Karti made a disclaiming gesture and stowed it in her bag again.

'Filipinas and Indonesians are getting into too many arguments,' said Cherisha. 'We've got aggravation enough with our employers haven't we? We need to set some ground rules.'

'Indonesians can be very aggressive,' chimed in the big Filipina.

'More and more Indonesians come to Hong Kong who don't know anything,' added the skinny one.

'We love you too,' said Nurjanah.'

'Sure we can talk,' said Karti. 'But Victoria Park's our territory.' It annoyed her, the way they stood over the table. Clearly friendship was out with Cherisha, that had seemed possible before.

Cherisha tilted her head quizzically. 'Why would that be?'

'Our consulate location near, that why. Your in Admiralty, no? So you have Admiralty we have Victoria Park. That fair . . . and we need east of town when we are relaxing—it Javanese thing.'

'Ok, but not the sports pitches. And this discussion, since we're having it, applies to Sunday only.'

'Yes, we have discussion. Why not have this discussion.'

The big girl came back with a tourist map, which had possibly been wrenched out of some visitor's hand on the street. The proceeded to divvy up Hong Kong

with a marker pen.

‘So put on Facebook?’ said Karti.

‘Right.’

‘Don’t forget to send a copy to City Hall,’ said Nurjanah.

‘We exchange phone numbers,’ said Cherisha. ‘If there’s any trouble we call each other and sort it out.’

‘Ok, but some Indonesian pretty hard control.’

‘Us too, pal.’

Cherisha and her friends rose from the table

‘Not bad. The battle of Victoria Park over in five minutes,’ said Karti to Nurjanah after they had gone.

The next day was a bad day. But it began well.

That the Hos were home was a source of happiness to Karti. They'd landed on time the previous night, Bob full of beans, running around Karti saying, 'Howdy, Karti,' in what was almost certainly a Vancouver accent. The stimulus of a family holiday in Canada had changed Fan Kin too: she had started to talk. 'Now we've got two talkers,' Connie said wryly. Everyone was happy to get home. Kent complimented her on how fresh and clean the apartment looked. Karti was going to heat some fish balls she had in the fridge for the kids but the travellers were dog-tired and went straight to bed. And now, not an hour into Sunday morning, Karti wasn't needed anymore. The grandparents had arrived, generating a new burst of excitement in the children. When Karti had finished helping Connie with the unpacking, Connie said, 'Take the day off, Karti,' and noticing Karti's crestfallen face, added, 'Don't feel bad, we're back to schedule tomorrow.'

Karti found the others at the waterfront again. Sitting around Astuti, they were intent on booking tickets for a movie that was supposed to be funny. Sringatin was

far more interested in the map. It had already got around, widely circulated among Indonesians and Filipinas, a big hit everywhere. Indonesians were delighted to see that Victoria Park now belonged semi-officially to them. Both Filipinas and Indonesians were tickled by the whole idea of divvying up Hong Kong Island real estate among themselves, with no reference to the authorities, a complicity among the small people. Not that criticism hadn't popped up. In a blog posted by a member of the Indonesian Migrant Workers' Union, a woman who was a nanny herself wrote disparagingly about 'Domestic helpers who have no authority to do so making decisions which affect us all,' – a clear reference to the map. The blogger had also taken a poke at Karti over Marliyah, writing that 'employment disputes and abuse cases should be left to professionals and those domestic helpers who have a mandate to deal with such problems'.

'You really did it,' said Sringatin. 'I could have sworn that girl Cherisha had designs on Victoria Park.'

'Nope, they were fine with Central.'

Tari said, 'Now we need to sub-divide Victoria Park, a patch for our Kalimantan cousins, a patch for the Sulawesi ones, another for the Sumatrans and the rest for Java.'

Cinema tickets booked, at two o'clock the band crossed the footbridge into the park and began sauntering along the shady path towards the Gloucester Road crossing place. Everything in the park was quite as usual: men raced their model speedboats on the inner pond; Indonesian domestic helpers had all the positions under the trees and on the benches. It was a moment of ease and happiness.

Gloucester Road ran down the side of the park and the familiar, crowded, main exit was fifty yards on, with traffic coming one way down the road from that direction. Ink and Astuti, walking ahead, jumped the railings, intending to cross the road here.

A silver Mercedes came out of the Park Lane Hotel opposite. Ink and Astuti found themselves caught in the middle of the road. They saw the Mercedes but failed to react. All they needed to have done was leap forward a few steps. The

Mercedes itself gathered speed, as if the girls from the park were not there. Yes, the girls oughtn't to have been jaywalking, but still. Karti watched the Mercedes come straight on, a young female Chinese at the wheel. Perhaps an instant status comparison was being made in her head – Mercedes versus Domestic Helper – Mercedes wins. Ink and Astuti made a late effort to avoid the car. Astuti jumped out of the way but Ink was caught. The car braked late. The noise of the screeching tires rippled out, causing people in earshot to stop and turn. Ink was down.

Karti and the others were over the railings, running towards Ink, who was on the tarmac, unconscious, the lower part of one leg twisted under itself. Tari's face went white as she saw Ink. She wobbled, almost fainting. Nurjanah knelt and cradled Ink's head, making a pillow out of her own jacket. Astuti dialled 999. People came from all directions, gathering into a crowd. The Mercedes was stationary and vehicles behind were roused to immediate impatience, honking their horns, not knowing what had happened ahead.

In the car, whose engine was still running, the young Chinese woman, wearing sunglasses, was yet to step out.

Ink was being taken care of by Nurjanah and Karti turned her attention to the Mercedes. She did not immediately feel antipathy towards the driver but she was impatient for the Chinese driver to get out of the car

She felt nauseated herself, a reaction to the sight of Ink on the ground with her leg broken. More than that, she felt a horror of every component of the road accident before her. The unnatural way the Mercedes was angled on the road, the skid marks, even the people standing and watching. She could feel her skin creep and her insides turning. It all brought back the scene of her father's murder.

Ink woke up. 'That crusty doll-face drove straight at me,' she said to Nurjanah. Ink hadn't started to feel any pain yet.

'Don't look but you leg's broken,' said Nurjanah.

'The ambulance's on its way,' said Astuti.

Still the driver had not stepped out of the car. Did that mean she was waiting for the domestic helper to be moved and intended to drive away?

By now there was a keenly interested crowd of Indonesians around the accident scene, all those who had been fifty metres up at the junction and all those who had heard the screech of tires from the park. Some of the crowd were on the hotel side of the road, on the pavement, some were on the park side and others were around the car close to Karti.

A punky girl looked for traffic cameras, found one at rooftop level on the building next to the hotel and pointed it out to her friends. Another girl, in a headscarf, whispered to her companion, 'Money for a Mercedes, trouble for us.'

Two more Indonesians were more forthright. 'Was the driver texting or something, not even looking where she was going?'

'Probably. And why doesn't the bitch get out?'

A river of other people was arriving all the time from up at the junction, moving through the jam of cars and honking taxis. Someone said, 'Look, it's Sukarti Rahardjo.' The name burned through the crowd.

'Is the injured girl a friends of yours?' someone asked her.

'Yes,' Karti replied.

Karti was aware of many eyes on her. It must be offensive to all of them that the driver was remaining in the car, a Chinese girl who had not even taken off her sunglasses. But did they imagine that she would rise to the occasion and do something? Yes, it seemed the crowd was breathless, waiting to see what she would do. Well, she wouldn't disappoint them, she would do something. She rapped on the window of the Mercedes. The driver remained still. Perhaps she was in shock. But no, on closer inspection the driver was on her phone.

'Stand around the car,' Karti instructed the crowd. Members of the crowd obeyed, pressed in, angry with this Chinese woman who had run down one of their own. Karti tried the driver-side door handle but it was locked. Others tried other doors. The sports car rocked a little under the pressure of their hands.

'You must come out,' Karti called to the woman through the glass. The driver didn't turn her head.

Sringatin appeared with an old brick in her hand which she must have found

in the park and Karti accepted it. She went to the passenger side and hefted it against the window. At the first blow the window became misshapen, giving in around the impact area, with the second it disintegrated into small crystals. Karti leaned in, looking for the ignition keys. She had to burrow right across to the driver's side. The driver put her hands to her face to shield herself from any assault. It was difficult to work the keys out of the ignition. Karti wanted to be away from the car as quickly as possible. She wasn't a bandit and she wasn't used to striking fear into others.

'You're finished in Hong Kong, nanny,' said the Chinese girl, dropping her hands. The Mercedes's cabin was infused with scent and the driver had glossy lips, pearly baby teeth. It was really too much and Karti wrenched the girl's sunglasses off. Exposed, eyes blinked at her, afraid again.

'You've knocked down another human being,' said Karti. 'Why don't you get out and help?' The driver did not reply.

Withdrawing from the car with the keys, Karti handed them to Astuti.

'Has the engine stopped?' Karti asked all the people crowding around. She wasn't sure.

A girl said, 'Your friend has the keys in her hand so the motor must have stopped. That's the rule with cars.'

Lights flashing, the ambulance arrived, coming up Gloucester Road against the traffic, followed by a police patrol car. The mass of Indonesian nannies edged back to allow the vehicles room. Paramedics left the ambulance and knelt beside Ink. She was bleeding slightly from her head wound but conscious, her left leg unnaturally positioned showing the break. Ink gritted her teeth as they put her on the stretcher. They carried her to the ambulance and Nurjanah climbed in with her. The ambulance drove away silently.

The driver of the Mercedes dropped red shoes on the pavement, extended slim feet and worked them in. She stood next to her immobilised car ready for the police.

Two in uniform stepped out of the patrol car, one young and tall, the other

middle-aged, spectacled and with a certain girth to him. The young one came to the Mercedes and the Chinese girl began to speak to him in fast angry Cantonese, gesticulating. While listening to her this policeman began to cast his eye around the scene, at the Mercedes, at its smashed headlight, its smashed window, its skewed position on the road, and unpocketed his notebook. Now he took notes, listening to the driver and following her arm as she pointed at Karti. The policeman nodded at Karti and said to her, 'Stay there, please.'

The older policeman was to deal with the gathered crowd. He advanced towards the domestic helpers with a serious face, his hands on his hips, a gun on his belt. Everyone in the crowd could hear the angry Cantonese of the driver, the sort of Cantonese domestic helpers heard from their employers when scolded. There was an uneasy stir among them. The policemen ordered them back, using his hands to push back away those at the front, and he quickly succeeded in imparting general movement among the rest. Some began shuffling their way back through the jam of cars, others got off the road onto the pavement.

Tari, Wahyuni and Mahmudan were standing a little way down the pavement.

'Don't stay,' Tari called to Karti. 'Just run.'

Astuti was still there, with the keys in her hand.

The young policeman broke off from the driver and walked a step towards Karti.

'Do you have the keys?'

'The driver wanted to drive away.'

'Do you have the keys?'

'No.'

The young policeman took her by the arm. Karti allowed herself to be walked to the police car, where she was cuffed and put on the back seat.

Karti felt many things. Embarrassment was one of them. Yes, the Mercedes had needed immobilising, but not necessarily by her. Stupidly she'd allowed herself to be provoked, to be pressurised by the crowd into playing the SGG gang leader, or even worse, into showing off. Her heart sunk somewhere down among

the detritus on the floor mats of the police car. Sooner or later everything turns to shit. Nurjanah had said it only yesterday.

Outside, as one policeman continued to listen to the driver, the other did more to clear the road, until cars could start to get past the Mercedes. Sringatin appeared to shout something and be pushed away. Astuti must have handed the keys back because the young Chinese rich girl, or whatever she was, got back into her car and drove off. Karti trusted her friend's judgement, but could wear nothing but a bitter smile to see that Mercedes drive off while she remained in the hands of the police.

Karti closed her eyes. The angry crowd of nannies had needed only one policeman to disperse it. It had possessed true force for a minute, the embodiment of the support shared between everybody in the park, but it had been easily dissolved. Karti, too, had been easily taken in hand, while the Chinese driver had successfully talked her way out of the situation. Whatever a fanciful map might say, no part of Hong Kong belonged to them the Indonesian domestic helpers. The map was false. And Ink had been too full of herself in thinking the local traffic would behave with respect at the perimeter of their Sunday park bastion.

The policemen took their seats at the front, one busy on his walkie-talkie, the other starting the engine. On the kerb, stunned faces watched Karti being driven away.

HAPPY VALLEY

When the telephone rang, Harold Lam, Assistant Divisional Commander (Administration), was standing at the window of his seventh-floor office in Happy Valley police station and looking without special focus out of the window, taking a break from the paperwork. The corridors were empty and those upper floors of the station had an air of silence peculiar to Sunday. He was thinking that, as a young man, Sunday afternoons at the office had left him impatient and maddened, cooped up like this, but to the man he was today, well, on the contrary, these quiet afternoon hours were not at all distasteful. Monday was a more palatable day too if the desk had been cleared over the weekend.

Lam stood at the window. A Toyota Prius from the force stopped on Sing Woo Road to turn in at the gate, giving way to a white police van coming out, both vehicles with cardinal identification numbers on their roofs. On the shop-fronts on the opposite side of the road hung decorations for the Mid-Autumn Festival, which was on Tuesday. Red paper lanterns hung from the eaves in strings of four. On the holiday he would share a meal at home with his wife and unmarried daughter and with his wife's sister's family from the mainland, who were coming as usual.

Once a strong, fresh-faced recruit, at the cusp of retirement Lam knew very well to what form his physique had retreated. His shoulders had narrowed and his belly belonged to the Hong Kong labourer who, in hot weather, rolled up his vest to show a white balloon stomach. That comparison was his wife's. A baffling anthropological male display, she had added, unthinkable in the female sex. All Lam had kept of that once fine physique was its long frame.

Lam's pension would not be great enough to both live on and service his debts, that was the trouble. But one rank more and the account book would balance, so he and his wife had agreed a strategy for promotion. Doing extra shifts was part of it. True, his wife wanted him to cultivate Chief Han over golf. Chief Han would be playing at Mission Hills right now, as he did every Sunday. So easy, his wife said. On the golf course men bond, there is camaraderie in the locker room, there are drinks in the clubhouse. Preference comes naturally after that. Somehow his wife knew it all. Funny that she had never set foot on a golf course and yet could be such an expert. Lam conceded that she was right of course, but golf was not his game and if he adopted it he knew perfectly well that he would make himself look a fool, perpetually grubbing away in one bush after another for lost balls.

Did Chief Han know of his subordinate's financial situation? Possibly not. Lam's debts had been run up over twenty years because of an avaricious extended family, mainlanders who assumed wrongly that a senior Hong Kong policeman would be just as rich as a senior Chinese one. No, Chief Han most likely did not know of his debts, and nor did Lam's wife's family. Lam was too proud, his wife said. Here he put his foot down. She would be wise to let him do things his own way and keep silent. So extra hours on Sunday it was. Yes, seasoned policeman are tough and proud, they stand an inch above others, even in administration. He would stand high in his family, even if his debts were secretly crippling him. His colleague, Senior Constable Po, had taken another route. He had shot himself on the second floor of this very building with his Smith and Wesson service revolver, to solve similar problems after failing at the baccarat and sic bo tables of Macau.

The telephone rang.

'Hello, Terry Wong here. Have I got you, Mr Lam?' A cultured voice speaking Cantonese.

'Yes, it's Lam.'

'Glad to have caught you. I'm not disturbing anything, am I?'

'Not at all.'

A surprising call. Terry Wong Tsz Lung. What could he want with Lam?

Recently, Lam and his wife had met Terry Wong and his wife, Venus. This was at an afternoon gala in the grounds of an old Chinese mansion on Stubbs Road, a crumbling pile which the Society of Historical Buildings was trying to save. Wong had given a nice speech urging the government to save the property while pledging some money of his own. The widow, who had inherited this landmark on the hill, was holding out for the highest bidder, whether it was the property developers, who would level it and build an apartment block, or the government. She made no bones about wanting the best price. There was for her no other consideration. For Lam and his wife the event gave them a chance to network and to raise their profile among influential people, another stratagem for advancement. It was also an occasion for his wife to dress up. Lam hadn't expected to enjoy the event but he had taken away one pleasant memory, when Venus had slipped her arm into his and whispered something to him.

Terry Wong was roughly Lam's age but had a rather different life. He ran an arm of the extensive business his grandfather had built, its headquarters plumb in the centre of Admiralty. And his wife Venus was one of the Cheung sisters, heiresses each to large fortunes in property, a family anybody who read a newspaper or picked up a magazine would have come across as a staple of the Hong Kong social pages. The combined wealth of the married couple was enormous. After his speech, Terry and his wife had made the round of guests and came in time to the Lams. Flatteringly, the Lams found themselves addressed by their first names. The Wongs were delightfully down-to-earth. While Terry complemented Lam's wife on her appearance, Lam found himself with Venus, who was wearing a trim little Chanel suit. As he remembered now with delight, she had leaned towards him, taken his arm and whispered, 'I wish the Society would buy our old house as I'd far rather live in an apartment.' Lam had guffawed as everyone knew the Wong's villa, at 88 Plantation Road, was one of the finest on Victoria Peak, as modern on the inside as it was old on the outside.

And now this telephone call.

‘I apologise for intruding on your time,’ Terry said, ‘only my wife and I have a distressed niece on our hands. Her name is Cherry Cheung. It seems she has been involved in an accident. A girl from the park ran out in front of her car, probably an Indonesian because it happened on Gloucester Road. Have you heard anything?’

‘No, I’ve not.’

‘Would you let me know if you do? I’ve spoken to your colleague, Police Chief Han. He thinks your station may be handling the arrest.’

‘Was there a bad injury?’

‘I don’t know. All I know from my niece is that a girl was arrested, a ringleader of some sort among a group of threatening Indonesians, who smashed the passenger window of her car.’

‘I see.’

‘We don’t know about the other girl, the one who was hit. Obviously we hope she was not injured badly. My niece says she was taken away by ambulance.’

Lam collected his thoughts. So Wong had already called his boss, among his irons and putters at Mission Hills. An accident on Gloucester Road, close to Victoria Park. Yes, it was likely one of his patrol cars would have gone to the scene. And if anybody had been picked up they would be brought into custody here at Happy Valley on a Sunday.

‘Let me find out,’ said Lam. ‘I’ve heard nothing yet.’

‘Thank you. We’d be grateful. You’re a family man so you’ll perhaps understand. My wife is close to all her nieces and this one is sobbing at her feet right now.’

‘Yes,’ said Lam. ‘I’ll give it my personal attention, of course.’

‘I won’t take another moment of your time. Thank you.’ Wong rang off.

Lam telephoned the main desk downstairs, feeling pleasantly alert. Yes, they had a maid in custody, one Sukarti Rahardjo. Lam ordered her file to be brought up. Normally there was a superintendent to deal with incoming cases but not with the skeletal Sunday staff.

‘Did she give a statement?’

‘Yes, readily.’

‘The language?’

‘English.’

‘And was there a girl knocked down?’

‘A Fitriyah Rezaei. She’s at St Mary’s. Broken leg and slight head injury but conscious.’

After a few minutes the sergeant came up with the file.

‘Leave it with me,’ said Lam. ‘I’ll bring it down later.’

Lam began to read the statement.

Statement: Sukarti Rahardjo

‘My friend Ink crossing road and hit by car. She looking forward watching movie Despicable Me 2, not want get run over.

Lam stopped to smile. No, probably she hadn’t.

She lying on road and definitely leg broke. She asleep then wake up. My friend Nurjanah make pillow with jacket. Ink open eyes very very shocking. She say, that stupid girl hit me on purpose. Driver not get out of car and I wonder why and know she wait drive away. That wrong and make me angry. Nurjanah tell Ink not move and I go knock on window but driver she not even look. She wear a sunglasses, very young. Then I try open door but it locked. Some other Indonesian girls there. They help try open door. Someone open hatch back the car. The traffic behind pushing and many nannies because next Victoria Park. Everyone angry with girl inside. She Chinese. Someone give me stone, I break window take key. I not speak to her. She speak to me. I not touch her except take a sunglasses look in hers eyes. I not touch or threaten her. Then ambulance and police car come. I don’t know why I here because I do nothing wrong. That Chinese girl liar if she

say something different. I know she tell long long story to policeman

Lam's first impression was that the statement had the ring of truth. So why had his officers taken in only the Indonesian maid and not the driver? It would help to see their report, but that wouldn't be available until at least six o'clock, after they had finished their shift on road patrol and come in. There was, of course, the broken car window and whatever had happened in the interior of the car. Perhaps this Wong niece had managed to give the impression of being the wronged one. The maid would face two or three months in jail if she'd laid a finger on her. Lam was irritated. Irrespective of what Terry Wong had just told him, he wanted the niece Cherry Cheung's own statement. He disliked failures in police process. But a hectoring heiress would obviously have been a handful to his men, he could see that.

He called his wife at home, the spacious police apartment on Garden Road. 'Darling, I won't be home until late. Eat without me, won't you?' His wife was non-committal. Of course she was used to his not showing up for meals. She'd watch the TV and spend an hour on the phone, no doubt quite happily. Perhaps Heather, his daughter, was home too.

Who was the duty officer to interview the maid? The book said it was Yu. Lam rang down. 'Yu, I'll observe. Call me when you're ready to interview.'

Now Lam was faced with slow hours waiting for the interview. The station accounts for the second quarter, which earlier he been quite content to wade through, were on the desk waiting for his renewed attention. He managed to sign-off on one sheet of figures before escaping from his desk to the window again. Yes, he was principally an administrator, but, despite what he had earlier said to himself, his work was too dull sometimes.

Again the absence of a statement from the driver bothered him. There was a possible case of dangerous driving here. She should have been brought in. Had the patrolmen been intimidated by the hauteur of a Cheung? Very possibly. And now Terry's call made it awkward for him to call in Miss Cherry Cheung. What if

Venus answered the phone? The last thing he wanted was to be impolite to her, or to cross her. “Was what my husband told you not good enough, Commander Lam?” He could hear her saying it with mock stress on his title. No, he didn’t want to walk there.

Of course it was only right to handle a case involving a big family carefully, with consideration. The police owed that much. A frenzy of media interest was likely to be set off if a case came forward associated with a person of high profile. But bias was not conducive to good police work. Here they were, with a few words from the wealthy uncle on the telephone, but no statement from the subject herself. He would chide his wife when he got home. Networking with high society had been her idea.

Yes, he would reprimand his wife as follows: I told you that chasing after promotion was not good for a policeman. Now look at it. Thanks to our networking I have Terry Wong Tsz Lung bending my ear while behind him no doubt Venus and the Cheung family are ready to leap at me. All because of your damned avaricious relatives! But, of course, he would say no such thing. Or at least not all of it. His wife would not allow him chastise her at such length.

In the patrol car, Karti told herself she'd broken someone's car window, so it would probably have to be paid for, but otherwise she hadn't done anything wrong. The Hos expected her back at eight o'clock and as far as she was concerned she'd be there.

The vehicle moved in the traffic and the mannish smell of the interior was in her nose. Was it the smell of the gear of the two sergeants, their leather and boot polish, the stuff they wore around their belts, or the soap they used? All of the above, probably. The other distraction was the police radio, which threw up a noisy discourse of crackling voices. To judge from it, mischief was in the making all over the territory on a Sunday afternoon – surprising if true. Perhaps the conversations were mundane and only dramatized by the walkie talkie. It was difficult to hear exactly what was being said.

How were Ink and Nurjanah doing in the ambulance, she wondered. Had they reached the hospital? Ink was clearly going to be off her feet for some time. She would come out of the hospital on crutches, poor girl, whatever that meant to her

future in Hong Kong.

Karti looked at the cuffs on her wrists. Maybe I am in more trouble than I realise, she thought.

‘Where we going?’ she asked the driver, in English.

The men in the front seats didn’t answer. One was speaking on the radio, the other driving. Karti compressed her lips and put her head back against the seat.

The car stood for a moment at a junction in a three-lane queue. The people in the other vehicles were having an ordinary day. How odd, she thought, to be the one handcuffed inside a police car.

She started breathing with difficulty and for a moment hoped that God would do something, rewind time and allow her to start the day again. But that was not going to happen, was it? She tried the constables again, in Cantonese. ‘Where we go? Why the Chinese girl not here too? Mr Handsome, Mr Young Man, I speak to you.’

Up front they didn’t answer but they exchanged a smile.

‘Mr Short Haircut, what happen now? Please tell me.’

The policeman in the passenger seat turned to her, the younger one who had taken the statement from the driver. He looked tired, as if exhausted by a long shift.

‘Miss, you took on the wrong person. That lady was the daughter of Gladys Cheung.’

‘She couldn’t tell us often enough,’ said the older one, letting out a puff of breath.

‘So what?’ said Karti.

‘Rich, rich family.’

‘All I did was break window. She broke leg my friend, nearly kill her.’

‘You can tell your whole story at the station. She said different.’

‘What she say?’

‘Your friend jumped in front of the car. You assaulted her.’

‘No, I not do that. And that stupid, nobody ever jump in front of car, not even

poor stupid Indonesian. We all go watch *Despicable Me 2*. We happy. Ink not want jump in front of car.'

'It's a good movie,' said the younger constable.

'Maybe you can stream it later,' said the other one. They laughed, but not unkindly.

'Ok for you,' said Karti and smiled, finding her breath once again.

The police car reached the tall police station on Sing Woo Road and turned in. She saw an open gateway beside the building, a barrier and a security point. The patrolmen uncuffed her and handed her over to the reception desk at the rear then returned to their car and drove out.

In 9B, Lam sat in partial darkness behind one-way glass to observe the interview about to start in 9A. He wanted to see the Indonesian domestic helper at first hand before calling Terry Wong with an update. This was the basement and the corridors were silent, but the slight vibration of traffic got through, a bus hauling itself past, on its way to Stanley. It was 6.45 p.m. Five hours had passed since the young Indonesian had been detained.

The patrolmen's report, written by the senior of the two men and signed by both, had come to Lam fifteen minutes earlier. It was brief and offered no surprises, containing an account of what the officers had seen and a paraphrase of the long rant which the driver of the Mercedes had directed at them, taken from their notes. Called to the scene by radio the patrolmen had found the injured girl on the road, being attended to by paramedics, evidently a casualty of the Mercedes car that stood a few feet away. The driver of the car had come forward declaring herself to be Cherry Cheung, daughter of Gladys Cheung. The paraphrased words of Cherry Cheung in the report read as follows: 'This crowd is intimidating, it

shouldn't be allowed. That girl (Miss Cheung pointed to Miss Rahardjo) is the ring-leader and you should arrest her. She smashed my window, stole my keys and attacked me. The injured girl jumped in front of my car deliberately. I couldn't avoid her.' The report ended with a note that Miss Rahardjo had been detained while Miss Cheung's ID card, and the paperwork of her car, had been inspected. Miss Cheung had then been asked to drive her car off Gloucester Road.

The interviewing officer, Yu, a correct young man with clipped black hair and broad shoulders, came in with the maid. Miss Rahardjo was short by comparison. Her face was attractive. Lam registered that she was not one of those hijab-wearing Indonesian maids, instead she was one of those street-wise ones, those who looked like they were from the Bronx or a precinct of down-town Tokyo. Occasionally these girls came up before the law for immigration offences, or for taking unauthorised employment. The interview room was square, white-lit, scrubbed clean and it contained a single central table. Now the microphones picked up the scraping of chairs as the two actors sat down, an amplified noise which shattered the peace of Lam's brain until he found the volume button in his own room.

Lam was expecting a fatalistic attitude to have settled and matured on the detainee after these hours of detention. That reaction was common to many Asians, who readily assumed the mantle of a guilty person, focussing on adjusting to misfortune and their fate. It was a broad generalisation, but common enough. Equally broadly, the Westerner's response to custody was often an outrage which grew with every passing hour, making for an indignant and vituperative subject who didn't for a moment think they belonged here. However, as Lam watched Miss Rahardjo, the first impression she made was one of calm defiance.

Interviews at the station were always conducted the same way. The interviewing officer was to focus on trying to gather as much incriminating information on the subject as possible. In English, Yu began by going through the details of the initial accident. Miss Cheung had said that the girl, Miss Fitriyah, had some sort of death wish but Miss Rahardjo's statement stated that her friend

had tried to avoid the car. Had Miss Fitriyah not in fact jumped in front of the car?

‘Are you joking? Of course no.’

Lam had to agree. If he’d come to know one thing over the years it was that when a driver started complaining that the person they’d hit had a death wish it was seldom true.

‘Why was she jaywalking on a dangerous road?’

‘I don’t know. Ask her. Maybe she in hurry. We all go watch *Despicable Me 2*.’

‘Do you know that crossing the road anywhere except at designated crossing places is an offence in Hong Kong?’

‘Yes, I know.’

‘Didn’t Miss Fitriyah goad the Mercedes?’

‘Goad?’

‘Provoke.’

‘No, she tried avoid it. Why don’t you ask driver why she hit my friend? Maybe driver texting, not look where she going. Maybe she bad temper, want hit someone.’

Yu moved on to Miss Rahardjo’s own actions. He wanted to hear her say that it was she who had smashed the car window. The maid had no difficulty admitting it. Then Yu asked exactly what had happened in the car. The accounts given by the two subjects differed here. Miss Rahardjo repeated the account she had given in her statement. No, she did not punch or otherwise deliver some sort of blow to the driver. She had only taken that girl’s sunglasses off.

‘Why did you do that?’

‘I not like she hide her eyes.’

‘You were angry with her. She had hit your friend. So you punched her?’

‘No. I wanted, but I didn’t.’

‘Did you tell other people to surround the car?’

‘Yes, but only to stop drive away. I know that girl not care my friend, she just want drive away.’

‘Were those people your friends?’

‘I know some of those girls.’

‘Were they a gang?’

‘You could call some that. I don’t call it gang.’ Lam saw slight hesitation from the maid.

‘What do you call it?’ continued Yu.

‘Just group friends.’

‘Are you the leader?’

‘No, not leader, just one.’

After the interview Lam assembled Yu and the duty sergeant in his office upstairs. ‘Where can we put Miss Rahardjo? Tai Tam?’

‘Tai Tam Centre is under renovation, sir’ said the desk sergeant. ‘But Cape Collison men’s prison has temporary facilities to take women.’

‘So remand her there. Give her one phone call before she leaves. I’ll take her signature on the final statement before you move her.’

The rear reception area of the police station had been calm and quiet. There was a counter and two computer cubicles against the opposite wall, in some resemblance to a high-street internet room. In a side-room a lady officer had asked Karti for her bag, everything in her pockets including phone and money and for her shoelaces and belt. The collected items were put in a box and Karti was given a receipt for them. The staffer patted her down then took her to one of the computers and invited her to write a statement. Karti was glad to do so. She tackled the job calmly, continually confronted by her weaknesses with the English language but reassured by her own account of events. Next she was taken along a corridor and left in a room which had nothing in it except a bench and an unplugged vending machine. An bare bulb hung from the high ceiling and the guard shut and locked the door on Karti. Left by herself, she sat on the bench, maintaining reasonable morale.

After what might have been an hour Karti lay down on the bench and traced the knots in the wood with her finger. The unyielding wood of the bench created

pressure points on her cheek, her pelvis and her right knee. She liked the touch, the resinous smell of the varnish and dropped off to sleep.

A tray of food—rice, pork and green vegetables and a can of Sprite—was given her. She ate and left the tray next to the door as no one came to collect it.

Then came the interview in the basement with policeman Yu. She noticed the black-glass screen at the back of the room, the cliché of every episode of CSI Miami, for a while Mrs Parsons' favourite television programme.

When the interview was finished she was returned to the same room.

Karti was becoming vexed now at how time was running on. It must be close to seven o'clock. That meant she was due at Kwai Hing in an hour. What an eon seemed to have passed since the morning, when Connie had given her the model of the Vancouver sky-train as a present. Was it possible to meet that eight o'clock commitment? It had begun to seem less likely. She hoped for it with all the force of her being. That she might yet walk out of the police station and be allowed to take the MTR to Kwai Hing, to see Kin Fan and Bob to bed, to restore order to the kitchen after the family had fended for themselves for a few hours, to quietly use her phone's internet service, standing in the kitchen until bedtime, then to lie quietly on her mattress in the kid's room, Bob sometimes not asleep, whispering in the dark, give me a kiss, Karti.

There was a knock on the door and a tall man in his fifties entered, dressed not in a police uniform but in a light-coloured cloth suit. 'I'm Harold Lam, Assistant Divisional Commander,' he said. 'May I?' He sat down beside her on the bench. 'Your final statement for signing.' He handed her a clipboard. 'If you don't mind?'

Her statement was clipped on. '*My name is Miss Karti Rahardjo, my nationality is Indonesian, my HK ID number is W452213(3) –* '

'Can I read it?' she asked.

'Of course.'

It seemed rude to keep Commander Lam waiting but she felt she ought to check what she was being asked to sign, policemen being what they were.

'Something missing. I write before my injured friend say driver hit her on

purpose. Now it gone.'

'Yes, that's deleted.'

She read the rest of the statement. 'Something else. I say driver waiting to drive away, escape. That gone.'

Commander Lam worked himself down the bench, presumably to open up some space across which to talk.

'The first deletion is the comment of your friend. It's hearsay which doesn't need to be included in your statement. As for the second deletion, it was only your belief that the driver wanted to drive away, you couldn't know her intention. So we'll delete that too, don't you think?'

He spoke with a kindly tone but he blinked uncomfortably.

'But that why I broke window,' Karti said.

'You were angry weren't you? Your friend was lying injured on the ground. But it was nobody's fault, was it? Or the fault was split evenly. Your friend was jaywalking, the driver could have been quicker on her brakes. Let's agree on that. But mainly you were just angry because your friend was hurt and you acted on impulse without thinking.'

'No. I want keys so she cannot drive away. That all.'

'But didn't your friends surround the car?'

'Yes, but that not enough. She can still drive. Maybe she knock down one more girl. I do not know what she do.'

'But she didn't drive away?'

'No. But she thinking it. That's why she stay in car. She not even take sunglasses off.'

'Don't you think she might have been intimidated by the large crowd around the car?'

'No, I don't, not that girl.'

Lam smiled despite himself, then his face became troubled. For a moment he didn't speak, the large eyelids of his long face blinking.

'It's true, leaving the scene of an accident is a serious offence. But no one can

say for sure what the driver's thoughts were. There are CCTV cameras on that street. You didn't give the driver a chance to get herself into trouble. Instead you took the law into your own hands.'

'I not change my statement, if it my statement.'

Lam nodded. 'I see.'

'Sorry, but my principle.' Karti felt very tired. She knew her resistance was almost spent. The policeman had only to press her a little more.

'I'll try to see you are dealt with as fairly as possible,' he said unexpectedly.

'What's going to happen to me? Can I go back Kwai Hing? I told Mr and Mrs Ho I back eight o'clock.'

'No, I'm sorry but you'll be detained. You have criminally damaged a car. Possibly the driver will press charges for assault on her person. She's from an influential Hong Kong family.'

'I know she look rich.'

'I should tell you that if the magistrates find for assault they will impose a custodial sentence of three months. However, it's yet to be decided what file will be put forward to the Criminal Prosecution Service. I will tell you one thing. This is a sensitive case and I've already spoken to the family head. We shall have to see his view. You'll be told more in due course.'

Lam left the room.

The policewoman who had first processed her came back with a reprinted statement. Karti dried her eyes of a few tears while the policewoman waited without emotion. Karti signed.

'You'll be taken somewhere else for the night,' the policewoman said suddenly. 'First you will make a phone call. Call your employers. We contacted them earlier. They know you are here.'

An old-fashioned wooden call-box stood in the corridor with a Bakelite phone inside. The officer let Karti close herself in. Karti's fingers trembled and she had difficulty remembering Connie and Kent's home telephone number in her distress. It was Connie who answered.

‘Hello, Connie, it Karti.’

‘Hello, Karti.’ Connie’s voice sounded fraught. ‘Wait a moment please—here’s Kent.’

‘Hello, Karti,’ came Kent’s voice. ‘You’ve got yourself into trouble with the police, we hear.’

‘Yes.’ Karti realised, disliking the insight, that it was over with the Hos – useless even to talk to them.

‘Listen Karti, the police contacted us. I’m sure you had your reasons for whatever you did. But look, in Vancouver Connie and I made the decision that we don’t need a domestic helper after all. We didn’t expect my parents to return so soon from Guangzhou. We weren’t going to tell you until September, but now . . . we were not prepared for this . . . We’ll pack your things and pass them on.’

Connie returned on the line. ‘Karti, we’re so sorry. Are you going to be ok?’

‘Yes. I know grandparents always there. I not needed.’

‘Shall I come to the police station to help?’

‘No need come. I been stupid. Say goodbye Kin Fan and Bob. Goodbye Connie.’

Karti composed herself before opening the cubicle door. She did not want the policewoman to see her second round of tears. With vim in her voice, she came out and said, ‘Where now? I’m ready.’

Lam locked his desk drawers. He had nothing to do before going home but call Terry Wong. Getting straight through, he began by informing Terry that, as things stood, no charge would necessarily be brought forward against his niece, Cherry. The domestic helper, on the other hand, was in custody and, if desired, could be subject to charges of assault and criminal damage. But, Lam added, the domestic helper had made a firm statement of her version of events and would not be budged from it.

Terry chewed on what Lam had told him for a moment. ‘Don’t tell me. My niece is far from blameless in all this, isn’t she? And for that we have to blame her mother, my sister-in-law. She has needed straightening out for some time. Fortunately she returns soon to the USA for her studies.’ Then, flatteringly he added, ‘What is your advice, Commander?’

‘Yes, your niece ought to take more care in future.’ Lam accepted the invitation to be frank. ‘The nanny, I think, is a reasonable person. In the heat of the moment things happened, that’s all.’

‘All right, let’s call it quits. I’ll instruct my niece to view this as a salutary lesson and consider herself lucky. I am quite happy for you to let the nanny off with whatever reprimand you see fit.’

‘That is very understanding of you,’ said Lam. ‘In that case we will hold the nanny for a few days anyway, for our own reasons.’

‘May I ask why, Commander, from my own curiosity?’

‘She has lost her job as a result of this and if we let her onto the street she may be desperate. She’ll have nowhere to go and may do harm to herself or to others. There also appears to be the question of a gang. We want her separated from her associates while we look into it. Just a few enquiries among our informers and contacts.’

‘So my niece did have something to fear?

‘Gang may be the wrong word. But we’ll get to the bottom of that.’

‘Did you meet this maid? What did you say her name was?’

‘Sukarti Rahardjo. Yes, I did. I have to say she impressed me. My daughter is always saying how migrant labour in Hong Kong is a great resource to our city, deserving more appreciation, greater status. In front of this nanny I would not disagree.’

‘Our children are often more liberal than we,’ Terry chuckled. ‘But this maid does begin to interest me. I have contacts in Indonesia. Do you mind having lunch with me on Tuesday? We could compare notes.’

‘Most certainly.’

As Lam left the station, feeling fatigue all the way to the marrow of his bones, he wondered what Wong could want with the maid. Anyway, he was glad there would be no charges against her. Well, whatever was ahead it was fine by him – better than fine. A one-to-one lunch with one of Hong Kong’s big men, and no need to worry about lost golf balls. His wife would be ecstatic.

The small, plain room was bright in daylight cut by the bars of the window. Below the window was rock, a stand of weather-beaten pine trees, a prison fence and the sea, lying blue and tranquil under an open sky. The coastline either side was one of wild green hillsides leading down to granite headlands. Some way offshore was an island shaped like a turtle.

They had taken her clothes and given her a suit of prison ones, brown cotton trousers and a yellow cotton shirt. In the room there was a metal-framed bed, a chair and table, and a toilet. The toilet, a bin and lid contraption, was secured to the wall by substantial metal brackets at knee height. The instructions for the toilet were laminated on the wall: daily slop at noon. On the back of the door were incongruous civilian fire instructions.

Whatever else, Karti felt she would have a great deal of peace here.

The door opened and a prison guard – the name stitched onto her uniform was Adele Chan – called her to breakfast.

Meals were taken in an oblong room along the corridor more like a meeting

room than a refectory. Two women were already sitting at table separate from each other. One looked like a Columbian working girl from Wanchai. Her face retained vestiges of make-up and she had a black eye. The other girl appeared to be Hong Kong Chinese, dour in appearance. Both were wearing the same suits as Karti. Breakfast was rice congee served from a trolley.

As she ate, through the window Karti could see they were among a complex of buildings. The older buildings were hunkered down, dug into the ground, as if conditions on the cape were perpetually windy, but newer buildings appeared more conventional. This one could be guessed to be an administration block, part-converted for detainees.

A second prison staffer stood next to Adele Chan. Neither had much to do but watch the inmates eat. The batons fastened to their belts were faintly ridiculous. A sudden flare up of violence seemed unlikely. More to the point was the degree to which their circumstances were no different from that of the prisoners, stuck here all day long.

'Did you like your congee?' Adele said as she took Karti's bowl. 'It's good, isn't it? Chinese congee.' There was something in her manner which suggested she had been a primary school teacher before joining the prison service.

The other took a farcical roll call.

'Tang, Yi Chen?'

The Chinese girl stared blankly at the guard. The guard repeated her name twice but she refused to open her mouth.

'Hashapina, Toto?'

The Columbian replied with something loud and unintelligible. It was good enough for the guard.

'Rahardjo, Sukarti?'

'Yes.'

The three girls looked at each other with interest as they were taken down the corridor to their separate rooms. Karti took the opportunity to ask Adele what would happen to her.

‘I don’t know your case. You’ll have to wait for the police to fetch you if there’s to be a magistrates’ hearing. But it won’t be tomorrow, that’s the Mid-Autumn Festival.’

‘Where are we?’

‘Cape Collison Correctional Institute, a male facility temporarily taking female inmates, so you’ll have to stay in your rooms except for meals.’

In her room, Karti lay down on the bed, low without a headboard or footboard, and let her head onto the flaccid pillow. Then she went to the window. This view really was better than could to expected from a detention centre, the sky serene, the sea sparkling.

A ship could leave, disappear over the horizon, and get to Java in a few days, Karti reflected. Good. And if she were on such a ship she could have her day with Santoso at last.

The turtle-shaped island was how far? Two kilometres? Certainly the fishing boats passing in front of it were diminished by distance, chugging out to sea. Much further away was another shoreline, low hills of parkland and a few clusters of apartment buildings. How remote it all seemed from Victoria Park. They’ve put me in Alcatraz, Karti thought with a smile, remembering the movie.

A man standing inside a small fishing boat sculled into view. Brown-skinned and elderly, he was in one of those thatched cone hats and handled a pole as long as the boat. Trailing over the side was a fine net. His eyes were on the water and occasionally he worked his arm to scull the boat a few metres on. The water under the boat was as clear as a swimming pool. It looked good enough to bottle and sell for ten dollars a litre. There was something of a wash on the rocks but the fisherman was safe where he was, a few yards out. It would have been great if the fisherman had hauled up his net. Karti wanted to see a haul of silvery fish but the man just kept working forward until he was around the next point.

Astuti had suggested going to the beach several times and Karti had always thoughtlessly declined. Now she saw that the pristine nature of the coastal water bore no resemblance to the murky water at Causeway Bay and was sorry to have

denied her friend this pleasure.

When it was time for lunch, Adele Chan came to fetch Karti. Rice congee was served again and now the Columbian was unhappy. ‘Don’t torture me with congee,’ she said with great displeasure. ‘This food is for toothless old people. I need steak.’

‘No grumbling, please,’ said Adele. ‘Wait for dinner.’

Karti asked for something to read and Adele half-promised a book or magazine. Again she was able to look out and observe the surroundings: the dug-in old stone buildings with their barred windows; the covered walkways running across the complex. On a court near the water a group of men were playing basketball, either prisoners or off-duty staff.

After lunch, meditation for her, or an attempt at it, sat on the bed with legs crossed, feet turned inwards. The great meditator was Basri, her customer at Masduki’s. Could that ginger tea he took really have been his chief daily sustenance, as he took a break from the spiritual plane?

Her father had belonged to a mystic sect, aligned to Islam, long before he had involved himself in local politics, convening with friends to hold discussions and meditation sessions, sometimes at home. As a kid she hadn’t enjoyed being left outside the door. ‘Ladies don’t take to meditation,’ she remembered one of her father’s friends saying to her kindly. ‘They are not able to be still.’ And another had whispered, as kindly, that this was their excuse to get away from our wives for a few hours.

Draw a batik pattern on the heart. Karti recalled that phrase from somewhere, a prescription on how to meditate. She opened her eyes. Perhaps it was true women couldn’t be as still as men. But how could you draw a batik pattern on your heart? Wasn’t that nonsense? Javanese men were pretentious sometimes.

Pramoedya Ananta Toer wrote that Javanese people lived too much in their dreams – an observation he placed inside one of his novels. He was writing about the time of the Dutch occupation when, governed by a foreign power, the Javanese people’s ineradicable pride hadn’t chimed with the reality of their condition. Why

she should remember this now, from an old class at school, she didn't know.

Her father was proud of Javanese culture and told her it was admired outside Java. He'd never travelled and didn't pretend to know much about foreign places. He worried that she and her friends overlooked the cultural wealth of Java. Their eyes were glued overseas. They were obsessed by modern imports, communications gadgets, foreign movies and television shows. Don't forget the gamelan, the wayang puppetry and the batik textiles, he had told her. He told her that while Java could be proud of its development, it had always been subject to foreign ideas, Western science and technology and political ideas coming in from overseas. While there was no way to stop this flow of Western innovation, at least its influx had been partly limited by the equatorial isolation of Java from the West. Now, the internet removed this restraint. Hers was a generation in direct access to the world through the internet, with few filters, without any directing influence from teachers and commentators.

An intellectual worrier yes, her father was that, but he was also practical. He had a characteristic way of breaking off any long discussion by getting to his feet and saying something like, 'Time to go and mend the drains'. Was that un-Javanese of him? Probably, thought Karti. She was very happy to be remembering her father in peace.

Adele unlocked the door. Supper.

On the food trolley, *Ka Siu Fan*—pork and rice. As for the previous meals, each inmate sat in a different part of the room to eat. The guards stood near the door. The Columbian was stuffing her face. The drawn-faced Chinese detainee was mumbling to herself in Mandarin.

'You have something to chew on now,' said Adele to the Columbian.

'Yes, I like Chinese pork. Don't poison me with congee again.'

On her way out the Columbian waved her finger at Karti then drew it over her crotch. 'So many hours alone, what to do?' she said and laughed with gusto.

Adele took Karti to her room and passed her a magazine.

'Thank you,' said Karti. 'Going home now?'

‘Yes. Those other girls have been here longer than you. They’re getting restless.’

‘Don’t worry about them,’ Karti said. ‘I think they’re no trouble, just need to joke.’

As darkness fell, the relative cheer of the day disappeared. A long night was in store for Karti. She found herself unable to sleep. The silence of the prison compound weighed on her, remote on its headland eyrie, with its black buildings where unseen male inmates were presumably locked up in their cells. How comforting an earful of Kwai Hing sounds would have been, bumps from neighbouring apartments, the continual white noise of Hong Kong, even the mechanical roars of urban buses calling to each other as they pulled into the traffic. Instead there was a low, elemental howl from the wind outside. Realising she would not sleep, Karti went to stand vigil at the window. Out in the darkness a red light flashed somewhere at sea. She felt her life was lost in space, unattached to a single anchor point, as if an aggressive darkness lay waiting for her in Java, a black hole of revenge and violence.

The mood at breakfast was sullen. The guard duty was new and again congee was served. Moon cakes were handed out on account of the holiday but the warden who did so offered no smile.

Back in her cell, Karti went to the window hoping to see the same solitary fisherman in his boat but he wasn't there. The light was different, the sky a low-burn blue, the sea milky grey, though immediately off the rocks as inviting as before, sugared by platelets of light.

Not having slept well, Karti napped, then lay fully awake on her side with her face towards the barred window. She thought about the Hos and grieved at her dismissal.

At the window she waited again for the fisherman. What life did he have? She put him beside the Indonesian working man, lives probably not so different, toiling under the sun. Even Chinese habits would not separate them profoundly. The fisherman and his wife might have a tray of House Gods outside the door, burn joss sticks and leave out small quantities of tea, grapefruit and rice. Perhaps there

was a family shrine in the hills, like those Karti had seen here and there, places for the ashes of the deceased. If so, all these details were within the comprehension of ordinary Indonesians. Everything under the head of Chinese Folk Religion was not strange: multiple deities, legends, men whose spirits persisted on earth after death, good and bad luck. Indonesians had much of this too.

But what notions did Chinese men like Ka Wor harbour about Indonesians, and about domestic helpers? His ilk had no esteem for dark faces and no doubt placed Indonesians alongside Chinese peasants, looking down on both. That was the insulting attitude among all the white-collar workers in Hong Kong bringing up their families in Kowloon and elsewhere with the help of a nanny.

Of course if people were living pinched lives it was impossible for them to offer the largesse of the wealthy and in those conditions kindness stood out. For every Mrs Ling there was a good Chinese employer. The Ho family were good, despite their harsh decision at the end.

Some domestic helpers nursed their pride more closely than others. Many could laugh off on Sunday all the offences of the week. Karti could divide her friends easily. Ink and Sringatin were touchy. Tari, Wahyuni and Mahmudan could laugh. Astuti was more thick-skinned than everybody. Nurjanah was too smart to work for anyone who played the prince or princess. Marliyah showed marvellous resilience to ill-treatment. Seemingly she did not carry it on her back or load her mind with it.

'Sukarti Rahardjo.' Adele Chan was back, knocking and entering the room.

'Yes?'

'Come!' Adele was animated about something. 'Come and see.'

Karti found herself taken by the arm and led along the corridor, in the opposite direction to the room where they ate, all the way to the end of the building, where there was a corner window facing landward. The compound buildings and the green hill were in view. Near the summit of the hill, perhaps a few hundred yards away, there was a gathering of people, not hikers taking the coastal path from Chai Wan to Big Wave Bay because there were placards:

SGG POWER

STAY STRONG, KARTI

FASCIST POLICE, LET HER GO

Adele opened the window for Karti to see better. Karti waved. The posters jogged up and down and vague calls swirled in the wind. Then a male prison guard spotted her. He started to blow his whistle. Adele grabbed Karti and returned her to her room, entirely discomfited, locking her hastily back in.

Karti put her head in the pillow. She knew she should be touched by her friends' show of support, but all she could feel was an overriding bitterness that her Hong Kong life was over.

At supper, a fresh watch of two female guards stood at her shoulder as she ate. One said, 'Prisoner stay silent,' when Karti asked where the Columbian and the Chinese had gone. The desolation of the prison compound, under floodlights, through the unshuttered meeting room windows, took away all appetite and Karti put down her spoon, half of her congee uneaten.

'Finish eat,' a guard ordered her.

'I don't want it,' Karti said.

'Every prisoner must eat all.'

Karti stood up. She wanted to be returned to her cell.

A Mexican standoff followed. Karti used it to calculate how much trouble she could cause them. Then one of the guards gave way and let her go back to her room.

At ten o'clock in the night the navigation lights flashed and the moon came up over the lonely turtle-shaped island. Karti thought about the gathering on the hill calmly now. Probably Wahyuni had been at work with her blog, rallying people for the Mid-Autumn holiday. What a nice moment of self-determination for those involved, fellow nannies who understood each other's situation better than anybody else, joined for a day in a common purpose. Karti was sorry to have missed it, smiling at her own dotty thought.

Without knowing why, she found that now her cares had lifted and gone away.

Her brow unknit and the amorphous shroud of grief was gone from her heart. She started to pursue ideas about her return to Java. Vague pictures formed in her imagination of what it would mean to return there. What about all the ex-maids from Hong Kong who must live in Java? They would surely cross her path and she would find new friends among them. And what of Aunt Kadek? Perhaps that lightly-made wish to join her in Bali could be fulfilled.

Standing at the window, watching the night sky, Karti decided what she would want to tell Aunt Kadek about Hong Kong. She would say that Victoria Park on Sunday was a little piece of Indonesia, not as it was at home but as it was in Hong Kong. For the crowds of nannies there, life had brought them an independence they hadn't asked for, and there was nothing to do, for those who were still young and whose minds were open, than to embrace it. They were detached from Indonesian and alone but for each other. The voices of religious groups and parents had lost their authority. Whatever direction they took now as people, it would start there in Victoria Park on Sundays, breathing the air of a relatively liberal, international city.

Then Karti began to wonder about the future lives of all her friends in Hong Kong, in forthcoming years, and shed tears again for her loss – loss of this seductive city state from her life.

The next morning, as Karti was standing at the window after breakfast, in front of an iridescent sea, somebody, perhaps Adele, slipped a page of the *Hong Kong Daily Post* under the door. A circled paragraph at the bottom related to the police action clearing the hilltop at Cape Collison of domestic helpers. Karti had hardly time to read it when the door opened and a male prison officer of smart appearance let two men in and closed the door on them.

The older of the two visitors was a Chinese man in his mid-fifties of medium height, in a lightweight white shirt and the trousers of a suit, whose leather belt and shoes were both dark and of a high finish. His complexion was that of a younger man, his hair was strong and well-groomed. The other fellow was a Western man of about her age, slim and somewhat tall. He was wearing a pair of spectacles and had tawny, centrally-parted hair.

'No two better golf courses in Hong Kong,' the older man said, joining Karti at the window and talking as if they were companions of long standing. 'Clearwater Bay and Sheko. Your view here—people would pay a great deal of

money for less. We have a friend in common, by the way, Commander Lam.'

Something seemed to have put this man in the best of moods. 'May we sit?' he said, halfway to sitting on the side table by the window.

'You are welcome to,' she said.

He sat here, Karti sat on the bed, and the only possible place for the younger man, unless he stood against the wall, was on the closed lid of the toilet, fixed there to the wall. He gamely let his weight on to it bit by bit, satisfied himself that the device could take him, then leaned back projecting comfort and dignity. He too seemed happy. Was a prison visit such a tonic for others?

'Comfortable?' the older man asked.

'Very,' said the younger man.

'Shall we speak in English or are you more comfortable with Cantonese?' the master of the visit said to her.

'I am better English.'

'And your name is Sukarti Rahardjo?'

'Yes'

'I am Terry Wong Tsz Lung. This is Marcus Devas, who stays with us. I will give you some news about your friend. They are looking after her at the Queen Mary Hospital and have set her leg; there's no concussion. . . Marcus, what was her name?'

'Fitriyah—sorry, I've forgotten the whole name.'

'But you spoke to the hospital?'

'Yes.'

'We call her Ink,' said Karti.

'Ink then. You are wondering why we're here? The driver of the car was my wife's niece. She was upset and came to us. Since then we have been helping the police. Commander Lam and I lunched yesterday.'

In that case, Karti thought, this was the family who had given the chic little fluff ball all her haughty airs.

'Don't think because of this we are hostile to you,' he said, doing a nice job of

reading her thoughts. ‘Not at all. In fact I have come to offer you a job. My wife, Venus, and I have a villa on Victoria Peak and for some time we have been looking for a new housekeeper. A domestic helper could take on the position if she had the right qualities. The circumstances of Sunday were of course unfortunate, but it occurred to both of us that you might be ideal. That’s what I’m here to find out. Please know that Commander Lam and I have looked into your background. Are you with me so far?’

‘I’m with you, if they let me out of here,’ Karti said.

‘Good,’ said Terry and everyone gave vent to tension-easing laughter, while Terry spent a moment smoothing his trousering at the thigh with quick sweeps of the hand.

‘As for that,’ Terry said, ‘you’ll be released tomorrow without charge, whether or not you join my wife’s staff. I have this from Commander Lam himself.’

Terry gave her a moment and Karti could only register pleasurable surprise, then he went on.

‘There has been media interest in your friends’ protest on the hill yesterday. We know our niece may not be faultless in Sunday’s affair and we are a family who wants to keep our privacy. That’s why we applaud Commander Lam’s decision not to charge you. Let no one suffer unfairly and let’s not allow anything to develop which might bring my niece into an unseemly hearing before a magistrate. She is returning to America soon. She will be out of the way. Now, the job. It’s a responsible one. Long irregular hours compensated by a good salary. How does it sound to you, Sukarti?’

Rather than simply saying yes (which she was saying to herself) Karti thought she’d better show some sophistication and so she asked about children. He named his son and daughter. They were almost grown-up and more or less fended for themselves. It was the house which would take the main toll on her time, that and the management of the the house staff.

‘At home in Java were you ever in trouble with the police?’

Terry asked the question, stood up and looked out to sea.

Karti felt herself reddening deeply. ‘I know some police but I never did anything wrong.’

‘Your late father was involved in politics wasn’t he?’

‘Yes.’

‘Do you mind explaining again why you smashed the car window. I promised my wife I would ask. We must understand this point clearly.’

‘I support my friend. That why.’

‘And you had no political objectives?’

Karti laughed at such a funny question. ‘I don’t think so, do you? Even big crowd was just picnic and holiday crowd, no politics.’

‘Good. Will you take the job then?’

Karti said yes but she had one condition. She wanted to travel to Java not far in the future.

‘A holiday?’ said Terry. ‘Yes, I think we could agree to a couple of weeks.’

‘Not holiday. But I come back if I can.’

‘Can you explain what you mean?’

Karti said no. If Terry was irritated he did not show it. ‘All right. We’ll remember to give you two weeks in March. That's in six months' time. Now shake my hand.’

Marcus, spectator until now, raised himself from the toilet. He beat the seat of his trousers thoroughly but not rudely. Karti shook hands with them both. Marcus’s hand was large and dry and she felt herself colouring all over again as she accepted it. The men made a business-like exit. My car will pick you up tomorrow, were Terry’s parting words.

Karti stood at the window. How could all this sink in? Was it really true that her run of ill-luck had come to a decisive, resounding end? Could it be believed that she would see her friends again and it was not all over?

She looked where Terry had, at golf courses on far off headlands, and she looked across at virgin Turtle Island. To be a housekeeper on Victoria Peak, in charge of other domestics. What a chance this was that had suddenly landed in her

lap. To make something of herself, way beyond anything her family could possibly imagine. And, colliding with all that, she had just got herself a fixture to go and find Santoso in Java, to kill or be killed.

In the morning they re-processed her. She got out of the brown prison trousers and yellow shirt into her own clothes and had her mobile phone and bag given back. In the car park of the prison Terry's driver was waiting for her, the boot open so she could see her suitcase. It was packed by Connie who had left a card wishing her good luck.

They set off. The driver was a young Chinese of pleasant manner in a black suit. Sitting in the back Karti opened the window and felt with delight the wind on her face as they crunched up the Cape Collison access road, the sea sparkling blue to the right, the green hill climbing to the right.

The ride took them on to a narrow winding public road which transited the hills back towards the city. Karti turned on her phone. A queue of messages arrived but the battery level plunged immediately into the red. She asked the driver for a charger. He pulled up the end of a wire from the foot-well but it had the wrong kind of socket. She decided to listen to the voice messages first.

The oldest was from her mother, recorded on Sunday evening. In a happy tone

her mother announced she was coming to see Karti in Hong Kong. In an injured tone she added she must, because Karti hadn't once returned to Java. The boys would be out of school in a few days for the *Eid el-alya* holiday and they would all come. It would be a sort of a honeymoon for Muhsonuddin and herself too. Even Idris, his wife and his baby were coming, equally keen to see her. Ring back and tell us where we should stay, was the message's final instruction. The second message, left on Monday, was a plea for Karti to call. Flight tickets needed buying on the hour. Ridhaan, Idris and her mother all spoke on the call, excitedly and with a trace of disillusionment, desperate to hear from her. A final message on Wednesday, just yesterday, declared the party had arrived in Hong Kong, eight in number, and were staying at Chungking Mansions. Her mother read out a Hong Kong telephone number in a hopeless voice and uttered a plaintive last prayer that Karti would get this message soon. Her hands shaking, Karti called the number.

'Mum.'

Her mother let out a wail. 'Karti, at last. Thank God. Are you all right?'

'Yes. But my phone's going to die any minute.'

'We're at Chungking Mansions waiting for you.'

'I'm coming. But I have to do something first. I'm in a car. I'll come soon.'

'Don't be lon–'

The phone went into hibernation.

The limousine arrived at unassuming Kei Shau Wan at the foot of the hill and moved west, sometimes crossing the tramlines, the traffic always thickening, passing Tai Koo Shing with its frontage of massive sea view apartments, then onto a regular city street in Quarry Bay. At Victoria Park they shot under the familiar footbridge on the big highway. High-end, traffic-laden Admiralty opened out. Karti saw it all and felt elated by the idea that eight of her family were only across the water in Tsim Sha Tsui. She was glad to see Hong Kong again. It seemed she had been away longer than she really had. And at the re-encounter she had a pleasant sense that her own footing was that of a resident, or at least a friend-of-long-standing.

Drawing on more of its power the car climbed Garden Road, St John's Cathedral on the right, then, with a suggestion of crampons and ropes, made the long ascent of Stubbs Road until it was gliding along Plantation Road, cooler by a degree up here on the heights of Victoria Peak. Gated residential complexes stood back from the road and Chinese fan palms predominated along pavements and in gardens. As a pair of gates opened and the car turned in. Karti glimpsed a name board reading 88 Plantation Road. They rolled over a short driveway, past a white parked Alphard with the bonnet open and a Filipino at work, to fetch up before a white house whose top floor was on the brow of the hill and whose lower floors clung to the descent in heavy tropical forest.

Terry Wong came out, dressed as before in a white shirt and the trousers of a charcoal grey suit. His smile was reassuringly friendly.

'Come in and meet my wife. We'll all have a short chat.'

She followed him into the house, along a hall and down a white spiral staircase to the living room, lofty and white-walled, which opened through french windows onto a swimming-pool terrace.

Venus was waiting and Terry introduced them. Venus was picture perfect in a pencil skirt and blouse. As they shook hands a touch of motherliness was conveyed by her as well as the confidence of a high-powered Chinese socialite.

'So we've sprung you from jail, have we?' said Venus, sitting on one of two white sofas adjacent to each other, her feet, in black court shoes, keeping their contact with the marble floor. She motioning for Karti to sit as well. 'My husband and I think the site at Cape Collison wasted on a prison. A hotel or a condominium block would be far more suitable.'

'I not see many prisoner,' said Karti.

'I knew it! Our administration is so wasteful.'

'We're not quite agreed, darling,' said Terry. 'It's too windy for a hotel—ask any golfer.'

'Then a wildlife sanctuary? I just don't think we need treat our criminals—of course we don't count you as one, Sukarti—to quite such a lavish view.' A slight

smile gave away her humour.

‘Once piece of advice, Sukarti,’ Venus went on. ‘If our niece, Cherry, makes an unexpected visit, just keep clear of her. Expect a funny look from her mother too—my sister. You may meet her in due course, but don’t worry, she’s on board about your appointment here.’

Venus raised herself in an adroit movement, rarely in one place for long as Karti was to learn. ‘Marcus is lurking somewhere and will show you around. We’ll talk again later.’ She disappeared up the staircase and Karti caught the sound of the front door and then the fainter sound of a car driving away.

‘Poon has some papers for you in the office,’ said Terry, casually going through a pile of mail on an occasional table. ‘He has your passport. I expect he’ll tell you to make a day trip to Macau to validate your new employment visa.’

Karti couldn’t put off any longer mention of her family’s arrival in Hong Kong. She said she had had no idea they were coming but now they were here, she longed to see them.

‘All right,’ said Terry. ‘We can manage a few more days without you. Discuss it with Poon.’

He too now took off up the staircase, with a heavier foot than his wife, and again she heard the front door and a second car driving away.

Marcus had appeared, swinging her suitcase at his feet, gripping the handle with both hands. She coloured.

‘Poon first?’ he said, colouring himself, ‘then I’ll show you where you’re sleeping.’

They found Poon in a small cluttered office annexed to the house, busy working at his desk, a small, bespectacled, middle-aged Chinese man in a sleeveless white shirt. He had been expecting her and had her passport ready. As predicted he invited her to take a round trip over the border, Macau or Shenzhen would do equally well, and if she kept the receipts he would reimburse her travel costs later. Marcus stood in the doorway, grinning and still taking the weight of her suitcase, then he led her outside to the terrace.

‘It has wheels you know,’ she said. ‘Shall I take it?’

‘No, thank you. I ought to be able to manage,’ he said gallantly, with another rash of embarrassment.

Midway down the garden path he stopped and issued Karti some verbal notes of information.

‘If I’m showing you around I suppose I’d better point out a few things. Garden here, obviously, but no gardener. I think you’ll be asked to find a replacement. The last one left in disgrace.’

‘Did he?’

‘Yes he did . . . talking of which, there are two housemaids who you’ll be managing, but I don’t think it’s for me to introduce them. Venus will do that. There’s also Ricky, Venus’s chauffeur. Now we’re going down here.’

In the garden around the swimming pool were travellers palms, bauhinias and yellow oleanders. Just the wax mallow was in flower, in red Turk’s hats. At a lower level still were staff rooms inside a white cottage with a flat roof. Marcus explained that he slept in the main house but Ricky, whom he’d just mentioned as Venus’s chauffeur, had a room here. They went into a dwarf-sized corridor with a musty smell. In an unoccupied room, clean and plain, he put down her suitcase. The room had two doors, one to the corridor and a second opening onto a clearing on the hill side of the cottage. The bush was worn back and, in a large tin can, there were the ashes of a fire. Ricky must relax here. Around the clearing the greenery closed in again in an inaccessible tangle, plunging down the precipitous hillside.

Karti begged use of Marcus’s phone and called her mother to say she would be there in an hour.

‘So, you’re going to meet your family, are you?’ said Marcus as they retraced their steps back up to the house and then up again to the driveway. ‘You’re out of luck about getting a lift though. Venus has gone in the Alphard – she was only waiting for you before going into town. Terry has gone to the office in the car you came in, so you’re left with two options, the bus or a taxi. Neither is easy up here.’

He pushed a button to open the electric gates. ‘Just walk along Plantation Road until you find the bus stop. They all go down to Central. I’ll come if you like.’

‘I think I can find,’ said Karti. ‘Are you English?’

‘Yes.’

‘Same my old employer. But she old lady.’

‘There are still a few of us around . . . I mean not that we’re any more entitled to be here than anyone else.’

‘I know England make Hong Kong, my employer told me.’

‘Yes, we certainly got it going. Listen, are you sure I can’t walk you to the bus stop?’

‘I’m ok.’

‘Straight on then. It’s quite a nice stroll, actually.’

He gave a wave and turned back to the house, and she looked back to watch his long, lanky stride.

The Rahardjos and the Muhsonuddins were holed up on the tenth floor of Chungking Mansions. Karti arrived on the ground floor to be met by the same scene she and Astuti had witnessed a few months earlier, squashed aisles between South Asian food counters and phone card desks manned by Africans. There was a queue at the lifts shared by trade and before Karti had reached the head of the queue the lift doors had opened and closed several times on an agglomeration of travellers, luggage and commercial goods, all of which took some time to unstick.

On the tenth floor the lift opened to a small lobby serving various anonymous doors, some fortified with metal cages. One door was wedged open and this led to a small hostel reception room. Here an Indian was watching a Hindu movie on an iPad behind the desk. He directed Karti to room 1014. It was a maze-like journey which began along a windowless corridor, then there was a security door requiring a four-digit code, then right and left turns along another corridor with small coffee stations in the corners under sconces of plastic roses.

Karti knocked and went into 1014 where she found her mother, Muhsonuddin and Hashanah – Muhsonuddin's first wife. It was a cramped room though refurbished and clean. On the air was the scent of clove cigarettes – the scent of home. They were all sitting on the double bed.

'Hello,' Karti said shyly, all sense of adulthood deserting her.

Her mother got off the bed and they hugged standing between the shoes in floor space no more than a metre square. The others wore smiles of welcome.

Her mother looked young and in good health but Karti hadn't seen her dressed as she was now in a flowing dress like a sari.

'Are you comfortable here?' Karti said.

'Yes, we're comfortable.'

On the bed Muhsonuddin chuckled.

'Oh, we're comfortable,' he said.

'We knew Hong Kong was going to be small,' said Hashanah. 'But not this small.'

'Mum, you've changed,' Karti said. 'But you look fine.'

'You've changed,' said her mother. 'Your hair is cut like a boy, you've no head shawl and is that a tattoo?'

'It is, Mum.'

A few tears came, mostly from her mother, and she made use of the square box of tissues above the toilet in the shower room.

Karti said, 'I don't dress like this all the time. It's for Sunday.'

'But if we remember correctly it's Thursday,' said Muhsonuddin. 'I admit Hong Kong has us confused. In this room we're not sure if it's night or day.'

'That's a long story,' said Karti.

Muhsonuddin took up much of the bed. He seemed perfectly relaxed – a big man with a large, almost ugly, face and shaggy eyebrows. He wore a buttoned shirt underneath a cotton suit of batik print. He clasped his feet, which were bare and emerged prominently from his trousers, self-consciously with his big hands.

'Sit, sit,' said Hashanah and Karti and her mother climbed onto the bed. Karti

had met Hashanah and Muhsonuddin many times before, lastly at her father's funeral, but to see Hashanah now was new. Hashanah had always been a quiet, compact person, intelligent and practical beside her now-shared husband. She had an oval face and pinned-back hair. She wore a sari identical to her mother's.

'The nannies here say you take your hijab off at the airport and you leave it there,' said Karti.

'As your mother said, Hong Kong has changed you,' said Hashanah, tilting her head and smiling.

'Isn't she changed,' said her mother, both a fond parent and smiling stranger.

'Yes, I've changed,' said Karti. 'But who hasn't?'

'Very true,' said Muhsonuddin. 'You mean all of us I suppose.' He chortled and produced a packet of cigarettes, offering one to Karti, who declined. As their shared husband lit up, Karti's mother and Hashanah said nothing. Perhaps they were thinking in such a happy moment it would be wrong to object and Augustaf, as they called him, may have anticipated this thought. Behind Hashanah's head was a curtained window with an air-conditioning unit penetrating it and Hashanah tried to turn it on but couldn't. 'Karti, we didn't know if this worked,' she said.

Kneeling on the mattress, Karti succeeded in laying bare the controls concealed under a hinged panel and turning the thing on. The view through the window was not nice: a sunless court of black walls and AC boxes, dropping to a sinister rubbish tip below banished from light and life. She had to admit the aptness of Muhsonuddin's comment. You could hardly tell whether it was day or night out there.

The AC box started to make its noises and her mother and Hashanah congratulated her. Looking at them in their complementary outfits her curiosity about this marriage started to becoming active in her mind. Evidently her mother and Hashanah were at one in how they wanted to dress for the holiday; there was certainly nothing to suggest interference by Muhsonuddin, who at this moment was keeping his cigarette going with an air of besiegement.

The corridor door opened and Ridhaan and Agus came in. Their room was

along the hallway. They were in kopiah hats and travel suits similar to their step-father's.

Karti used the bed as a trampoline to reach them. Ridhaan was still half a head taller than his brother and the more handsome, thirteen years old, half man, half boy, with caramel skin and a confident, raffish expression on his face. Agus, eleven years old now, was more the child. His ears stuck out and he had an affectionate, patient face, less dark than his brother's, as if he spent more time cloistered indoors.

'Handsome, handsome,' Karti cried, pinching Ridhaan's cheek and then Agus's. 'The days I've missed watching you grow up. And has Halal Fried Chicken really been closed to make way for a mall?'

'Afraid so, sister,' said Ridhaan. He put his hands in his pockets and sat on the edge of the single bed. Agus lined up beside him.

Perching half a trouser-seat back on the double-bed, Karti said: 'I miss our sleepy town. I miss our volcano.'

'You missed us more though, didn't you?' said Agus.

'Totally,' she said.

'Totally,' repeated Ridhaan. 'She totally missed us.'

'Yes, she totally did,' said Agus.

'The boys have been so excited,' said her mother. 'Agus is in love with airplanes and Ridhaan can't stop talking about the MTR.'

'Now, Karti, there are stations deep down with trains,' Ridhaan told her. 'A scary one even goes under the harbour. Imagine if the water broke through the ceiling. Everyone would drown. Just imagine it.'

'Like in a disaster movie you mean?'

'Exactly,' said Ridhaan with relish.

'We were in an airplane, Karti,' said Agus. 'We saw islands and ships in the sea.'

'I'm sure Karti will show us lots more now she's here,' said Hashanah.

'Yes, Karti, will you show us everything?' said Ridhaan.

‘We want to see everything,’ said Agus.

‘First eat,’ said her mother. ‘Karti can first show us Chinese food.’

Now Idris and Ernawati arrived, Ernawati holding a baby boy in her arms. There was no more room inside so they stood at the threshold. Idris introduced his wife to Karti. Ernawati was not from Nadiyudan, she was from Yogyakarta. She was pretty but plainly dressed, obviously fully occupied by the infant. Idris was clean-shaven and was wearing jogging clothes. He had just taken a run along the waterfront, he said, where he had marvelled at the beautiful crowded office towers on the opposite bank. He was tall in the doorway and he grinned at her. Dika, the baby, was awake and the two grandmothers put their hands out for him. Ernawati sat Dika on the bed between them and he lolled happily enough there for a moment. Augustaf stubbed out his cigarette.

‘He looks just like his father,’ said Karti, putting her cheek to the baby’s and smelling him.

‘You’re in Hong Kong, little one,’ said her mother. ‘How do you like that?’

‘He likes it fine,’ said Hashanah. ‘Meet your auntie, baby.’

‘What a relief that the vanished girl has finally reappeared,’ said Idris. ‘Tell me I’m right, you didn’t lose your phone, did you? My bet is it was something else.’

At once they were all looking at her in concerted interest. Her disappearance had been vexed over endlessly between them.

She did her best. On Sunday a police-woman had bagged her phone at the police station and it was only returned a few hours ago, a crumb of battery life remaining. It was true a friend of hers had been hit by a car. Her friend was ok but for one reason or another a lot of things in her own situation had been thrown into the air. Anyway, that was all water under the bridge now. Here she was and here she could remain for a few days holiday.

In slight bemusement they all listened. Those unsatisfied by the explanation looked towards her mother. If, in her tact, her mother let the explanation be, that must be a cue for the others to do the same.

‘All that matters now is that you’re here,’ her mother agreed. ‘You can tell us the rest another time.’

Karti unpocketed her phone, physical evidence for her story. ‘I’m desperate to charge it.’

With a paw as speedy as a monkey’s Ridhaan prised the phone out of her fingers. Agus crowded around for his turn to handle the exciting, if inoperative, device.

‘So they take your headscarf and issue you with a smart phone instead?’ said Augustaf. ‘At the airport, I mean.’

‘I’m ashamed of my relic,’ Idris said, and waved his fake BlackBerry.

‘Have you messages inside, Karti?’ Ridhaan asked with tilted face. ‘From your boyfriend?’

‘No, silly.’

‘Karti, will you sleep in our room? There’s an extra bed,’ said Agus.

‘Yes, if there’s room.’

‘There’s some.’

On the way down in the lift the group found themselves pinned around a pallet of boxed electrical goods, jammed in with six smiling Indians.

As they made their way to the street Karti asked after her grandparents. Her mother said they had made the move to Muhsonuddin's place too, building their own small annex. Their unavailing adventures in Semarang had taken some of the stuffing out of them but they remained active. For something to do they were growing rice as tenant farmers on some land which belonged to a Chinese man who owned three K-marts in town. The harvest was coming in so they couldn't travel. They sent their love and were saddened not to be participating in the visit to Hong Kong. Ridhaan butted in and began to tell Karti that living at Muhsonuddin's wasn't so bad. On the one hand it was now farther to school every day, on the other hand the garden was bigger and, past a grove of trees, there was a direct route to the rice fields which mounted the slopes with countless little footpaths and hamlets, so there was much to explore and many adventures to be had. Karti remembered Muhsonuddin's house as a plain bungalow with a blue, tiled roof,

identical to those of half the town. She remembered at the back the copse of dry trees that was living quarters for chickens, and the cleared space where Augustaf kept his aviary. She used to watch the Javanese sparrows inside with Idris when she was fifteen years old, happy the aviary was large enough to allow the birds short flights.

Karti guided the party out to the street behind Chungking Mansions. The buildings here contained restaurants and shops at ground-level and monolithic office space over countless floors above. She felt sure of finding an ordinary, clean-looking restaurant of the local type to show them Chinese food. There was indeed a suitable one, a bright-lit, square room dominated by round dining tables. Some were strewn with the remains of meals already finished, at others large family groups were in the middle of their meals. They walked into the noise that only Chinese mainlanders can generate on holiday and found a table. A waitress came quickly, brushed the table down, then returned to thump bowls and spoons on it, apparently wishing to make as much clatter as possible.

Karti asked for boiled water and demonstrated how the Chinese washed their crockery and chopsticks, as she'd been taught by Connie.

'Don't they clean the bowls in the kitchen?' said her mother, taken aback, and Karti said, yes, but the Chinese liked to clean them at table too. Ridhaan and Agus had separated their chopsticks and were playing with them and everyone was ready to eat, with chopsticks and spoons, if not fingers.

Families in Nadiyudan were not accustomed to eating pork, it was not halal and the shops in Java couldn't very well stock it, but here it featured prominently on the menu. When a waitress came by carrying a dish of BBQ pork for another table Augustaf looked at it approvingly. 'I think we should have some of that,' he said. That made it easy for Karti, for many of the best Chinese dishes were pork dishes. She ordered up a meal pleased by Muhsonuddin's rule breaking attitude. They were on holiday after all.

Augustaf and Idris, father and son, put their heads together and decided to order some beer. The waitress decided to be obtuse. Idris had to tap the picture of

the bottle on the menu several times with implacable resolution before the woman admitted she understood the wishes of these foreigners.

'She's rough, yes?' Idris said to Karti.

'Yes,' said Karti. 'That's their way. There's no sell.'

'Just the opposite.'

Karti was feeling very proud. Here her family were at table, Indonesians on holiday, undemonstrative and polite, their dollar as good as the next person's. Their burnished, tea-coloured faces made her feel deeply relaxed. She looked at her mother whose hair was falling on her shoulders because neither she nor Hashanah had worn a headscarf to go out. She thought, I may be a different person in Hong Kong but so is my mother.

'Mum, how do you like what you've seen of Hong Kong so far?'

'It's very impressive. I'm glad to see it. I don't know I'd want to live here though.'

'I'm glad you came.'

'Don't you miss Nadiyudan? Or do you love it here so much?'

'I miss Nadiyudan. Maybe I like Hong Kong—I don't know.'

Food arrived and Ridhaan began eating suspiciously but hungrily. Kids had the least experience of these dishes. He leaned across to confide something to her. 'Santoso's out with Brata. Brata doesn't deal with him now. He's not Second Mayor any more.'

Karti held his hand under the table and said nothing.

All the time, Karti had been aware of Idris. It was amazing to find him older and married. She wanted to watch him and see how he had changed but when she looked at him he smiled back as if he had been waiting for her attention . . . and Ernawati smiled too. Ambushed! Karti looked down at her food, her eyes swimming in confusion. Oh God, was there a shared thought between them? Had somebody launched her as a candidate to be Idris's second wife? Did the couple expect her to climb on board their marriage, just as her mother had got aboard Muhsonuddin and Hashanah's?

What did Ernawati know? Idris would have talked to her and she would know that Karti and Idris, childhood sweethearts, had been all but engaged and, but for her father's murder, would have been married. But this past did not seem to worry Ernawati, judging from the friendly look in her eyes. Obviously she saw Karti as no threat. Polygamy was not a fixed Javanese practice, it was an import from the Middle East. Yet here was Muhsonuddin as a standing example of someone with two wives, and it seemed to be working out. Hashanah and her mother did appear like two adult sisters. But for son to copy father? Suddenly that phone call from Idris a few weeks ago, telling Karti about his marriage, took on new meaning. Karti blushed deeper and avoided looking at them, hoping none of her confusion was being picked up by their marital radar.

With the meal reaching its conclusion, discussion about the next day began. Muhsonuddin, sedate and comfortable, launched a series of light enquiries towards his wives. Will you go *shopping*, was his first question, giving that word weight and respect.

'Yes,' said her mother. 'We want to see the Ladies' Market and Shoe Street. Karti will show us. And Ernawati will come too.'

'And Flower Market and Bird-cage Street,' Hashanah added.

'But you won't go tonight?' Muhsonuddin affected surprise.

'Tomorrow. It's ten now.'

'Ah.' Muhsonuddin allowed himself to be edified by the answer.

'We're carrying a lot of Sekar's money,' Hashanah told Karti. 'We've promised to buy her a Chanel handbag.'

'Sekar, Brata's wife?' said Karti in aghast tones.

Hashanah stalled, embarrassed, her mother shrugged a yes and the subject was dropped.

The lights went out in the restaurant before they got to the door. Other than Muhsonuddin and Idris, who liked the look of a bar across the road, everybody was ready to go back to the hostel.

'Mum, coming to Hong Kong was the best thing you've ever done.'

‘It was, wasn’t it? You know who’s paying? You. All that money you sent home, I saved part of it.’

‘I thought Muhsonuddin was building a mall with Brata.’

‘Yes, but he hasn’t received any money, it’s only promised. Augustaf has no money. I thought he had money but he doesn’t. He’s as impractical as your father really. Hashanah has a little. We live on almost nothing at home.’

‘Your fault for marrying him.’

‘He makes me happy.’

‘Yes, I admit he seems to.’

The party reached the rear entrance of Chungking Mansion.

‘Will you go and make friends with Augustaf now?’ her mother said. ‘You don’t need to come back with us this early. I’ll just take these tired children to bed.’

‘Ok, Mum.’

Karti saw them into the lift, waved goodnight and turned back. She was surprised Muhsonuddin had no money, but liked him more for it. In the bar across the street from the restaurant father and son were installed at a booth table drinking beer. It was one of those bars with peanut shells on the floor, sash-wearing sales girls walking around looking for orders, muted televisions in corners showing sport and a band hidden somewhere playing covers. Men brayed loudly at each other, demonstrating what good sports they were. Karti ordered a beer from one of the girls in the green sashes.

‘The Chinese have been in Java for three hundred years,’ Augustaf was saying to Idris above the noise. ‘But the Chinese merchant has not always enjoyed an easy relationship with us. This is a good opportunity to see them in their own home, so to speak. We might like them more here.’

‘We are provincials,’ said Idris, with an emphasis derived purely from the beer he consumed. ‘We like Nadiyudan and we don’t like foreigners.’

They made room for her and Muhsonuddin at once switched his attention to her.

‘I can understand why you might loathe our Mayor—and his wife,’ he said, ‘but may I tell you that Brata was very different when he was young, before he married. I knew him at school. He wrote poetry. He was a high-minded, well-mannered young man while his father was still alive. Does that interest you at all?’

‘It doesn’t much,’ Karti said, although it did, a little.

‘Do you know, your father and I decided to go into politics for the same reason and that reason was money. I don’t mean stealing from public funds, of course.’ He smiled. ‘Your father was satisfied enough driving the hills and giving the farmers a good deal, but there comes a time when money is important. I’m sure you know how hurt your father was, Karti, that he could not send you to college. He said as much to me and that was why he had designs to raise his income. We hit on the same idea of entering the mayoral race. He was thinking of Ridhaan’s and Agus’s education in years ahead. So your father and I converged. We could each call up a separate constituency, the farmers, the Islamists. We realised that by making an alliance we might get somewhere.’

‘He never said much about you,’ said Karti.

‘What is there to say about me, except that I’m over-large?’

In all her severity, Karti had to grant he had a sense of humour.

‘Perhaps you think I’m only out for self-aggrandisement?’ he added.

Karti was too embarrassed by Muhsonuddin’s candour to answer.

‘Yes, politics is full of such people. But have some trust in your father—and your mother for that matter. They’ve been prepared to put up with me.’

Uncertain of her response, Karti kept her mouth shut. Idris took no part in the conversation but watched Karti from under his eyelids, his head back on the seating, a smile on his face.

‘For all my youth I was devout,’ Muhsonuddin said. ‘But our religion wore me out. Perhaps at heart I like comfort more than rigour. I am a Javanese man, after all. Your mother tries to change me for the better. With two wives teaching me perhaps there is some hope. And what is the point of all these words, Karti? I’m trying to win you over. You’ve seen me eating pork. I’m drinking beer now. Admit

it, you're surprised I'm not the inflexible imam you thought I was.'

'You are different,' Karti conceded.

'Well, that's something,' Muhsonuddin said. 'Your mother would like us to get along, wouldn't she?'

'All right, Augustaf, I like you.' Karti smiled from father to son. 'Since you were good enough for my father and because you are good enough for my mother, you are good enough for me.'

'Wonderful,' said Muhsonuddin. 'Wonderful.'

Karti awoke at six-thirty. The small, permanently curtained window on the hemmed-in courtyard outside offered no clue if it was light or dark. Leaving Ridhaan and Agus to sleep she went out into the corridor and found her mother already in the coffee-making corner, slightly hunched from being just risen, wearing cotton pyjamas. Karti was wearing boxer shorts and a T-shirt and they were both barefooted. The corridor was silent and windowless and there was the self-consciousness of being in skimpy clothes here where anyone might walk past. On the corner table under the sconce of plastic roses was a water heater, a tray of all-in-one coffee sachets and a stack of plastic throw-away cups.

'How did you sleep, Karti?'

'First Ridhaan smothered me, then Agus. It was nice. How about you. Does Augustaf snore?'

'All men do, sometimes.'

'I like Augustaf, Mum, we made friends at the bar last night.'

'Good.'

Her mother's hair was long and hadn't been combed yet. Karti played with it while her mother bent and made two cups of coffee.

'Maybe I'll grow my hair like you,' Karti said.

They stood face to face. Karti looked searchingly into her mother's face – well-complexioned, dainty, grave – taking satisfaction from doing so. She wanted to repeat this inspection often in the days ahead.

'How are you, mum?'

'It was a relief that you appeared yesterday.'

'I've had a funny week.'

'We can't avoid being happy now—all of us.'

'No, we can't. You and Hashanah get along very well.'

'We do. They both make me happy. But Ridhaan can be wild. He resents having a new father. For Agus it's easier, being younger.'

Ridhaan showed his head along the corridor, then Agus. Agus ran along the corridor in his pyjamas.

'Shhhhhhh.' Her mother padded down the corridor to meet them and shepherd the boys back into their room, Karti followed. There was a slight fug inside that Karti perceived this time. They all sat in the half-darkness and the boys woke up properly.

'What are we going to do today?' said Ridhaan. 'Can the four of us do something?'

'I don't think so,' said her mother.

'Why, why?'

'Because we're one family now. You know that.'

'But we're the only Rahardjos.'

'But we have to think of everybody. You don't want the others to feel left out, do you? Let's simply make the most of moments like these.'

'I suppose so,' said Ridhaan dejectedly.

'In other words, Mum has to obey Augustaf and Hashanah,' said Karti. 'What happens otherwise, Mum? Do you have to sleep the wrong end of the bed? Do you

have to wash all the smalls? Ridhaan, we're the minor family.'

'That's what we are. You said it, Sis, we're the minor family.'

'We're minor,' chimed Agus.

Her mother looked at Karti and the others with slight disappointment.

'Nobody's minor, don't be silly children, all of you. We're all one family and everybody is equal.'

'Just teasing,' said Karti, putting her arms around her mother. Her brothers followed suit and they all scrimmaged over their mother on the bed.

Collecting himself Ridhaan said, 'Karti, let's all go and have breakfast. I once saw Augustaf eat five fried eggs. I bet he can beat that today.'

Karti participated in three days of tourism among the nine-strong Muhsonuddin–Rahardjo family group. They formed their own ball, engrossed in each other, and none of Hong Kong's sights really touched anyone, except as a light brush of amusement or delight.

Like all sightseers they took the Star Ferry to Central and then the Peak Tram up to the Visitor Centre at the top of Victoria Peak. In the ferry Ridhaan and Agus put their chins on the window ledge and watched the waterfront of Hong Kong island coming closer. Karti watched the waterfront too, with almost a tourist's eye. On the port side were the office towers of Toshiba, Epson and Panasonic, evidence of Japanese electronics' past supremacy in Hong Kong. Then the pageant of commercial history went on westwards with IFC2 tower, eighty-eight floors of computer-modelled magnificence. A tall city and a taller green hill, each setting the other off. Karti showed Agus where she thought 88 Plantation Road was, somewhere up on the hill. Later they looked from the heights of Victoria Peak at the great hive of human life where they'd had their breakfast, and let their eyes

wander over the bays and green hills of the extended city. Then Ridhaan practised his *silat* fighting moves against Agus and they all went and had noodle soup with prawn wontons at Mak's café, which Muhsonuddin had researched on the internet, being something of a gourmand.

The second day brought the self-promised trip to shopping mall and market for the ladies while Muhsonuddin went to acquaint himself with Kowloon mosque and Idris took the children to the park. The shopping party emerged from the MTR onto the febrile streets of Mong Kok, market streets packed with shoving people.

'Why do Chinese shove?' said Hashanah

'Try shoving someone else, they won't mind,' said Karti. 'I think some Chinese don't really notice shoving.'

'Stick up for Hong Kong all you like, but I don't like it.'

They walked around. In Canton Road a queue of six people stood in front of Hermes and, at the larger Louis Vuitton store, five shop-fronts wide, the queue was three times longer. East Asians circled the pavements offering to take visitors off to bargains on Rolex watches, real or fake, and to tailoring shops which made shirts and suits, or, in a last throw, to their man who sold hashish. They settled in the queue outside Chanel. Hashanah and her mother produced head shawls and dark glasses.

'We don't want to be stared at by rude sales girls,' Hashanah explained.

'As if we're from the jungle –' said her mother

'– or an old people's home,' finished Hashanah.

They were all a little awed by Chanel but in no hurry to leave. Hashanah purchased the handbag Sekar wanted with bundles of US dollar bills. They went back to the hostel and put the handbag in the safe, then took the MTR to Central and went up to the IFC mall where, after walking a little and seeing the clothes prices with disbelief, they found a café where they could have a drink and rest their feet.

They had been taking it in turns to carry Dika. When Karti had him he played with the silver ring in her ear. As they sat down in the coffee shop he dived

towards her breast on the search for his own refreshment. Flushing, Karti handed him back to Ernawati, who went to find somewhere to feed him. A black cloud came over Karti. She was painfully reminded that life for a domestic helper in Hong Kong was fundamentally arid, it was a life without the consoling presence of their own men and children. So many employers thought of their helpers only in terms of the service they could provide, not as people in the midst of their own quickly-consumed lives. Karti shrugged to break free from her gloom. Her mother and Hashanah read her face and looked as if they understood. At that moment Karti would have liked a headscarf to hide behind.

Then to Hong Kong Park to find the Javanese sparrows in the aviary. Hashanah took photographs for Augustaf. Near the pond they found a tree labelled as a Javanese Apple Tree and Hashanah took photos of that too.

Day three was the last full day of the visitors' holiday. They spent it in Macau, a ninety-minute ferry ride away.

They visited the thick-walled Portuguese Fort and admired the multi-coloured shells of nearby casinos, then took a taxi for lunch at Fernandos on Coloane Island. Having walked on the black sand beach they found a bus stop, intending to go to Cotai Strip.

Domestic helpers were already in the queue, both Filipina and Indonesian, and though everybody was able to get on the bus when it arrived, not all could sit. Karti found herself standing on the deck by the central doors shoulder to shoulder with her mother among domestic helpers of all kinds. The others had climbed deeper into the bus. There was a subdued atmosphere among passengers, the weariness and low spirits of late Sunday afternoon. The grinding gears and jolting halts seemed to reflect the pinched morale felt by all those nannies squeezed together. Conscious of the atmosphere, neither Karti nor her mother spoke. Instead their eyes were both drawn to a young Indonesian tomboi with her hand wrapped in a handhold in front of them. She had a soft beautiful face, a beautifully smooth complexion, and a scar on her cheek, and next to her, sitting down, was an Indonesian femme of similar youth, a sulky beauty with big eyes and dark hair in

profusion, who, as they watched, first buried her head in the tomboi's shirt then looked up in despair several times. Obviously they were both nannies, whose hearts were plugged into the progress of the bus, making its stops from the beach to the ferry terminal, bringing them towards the end of their Sunday. Perhaps all Karti's family, even Ridhaan and Agus, were curious about the nannies on the bus, since their own Karti was one too. Karti watched her mother watch the femme and the tomboi. No doubt, for her mother, curiosity was sharp. Karti could almost read her thoughts. Here were two young Javanese girls but they were not like any couple Nadiyudan could tolerate. Did her mother see some new aspect of Karti's own existence in Hong Kong for the first time? She might have.

They disembarked and went into the Venetian casino complex on the Cotai Strip. Her mother clung to her, arm in arm, holding her close, as if pulling her away from the sadness of life as a domestic helper.

There were frescos on the ceilings and, in shop windows, wrist watches and jewellery on display. At the canal-side frontage of an Italian city a gondolier burst our terrifyingly into song. The sky dome was painted blue in guarantee of a twenty-four hour summer's day.

In the casino halls Muhsonuddin enjoyed the Russian dancers who jumped out to perform on the red-carpeted aisles you never knew when. There were champagne bars with gilt chairs. Still arm in arm, Karti and her mother wandered through one Renaissance hall after another watching the leathern-faced Chinese playing baccarat: middle-aged, hard-shoed people in padded winter jackets who brought a tincture of Chinese rural life to the Florentine palazzo.

Someplace in the afternoon the necessity of saying goodbye to her family slipped into Karti's brain together with a prick of anxiety about her big new job. Probably the same consciousness of things drawing towards their end fell over all because the bus ride back to the ferry terminal was another subdued affair, although by now all the domestic helpers were off the streets, off the buses, back indoors in their situations. At the terminal Karti got her employment visa stamped, then they boarded the boat back to Hong Kong. At Chungking Mansions, close to

midnight, they crowded feverishly into one bedroom. The return flight to Surabaya was early the next morning. Revived by the crush, the children examined the souvenirs they'd picked up. When everybody was cheerful again they went out for a midnight feast.

The next morning Karti rode with them on the shuttle bus to the airport. The steel and glass terminal building was invitingly clean and airy, just like one of the Hong Kong malls where hours could be spent in comfortable inferiority. Karti took a long look at her mother's face and tried to make a memory print for the months or years ahead. The travellers joined the queue moving towards a cordon of immigration officers. Muhsonuddin carried all the passports in his large hands. Karti watched them until they were beyond the partition. Then, walking alone, she began her own, shorter journey to Victoria Peak.

88 PLANTATION ROAD

Each day in the main house began with Venus and Terry's breakfast. Venus didn't need to rise at the same time as her husband but it was something she liked to do, and she would pour Terry's coffee while he looked at the newspapers. They chatted like any long-married couple and they didn't want anyone there except the maid, Mary-Ann, to fry an egg or serve a bowl of congee. Then Terry would go up to his waiting driver and Venus would go to dress.

When Venus reappeared, set for a day which as often as not involved a morning function and a lunch, she would give her instructions to Karti. This was largely a matter of the meals wanted that day, of areas around the house that needed attention, dry-cleaning that had to be taken out or collected, and sundry household matters of that sort. When Venus was ready to go out Ricky the chauffeur was waiting, with the central doors of the Alphard slid open and the seating brushed.

Ricky was a grey-haired Filipino who had been working for the Wongs for more than ten years. He now shared the cottage with Karti and was nominally under her charge, but his stock was high in the family and Karti had no need to supervise him. He spent his days on the drive, working on the Alphard while making long telephone calls home to Luzon, his ear weighted with a blue-tooth device in typical chauffeur fashion. He drove Karti into Central as often as she liked, as she had to buy the food and wine of the house.

There were two domestic helpers, Mary-Ann in the kitchen and Mitch in the laundry room, both Filipinas in their late twenties and both single mothers who had quit their Philippine lives to earn money here, while their children were left in

the hands of their families. They were both second-jobbers in the Hong Kong market and shared typical Hong Kong maid's quarters in the main house. Behind a door in the kitchen was their cramped bedroom, tiny shower stall and toilet.

The gardener who had been dismissed was Ricky's nephew. This youth had been bedding both maids at different times in the garden shed, and when this came to light it had caused a great deal of trouble between the maids, who were rivals at the best of times. Venus set things straight by firing the gardener, while Ricky wisely kept his distance, not trying to save his nephew's skin. His loyalty belonged to the Wongs and his nephew had embarrassed him and deserved what he got.

Of the remaining staff, one was Poon, the book-keeper. He reported directly to Terry and went home in the evening to Mrs Poon. Karti had a chair in Poon's office though she spent little time there. Then there was the permanent crew of the yacht, *Venus III*, two Filipino men, Danito and Joselito. They were, to the extent they were members of staff, under Karti's charge. The boat was moored in Aberdeen Harbour at the yacht club. Finally, there was an industrious Chinese lady who came in by bus daily to help with bed-making and cleaning.

As Marcus had correctly guessed, one of Karti's first jobs was to find a new gardener. She had to think from the employer's point of view. At first she imagined giving the job to one of her friends. Then she decided if she didn't chose a professional she would be failing the Wongs. As she fretted about this it became clear only part-time help was needed, which simplified the matter, excluding her friends who required full-time roles. She approached an employment agency and they quickly found her a Chinese botanical student from Hong Kong University. This individual had no interest in the domestics and struck up a rapport with Poon, and was ideal.

For some time, between Karti and Venus, a simple employer–employee relationship existed. Venus gave out her instructions and Karti executed them. On Victoria Peak employers didn't live have to live shoulder to shoulder with their domestics and there was more opportunity for distance and protocol. However, with time, as Karti proved herself a capable and reliable person, a note of

informality and confidence came into Venus's manner. She wanted Karti to know more about food and wine and gave her a few rapid hours of coaching. The last housekeeper had gone to work for more money with a family on Black's Link. In confiding this information it was apparent that Venus was no longer sorry to have lost her. The high turnover of staff on the hill was an issue for all employers. Karti did mention some of her friends now and Venus told her that opportunities would undoubtedly come up.

Karti now had a problem of sorts. Too many people wanted to make love to her. There was Idris, Marcus, Tari, and Rafli, the DJ at Star Bar.

She and Idris had been Skyping regularly using their tablets. Karti took the calls in her room in the cottage while Idris was either roaming somewhere in Nadiyudan or at home when he fell into a compere role, allowing Ridhaan, Agus or her mother into shot to fire questions and greetings. Marvelling at the technology, even the Sukimuns grabbed a bit of time with their granddaughter – they had heard all about the Hong Kong trip. Sometimes Ernawati sat Dika on her lap in front of the screen and the two of them simply enjoyed the baby together, as it drooled, made odd sounds and occasionally stretched its hands out. It wasn't surprising Idris sometimes took his tablet out and about town. At Masduki's he found her old boss polishing glasses, a cracked dark face who peered at the screen doubtfully and offered Karti her old job back. Idris took the tablet to show her the new mall being constructed where Halal Fried Chicken had been. Idris himself was always pleasing to the eye, his caramel face, big grin and girlish eyelashes

swooping up to the screen and away again as he said something to her. He showed her Jepara Street in the pouring rain. He took her to the rice fields beyond Muhsonuddin's garden. They watched the aviary.

Karti did her best to make time for these calls. The sub-text, so clear in the restaurant in Hong Kong without anything being said, was the same: the way was open for her to become his second wife, quitting Hong Kong and raising a family alongside Ernawati, if only she wanted to take that step.

These calls were easier on Idris, whose time was his own. Outside town the farmers worked hard on their land but in town the day was mostly made over to God. The five daily observances, when the mosques called people to prayer from the minarets, gave occupation enough and if some people were lax that was their own affair. Idris was a homebody. As secretary for his father's party he attended weekly meetings and performed the odd administrative task. If his father had somewhere to go he might keep him company and from there visit his own friends. Often he had nothing to do, and when he had left Ernawati and Dika at home he just wanted Karti to share with him the rain and the town – and she knew it.

He was quietly persistent and she was non-committal. She was thinking that she wanted Idris to find a job. If his father stood for Mayor again, the campaign would not start for another year and its outcome was uncertain. A family needed a steady income of its own. Idris was too much like other men in Nadiyudan, free-floaters. Many got off lightly at the hands of their spouses – rarely pulled up and admonished. During one Skype session she warned him, 'I'm not the same as before, Idris. I could not live like an ordinary Javanese woman. Hong Kong has changed me. I'm trouble for a man now. I don't like loafers and layabouts. I will cajole you and be a bulldog. I want my kids to have the opportunities we never had.' To this Idris said that he was prepared to change. He said it sincerely and to be fair she admitted his quest to add her to the marriage was not selfish but within the bounds of what might be good for everyone. Yet he had seen 88 Plantation Road, when she had given him the guided tour through the eye of her tablet. He knew she was fluent in English and had a good salary. He could no doubt see that

Hong Kong promised other things for her. He told her he wanted to do more and live up to her but felt unable. Nadiyudan had its limitations. He had no start-up money to begin something and no career experience. He cared about the farmers, about the well-being of his family, about Java, but he mixed with friends in town even less ambitious than himself. Perhaps he should think of studying English or Chinese, she said. Idris was prepared to entertain the suggestion. On the upside he was only twenty-five years old. He was no sloth and he was ready to work hard if an opportunity presented itself.

Always they flirted with each other.

'Karti, you have such lovely twinkling eyes. Show me what you are wearing today.'

Her costume these days was trainers over ankle socks, tailored shorts and a collared polo shirt like those Venus occasionally wore. She had keys in her pocket on a chain attached to her belt—not a fashion statement, just a convenience for the chatelaine she was, in charge of four or five store cupboards.

'Karti, you are still slim. Strong too, but not too strong. Those bare legs of yours would have people talking on Diponegoro Street.'

'Everyone goes bare-legged here. I can't move in heavy clothes. It would be too stifling.'

She was always the one to cut short their chats. 'Gotta go, Idris. Ricky the driver's waiting. The shopping won't do itself.'

Venus liked Karti to do all the food shopping at CitySuper, the emporium of choice for Victoria Peak residents. It was a quick drive down the hill and there was parking at basement level. When Venus sent her there the first time she said to be on the look out for movie stars.

Marcus came along on these rides. One of Venus's ideas was that Marcus could teach her about Western food and wine. He took her to the cheese counter to show her English cheddar but she was the first to spot the New Zealand flag stuck in the cheese on a cocktail stick. 'All right, sausages then,' said Marcus. 'They *are*

English.' But the sausages were German or American. 'I give up,' he sighed. 'At least remember English jam. That is good.'

Angel left stickers on the fridge enumerating her dietary needs. Tofu was always top of the list. 'Find me tofu, Marcus,' Karti would say. 'Not sausages. Tofu.'

'If I may tell you one thing,' said Marcus in the wine section, with the last of his confidence, 'not all table wine has to cost 250 HKD a bottle. In France a bottle need be no more than 30 HKD.'

'Here, every one 250 bottle,' said Karti. 'Must pay.'

'Yes, I suppose you're right,' he agreed, defeated.

Neither of them would have recognised a Chinese movie star if they'd seen one but they both liked the supermarket and the mall. Meanwhile, Ricky remained stubbornly in the Alphard in the basement as he loathed supermarkets of any kind.

Now Karti understood Marcus's footing in the household. Back in England his father was connected in some way with the Wongs' business empire. Marcus himself had graduated from Oxford in the summer in Modern Languages. Mandarin was one of them and he had spent a year in Beijing on the course. It was Venus's idea that Marcus should come and stay. When you have a large staffed house you do little by inviting an extra guest. Marcus could help Angel (their daughter), with her Oxbridge application—she wanted to take a degree in either the History of Art or Economics—coach Henry (their son), and keep the family generally up to scratch in their English. Meanwhile he could discover Hong Kong, take whatever opportunities came up to use his Mandarin and learn some Cantonese. When the proposal had reached Marcus through his father it had made sense. Like many of his fellow graduates he did not know what job route to take but he knew ideally it would involve China.

When she was free in the evenings, sitting outside the staff cottage with Ricky in that clearing at the back, Marcus came to find her there. Ricky made a fire in the can that had once contained five litres of car oil. The flame was welcome as there could be a chill. They had logs to sit on. For something to do Ricky liked to

barbeque bananas in their skins on a mesh tray borrowed from the kitchen. He was taciturn but a story could sometimes be got out of him about Luzon, his province. Marcus was fascinated to hear of life in Indonesia and in the Philippines, if either of them were willing to share a story. He started to talk about learning Bahasa. He said the famous British orientalist Robert Fleming had learnt twenty-two languages, so by that score Marcus was only beginning as a polyglot. He said he wanted to live in Java, to do some useful work there. Karti did not take the bait on whether she was expected to accompany him. 'You don't know one thing about Java, do you?' she said instead. He sadly agreed. His girlfriend was called Sal, he told them. They had graduated together and she was now in India. She had worn very low-cut tops at Oxford and when in a bad mood used to round on him for ogling her. She was very strong, he said, digging wells now all over India.

'Why she show so much breast if she don't want people look?' was Karti's remark. 'That not make sense.'

The yacht, *Venus III*, was a white-hulled motor cruiser capable of forty knots. Danito and Joselito worked full-time keeping her clean and ship-shape. Each family member had their own cabin with a cache of clothes in the wardrobe. When they took to sea at weekends Marcus came as a guest and Venus liked to have Karti there too. Danito and Joselito took care of everything so Karti and Marcus sailed essentially as passengers. When the yacht quit its mooring at Aberdeen and set a course for an island bay forty minutes away, the two of them would find somewhere out of the way on deck to sit while the family disappeared into their cabins as if still at home, only emerging one by one when the boat was at anchor, changed into swim-wear or beach-wear. Terry and Venus went on their launch to pay visits to friends on neighbouring boats at the same anchorage, popular because of its sandy bay and clear water. At intervals during the day Henry and Angel relinquished their iPads to swim. Both were good in the water, adept at diving one side of the boat and reappearing the other, their fine bodies floating in the sunshine-lit, wobbling water, which was clear to five metres. Karti watched them, afraid of water herself, keeping a life-saving flotation ring near at hand and

Marcus lay in his Bermuda trunks beside her. She watched for fishermen and if she saw one they'd try to wave him over. Danito negotiated for the catch and they looked down from the rail.

Daneto and Joselito were expert at scaling, gutting and grilling fish. Terry was the appreciative eater. He was different at sea and liked to wear a white captain's hat, oily shorts and a sun-bleached shirt.

In Marcus, Karti had her first Western friend. He was thoughtful and well-mannered. For instance, having kept her company all day, he swam at the last minute just before the anchor came up. She was aware of his white skin, his brown body hair and his freckles and moles, by halves squeamish of, and fascinated by, his body. He was tall, unmuscular, not at all vain. When he swam his spectacles had to be given a safe home and she kept them with a slight shudder.

One afternoon they sat side by side on sunbathing mattresses fitted to tracks at the bow end. Henry and Angel were in the water. Karti noticed that something was making Marcus pensive.

'What you look at, Marcus?' she said.

'We're in ecological retreat, aren't we, Karti.' He sighed and his intelligent eyes looked into hers.

'Are you the same?' he continued. 'Everyone I know is terrified of running down the environment. I'm sure Angel and Henry are. It's a global deal.'

'But why you think that now?'

'Because this anchorage is so beautiful. And when you think of what most of South China and Hong Kong has become.'

She considered this. 'My old employer tell me there was pearl fishing here long time ago. Hard to believe.'

'Yes. Only in this bay does that become believable. And in the present day I expect the environment's shrinking faster here than anywhere. Indonesia's probably in trouble too, isn't it?'

'I don't know. Dutch used to steal everything. Now foreign company taking coal and oil and commodity out Indonesia.'

‘Our generation will have the bill, won’t it, Karti?’

‘Marcus, I never think about it.’

‘Don’t you? We’re the ones who’ll be here in fifty years’ time. Well, Sal’s always saying it.’

‘We lucky Sal such expert,’ Karti said sourly. ‘You think too much.’

‘My tutors would say that was a good thing.’

She looked at him closely. His mind was quite different from that of her friends, people like Astuti and Nurjanah. ‘I never hear anyone talk like you,’ she said. ‘I know you student before. I like you talking.’

‘But I look as if I’ve been blanched in vinegar, don’t I? While your colouring is so pleasant.’

‘You ok. I just scared of your spectacles. I afraid if I touch them too much they make me blind.’

‘I never minded wearing glasses until this moment, blast them.’

‘What’s pleasant about me?’

‘Your black hair is pleasant. Your brown face is pleasant. Your dark eyebrows and long eyelashes are pleasant. The harmonious whole is pleasant.’

‘You should meet my friend Tari, she blonde hair and look very pleasant.’

Marcus stood up. ‘I suppose there were Asians girls in England, and others in Beijing.’ He seemed to be speaking to a large crowd now. ‘But I don’t think I ever really noticed one before.’ He dived over the side and, because the bows was high, made a big splash. She stood at the railings watching him, sweeping her hair from one side to the other. Angel and Henry, further down the yacht, dropped their iPads and dived after him and the three of them formed a momentary ball of wriggling legs and arms on the sandy bottom of the bay.

He wanted to go to Kowloon with her, he said, so one afternoon they took the ferry to TST. She showed him Kowloon Park and Kowloon Mosque. They walked up Nathan Road and explored the streets of Jordan. That day, Marliyah in nearby Yau Ma Te belonged to a separate existence. When their feet were tired they sat down in a café. Marcus talked about English family life, becoming ever shyer and

Karti wondered if he was going to kiss her, but he didn't quite. They returned to Victoria Peak chattering meaninglessly to fill the self-conscious, heaving silences, and avoided each other for a few days afterwards before closing in again in their growing friendship.

A continuing romantic interest was asserted by Tari, who had a surprise for Karti's twenty-fifth birthday, a room booked at the Park Lane Hotel. Each turned up dressed for the occasion, no tattoos on show, Tari's alkaline hair under a hat. It was the one time neither would have minded a nice Chanel or Prada clutch. At check-in they played two ladies.

Their room on the eighth floor overlooked Victoria Park. More importantly the bathroom contained a large tub. Having filled it, Tari brought in a bottle of Rose d'Anjou and released three sachets of scented bubble bath into the water. They sat either end, in the bubbles, and drank the wine. 'I thought it would be sweeter,' said Tari, referring to the wine. Next door they had left the television on. After their bath they lay on the big soft bed in hotel robes and Tari produced some kind of rubber object, poking and touching Karti with it as she tried to watch a National Geographic documentary about blue whales. Cooling under the breeze of the air-con they then put on some clothes and Tari refreshed their glasses with wine.

‘Well, we tried,’ she said.

‘We don’t quite fit the mould, do we?’ said Karti.

‘It seems not.’

‘On another subject, can you really afford this room?’

‘Yes, why not, one night every five years. Let no one say the Chinese don’t pay us well.’

Karti laughed. ‘So I hear Marliyah’s going to dance with you?’

‘Yes. We always wanted four. I might get her to dye her hair too.’

It was late afternoon and they went to stand at the window to look at the tree tops of Victoria Park. It was possible to think of the intimacy found among those bowers sometimes, between Indonesian friends, one playing the part of the lesbi the other that of the tomboi. They went back to the bed and cuddled.

‘This is what I really miss,’ said Tari. ‘I always think of the thousands of ordinary people sleeping in their king-sized beds limb over limb while I have not a single human touch from one month to the next. It makes me feel such despair.’

Unfortunately her bed at her employers was no more than the boxing over the pipes in the utility room.

Karti got up on one elbow, sucked Tari into her eyes and gave her a bear hug.

‘It’s not funny,’ said Tari, almost angry, refusing further consolation in Karti’s arms, talking into the pillow in which half her face was buried. ‘We Javanese will never get used to sleeping alone, or sharing the corridor with the bloody dog, or putting two chairs together, or whatever other arrangement our ragged employers make for our comfort.’

‘Lovely Tari.’ Karti played with Tari’s blonde hair, found her cheek to caress. The laundered bedding and the bubble-bath scent on Tari’s skin mingled delightfully.

‘Am I lovely?’

‘Yes.’

Appeased, Tari sat up. ‘God, I love these sheets. Do you think we can steal them?’

‘Not unless you want to be in the newspapers.’

‘Shall I tell you who first made me a lesbi?’ Tari said.

‘Go on, do.’

‘It was a tomboi called Robi.’

Tari arranged her pillows and found a comfortable position to recline in. ‘We were in the same horrendous training centre, back in Java. The place was a near-derelict building in the countryside. We slept on the floor, twenty to a room, the walls were filthy, the food was bad and the teachers hated us. Some girls were not nice to each other either. I was so shocked I didn’t talk for a fortnight. I decided my mother mustn’t know. I just had to bear it alone. Then Robi took me under his wing. He sat beside me during the interminable hours of doing nothing. He made sure I got my food. He was strong and the other girls respected him. He said, ‘You know why so many women in Indonesia are lesbi? It’s because it’s so shit being a Muslim.’ That made me laugh. This tomboi was tougher than I was and wanted to protect me. Something shifted inside. Suddenly I was his. From that moment I didn’t care what anybody thought, I was a lesbi. He explained himself. ‘I don’t have a dick but I’m not a woman either.’ He told me about his childhood. He had worn boys’ clothes from the moment he was old enough to get his own way with his mother. He knew he must come and go as he pleased, run with the other kids on the street, sleep here and there, and not be confined at home like other little girls helping mama. ‘I was a little S*akandri* from the beginning,’ he said. He was proud of who he was. In the training centre we never touched, not really. I’m still a virgin in that way. He was placed as a casual worker in Bahrain. He stayed there a year and now he’s back in Jakarta working in a car park. He wants to come to Hong Kong and watch me dance. You’re not jealous are you, Karti?’

‘Yes, I’m very jealous.’

‘Good. Be jealous. I like the idea of two boys fighting over me. If we’d been in the training centre together, you’d have been my Robi, wouldn’t you?’

‘That is a good question.’

‘But Robi was not good-looking. If we’re honest he was better off as a man.

You, Karti, are both beautiful and fearless, that's what really makes me dizzy.'

'My mother and I saw a wonderful tomboi on the bus in Macau. But I'm not a tomboi.'

Outside it had grown dark. The street lights shone on Gloucester Road and in the park. There was a knock at the door. Tari went to investigate. A Chinese chambermaid stood outside, asking if she might come in to turn the bed down. Tari, in her dressing gown, looked over towards Karti in mute panic.

'Extra towels then?' said the chambermaid, a women in her forties.

'No, we don't require extra towels, thank you,' Tari said archly.

The chambermaid briefly disappeared then swept in with the early evening fruit plate and chocolates, setting them down on the side-table. They watched her do it and Tari closed the door after her in the manner of someone holding back flood water.

'She looked just like my employer. I nearly peed my pants,' she gasped.

Tari put her elbows on the windowsill. 'We're missing out, that's what I feel. We're stuck here while our friends at school have got married. We're two flowers wilting in a wilderness, unseen by Indonesian manhood.'

'I know. But at least your siblings are not on the street. They're headed for a solid education thanks to you, and your mother's spared from money worries.'

'Not much of a consolation sometimes.'

Karti asked Tari to tell her about the gathering on the hilltop, which Karti still felt odd about missing. They talked about some of the others who had attended. Among the messages Karti found on her phone afterwards were some from Sringatin's, containing phrases of particular stridency such as 'illegal detention', 'fascist police', 'SGG solidarity'.

'I don't mind if I never see that girl again,' Karti said, realising she had wanted to say this to someone for some time. It was Sringatin who had provoked her into hurling that brick against the car window.

Karti fetched the fruit bowl to the bed, then began to peel a hairy rambutan for Tari.

‘Find me a job on Victoria Peak will you, darling?’ said Tari. ‘A nice Western couple. No children. Just one little poodle to march around on its lead.’

‘You’re first on the list, don’t worry.’

‘Really?’

‘Of course. I’m working on it.’

‘It’ll please Sringatin if a few Filipinas are booted down the hill to lesser work.’

‘Unfortunately she’ll be the last to know.’

‘And what about that policeman in Java?’

‘He’s still living on borrowed time.’

Karti fed Tari a segment of fruit. ‘We could do something now, if you like, Tari. Show me where to touch. Then let me take you out and we’ll get drunk.’

Though Karti had not been to Star Bar for some time, the DJ there, Rafli, had been keeping in touch, making calls and texting her with a certain persistence. A student due to graduate from Hong Kong University, he was doing the DJ work and saw Nurjanah and Andre from time to time. He called and asked Karti out on a Saturday night date and she accepted. He'd pick her up at seven.

When he arrived at the gates of 88 Plantation Road, Rafli was wearing jeans, a belt with a substantial buckle, an ironed shirt and a suit jacket, quite a mature look, inspired perhaps by a photo in a men's magazine, though the gel combed into his hair gave more of a boy-band look. Judging by his puffed out upper body he was still a regular at the gym. She ran out of the gates to join him in the taxi and he complimented her on her appearance. She hadn't wanted to wear a dress – she didn't own one – but had felt the rules of the Saturday Night Date demanded she go and buy one.

The taxi ride was initially awkward because they were quickly reminded they could not talk comfortably in Bahasa which, instead of unifying them highlight

their differences. He was half-Chinese from Jakarta she plain Central Javanese. When she opened her mouth she felt she sounded provincial and rural. It was easier to jump into English as they had done before. After that things went along more gaily. Rafli was a together guy with plenty of ice-breaking comments. Even if they seemed a little rehearsed she was grateful for them. And knowing she was on that thing called 'a date', her first in Hong Kong with a man, it was for once thrilling to zigzag down Stubbs Road in a taxi.

At the restaurant, which was on the third floor of a waterfront hotel, they were given a table that showed the harbour through glass panel walling. Saturday night service was in full swing. There was a rich murmur of conversation circulating among the tables and there was no reason not to like the experience of being waited on in fine surroundings.

As they settled down at their table Karti took stock. Idris had taken his time before asking for a date. She saw that as good tactics on his part. If he'd asked earlier she would have said no. In that fortnight when the Hos had been away in Vancouver and she had gone to Star Bar everyday, they had talked at the bar after each of his sets and become friends, until he had given her a silver necklace and embarrassed her. How much he was into her she didn't know. She liked him but, in all that had happened to her in the months gone past, he had remained at best static in her thoughts, or more probably had fallen behind as other things and people had come to the fore. She had let him into one or two daydreams, but there was always the incompatibility between their families intervening in any romantic train of thought.

They ate two good courses and he talked of his ambition to do a DJ set at the hotel bar here. He pestered the management regularly, he said. Then he stiffened and said, 'We Indonesians don't always like to be direct, Karti, but you've been constantly in my thoughts. I'd like to see much more of you, take you somewhere.'

'Well, that's nice,' said Karti.

He looked at her with smouldering eyes. He was indeed many of the things a girl wanted.

‘But go where?’ she said, pleased with his overtures and not disarmed this time. ‘Jakarta?’

‘It’s not the furthest place in the world.’

‘But your family might be. That big house in the suburbs surrounded by a breeze-block wall. Your Mercedes. The three nannies lined up in their pink-and-white uniforms. Do I have the picture right?’

‘Not quite—but close. You know because you live on Victoria Peak now. I’ve just seen 88 Plantation Road through the gates remember.’

‘I only work there.’

‘Well, it’s rubbed off.’

‘You mean my clothes? You’re right, I’ve changed since I worked in Kwai Hing.’

‘Don’t nannies sometimes marry their employers? Start in the kitchen, finish in the living room via the bedroom?’

This could have upset her. She decided not to show his error.

‘That’s not going to happen, Idris. Mr Wong is happily married.’

‘No, of course not. But you take my point.’

She thought a moment, then said woodenly, ‘As I’ve said, I don’t think your mother would like me.’

‘Maybe you’re right there. Not at first. She has her own ideas about marriage.’

‘Ah, marriage.’

‘Yes, and forget Jakarta, think Bali. We’ll set up a business, you behind the bar, me behind the DJ console. My parents would accept you when their first grandchild was born, if not sooner.’

‘That would make Aunt Kadek happy. She lives in Bali. Can we give her a job?’

‘Give Aunt Kadek a job? Yes. How about Resort Manager?’

‘Or she and I could be your cleaners.’

‘Karti, I don’t want a cleaner, I want a wife.’

‘Yes, you want a wife, but really you want a wife in Jakarta. I would not fit in

with your family. And I might be bored. That's what I feel.'

They fell into silence. He ordered the signature dessert. They consumed it and drank a glass of dessert wine each.

'I haven't made a scene,' he said. 'I can't very well here. I've stupidly chosen a restaurant where I can't make a scene.'

'You're a nice guy.'

He accepted the compliment without quibbling. 'This was the wrong place to bring you. It makes me look a rich boy.'

She couldn't disagree. If he had taken her to some romantic spot on the waterfront and talked of his passionate feelings there, she might have found herself more yielding. Instead he had allowed the conversation to dwell on the things that were against them. He was honest but it was sharply unflattering for her to wrestle with being low-born and un-moneyed. She would rather have a boyfriend from her own station in life and stand up as an equal.

He took her down to the foyer. At the taxi rank a uniformed doorman was putting guests into cars, which shuffled forward one by one. In a minute it was their turn.

'I don't have to give up on you, do I?' he said.

'No, you don't. Thank you for a lovely time.' She kissed him quickly on the lips. The doorman helped Karti into a taxi, shut the door and waved the taxi way.

Karti had not meant it that way but the kiss had heat to it. The heat came from some place of its own. Sitting in the back of the taxi as it ground its way up the hill, she had the sense of a little electric charge having been introduced into her, and it would not quit. The buzz was still there when she lay in bed in her cottage bedroom. Unable to sleep, memories of school came into her mind, remembered tears and scenes between girls and boys finding their way in love. Even then, for her, it had been Idris. Now it was Idris, Marcus, Tari and Rafli.

The time for Karti's two weeks in Java had almost arrived. She had bought her ticket to Surabaya and the task there was close at hand. Everybody thought of it as a holiday and was excited on her behalf, bemused by her own reticence on the subject.

The wax mallow and the bougainvillea were over, so was the bauhinia. It was March and Nurjanah and Andre were giving a party to celebrate their engagement. The party was at Andre's apartment, which guests could find by ascending the Mid-levels escalator and stepping off at Prince's Terrace or by taking a taxi to Mosque Street. On their little roof terrace candles burned and cushions, rugs and chairs stood in place ready for the event.

'The bank want to send me to New York,' said Andre. 'So we'll marry now and go to America in the summer.' He was speaking on the roof terrace. He looked fresh and happy. 'At last Nurjanah can forgive my failure to be an American.'

'But I like you as a German now,' said Nurjanah. She was wearing a red cocktail dress, her hair was up and there were two inches of heel under her feet.

‘Don’t hold your breath for a visa,’ said the guy they were talking to, one of Andre’s colleagues. ‘These things can take six months.’

Das Rheingold was playing on outdoor speakers because Nurjanah had acquired a taste for Wagner. Inside the apartment, the lights were turned low. These days Andre’s flat was furnished in equatorial colours. Batik prints and ikat tapestries hung on the walls. All his friends had remarked on the advantage of a woman’s touch in making a home of an apartment.

Separately, on the terrace, two young men who had arrived early were peering at the buildings around them and talking about Mid-levels.

‘*The Middle Levels* sounds very Chinese to me,’ one said. ‘Perhaps it’s an allusion to reincarnation: a half-mountain area, halfway into the next world.’

‘Do the Chinese believe in reincarnation?’ said the other.

‘Some do.’

‘What interests me is the gradient. Where else would there be apartments but Hong Kong? It’s so bloody steep.’

Then they discussed the new bar that had opened on Arbuthnot Street.

Tari arrived with Wahyuni and Mahmudan. They had each brought a dish of Indonesian food covered in tinfoil for the buffet table. Tari was looking blonde and Japanese. Three men instantly surrounded her and Mahmudan, who had brandy-coloured hair for the evening, while a young Belgian started telling Wahyuni about his recent visit to Sri Lanka. Nurjanah gave everybody drinks and they made a toast to her engagement. A man in shorts was exercising on a fixed bicycle on the roof opposite and they talked about him for a while, waving at him.

Astuti arrived alone. She wore a brown cotton veil that covered her hair and extended over her shoulders, showing her face through an oval aperture. Otherwise she wore jeans and a shirt. She looked strong and fit. She had brought a dried fish from Jepara from the most recent box of her father’s and added it to the table. A guest not put off by the headscarf introduced himself. Astuti didn’t want a drink but was glad to be shown the roof terrace and to look around from this vantage point at the cluster of apartment buildings, some nail-shaped, climbing the

gradient. This was the first time she had been to Mid-levels. When Karti arrived, Astuti had lost him and was in the living-room examining three terracotta warriors on a side table.

Karti came with Marcus, who had been at a loose end. The Wong family were out for the evening, visiting Venus's sister in another villa on the hill. So here they were, appearing just as if they were a couple. He wore a tweed jacket and she the dress she'd worn on her date with Rafli. She found Astuti and they sat down on the sofa to talk. Marcus went onto the terrace. Astuti had news. She was seeing a man.

'I'm fossilised with excitement,' said Karti.

He was a man named Sameer, from Pakistan, Astuti explained. They had met at the mosque. He was married but hadn't seen his wife and children for two years. Karti stroked Astuti's hand and wanted to hear more. How unlucky that he had to be married.

Ink and Marliyah arrived and joined them on the sofa. Ink was wearing loose clothes and her arms and neck were bare. She looked dark and lean, as always very much the rebel or the wannabe musician. Her leg was out of plaster. Marliyah was in full fig in a blue cocktail dress and high heels.

A change had taken place in Ink's situation since that day on Gloucester Road. She had parted company with her earlier employers to go full time with Mr Ling at the lock-up. Ling had signed an ordinary domestic helper's contract with her, like Marliyah's, but the arrangement was that she lived out. The fake French wine business was making money. Ling went around in a suit now, attended business meetings. Things were better for Marliyah. Her agency debts were cleared and she had Ink by her side to protect her – even if her cousin could be bossy.

The other thing Karti had heard was that Ink, as soon as she had got out of hospital, had lodged a complaint with the police about Cherry Cheung's driving. She and Sringatin had both joined the Indonesian Worker's Union, hoping for support in the case. To cut a long story short nothing had come of it. The case was closed, the police immoveable. That Ink hadn't consulted Karti was perhaps bad form. On the other hand, Karti saw that she had landed on her feet after Ink's

accident while no good had come to Ink, so Ink was probably entitled to feel hard done by.

As Ink and Marliyah sat down, Ink cast a predictably sour eye at Karti. Perhaps to indicate what a regular visitor Ink was here, she sat with legs splayed and lit a cigarette, although guests might have been expected to confine their smoking to the terrace. Marliyah fidgeted on the couch beside her cousin, like a debutante at her first party, more coltish than elegant. She kept glancing at Karti, as if wanting to talk to her but constrained by the presence of her cousin.

'It's wonderful that Nurjanah and Andre are getting married,' said Astuti.

'I was first with her,' said Ink.

'First what?' said Karti. 'Nurjanah's no lesbi.'

'You'll never know,' said Ink.

'I want to kiss you myself,' Karti said, having suddenly decided she was just happy they were all together. Astuti and Marliyah laughed and Ink blew a jet of smoke towards the ceiling.

'I wouldn't say no,' Ink replied at length, bent to the limit of her own rather lacking sense of humour.

Two voices passed by the couch. 'All nannies look approximately the same to me,' said one man. 'Yes, it's often a case of recognising the infant or canine rather than the nanny herself,' said the other. These two friends of Andre's walked in from the terrace, spotted Marliyah, then disappeared into the kitchen.

More arrivals: Cherisha and her friends; Rafli together with Ella, the Filipina who sang with the band at Star Bar. Rafli took charge of the music by putting on his own mix and girls on the terrace started to boogie at the hip while continuing to listen to the men braying their stories. People had started a party on another rooftop and occasionally the two factions waved at each other. It was past eleven o'clock. The sky was milky grey. Space was cleared and Tari, Wahyuni, Mahmudan danced. Then Ella sang a song without accompaniment. Karti and Nurjanah went to share a bean-bag in the corner of the living room.

'I like Andre so much,' said Karti.

‘He would be better off with a Western girl, wouldn’t he? A pretty, blue-eyed one, instead of a divorced Javanese Muslim.’

‘No, you’re good together. He’s the lucky one.’

‘When they told him to transfer he panicked. He was afraid to go alone. The next thing we were engaged. He’s circumcised now, you know.’

‘Rather them than us.

‘He likes a blow job and I like a clean dick.’

‘You’ll have a wonderful life, taking care of each other.’

‘Yes, it’s going to be Prada on Fifth Avenue after all, not a last stand in Yogyakarta. What about your love life, Karti. The world would be a dull place without men to love us, wouldn’t it? ’

‘I don’t have a love life.’

‘Rafli’s in love with you. You know that don’t you? And what about this Marcus you’ve brought?’

‘Marcus has a girlfriend from England. But yes, he likes me I think. So does Idris.’

‘You’ve got to choose, my girl. Take it from big sister.’

‘I will soon.’

‘Keep your pussy shaved and ready for action, that’s my advice.’

‘I’m not sure America is ready for you.’

‘Marcus says the Americans love vulgarity.’

The two men who had been talking about Mid-levels and reincarnation were still talking.

‘The most extraordinary thing about my Chinese girlfriend is that she brushes her teeth before breakfast. I tell her, wouldn’t your mouth be fresher if you brushed your teeth after breakfast? But no, she wants her teeth clean *for breakfast*. They all do.’

‘I can’t get mine to close her mouth when she’s eating. I feel I’m watching a meat ball being rolled. I’m watching a washing-machine spin-dry a shepherd’s pie.’

‘I wish they knew more about their own family history. Here you have a well-educated Chinese girl who’s Vice President of a bank. She prances around with a three thousand dollar handbag. But when it comes to general knowledge she has none. Ask her what her grandparents were doing during Mao’s Great Leap Forward and she hasn’t a clue.’

When Marliyah came out onto the terrace, one of the young men who’d spotted her earlier followed her. After waiting for the tomboyish cousin to go away, he slipped in beside her. He was French.

‘Hello. Nice party, no?’

Marliyah turned towards the man and lost her balance, having been putting everything into standing in her high heels with dignity. He caught her easily.

‘You’re very petite, no? Like Edith Piaf.’

Marliyah didn’t know who Edith Piaf was.

‘Was she your friend?’ The man motioned with his head towards Ink. ‘Because you are not like her. She looks like a man, you look like a woman.’

‘That’s Ink, my cousin.’

‘Are you having a good time in Hong Kong?’

‘I just work.’

‘Terrible Hong Kong. I’m French and in Paris we’re so scared to come here for the long hours. The reputation is just. No time for our coffee after lunch. Our friends take their Pernod and we are still working. Do you have very long hours?’

‘Eighteen hours. I sleep on table. I only eat twice. I do three job.’

‘Terrible.’ The Frenchman was perplexed. ‘Do you have a little friend, a boy to love you?

‘No. Ink and Karti and Astuti take care of me. Do you like blue things or red things?’

‘Blue is unhappy, no? And red is the colour of love and flowers. So let it be red.’

‘I like yellow.’

‘Of course, yellow is very important, more important than red perhaps. The

colour of … pardon me, I don't know *la culture asiatique* so well.'

'Is France bigger than Hong Kong?'

'Yes.'

'Is it bigger than America?'

'No. You are teasing me, beautiful mademoiselle. I know about Javanese women. Our great writer, Balzac, said you were the most beautiful, the most *ravissante* ladies of Asia. Let me take you to the beach tomorrow. We will drink Pastis together.'

'I like blue drinks.'

'I will find you a blue drink, I promise.'

Nurjanah brought a man to Karti on the terrace, an American. He was in his early thirties, strongly built with a fair complexion. 'Finally, a real American,' Nurjanah said, by way of introduction. 'But it's too late for me, I have my German.' To the American she said, 'My friend here will answer all your questions.' Then she left them together. The American had freckles over his forehead and settled himself in front of her in a boxer's stance, holding a gin and tonic in one hand and making a fist with the other.

'I was saying to Nurjanah . . . ' He was drunk and looked at her closely for the first time. 'Hello darling, I'm Larry.' He found her glass with his, clinked and said cheers.

'Karti.'

'Karti. I was just saying to Nurjanah, in Kansas we have a subway system just like the subway here, but hey, we let folks get out of the carriage before we barge in. I guess that's the way we've been taught. Here they don't wait. It's all pushing and shoving every time.'

Karti was a little drunk. From the corner of her eye she was watching Marliyah and the Frenchman.

'So here's the thing. Somehow the Chinese don't owe much politeness to each other. They can roll suitcases over each other's feet, let doors slam in each others faces, jump into queues, and nobody turns a hair. What do you suppose makes the

Chinese like that, Karti?'

'I don't know.'

'How are things run back in your country?'

'We don't have subway but we don't like shoving. You can flirt with me if you like.'

'Flirt?' He laughed. 'This *is* flirting. Can't you tell?'

'I never talk to American before.'

'Now, democracy. Is it for the Chinese here in Hong Kong?' He seemed to need to press on with his line of conversation, as if, if he lost concentration and stopped talking he might fall asleep. He was sweating and looked deeply tired. 'I tell everybody that democracy has to operate from the bottom up to work. You've got to have small people blowing their top and confronting every little thing square in the face, otherwise you can have as many general elections as you like and they won't be worth a damn. Look at democracy in the Middle East, in Egypt. It doesn't change the country because the people don't change, only the system.'

Karti had stopped listening but she thought she might have sex with this man, if there was somewhere to go. The bathroom had a lock on it but was hardly ideal. There was a bedroom but it had been full of people the last time she looked.

'Tell me about Indonesia?' said Larry. 'You've been a democracy for what, fifty years? How's it going?'

'I don't know Indonesian politics.'

'Oh yes you do. You just don't think you do. If you're Indonesian you know. It'll be there somewhere in your bloodstream.'

'I don't know about bloodstream either.'

'You see, this is flirting,' said the American. 'It might sound strange but we're flirting.'

'Indonesians go with flow,' said Karti, smiling in a way she hoped was saucy.

'Come to America, Karti, you and Nurjanah and Andre, all of you come and visit me.'

'You have house?'

‘Oh yes, and a firing range, and horses.’

‘I want to learn fire gun.’

‘I’ll give you a good American pistol to fire.’

Later, everyone who was still standing went to Insomnia on D’Aguilar Street. They moved through the outer bar to the interior of the pounding club. Dancing before the band were young Indonesians and Filipinas, Chinese, Germans and Frenchmen, Japanese and Americans, all a common pool, young in Hong Kong on Saturday night. It didn’t seem to Karti a bad mix and Nurjanah and Andre, opposites by religion and culture, were getting married, and after marriage they would perhaps have children, children who were beautiful and mixed-race.

A spruce Middle-Eastern man attached himself to Karti until he realised there were force fields there, male consorts – Rafli and Marcus – and he drifted away. Karti danced near to the engaged couple, drank shots and gave herself up to the music. At four Marcus took her home by taxi and put her to bed.

JAVA

Surabaya airport, Java, midnight. Karti walking out through the green customs channel to a long, drab parade of shops open to the night. The shops closed except one cafe where nut-skinned men in shapeless clothes sit, staring sleepily at each other and making sporadic conversation. She wheeling her suitcase by.

The taxi rank, the night sky warm and damp, puddles reflecting the moon. Rain. Roads partly submerged in rain water. Walan Syariah Hotel, one kilometre from the airport, new and minor in class, in a dark, narrow road lined with soggy wooden carts.

Dysfunctional plumbing in the bathroom. Sitting up in bed, turning on the television and channel-changing through Indonesian domestic programmes. The re-encounter with game shows sponsored by telecom companies and interrupted by long advertisements for powdered coffee and toothpaste – a brief pleasure, so familiar, so bad. Switching off, lying in darkness. Strange in the space of a day to be relocated from one part of the planet to another.

Thinking out the plan. Returning tomorrow to Nadiyudan, finding Santoso, doing for him as he had done for her father, returning to Hong Kong, all cleanly so her family wouldn't know, the police wouldn't suspect. But needing to bring Idris and Sundari into her confidence if she were to do anything.

Breakfast with shoe salesmen. Waiting for a taxi in the plain lounge. The Koran on the wall in a gilt frame.

A warm bright day. A rush of feeling from being stood on the soil of her homeland under a Javanese sky. One of the bell boys sitting on his heels on the forecourt next to the gas tank. Cigarette smoke hanging in the air, drifting

horizontally into the lane where the legs of the market stalls lie rotting in the puddles.

The blue-suited taxi driver cheerful, handsome, from Sumatra. The ride through the mangrove swamp on the banked up expressway. At the toll-way a beautiful tree blazing with colour. Karti melting, in love with this tree. The radio playing. A mosque complex in the distance, a cluster of green and blue cupolas shining like jewelled eggs.

Thicker traffic going into Surabaya City, roads in disrepair, pavements not laid. Motorbikes and cars slowing and getting ravelled up. Low, rain-stained cement frontages, market stalls, cooking carts, tarpaulin roofs. Here and there a small mall, a factory, an office tower.

'Traffic, traffic!' The handsome driver tapping the steering wheel.

Arriving at the station. Asking for the driver's blessing. Buying a ticket. Waiting for the train.

The eight-hour journey. Images of Java. A woman riding a bicycle along an embankment. Three people weeding a rice field. A little girl waving at the train from the lap of her mother. A man swinging a sickle at weeds. Chickens in back yards, young boys on motorcycles followed the track, a schoolgirl caught in the rain pulling her headscarf over her brow hurrying along a worn path between the paddies. Long stops at provincial towns, the carriage invaded by families selling lunch wrapped in banana leaf.

The train reached Nadiyudan deep in the night. The empty streets outside were like those of a ghost town. A taxi took Karti straight up to the hills. She checked in at a resort where the office was no more than a cabin beside the road. No need for registration: the night clerk handed over a key, a night security man lead her through steep gardens between holiday bungalows propped up on stilts to her bungalow.

A good-sized bedroom. The smell of mountain water. The coolness of the altitude. Old water stains on the carpet. A wooden balcony outside on stilts. The sound of rushing water from somewhere out in the darkness. Tiredness cleansed

with a good hot shower. Then into bed, into clean sheets under heavy blankets.

In the morning, barefoot on the balcony in shorts and a T-shirt, Karti waited for Idris. It was already warm and sticky. Close to the balcony small birds jockeyed on and off a flowering shrub and she was watching them with pleasure. There was a blue sky and a ranging hillside of conifers disappearing into mist. Somewhere in the mist was the volcano and there were hot springs near the resort. Down the hill Nadiyudan sat in its heat haze, on the flat, met on the other side by more green hills.

Idris arrived on foot, off a minivan from town. He came smiling but there was confusion in his eyes.

She sat on the bed. He took the rattan desk chair.

‘As I said on the phone, Idris, no one knows I’m in Nadiyudan. Promise you won’t tell anyone. Not my mother, not anybody.’

‘I promise.’

‘I’m not on holiday. I need a gun. Can you find me one?’

‘A gun.’ Idris took the request coolly at first, then said, ‘Oh God.’

‘I’m not saying no to you, Karti,’ he said, ‘but I have to think. Listen, Santoso’s not living in Nadiyudan anymore, you know that don’t you? He works with the mobile brigade in Yogyakarta.’

‘Since when?’

‘Last month.’

‘No one told me.’

‘You were in Hong Kong and not everyone knows. Your mother, Ridhaan, Agus—they don’t know. Dad and I do. I didn’t tell you as I didn’t like to bring the subject up. Anyway, you know how things happen in Java. The transfer hasn’t been announced or explained officially. Things happen without appearing to happen and everyone is too tactful to ask questions.’

‘Why did he move?’

‘He lost Brata’s favour, I assume. Maybe because he went rogue and shot your father. Now Brata has dumped him from the administration. It took three years but that’s what’s happened. Maybe Brata will ask Dad to run now and Dad will accept, I don’t know. Anyway, Santoso’s moved on and the town’s rid of him.’

‘It doesn’t make any difference. I still want a gun.’

‘Do you really?’

‘Yes.’

‘Surely that’s madness, Karti. . . but all right. I can think of one person who might be able to help: Sutejo. You remember his band, Darkfoot? He lives in Cilacap now. Whether he can help you I don’t know, but he’s had run-ins with the authorities, he’s almost a radical, he might know people. His address is on the website.’

‘Darkfoot? Yes. That free concert at Parseko village.’

‘You were eight, I was ten.’

‘I didn’t like the music but the crowd was exciting.’

‘What are you going to do with a gun, Karti?’

‘Let’s not talk about that.’

‘I don’t know how you could find Santoso in Yogyakarta—it’s a big place.’

‘I have two weeks.’

‘Karti, you’re frightening me.’

‘Come and sit with me, Idris.’

He came to the bed.

‘I know you’re not prepared for this,’ she said. ‘You thought today was just another steamy day in Nadiyudan.’

She lay back, in an invitation to be kissed. If they renewed their intimacy Idris would become more reliable. Anway, it wasn’t much of a boundary to cross. They’d done it before.

With as little romance as last time, in circumstances no more ideal, they undressed and joined in bed. Afterwards, Karti withdrew to take a shower. Foremost in her mind was dissatisfaction that Idris was a married man, who had Ernawati to go to after he was finished here. Not only did she feel jealous, she felt sharply for the first time that she would be selling herself short to join their relationship. She stood quietly in the bathroom. Yes, her mother had been widowed and could accept the role of second wife but Karti was entitled to more. And Idris and Ernawati had already a store of experience together in marriage she could never acquire as a late joiner. At last she had clarity. She would never marry Idris.

‘You dress so quickly,’ he said when she came out. He was lying in bed half-covered by the white sheet. His physique had not changed. He looked handsome and he looked glad. ‘Let me enjoy being here with you for a little while, Karti.’

She sat next to him and took his head fondly, but spoke coldly. ‘Forget you’ve been here. Don’t have any ideas of your own and don’t fool with me on this subject.’

‘As you like.’

Clearly irritated he went to the bathroom.

Karti saw him to the road. He would walk down the hill and jump on another minivan. She swallowed the morning-after pill she had brought from Hong Kong.

Sundari came up on her Honda. Her face and hands were sunned, she wore a wind jacket and jeans, her body underneath strong and full-bosomed.

‘It’s been exactly three years,’ said Sundari. ‘But are you really staying here, why not with your family in town?’

‘Yes. Don’t ask. I thought we might visit a few places. Can you show me where Santoso visits his mother.’

‘Sure. But I haven’t seen or heard of Santoso in a while.’

‘Supposedly he works in Yogyakarta now.’

‘I didn’t know.’

They rode together as they had done once before. The road was straight and steep and called for slow driving downhill. Past Sundari’s shoulder Karti had glimpses of Nadiyudan through the palm fronds as they passed roadside advertising hoardings for the tourists going up to the waterfalls and spas. Sundari turned in where twenty motorcycles stood in a row. Schoolchildren were playing baseball on a terraced football pitch overlooked by a derelict schoolroom whose

windows were boarded up. Beyond lay a path in the grass following the contour of the hill into the farmland.

They took the path and before them were terraces of rice fields, with the splayed leaves of banana plants at the margins. There was a level of fruit-bearing palms and on the horizon the dense green hillside with its false peaks, on its long way up to the volcano wrapped in mist and rain clouds. Men and women were working the land.

'We're here,' Sundari whispered five minutes later.

A turf embankment showed signs of Santoso's visits. Pushed into the slope was a wooden board half-destroyed by bullet holes and twenty yards away was an upturned packing box and a number of bullet cases.

'It's a shame Santoso won't be here,' said Karti. 'Still, it might be useful.'

'If he's moved to Yogyakarta doesn't that make your family rid of him?'

'If he'd moved to America, maybe. But Yogyakarta, it's only a few hours away. He killed my father and he's wrong to expect a long life.'

'So you've got a gun?'

'Not yet.'

'Could you really do it, pull the trigger?'

'I don't know. Why not?'

'Perhaps God will decide.'

'Perhaps. Or perhaps I will decide. Did God decide my father should die?'

'No one can answer that. But God is all we have.'

'You remind me of a friend in Hong Kong, Astuti.'

'Why's she like me?'

'I don't know. She's been unlucky in her family life.'

'How unlucky?'

'Her father doesn't love her. She's taken advantage of by her sisters.'

'She is like me then.'

A cry came from their feet, quavering, interrogative. 'Santoso? Santoso.' An old woman's cracked voice. Unnoticed, almost where they stood, was a roof of

corrugated iron and plastic sheeting belonging to a dwelling on the level below. At the entrance they found a bent old woman with a hand gripped to the door post. She was alone and evidently living on the quarter of an acre before the shack, which was tidily laid out with vegetables and a paddi.

‘Hello, grandma,’ said Sundari. ‘Do you need anything?’

‘My hoe is broken.’

‘All right, we’ll get you a new hoe. We’ll come back tomorrow.’

‘So that’s Santoso’s mother?’ said Karti as they returned up the path.

‘We can ask one of the neighbours.’

‘Let’s not. Help her if you must but I don’t want to think who she is or who she isn’t.’

It had rained in the night and it was raining now. Good, people would keep off the streets. Karti could visit the cemetery where her father was buried without fear of being seen. She sat on the bed, then locked up and started walking down the hill, ready to hail the first minivan that came by. It was not cold and people were still out, under the eaves of their shacks, watching the rain and doing their things. A minivan stopped for her and another woman. These undersize vehicles operated mostly for the schoolchildren who travelled up and down the hill. For a full-sized adult it was a squeeze, but there were few other transport options. Legs folded and compressed Karti smiled at her fellow sardines. At its fourth stop she, along with an old man, jumped off in front of the hotel.

There it was, one source of all the trouble, the resort hotel built on her grandparents' land, ousting them from their farming life, the hotel of Brata and of Sekar. It was substantial, with a driveway from the road, the building something in the style of an American ranch house. The old man who had got off the bus walked along the driveway, his figure somehow diminished by the downpour, making for a

wing of the building and disappearing behind it. Perhaps he was a kitchen hand or gardener. The lie of the land was unmistakeable. Where the Sukimuns' vegetables had once grown, a hotel breakfast terrace stood now. Karti remained where she was, not wishing to go any nearer.

She stood with her thoughts, in her rain mac on the road, until a man on a motorbike stopped and offered her a lift. He was going into town. With the rain and the rush of wind it was cold on the motorbike. Sodden grey clouds moved in the sky. Bending left then right past further hotels they passed under an avenue of trees and then into open country, always with the gradient and Nadiyudan down below. On the rice terraces the rainwater was pouring in orderly falls through the farmers' drainage systems.

Coming to the place where her father's car had careered off the road, she tapped the driver's shoulder and got down. The ditch that ran beside the road was purling with clean water. In the big landscape the spot was unforgettable but there was no mark left now of that day.

She walked the rest of the way into town, picking flowers from the dripping bushes of the roadside. It had rained so much that it seemed as if the roads into town must be flooded, but they were not. In the cemetery, rain drummed on the graves of blue and green tiling. Her dad's was the same as all the others except for a soaked bunch of flowers there. Perhaps Ridhaan, Agus and Mum left them. She put down her own spray. Now that she was here beside her father she felt the need of it, having been away too long. No longer noticing the rain, warm inside, she stood there for a long time.

According to its website Darkfoot was performing in Jakarta for two days so while she waited for them to come home she got to know the gardens, the swimming pool (nobody ever swam there, she was alone in the resort) and the wild, tangled slope opposite the gully. Every day the air was thick and warm and the sky piercingly bright when the clouds cleared. At night, deeply alone, Karti found herself longing for Sundari.

Sundari paid another visit in the daytime and they sat together on the balcony.

‘Is there a boy?’ Karti asked.

‘Yes.’

‘Will you marry?’

‘Yes.’

‘Then you have something.’

‘Yes.’

‘I won’t spoil your life by seducing you then. You’d better not come back.’

Sundari left in tears.

Idris returned.

‘I just have one question,’ he said. ‘Will we get married?’

‘I’m sorry, the answer is no, Idris.’

‘I was selfish to pursue you then.’

‘It wasn’t selfish and I didn’t know my own decision until now.’

‘I’m disappointed but not surprised. I'll go then. But I’ve something for you.’

He produced a wad of papers. ‘Your father’s notes. They were in a drawer. Your mother must have brought them when she moved in. I’m sorry I didn’t know your father better – only teased him.’

‘I loved it when you teased him.’

‘He was a bad liar, wasn’t he? That’s what made him funny. He tried to keep you all to himself.’

‘Yes, he did.’

‘Karti, be careful won’t you? You don’t have to do anything, if you ask me. I’ve been thinking about it and I have to say it. Your father was a gentle man. Would he really want revenge the way you seem to be thinking of it?’

‘Maybe you are right, Idris, maybe he wouldn’t.’

Karti didn’t want to discuss it further and saw him to the road as before.

The pencilled collection of notes were written on pages torn from a spiral exercise book, perhaps an old one belonging to Ridhaan or Agus for school work, folded down by Idris from A4 into a wodge to carry. Her father’s writing was legible but there was no attempt at neatness in what were no more than personal notes. She read through each leaf, unfolding them one by one on the bungalow desk.

In the months before electioneering had really kicked off, her dad had given speeches at various places, gatherings of forty or fifty people. One was after a football game at the school, another was after a dance on the fringe of town. There were three mosques in town and Muhsonuddin held several gatherings at these locations and her father had attended some of them. They could not compete with

Brata who put on free concerts and whose rallies always involved a free buffet. One of her father's gatherings was under a tamarind tree at a junction out of town. She remembered it because she had wished her father had made more effort to dress. It wasn't that he was second fiddle to Muhsonuddin, it was that Muhsonuddin had an orator's voice developed for big assemblies while her father's voice was a little dry and did not carry well over the heads of a crowd. At least he might have dressed well. Still, out in the hills he was always well received. They were easy, happy little gatherings full of an optimistic spirit, to which the farmers brought their own refreshments.

The first page was a speech draft.

Well, my friends, shall we begin this meeting by asking ourselves who we are? I mean, what sort of animal shall we call ourselves? It's never an easy question in Indonesia. Let's say our forefathers lived under the Dutch and during the 1939 war the Japanese were our guests. We had our nationalist uprising and we've seen through the eras of Sukarno and Suharto since. For five decades we've had a vote in local and national elections, but if we're honest we're still not sure if democracy functions properly here and if it will stick. We are Muslim, Christian, Animist, Buddhist, Hindu. Anybody who cracks open our skulls will find a rainbow. Foreign corporations come from all points of the compass to remove our natural resources. Our political families write out the licences and get ever richer. If we draw attention to the billions they are stealing they point out our living standard have improved too. Does anybody live in such a perplexing nation as ours?

In fact, let's put Indonesia aside, it's too baffling. The Republic may exist in the minds of central administrators but our friends in Sulawesi and Kalimantan no more think of themselves as Indonesian as we do. Among ourselves we are Javanese. Central Javanese. Even better, citizens of Banyumas. Central Java we understand. Our mountain chains, our lack of transport links, they protect us from the rest of the world. We are farmers and this is a fertile place. The only thing we

cannot do here is stop things growing. We have three harvests a year. Part of our Javanese culture has its source here. Yogyakarta and Solo may have perfected our arts, but their initial stirrings were here, among our green, terraced hills.

Karti thought her father had definitely not given this speech. What she remembered was a lot of practical chit chat. Farmers would ask who would bring their fertiliser and seed if Rahardjo was in office. And they asked where the polling booth was to be erected and when they were supposed to turn up. There was a lot of fretting about this subject, is she remembered correctly.

She read on:

Now, let's talk about Mr Muhsonuddin. I know we are all curious on account of this man who leads our Alliance. Some people are born taller than others, with bigger shoulders. He is one of them. He's a capable man, a clever, articulate man, respected amongst the Islamic community and he will make a fine Mayor. We don't agree on everything but we agree on the most important facts. Neither of us has any time for the present administration of this town, Brata and Santoso. This town deserves better than they. Muhsonuddin and I are both men of late ambition, we are family men who want to better this town and to better ourselves. Perhaps after the next administration we can think again, my friends, but for now Muhsonuddin it is.

That last sentence was crossed out but legible. It was the sentence she liked most of all.

I've been here for twenty-five years but I was born in Surabaya. My father was called a communist and killed by the army, along with many others, in 1965. I don't know if he was a communist or not. I was only a boy, but I knew he was an open-minded, good man. He wanted the best for all and I'm proud to call him my father. Anyone here who remembers what happened in this province at that time,

as throughout Java and Bali, will be wary of this animal called Indonesia. We must be fair to each other and trust in each other if we are to achieve a stable, true democracy.

I'm the usual indulged husband, proud father of two fast-growing children and one daughter who is already a young woman. I'm an ordinary man. My wife polishes me up for slamatans, otherwise I go around in my wire glasses and worn shirt. I have the Javanese weakness for retreats, spiritual withdrawals, a hankering to form a sect, to write a pamphlet vibrating with the occult. But as a father I despair of having enough money to provide for my family and to give my children a good education. I don't like the pace of change the outside world forces on us. If I could stop a million injudicious hands reaching our young people on the internet I would do so. I fear for our children. They are subject to a more complicated world than ours.

Karti went out to the balcony. Night had fallen and the garden lights were on. Of course everyone's tone changed when they gave a speech. There are thoughts and ideas which come out on paper which would never see the light of day otherwise, in a family living room. The page was a place where a person could be more expansive, getting into a rhythm that carried them away from normal chatter. Yes, dad as a speech-maker was a little bit of a stranger. He would probably have admitted that himself.

One last page, on its own.

Brata? A charming man, a cultured man. He and his wife, Sekar, beguile us as they rob us. Are farmers not always the losers in these tussles, when a political clan sees something it wants?

– What do we know about our administrators in Java? They serve themselves and their families first, the public second.

– What else do we know? There is a vein of intolerance in this country. We allow zealot groups to enact mob law. They are hardly checked by the authorities.

– Our police. Are they little more than rogue money collectors, acting above the law? We might think so. Do we expect any good from them? Rarely. Do they pick on small people and coax confessions with beatings? We've all heard about it. Do they have their eyes shut to criminality among our rich and influential? We understand their fear and we know their weakness.

The stream rushed in the gully. She lay down on the bed and closed her eyes. What would her father want from her now, she asked herself, and she came up blank. Idris was right, her father was gentle, but he was a fighter too. The Rahardjo genes had not given her antecedents a long life, not her grandfather, not her father. If her father's death had taught her one thing, it was that she was a Rahardjo too. Not that the Sukimuns took things lying down either. These thoughts filled her with strength.

At sun up Karti packed and shouldered her bag, locked the door of her hillside bungalow and settled her bill at the reception office. They called her a taxi and she asked the driver to take her south on Route 8 towards Cilacap, on the coast thirty kilometres away. This was where Darkfoot gave their address.

Outside Nadiyudan the road was in poor repair. The roadside had its familiar ugly fringe. And glorious rural scenery stood behind that lifted Karti's heart. To complicate her trail she ended her taxi ride and went on by bus. She stood by the side of the road in an unnamed hamlet with the shy eyes of children on her before a light bus came along, ground its gears, and stopped.

The bus came in to Cilacap, a treeless town of single-story dwellings packed in between the commercial harbour and canals running inland. The older part of Cilacap had its toes right in the heavy torpid ocean. The bus worked its way up the main street whose sides were lined with market stalls. Down the waterways Karti saw the backs of houses on stilts and wooden fishing skiffs tied to plank jetties.

When the bus stopped she followed other passengers off, taking an instant liking to the town. She ate in a musky, fly-blown padang, stopping long over her meal, keeping out of the intense heat of afternoon. As for finding the address, she had to rely on luck. Fortunately there was no shortage of loitering young man and she had only to say the names Sutejo and Darkfoot for a teenaged boy to help. He took her down an alley and they lost the main road in a maze of ramshackle housing.

Her guide stopped at a modest concrete and wood house. Under the frontage a little girl was combing her hair while a young boy was playing with a tabby cat. Her guide raised his hands palms open – Behold! Her Destination, then dashed off before Karti could thank or give him any money. In the teak-floored, swept interior, which had no furniture, a young woman was minding two infants while a second elderly woman in hijab lay on a roll of bedding in the corner talking. Karti bent her head and went inside bravely.

'Excuse me, I'm looking for Sotejo. Does he live here?' she asked.

The young mother got lightly to her feet, letting her infants into the care of the older woman. 'Yes. I'm his wife. Sit down.'

They sat cross-legged inside the door and exchanged names. Hartini, as she was called, wore a flowing robe, her long hair was loose and her shapely feet bare and brown. The little boy jumped into his mother's lap while the little girl looked curiously at Karti from the door.

'Did you want my husband for something?'

'I need something.'

'What do you need?'

'I need ID and something else.'

'You come here asking for ID? Why?'

'I'm sorry if I made a mistake.'

Hartini stood up. She was no longer friendly, instead wary and business-like. 'Wait,' she said and withdrew to another room.

'Can you comb my hair?' said the girl. Karti did so with pleasure while her brother rolled over the floor with the cat. Hartini returned with a tray of coffee and

sweets. The children were very polite, looking at the sweets but not touching them. Hartini told Karti that Sotejo was coming. She sat with Karti again and everyone ate. Even the children drank a little coffee.

When Sotejo turned up he was in the company of his brother-in-law. They wore the dirty overalls of their quay-side jobs. Sotejo was a man's age, his face ruggedly handsome and lived in, with tattoos on his neck and a ten-day beard. His brother-in-law, Suryokusumo, was relatively pale-skinned, slim and quiet, no wedding ring and more Karti's age. They joined Hartini and Karti cross-legged on the floor and the kids climbed over them. After Hartini had passed a wet towel over Sotejo's face and shoulders, working it a little way down his overalls, she rose and took the kids out of the room. Suryokusumo, her brother, didn't get a wet towel but in fact seemed cleaner to start with.

'May I know your name,' said Sotejo.

'Sukarti Rahardjo.'

'Really? Was Rahardjo your father then?

'Yes.'

'My condolences.'

'It was three years ago.'

Sotejo grinned. 'So you are the daughter who was sent to Hong Kong for her own good. I've heard about you.'

'Yes. My punishment.'

Sotejo gave out a long whistle. He ran a hand slowly through his hair.

Karti found that she liked all of them, Hartini, her children, Sotejo, Suryokusumo, even the old maid lying lazily in the corner on the bedding. It was a great family and she liked being among them.

'Nadiyudan is my town, too, Karti. Suryokusumo here is a local—they all are—well, except Mahma there in the corner. She's from Sumatra. I'm the only out-of-towner. That's what marriage can do for you.' He smiled at Karti, looking at her with flattering interest. 'So what brings you here? I'll help any way I can.'

'Idris Muhsonuddin suggested I find you.'

‘Curly-haired Idris. We know him. He follows the band. And of course his father is Muhsonuddin. A nice boy.’

The children burst back in. There was an ice-box and Sutejo handed around beers. Suryokusumo drained an entire can of beer in one go, to the open-mouthed satisfaction of the little boy. Hartini went off to her cooking at the back where the kitchen hung over the canal. The old maid in the corner kept the two infants corralled in her arms.

‘I haven’t been to Nadiyudan for ten years,’ said Sutejo. ‘I’m an exile of sorts too. Nadiyudan became too hot to handle for our band. I’ll tell you the story if you like. My wife and Suryokusumo, on the other hand, have not moved an inch from Cilacap from the day they were born. They have me tied down here.’

The little boy, who reminded Karti of Agus, wanted to see Suryokusumo dispatch another beer, and took one from the icebox, offering it with a little face of provocation. At first taking no interest, Suryokusumo sighed, took it and pulled the ring like a conjurer and swallowed the contents in one draft as before, to the delight of the boy, who would have fetched another if Suryokusumo hadn’t held him fast.

‘Muhsonuddin, Rahardjo, the Mayor Brata. Santoso . . . old names,’ said Sutejo.

‘You knew Santoso?’ said Karti.

‘Yes, he was a friend of the band for a short time.’

‘Tell me,’ said Karti. ‘Tell me about Santoso.’

So, while the family whirled around them, Sutejo and Karti had a moment to talk about Nadiyudan, matters of little interest for the Cilacap family, though Suryokusumo listened with half an ear as he played with the kids.

Sutejo’s story about Santoso was really the story of the early days of his band, Darkfoot, he explained. Darkfoot had started out as a school rock group at the large, orderly school for boys he attended, a school where, for the top form, the seedier parts of Nadiyudan were there to be explored out of class. He and his friends knew the places to buy weed and cocaine, the places where they could mix

with interesting non-conformists whose girlfriends were not at all like their mothers or sisters, and the places where the music was loud and vituperative – all those places which so draw young people away from their confining families. And conservative though Nadiyudan was, it had its venues for live music and its bars where Darkfoot began to get gigs.

Santoso was the policeman frequently encountered at all the same places. He took a cut from pushers and venue managers. People knew him as a volatile man, sometimes smiles, sometimes dangerous. For Sotejo and his band, the advantages of being on-side with a policeman were obvious. Santoso ensured the channels were open for the fun things they wanted to do while keeping angry parents or motivated religious ideologues at bay. Anyway, as Blackfoot had success and became part of the town's music scene, there was no getting away from him.

That Santoso was part of their scene was ok, but it also meant that their parties were invaded by people attached to Santoso: crooks, men of unnatural tastes, men who were violent. Their own fans, who were mostly nice young people whose rebellions against authority and orthodoxy only showed how straight and conformist their upbringings really were, had to come into contact with these people when their guard was at its lowest, late at night after drinking too much. A nice girl, still growing up but questioning everything, got assaulted and raped. She put up a fight but was left traumatised and ruined. She went back to her family who tried to carry on as normal and keep the shame of what had happened quiet. For Blackfoot, their success in Nadiyudan immediately paled. They stood by the girl, but Santoso waved the assault away, claiming the girl was a fantasist. She ended her life in front of the Jakarta-Jogjakarta train, to the shock of the whole town.

'We didn't play Nadiyudan again,' said Sutejo. 'From then on we kept clear of Santoso. The band found gigs in neighbouring towns. It was harder but that is the way we went.'

'Santoso's in Yogyakarta now,' said Karti. 'With the Mobile Brigade.'

Sutejo looked at her carefully. 'Was it Santoso who shot your father? I heard

it.'

'Yes.'

'So you want a fake ID?'

'Yes, a fake ID, because I am going to Yogyakarta.'

Their conversation ended here as Hartini came in with food.

As they ate, Hartini invited Karti to stay and Karti accepted. Afterwards, as the household settled into sleep, Sutejo came to her and she followed him through the back-door to the canal.

They found the town quiet in its night. The air was rich with sea-water smells and sewage tinctures. Sutejo led her along the home-made looking landing jetty.

He guided her step by step down wooden planks to his boat. It was long, thin and open, made of wood and had two outriggers. It stood placidly in the water, rocking gently in its bath of salts and seaweed. Karti was as agile as Sutejo was. He clambered to the bow, turned and sat down, lit a cigarette, looked musingly at the sky.

'Ever done any fishing?' he said conversationally.

'Not exactly on a fishing boat, but the crew used to drop a line on occasion.' She showed him photographs of *Venus III.*

He whistled. 'Nice. Hong Kong?'

'Yes.'

'And where did you fit in?'

'I was the housekeeper.'

'On a boat!'

'Not there, in the house. The boat was just for weekends.'

'Remind me to send my kids to Hong Kong.'

'It's ok, half good, half bad.'

'What place isn't? Karti, may I tell you something. Girls around here don't look straight into a man's eyes. Not unless they are very angry. But you are like my wife, you do.'

'That must be the bad half of Hong Kong.'

‘Well, the bad half is always partly the good half.’

He threw his cigarette into the water.

‘So you know Santoso killed your father, do you?’

‘I do.’

‘Once trouble comes into life it’s very hard to shake off, isn’t it, Karti?’ he said. He lit another cigarette. ‘Without our willing it, it works inside us and we change. After Nadiyudan I got myself into this, I got myself into that, and sometimes I wondered why. It’s Unions, Worker’s Rights, now for me. To the authorities I’ve long been a marked man, not so much to the ordinary police—not many are like Santoso, most are as brow-beaten and hapless as the rest of us—no, it’s at the powerful commercial interests in this country where you must look. There’s no justice in this country, Karti. You know that as well as I do. You had a father who was one of the good guys.’

‘I think you’re a good guy too.’

‘Sometimes a man likes to be hear that from a pretty woman, even if he isn’t. I try to be, but I’ve a wife and family, which makes me just another bumbler.’

‘Kids need dads.’

‘You are a tough one, aren’t you, Karti?’

‘For two weeks now I am tough.’

‘I’ll get you a new ID, but it will take money.’

‘I have American dollars.’

‘Are you good for USD 200?’

‘Yes, but I have more, nearly USD 2,000. I want a gun too.’

He nodded slowly and looked at the flooring. ‘It’s not my business to question you, Karti. You can have your ID and your gun, but you’ll have to be patient and wait a bit. You can stay with us. We can’t tell my wife about the gun though, you understand?’

‘I understand.’

The 2,000 dollars was in a money belt around her waist. She pulled the whole wad of notes out and handed it to Sutejo. She felt she had no option but to trust

him and did so wholeheartedly.

‘Thank you, Karti Rahardjo,’ he said.

As if there was nothing further to say that night, they climbed off the vessel and up the steps one by one. Sutejo went to smoke more cigarettes in the alley, where Suryokusumo and others were passing the time in neighbourly groups.

Karti passed the night with Mahma, the nanny, and the two infants who slept each end of an unrolled mattress in the centre of the room. The rest of the women and children were sleeping in another room. In the darkness Mahma lay in the corner with her eyes open. Karti lay on the teak floor with her head on her elbow and soon had a sense of sharing the quietness with Mahma. Occasionally a moped came by in the lane and when it had passed Mahma, who had started whispering to her, would stop and listen for sounds from the children, a little cough or splutter as they slept on, then resume her talk. Every now and again out-riggers returned on the canal and their yellow kerosene lanterns suspended on poles fore and aft lit the back of the house magically. Mahma was unexpectedly talkative, especially now she knew Karti was a nanny too. She had been with Hartini since Hartini was born. Karti listened to her stories with interest but her eyes would not stay open and Mahma unrolled a mat for her and she was soon asleep.

Karti found her patience hardly tested in the days that followed. The family took her on board without apparent difficulty – Nadiyudan or Cilacap, family life was much the same. And Karti was relieved to have her difficult mission suspended. All she tried to do was to keep her skin tough, not forget what lay ahead, otherwise allow her mind and heart to wander as it may.

Hartini’s parents lived bang next-door. There was a married brother there too with his wife and four children. Even on that first evening Karti had seen unexplained individuals coming in and out of Sutejo’s front room. At six every morning Hartini took Karti to the market lanes. They visited the fish market where the onshore wind blew through the rigging of the harbour boats. Hartini wanted to know about Karti’s family but most of Karti's family anecdotes were painingly old and out of date. Before long she knew less of Agus’s and Ridhaan’s daily schedule

than that of Hartini's children. Hartini was straightforward and apparently unthreatened by having Karti in her house and they got along well.

Daily at eleven everyone congregated in Hartini's parents' living room next-door, for chatter and coffee, under their only air-conditioner. There were nearby schools and kindergartens for the younger children and the oldest boy went to the primary school. Afternoon were slumberous and the men, up at dawn, came home at around four. Suryokusumo was the children's favourite and Karti found herself shoulder to shoulder with him after supper-times, jointly handling the last burst of energy of the crèche of children before they were put to bed. She felt that Suryokusumo liked her and she liked him, but it was Sutejo she had a crush on, married of course. Since the first night Sutejo himself had become standoffish. Perhaps he didn't like having a secret from his wife, perhaps he was embarrassed to have no solid news for Karti after pocketing her large bundle of money some days ago.

Sutejo kept his distance and by the fourth morning Karti was beginning to feel distinctly edgy, not knowing what was happening. It was Hartini who, at the eleven o'clock gathering that day, in front of everyone, handed Karti her new ID. Karti's concern at how this was done without privacy must have shown, because Hartini laughed and immediately said, 'Don't worry, you can trust everyone here. This town is divided into invisible enclaves.' Hartini was inexplicably amused by something. As Karti took the ID she felt a particular silence enveloping the room as if a good joke were about to break on her.

The image on the fake ID was a hijab-wearing girl whose veil covered every inch of her head and shoulders except a small oval of her face. The name was *Miss Rachmi DM Wirakusumah.*

Karti was aware of giggling. She was bemused and felt heat rising in her. Yet Hartini was smiling.

'The maker couldn't transfer your photo,' Hartini said. 'Anyway, it is best not to spoil your real ID, you might need it.'

Then Mahma bore down on Karti with a headscarf which perfectly matched

that in the photo, a thing that was fusty white, brocaded and lace-fringed. Whether Karti liked it or not, many hands proceeded to wrap her head up. As the family stood back to look, they were in convulsions of laughter. 'Look in the mirror!' Hartini said.

Karti did so. With the headscarf in place she had to admit it, she looked exactly like *Miss Rachmi DM Wirakusumah*. It was uncanny.

Even Mahma, the one Muslim in the room, found it hilarious.

Karti had not worn a headscarf for three years and felt like an actor with a prop. She was about to say something 'in character' for the others' when thought better of it and took the headscarf off. 'I'll be an actress later,' she said. Then she jumped on Mahma and tickled her, to show she could take a joke.

They all knew her now, so it was not surprising when Hartini spoke for the rest of them, asking if she wanted to tell them anything about her enterprise ahead. She embraced Hartini but said no. It wasn't that she didn't trust them, but it was Sutejo alone she was sure of, her fellow outlaw.

'So you have your ID?' said Sutejo that evening, taking her aside and looking her with a straight face.

'Yes,' said Karti.

'The supplier is a solitary old stick. He likes his little jokes.'

'Tell him to kiss my arse.'

In fact the image had been chosen with great care to match Karti's face. The name was fictitious. Sutejo explained this and gave her the news she'd been waiting for. The other 'item' was ready and tomorrow morning he would take her out on the outrigger and show her how to use it.

To catch the house asleep meant a five o'clock awakening. Down in the boat Sutejo gave Karti a paddle, he dipped one in at the bow and they moved off in the dark along the silent waterway. The channel was narrow and the outriggers sometimes snagged on the sloping bank. After a while the town was behind them. The water opened out to an inland fleet. A cool wind ruffled the water. The two of them in the boat made little sound paddling. Karti felt very alive now she was

awake, watching the dark form of Sutejo in front of her. His paddle scraped against the side and, after each stroke, water dripped from his blade like a running tap. The water slid by, growing more animated the further they went out into the lagoon. The horizon was black and the sky many-starred and blue-black.

A low shoreline began to show in the distance. Little by little the light came up. They were inside an inland lake, a kilometre or more in width, and were moving into it, away from the sea entrance.

They stopped paddling and had breakfast: sugared cakes, water to drink. Karti could see that Sutejo was out of his element, no more a sea-creature than she was, but he had a basic proficiency with the craft gleaned perhaps from his wife or from Suryokusomo.

'What are you going to do when you meet Santoso?' he said.

'I don't know. I want to kill him.'

'You're right to say you don't know. People can't tell what they will do in such situations.'

They went on until they reached the far margin of mangrove. The greenery on the rising land inland had coloured in the rising sun. The water was opaque, hot and stagnant. They paddled around a disused limestone quarry which had cut a white scar in the bank. Karti had grown to like the timbers of the topsides of the craft, bleached white from years of sun exposure. By now they both wore hats and sun-glasses from a compartment under the thwart.

Sotejo stopped paddling and brought out a small wooden box from the same compartment. The pistol was inside.

'You'd better try firing it,' he said.

There were ten bullets and he loaded five into the cartridge that dropped out of the handle. It was a small gun and seemed very old, with a dark patina worn to bronze at the touch points.'

'What type is it?' said Karti.

Sutejo inspected the barrel. 'Browning. And here's the safety-catch,' he said.

Sutejo fired into the bank. The retort was quickly absorbed in the open

expanse of damp sky.

‘Your turn.’

It was heavy. Karti took it and fired four times. The noise was sharp. The bullets went she knew not where amongst the mangroves. ‘Maybe I killed a crocodile,’ she said.

‘You handle a pistol surprisingly well.’

‘As well as any other strong-handed nanny.’

‘I’m sorry I can’t help you more . . . go with you. I want to, but I can’t.’

‘You have a wife and four children, I know. There’s no need. This is enough.’

He took the gun from her, restored it to its small box and handed that to her. A thousand of her dollars was inside too.

‘None of us will rest until we hear you are safe,’ said Sutejo.

Sotejo sang on the return journey, first a folk song then one of Darkfoot’s songs. He took the harsh tone of a rock singer but he was musical. She hardly remembered her father singing, but after a while she felt Sutejo’s singing was consonant with her father’s campaigning, each having their own way of making a difference, pushing out a message to others. Sutejo’s singing all but melted her and she wished she was Hartini.

As it was Saturday the whole family ate specially well at lunchtime. At table Hartini said, ‘Live with us, Karti. Start anew and marry Suryokusumo. My brother’s picky but he likes you.’

Karti blushed. Suryokusumo blushed.

She had to flee table and walk by herself around the fishing harbour to find the resolution to continue.

She took the bus back to Nadiyudan the same afternoon, but only to take the train on to Jogjakarta. She arrived at Nadiyudan late, after dark. At the ticket office at the station, wearing Mahma's scarf, she bought a ticket for the night train under the name Miss Rachmi DM Wirakusumah, and her ID card was not challenged.

Utterly wretched now, she stood among the few figures waiting for the midnight train. She remembered being twelve, leader of an innocent little gang who came to stand on this very platform, time out of number, to watch the noisy Jakarta-Yogyakarta express make its stop. She was as slim as a palm tree back then, with a bulging knot of hair under her headscarf and knobbly knees. There were two boys and they were twelve too and neighbours. It had seemed a grown-up thing to do, watching the train, then walking back home feeling somehow more adult. Why had life taken her from those innocent days to here?

Standing now on the open, midnight platform, Karti was aware of Rachmi DM Wirakusumah creeping into her. By wearing a headscarf she seemed to be giving that other person life. She could feel her own mind making room for this woman and starting to turn the wheels of a devout person's thinking. And the

potential of Rachmi DM Wirakusumah for action felt a strengthening one. Could Rachmi DM Wirakusumah belong to the world of ideologues with the stomach for violence, more ready to pull the trigger on Santoso than she was? Cut-off images flitted in her mind. The Bali Bombing. Zealot gangs in North Sumatra. Islam at its severest in the Middle East. The Koranic purity of Sharia Law in Saudi Arabia, the family of a murdered man offered revenge by the courts, like-for-like restitution, a gun killing met with a gun killing, or blood money.

I will do something less than kill, Karti suddenly told herself with conviction, then fell into confusion. For if she was not to shoot and kill Santoso then what else was she to do?

With a clamour more frightening than it had ever been the train arrived. Guards swung off from the carriages before motion ceased, following on foot for the last yards. A few passengers got down and made towards the exit. Those joining started to carry their luggage across the intervening track and Karti followed suit. The train was long into its journey and, inside, everybody was asleep, full-length on the floor and on the banquette seating.

The train started and between carriages the connecting gear grew noisy under the floor. The restaurant car was closed and there was a guard asleep in his cubicle, with the goods area beyond. Karti sat alone on the floor of the restaurant car, against the wall, jogged by motion, the deafening sound of the train's progress in her ears.

It was a five-hour journey periodically broken by stops at country stations, when a whistle from the platform was the prelude to a long vacant silence. Station staff came on board to load boxes in the goods area. The porters noticed Karti and she watched their bravado, when the train started again, swinging off at the last possible minute, repeated by different boys at each station.

Sweat broke on her skin, memories of Hong Kong slipped in and out of her mind, thoughts and half-wakeful dreams ran into each other, and she bunched herself up under the eating-shelf along the windows.

Hours on, the train squealed through the outskirts of Yogyakarta, a sleeping

shack village beside the track, a low-hung town out there all but unlit. People started coming through the restaurant car heading for the front of the train, their bags shouldered, suitcases wheeled forward scraping past Karti in the aisle. The train came to a stop with a death rattle and in a minute was empty and silent. There was a picket gate exit to a blank-ended avenue where porters, taxi drivers and rickshaw drivers stood in the shadows of the trees ready for grumpy negotiations. Karti remained inside the station, which was a carbon-copy of Nadiyudan's, night still heavy above the superstructure of iron pillars and struts. She took a bench and lay down.

At seven she left the station. Rickshaws, Japanese saloon taxis and horse-drawn buggies on Malioboro Road, which started outside the train station and went one way, dead straight in the direction of the Palace of Yogyakarta. She walked numbly. Under the arcades on the eastern side of the road, market traders setting up for the day, untying the tarpaulins over their fixed stalls of T-shirts, hats, trousers and other things for the tourists – she had been one herself, on a school trip, among young couples and youth groups from all over Java in search of the Old Java.

She had done her research. The Mobile Brigade headquarters occupied a complete city block. It lay between Malioboro Road and a forking road, and was surrounded by a green wall. The main entrance was on the fork road. There was a metal arch bearing the words PAMUNGKAS 03 and underneath it a pivot barrier arm. Six policeman in uniform were at the guardhouse having breakfast, their caps besides their plates on the deal table. Karti stood on the opposite side of the road watching them eat. Santoso was not among them.

In the police compound were grounds with trees and numerous green-painted buildings with black roofs. Some of the roofs carried satellite dishes and from one a red-and-white radio mast rose high. Where she was standing the pavement was high-kerbed. Flowering shrubs in tubs stood at intervals. Cyclists came past heading towards Malioboro Road, on creaking bikes, their handlebars loaded with breakfast snacks on frames.

Karti decided to follow the green compound wall all the way around in a search for other entry points. The wall was waist height with a further metre of railing above the coping. As she walked, different parts of the compound were visible and she saw plain, straight-edged buildings devoid of people amongst trees and shrubs.

One hundred paces on, the fork road veered one way and the green wall another, turning back towards Malioboro Road. There was an alley here, good for mopeds and foot-traffic. The backs of a row of houses took one side, the green wall the other. Some of the houses had been opened up for commerce. A woman was setting up a noodle stall in front of a shabby room with tables and chairs. At the mouth of the alley an elderly man was already at work in his metal joinery. Karti followed the alley to its head at Malioboro Road. It all seemed hopeless. The pistol under the waistband of her jeans was uncomfortable.

She retraced her steps to the noodle shop, to have breakfast and see about getting a room. The tables and chairs there were little better than scrap but she ate a good bowl of noodle soup with appetite. Rachmi's story, she decided, was that she was fleeing from a forced marriage engagement at Kebumen (a place the train had stopped last night). Rather than marry the weedy son of a friend of her father's she had come to Yogyakarta to find a job, to study, or just to make her point to her family. She told this story to the owner of the noodle shop, a woman with a metal crown in her teeth and a scraggly face, who seemed to treat Karti with respect on account of her hijab. 'You won't find the men here much better,' this woman cackled, 'but I do have a room for you, even if I have to throw out a few shoe salesmen.'

The room was up an exterior wooden staircase, a self-contained first-floor attic. It was a studio room of sorts, bare and full of light from numerous windows, nylon curtains hitched up in front of louvre slats.

'That's all police,' the landlady explained of the view on the police compound.

'For your prayers you might need an alarm clock, you don't hear the mosques—nothing that wakes me, anyhow.'

The landlady put a head in the wash-room at the far end. 'No need to kick out a salesman after all.'

'I'll start with five nights,' said Karti, 'just to let the trail run cold, in case my family are looking for me.'

'Right you are. Come on downstairs to have a chat anytime.'

Karti took stock. No Santoso yet but here were five initial days to find him. She sat on the floor and began to relax. Instead of pressure she had the lonely feeling of getting used to new lodgings alone. In the afternoon she circled the perimeter twice, then went shopping for a new headscarf. If she wore hijab she would at least be fashionable.

So, this temporary life in Yogyakarta as Rachmi took root. Karti avoided the landlady downstairs rather than have to elaborate her cover story. She visited the perimeter hourly, stopping near the gate. Before long she was summoned by a foot policeman and asked for her ID. 'Why are you hanging around here?' he demanded. Karti managed to keep her composure. 'I wasn't. I was thinking about something.'

'Thinking what?'

'Thinking about my prayers.'

'I don't want to see you here again.'

She couldn't help fixing on his gun holstered on his belt, whose plastic grip looked very much part of an old telephone. It was a Smith and Wesson.

One morning, when she was in her room drying her hair before the window, enjoying the flowering fig trees in the police compound, she saw Santoso in the alley immediately below, in company with another officer, both in green uniforms.

Santoso had put on weight but was immediately recognisable for his yellowish boyish face which hadn't changed. She scrambled to dress. Outside, she ran after him but the two men had disappeared. The time of this sighting was 10.57 am and Karti noted it down.

She walked randomly through the neighbourhood. She had to admit Santoso had become a stranger in the three years since her father's death. Was she really prepared to kill him? Did she have any choice? She re-examined it all, walking without compass for hours until eventually winding up on the outskirts of town, returning to her lodgings by taxi late at night.

Now, from ten to noon everyday, Karti sat on the bottom step of her attic staircase or at a table in the noodle shop, with her pistol inside her clothes, safety catch off, five bullets in the clip, and everything she needed to walk away in her shoulder bag: passport, ID, money, phone. These were tense hours and the tension seized her every morning from the first second she woke up, or was already been present in her dreams. She did not know what she would do if Santoso reappeared but she hoped and believed she would shoot him dead. But perhaps she would just scare him.

The noodle shop could be busy at lunch and Karti had to make room on her table for others, fending off conversation behind a newspaper. Everyone was a potential witnesses, each with a potential reaction to what might happen. What did she really know of death and killing, she asked herself. Could she really introduce it into a lunchtime scene? But hadn't she seen her father shot up, his body twisted and blooded in the front seat of the Daihatsu. Yes, she had.

Each day she took her ambush harder. It wore her down. To cast off the tension she turned to alcohol and late-screened movies – any distraction she could find. She slept badly and found herself awake at two or three in the morning with tangled thoughts, beginning to be afraid of the crises building in her mind. The five days ran to a week.

One evening she weakened and turned her phone on, wanting to ease her loneliness with whatever unrelated messages her friends had sent her. She sat on

the studio floor with her back against the wall, the lino floor lit by the moonlight in the window. Suddenly the phone rang. It was her mother.

‘Karti! I’ve been ringing all evening.’ Her mother sounded wide-awake for midnight.

‘Hi, Mum, how are you?’

‘We’re all fine, but listen. It’s Ridhaan’s birthday next month. Could you get away from Hong Kong? I asked Idris to ask you—he’s always calling you isn’t he?—but he was rather strange about it. Have you two argued? Anyway, I have had a feeling you are close – call it intuition. Does that mean you can come?’

‘Mum, don’t ask me that, I don’t know. But can I ask you something. How do you feel about Dad, after all this time?’

After a moment of silence her mother answered.

‘Since you ask I’ll tell you. Don’t repeat it but Muhsonuddin’s not the man I thought he was. He’s not devout. Somehow I thought he would be, even though I’m not. Thank God for Hashanah, who’s so easy to get along with. You learn more about someone after you marry them. I miss your father.’

‘But should Santoso be allowed to go on living unpunished?’

‘Not a day goes by when I don’t wish him dead, if that’s what you mean, Karti.’

‘The Sukimuns are the tough side of the family, aren’t they? Dad was the dreamer.’

‘He was. And you are more like me than you think.’

Karti disappointed her mother by saying she could not be home. Her mother said again she could almost feel Karti’s presence in Java and wouldn’t believe it. Saying goodnight, promising to ring more often, Karti switched the phone off with a sigh.

The next day Santoso walked by again, a little earlier at 11.30, before Karti was ready – but she saw him. She tumbled down her staircase and followed. She had just shouldered her bag and put her pistol under her waistband and now she worked her right hand around the handle without bringing it out. Santoso was walking slowly, apparently in no special hurry: come from who knows where; going who knows where – most likely the police compound. At last she was in a position of life or death over him and she could not fire. Just could not. She would stop walking now and Santoso would draw away, never to know how close he had been to death. Coming to the end of the alley she was three steps behind, with a bigger road ahead beyond the old man's metalwork shop.

It was Santoso's mistake to turn and follow a passing girl with his eyes and then to see Karti behind him. He reacted quickly, lunging forward as Karti's hand appeared from her clothing with the gun and she fired. In his eyes was less shock than a look of confirmation, as if he had been waiting for her all along. As the gun went off a cloud of gunpowder smoke enveloped the space between them. Santoso

fell and Karti fired twice more into the cloud.

He lay on his back on the ground, his head on the hard asphalt. Trembling from head to foot, Karti knelt beside him. He was hit twice in the chest, close to the heart but had enough live to raise his head to look at her. She hid the pistol back in her clothes. No one would think she had fired, unless they had seen it and believed their eyes.

'Don't speak,' Karti said. She cradled his head. His face went pale and his gaze fell away from her. She thought of his squawking mother and felt sorry. She watched Santoso die. Others were beginning to gather round. Some must of seen Karti fire the pistol but none seemed inclined to denounce her. She backed away from the body.

Not feeling in control of her feet she walked back up the alley to Marlioboro Road, not daring to look around. Someone offered her a horse-and-cart ride, but she wanted a taxi and waved one down. 'The airport,' she said. Then she was inside and the taxi was moving away. In a minute they were turning east at the Sultan's palace, already far from the alley. The driver was a taciturn old man. She opened the window and breathed in sobs.

Later on she must have lost consciousness, coming to with the driver standing on the tarmac of the airport car park poking her through the open passenger door. Overpaying she walked towards the airport terminal and stopped to dump the pistol in one bin the false ID in another. In the terminal she bought a ticket to Surabaya. From there she would take the first flight to Hong Kong. Making the ordinary steps of a traveller was difficult and she felt near collapse. At each security point uniformed men stepped forward to stop her but on each occasion they checked her documentation and let her through.

HONG KONG

Two months later, after the dry, cool, occasionally cold, Hong Kong winter was through, the territory was back to its hot, steamy self, and its green hills had put on another spurt of growth.

In Nadiyudan, in this time, there had been no police visit to the Muhsonuddin–Rahardjo household, no dawn raid. Santoso's death had gone largely unreported and news of it had trickled from Jogjakarta to Nadiyudan without causing much of a stir. A funeral was put on by Santoso's police cadre, twenty cadets in polished boots, but the ceremony was otherwise ill-attended. Idris held out for two weeks before telling Ernawati everything he knew, including Karti's determination not to join their marriage. Once out, Idris's confession ran through the household in a moment. Ridhaan danced from room to room, saying, 'Oh, Karti, my sister, you did it, I knew you would.' The Sukimuns stopped eating their breakfast and their eyes welled up with tears.

An old woman came into town who seemed to know something had happened to her son. She accosted stranger after stranger until someone confirmed that Santoso was dead.

In Hong Kong, everybody agreed that Karti, on her return from a two-week vacation in Java, had become a reduced person, who, far from being refreshed and rejuvenated by the break, was strangely diminished by it. She was punctilious in her housekeeping duties but her usual vigorous confidence was punctured. Everyone at 88 Plantation Road noticed it. Karti had become distracted and forgetful in a way she hadn't been before. Perhaps she'd picked up some equatorial

bug in Java or there were problems at home weighting her down, about which she chose not to speak.

Meanwhile, the SGG had found a new place to hang out in Victoria Park. This was under the tall trees which bordered the main grassy open space of the park. The shade here was much better than at the waterfront, the ground was dry, a shrub border gave a nice touch of privacy. They shared food and conversation with the other maids here.

Newbie Indonesian maids often settled on the open lawns, to laugh and chat in company, more concerned with finding friendly faces than shade. It was as if the sun could burn them as long as they were amongst warm-hearted companions, sharing an understanding of Hong Kong life.

Karti was not always present on Sundays, sometimes she was wanted at Plantation Road, but she was there often enough. Nurjanah was still waiting for her visa and showed her face, so too Ink and Marliyah. Tari and her dancers were thinking of next years' competitions. Karti's face was widely recognised and it wasn't unusual for some shy newcomer, who had heard of the SGG, to come and say hello. One rumour circulated between one nanny and another in the park: Karti Rahardjo had gone home and shot a policeman to avenge the assassination of her own father. That put the topping on Karti's reputation. But she would never be drawn on the subject.

Always there were young Indonesians discovering Victoria Park for the first time, nominally Muslim, finding their feet as people. The patrician religion was far away and there was an opportunity to explore new things in this green space, ringed by apartment blocks, in this relatively liberal air. The life of a domestic helper in Hong Kong was not always a bad one – for the most part that was agreed. True, time was not their own except for a day a week, so at best it was a half-life, and many were stuck in grim positions, counting each day until the the bad position was completed and they could find a better one. But Hong Kong dealt out its opportunities too, and its moments of happiness. Take Karti Rahardjo and her friends, whose ups and downs in Hong Kong had been so talked about. It all went

to prove that if you kept your wits about you, life here could be a reasonably good one, a good place to be for all the sacrifices implicit in being an overseas worker.

Marliyah was seeing the Frenchman from the engagement party, who complained it was impossible to meet her except on Sundays. He played football in the morning then came to the park to pick her up. They went to Stanley Beach, and Marliyah had tried pastis in a boule café in Sheung Wan. She liked the way it turned from yellow to white when water was added. New horizons were appearing before her. She liked the Frenchman very much and he liked his kooky Indonesian. With satisfaction she told everybody, 'I tell him he's very strange and he tells me I'm very strange.' At Hamilton Street, Mrs Ling had not softened. She still tried to make life miserable for Marliyah who still had to do the laundry for the girls downstairs and to work at the lock-up. But that woman could not make Marliyah cry so easily now or reduce her to the lonely misery she had once known. The balance had changed, particularly with Ink there at the lock-up, and at times Marliyah felt almost sorry for her employer, glad that her life would surely improve while that woman could only look forward to a lonely death – unless she managed to hold on to her husband, the financially burgeoning Mr Ling.

Commander Lam got his promotion and he and Terry had the odd lunch. They were pleased their judgement on Miss Rahardjo had been right, sparing her deportation, finding her a job.

Lam still had his informers in Victoria Park, who told him the SGG did not exist. Dormant was Lam's more cautious conclusion. One produced the tourist map partitioning Hong Kong between the Filipinas and Indonesians, and the signature of Sukarti Rahardjo caught his eye. Lam had smiled. As a police strategist, it was satisfying to think of her nicely wrapped up on Victoria Peak out of harm's way, her file a small but not entirely insignificant one in the police vaults.

Rafli finished at Hong Kong University and left Hong Kong to work at Bank Negara Indonesia in Jakarta. He had not contacted Karti and she thought that perhaps her family history had been investigated by his parents and found wanting,

or that Rafli had simply given in, allowing himself to be carried forward along a career path more seductive than he had admitted. Karti was sorry, then cleared her mind of him, leaving just Marcus in the picture.

Marcus had by now been dumped by his Oxford girlfriend, Sal. She stopped in Hong Kong on transit to North Africa (where her next humanitarian project lay) to give him the news face to face. They'd grown apart since graduation, she said, she was in love with a Sudanese man, and besides, she had always thought him the worst kind of stick-in-the-mud person. Karti told Marcus that Sal was a bitch, and, as Sal took to the air, Karti took Marcus to bed in the cottage.

Meryl Parsons had come back to Hong Kong, to Po Shan Heights, after the winter in England. Karti was shy about calling on her old employer and when she did she brought Marcus. Having visited once they became regulars. Meryl suffered no harm in England but missed Hong Kong and had decided she was well enough to continue her old life after all. Eddie, living with Mrs Johns in the interim, was back. He had a few more grey hairs. Meryl and Marcus conversed so fluently in English that Karti found herself left behind.

Meryl urged them to go travelling, particularly to Australia. She was adamant they ought to do it to really get to know one another as well as visiting her son-in-law's family in Adelaide. After Australia they could go to Darwin and take a boat to the first of the Indonesian string of islands and work their way towards Java or wherever they wanted to go.

Karti found the idea appealing, particularly if it meant a stop in Bali to see Aunt Kadek. And she longed to spend some proper time in Nadiyudan. She told Meryl and Marcus she would die unless she saw her brothers and her mother for a solid two months, day in day out, beginning soon. But she didn't wish to overstay in Nadiyudan, wanting no part in any future mayoral run.

There was one difficulty that had to be discussed. Karti made the tea in the kitchen (once seemingly so modern but now appearing a grubby elderly person's kitchen – so much so that Karti had cleaned it from top to bottom on an earlier visit) and brought it out to the balcony, where Marcus and Meryl were chatting in

their fluent high-speed way.

‘But how could I quit the Wongs?’ Karti said, after she poured the tea. ‘I just couldn’t.’

Marcus and Meryl took up their cups in silence. It seemed they agreed with her. The job at 88 Plantation Road was just too good.

‘What about Aunt Kadek?’ Meryl said at length. ‘Couldn’t she fill your shoes while you travel?’

Karti had to admit this was a brain wave. Kadek was only a few years older than Karti’s mother. She’d retired far too early. And the Wongs would probably like Aunt Kadek just as well as they liked her – maybe more.

‘Meryl, that’s brilliant.’

‘Talk to the Wongs then.’

‘I will. Kadek pushed me into Hong Kong, now my whole family can push her into Hong Kong – again!’ Karti loved the neat symmetry of it. Aunt Kadek would find it her turn to be marshalled unmercifully for her own good by a family acting in concert.

As for Marcus, he was fine with whatever plans Karti put on the table as long as they were together. If there was a language to learn, a culture to look at, so much the better. Yes, he thought more privately, he had got himself involved with a girl whose educational background did not chime with his own, whose family promised to be impenetrable, whose culture, religion and creed were totally at odds with his own, and who, around Tari, was something of a lesbian. But all this went with the territory when you got mixed up with the Indonesian crowd in Hong Kong, he saw that.

As for what had gone down in Java, it was Astuti that Karti confided to first, her best friend. They met in Kowloon Park on a Sunday morning and Karti told her everything. She waited nervously to hear Astuti's reaction. She wanted to hear Astuti say that her act of revenge could be excused in the circumstances.

Astuti was suitably grave. 'I'm not going to condemn you. You've done what you've done and I'm just glad you're back safe.'

'Are you surprised at me?'

'A little. You're going to forget this all now, aren't you?'

'Yes, I'm trying.'

They went to afternoon prayers at the mosque, worshipping from the upper floor while the men were at ground level. Afterwards they met Sameer in the lobby, Astuti's new lover. He was a dark-skinned young man from Karachi, quiet and good-looking and Karti liked him at one. She would have liked anyone who made Astuti happy. He had that easy-going Indian way about him. They all went to sit on a bench in the park. Speaking in English, Sameer said he had married young.

He was the proud father of two boys and described his family life in Pakistan as, 'so, so typical, absolutely normal,' leaving them to make the contrast with his life in Hong Kong. He was on a rolling two-year overseas contract, developing software for an American bank. It was all an accident of modern times, like the accidents that had brought Astuti and Karti to Hong Kong, an effect of the international nature of the job market and the sharp differences in salary levels. A kilo lighter after her talk with Astuti, Karti wanted to put all her heart into listening to Sameer and in watching this couple together. She wanted to love and understand them both.

They went to eat then watched a movie. She saw that Astuti was happy in Sameer's company. Yes, Astuti worshipped God and cared for others as a good Muslim; she attended a group that convened weekly at the mosque, sending small donations to flashpoints in Kalimantan, in Acer, in Sulawesi. But Astuti's need to have a man, her craving for love and affection, was evident from the particular new peace she radiated. Of course their relationship conflicted with the creeds of their religion. Perhaps they told themselves that Hong Kong had detached them from their traditions, despite the fact they continued to attend the mosque here. Karti didn't know how to tackle such a discussion with them. Probably they tried not to analyse their situation too much. It was a need, a craving for a mate that had to be fulfilled, and there was nothing more to say. Nobody at home in Pakistan would ever need know about it, or in Java. They were a sad couple in a way, good Muslims whose situation in Hong Kong had driven them to a relationship which, in parts of the Islamic world, would incur harsh penalty. Karti wished them all the happiness in the world.

With regard to her own moral equilibrium, Karti could live with her conscience. She would not go mad because she had killed. An onerous duty had been discharged and was behind her, leaving her drained and flat but functioning. She knew she would never return to the person she had been, three years before. She would always be fatherless and she would always know what she had done.

But her dreams were no longer clogged up with the aftermath of her father's

death and she found herself reunited with memories of earlier times. The twelve-year-old helping pack the car, to venture up into the hills to sell agricultural stuff, the radio clear when the engine was not racing, her father driving up into the rain clouds while boasted about her railway gang. If she refused to dwell again on the day of her father's murder, perhaps over time the damage would disappear from her psyche and all the shadows would vanish.

Small points of light had come into the Nadiyudan picture. If Muhsonuddin was going to be deputy mayor it would mean Ridhaan and Agus could expect to go to college, like other children whose families had means. And, where the police force was concerned, perhaps the town had seen its worst days. Better captains might come in, slow reform might take place, the same reform that so many in Indonesia wanted and did their best to push forward. When Karti went back she might be able in some ways to start afresh.

There was one last difficulty to be faced, admitting to Marcus that she was a killer.

Taking one view, Marcus need not know. It was family business, Javanese business. But if they were to stay together, if they were to go to Bali and then to Java, then Marcus would divine something sooner or later. Somebody, sometime, would say something inexplicable and smart Marcus would pick it up, probe, uncover her secret and come to her, asking why she had hidden something so big from him, suddenly wondering if he really knew her. So she must tell him now, openly and honestly, that she had taken revenge on her father's killer the old-fashioned way sanctioned by a couple of the Abrahamic faiths. Carrying a burden, unable to duck out at the last moment, she had become killer herself.

Until she spoke to him a black hole remained right in the middle of their relationship. Marcus might not know the black hole was there threatening to skew them and stop their relationship growing properly but she did. For instance she had not asked Marcus about England, because long confidences on his part could only make her secrecy worse. And she had said as little as she could about Java. Fortunately Marcus was not likely press, but if areas were continually avoided he was likely to notice and probe around them, at least within his own mind. And if

all those small stories from their past lives had to be repressed then obviously their relationship could not prosper as it might. But how to tell your boyfriend that three months ago you had gone home and shot a policeman three times stone dead with singular pre-meditation? And would Marcus feel the same about her afterwards? Or would that information end it between them?

Regarding the practicalities of their relationship, Marcus continued to room in the main house. Karti did her duties as before and Terry and Venus were none the wiser. When they spent time together they did so in her bedroom in the cottage. They could not neglect Ricky though, and continued to sit with him around the tin-can fire, even if sometimes they'd have preferred to be alone. Marcus had never had enough to do in Hong Kong. He was keen to leave and begin their travels together.

They lay in bed.

'Karti, teach me to say darling in Bahasa?'

'It's *sayang*.'

'*Sayang*, I want you to know that I am very happy.'

Karti sat up, straight as a bolt. 'Marcus, I need tell you something.'

'Ok.'

'It difficult. Not now. Tonight. We go Café Deco at Visitor Centre, ok?'

'Ok, *sayang*.'

So that evening, around nine, when her work was finished, they took the short walk to the look-out point on Victoria Peak next to the Visitor Centre. They walked in silence. She felt sick. Was she about to lose Marcus?

They sat down in Café Deco at a table on the second floor. To gain a few minutes she asked him to go and order a bottle of wine. The ornamentation inside the restaurant caught her eye. Claiming no historical sense of interior design, she saw the wood veneer, the slender steel work on the arms of the spiral staircase, were obviously of a period. Marcus would no doubt know about it. She took momentary relief from her nerves admiring the rounded walls and regular print patterns. He came back with wine and two glasses and poured out drinks. She

drank hers in one go and he refilled her glass. What ground was one on with a Westerner? Really, she had no idea. How tempting it would be to ask him something about the décor now. Time would pass easily and pleasantly. She would learn a bit and tease a bit. He would enjoy telling her things, occasionally stopping to ask her if he was being boring. But she couldn't wriggle out of this. He was looking at her expectantly, politely ignoring the fact she was moving around in her chair as if sitting on a cat.

'Ok. Marcus. Get ready. When you hear this you shocked. Ok? Now . . . When I go to Nadiyudan two month ago, you say I act strange. Strange when I return. You right. I not go see family, I do something else.'

'Ah ha!'

'Marcus!' She was on the point of tears. 'I go kill the policeman who kill my father.'

She watched Marcus's face register surprise.

'He called Santoso. I know he do it, he tell me before, on that same day he do it. You know my father dead, somebody shoot him. So yeah, I find Santoso two month ago and I shoot him. No one know in Java. It like God revenge.'

'Whatever are you telling me, darling?'

So she recited all of it in detail there at Café Deco. He listened seriously, as gravely as Astuti. Occasionally he topped up their glasses. Sometimes he gave an encouraging smile. He did not interrupt. She began at the beginning, that afternoon when Sundari tumbled into Masduki's in tears. She explained about the mayoral election, about Brata, about Muhsonuddin, names she hadn't spoken of before him until now. She explained about police in Java. She gave an account of her own feelings over the last three years. There had been no way forward but revenge, an elder daughter's duty to her father. She described her stay at the hill resort, how she had procured a pistol, the final act in Yogyakarta. 'I not want tell you but you smart, you find out one day, so no choice,' she said in conclusion.

'Thank you for that.'

'You still want go Australia with me?'

‘Yes.’

‘It not change anything?’

‘Yes, maybe it does. But I think I still want to go Australia with you.’

They said nothing. She was annoyed with herself for asking him about Australia. That was too pushy: a renewed commitment to their plans couldn’t be expected so quickly. How desperate she had become.

‘Phew,’ said Marcus at length.

‘Yes, with this hand.’ She held up her hand. ‘I hold gun, pull trigger, kill someone.’ She looked at him with wistful guilt, but open in who she was.

‘I nearly not kill him, let him go, but in the end no choice. He once show me do this to my father so I do to him, pow, pow, pow.’

They looked at each other with perhaps a reflected expression of the oddity of personal experience.

‘It was simple revenge. You had to avenge your father.’

‘Not have to. But did, yes.’ She replied with more ease. Marcus’s questions was reassuring. And she could not spend her life being ashamed.

‘To be honest, I’m scared of you now.’

‘That good for relationship. You strong mind but you soft. You heart pure.’

‘Your heart is pure too.’

‘No, my heart have *berdosa*, black spot.’

‘Whatever that means, it will disappear in time.’

He filled out his thoughts.

‘I won’t pretend I don’t need time to absorb all this, but it would certainly be more of a shock if I hadn’t met you the way I did, in prison. We knew you’d had it tough, Terry and I. You remember he’d already investigated your background. We knew about your father. I’m used to thinking of you as someone with more backbone than most, someone ready to take on a toffee-nosed Chinese girl when circumstances demanded it. As for calling an unlawful act a wrong act, that’s not always simple. I won’t presume to understand Indonesia. If you were to look at all the people serving prison terms in England it would be crass to band them

together. There's that saying, There but for the grace of God go I.'

'But am I really who you want, Marcus?'

'You know what, you are. How can I explain? Sal is right, I'm a stick-in-the-mud, which means I'm very likely to coast along more or less in my parents' footsteps. But no graduate wants that. We want to make our mark on life, or at least to do something of our very own. That's why I'm jumping at the chance of partnering with you, Karti. You are offering me just what I want, a life in new territory, unfamiliar footings, where I can't go to sleep for forty years. Do you see?'

'I know what you mean. I also go sleep in Nadiyudan quite happy, until I pushed to Hong Kong.'

'Of course you're beautiful and a tower of strength too. I just have the most complete confidence in you imaginable, if you want to know.'

'Yes, I want to know that. Maybe I do some good things, like help Marliyah a little. My HDH work very important to me now. After we go on holiday and I see my family in Java, maybe your family too, I want to come back Hong Kong, work with Aunt Kadek, help HDH. Revenge not a good act, it ugly. I think about it long time. I know it not good feeling. I need work for others now, for my own happy.'

Marcus nodded.

'Why do you think Santoso killed your father? Was it because Brata and his wife ordered it?'

'Before I thought that. Now I think maybe a moment of chance on road, a moment of gun madness. We never know.'

'That fellow Muhsonuddin sounds intriguing, your step-father.'

'Does he?'

'Oh, I don't know. I'm not saying anything. You tell me, darling.'

'Yes, if I look he, I don't understand or trust him. Even my mother say the same now.'

They had finished the bottle of wine. Marcus went to buy a second one. When he came back she said, 'I'm a fuck up, Marcus. You have to know that. I am

unstable now. Sometimes I will be crazy. I will have bad days when you won't know me.'

'Thanks for the warning,' said Marcus, 'but the men in my family are very stable. Not much knocks us off the perch once we've settled on a woman. We take a kind of pride in that. Besides, I cannot wait to meet Muhsonuddin and all these other characters you've told me about, at least the ones who are still alive.'

'Very funny Marcus. Yes maybe we be ok, if I don't kill you first.'

Karti had brought her father's speech notes back to Hong Kong and she fixed on the notion of burying them in the Victoria Peak hillside, in a small ceremony to link her father to Hong Kong and contributing to the process of moving on. Then she thought to cast a wreath from the Star Ferry into the harbour and she wanted Astuti by her side when she did it.

They met early one Sunday morning in Kowloon. Astuti said she was glad to attend. They boarded the lower deck. There was a pale sun and a handful of early-bird tourists. The engine throbbed. There was a smell of oil on the water. As the ferry gained speed, foaming wake thrown up from the bow moved alongside the boat. The water in the channel was green and fresh. They sat face to face on two reversible benches.

'I'm starting to love the sea,' said Karti, feeling a salty breeze on her face.

When the ferry was half way across Victoria Harbour they slid over to the railing and stood up, as tourists sometimes did, for a better view of the implausible waterfront coming towards them, a mirage never short of onlookers to confront its

reality.

‘You want to say something? said Astuti.

‘I don’t know what to say. How about you?’ Karti had prepared a bundle of flowers around the notes weighted with some of Poon’s paper clips.

‘Not me, but I have this.’ Astuti produced a flower out of her bag. ‘A flamingo for luck.’

Hands outstretched over the railing, the flower in one, the bundle in the other, Karti said, ‘Dad, I wish you knew Hong Kong as I do. You would like the politics better here. It is part of your legacy, anyway, that I am here, and I will always carry that with me. May I give your speech notes to Hong Kong, and then be allowed to think of you just as my dad again?’

She dropped the things into the water. The bundle lay in the foaming wake then gradually sank.

Karti and Astuti sat shoulder to shoulder and watched the waterfront come on.