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The London Embassy

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VOLUNTEER SPEAKER

It annoyed me when people asked, because I had to tell them I had just been in Southeast Asia. That was a deceptively grand name for the small dusty town where I was American consul. But who has heard of Ayer Hitam? Officially, it was a Hardship Post – the designation meant extra money, a Hardship Allowance I could not spend. There was no hardship, but there was boredom, and nothing to buy to relieve me of that. With a free month before I was due in Washington to await reassignment, I decided to finance a private trip to Europe – another grand name. One town on my route was Saarbrücken, where the river formed the French-German border. It looked like magic the day I arrived; at dinner it seemed like a version of the town I had left in Malaysia.

My choice of Saarbrücken was not accidental. The Flints, Charlie and Lois, had been posted here after their stint in Kuala Lumpur. They had been urging me to visit them: the single man and the childless couple are natural allies, in an uncomplicated way. Charlie had accepted this minor post because he had refused to spend the usual two deskbound years in Washington. He had not lived in Washington for fifteen years. It was his boast – no good telling him that Washington had changed – and it meant that he had to keep on the move. A little patience and politicking would have earned him promotions. 'Next stop Abu Dhabi,' he used to say. That was before Abu Dhabi became important. At dinner, he said, 'Next stop Rwanda. I don't even know the capital.'

'Kigali,' I said. 'It's a hole.'

'I keep forgetting you're an old Africa hand.'

Lois said, 'One of these days, the State Department's going to send us to a really squalid place. Then Charlie will have to admit it's worse than Washington.'

'I didn't squawk in Medan,' said Flint. 'I didn't squawk in K.L. I actually liked Bangalore. They once threatened me with

Calcutta. The idiots in Washington don't even know that Calcutta morale is the highest in the foreign service. The housing's fantastic and you can get a cook for ten bucks. That's my kind of place. Only squirts want Paris. And the guys on the third floor – they like Paris, too.'

'Who are the guys on the third floor?'

'The spooks,' said Flint. 'That's what they call them here.'

Lois winked at me. 'He's been squawking here.'

'I didn't think anyone complained in Europe,' I said.

'This isn't Europe,' said Flint. 'It's not even Germany. Half the people here pretend they're French.'

'I like these border towns,' I said. 'The ambiguity, the rigmarole at the customs post, the rumours about smugglers – it's a nice word, smugglers. I associate borders with mystery and danger.'

'The only danger here is that the ambassador will cable me that he wants to go fishing. Then I have to waste a week fixing up his permits and finding his driver a place to stay. And all the other security – anti-kidnap measures so he can catch minnows. Jesus, I hate this job.'

Flint had turned grouchy. To change the subject, I said, 'Lois, this is a wonderful meal.'

'You're sweet to say so,' Lois said. 'I'm taking cooking lessons. Would you believe it?'

'It's a kind of local sausage,' said Flint, spearing a tube of encased meat with his fork. 'Everything's a kind of local sausage. You'd get arrested for eating this in Malaysia. The wine's drinkable, though. All wine-growing countries are right-wing – ever think of that?'

'Charlie still hasn't forgiven me for not learning to cook,' Lois said. She stared at her husband, a rather severe glaze on her eyes that fixed him in silence; but she went on with what seemed calculated lightheartedness, 'I can't help the fact that he made me spend my early married life in countries where cooks cost ten dollars a month.'

'Consequently, Lois is a superb tennis player,' said Flint.

A certain atmosphere was produced by this remark, but it was a passing cloud, a blade of half-dark, no more. It hovered and was gone. Lois rose abruptly and said, 'I hope you left room for dessert.'

Charlie did not speak until Lois was in the kitchen. I see I

have written 'Charlie' rather than 'Flint'; but he had changed, his tone grew confidential. He said, 'I'm very worried about Lois. Ever since we got here she's been behaving funnily. People have mentioned it to me – they're not used to her type. I mean, she cries a lot. She might be heading for a nervous breakdown. You try doing a job with a sick person on your hands. It's a whole nother story. I'm glad you're here – you're good for her.'

It was unexpected and it came in a rush, the cataract of American candour. I murmured something about Lois looking perfectly all right to me.

'It's an act – she's a head case,' he said. 'I don't know what to do about her. But you'd be doing me a big favour if you made allowances. Be good to her. I'd consider it a favour –'

Lois entered the room on those last words. She was carrying a dark heap of chocolate cake. She said, 'You don't have to do something just because Charlie asks you to.'

'We were talking about the Volunteer Speakers Programme,' said Flint, with unfaltering coolness and even a hint of boredom: it was a masterful piece of acting. 'As I was saying, I'm supposed to be lining up speakers, but we haven't had one for months. The last time I was in Bonn, the ambassador put a layer of shit in my ear – what am I doing? I told him – bringing culture to the Germans. The town's a thousand years old. There were Romans here! He didn't think that was very funny. It would help if you gave a talk for me at the Centre.'

Lois reached across the table and squeezed my hand. There was more reassurance than caution in the gesture. She said, 'Pay no attention to him. He could have all the volunteer speakers he wants. He just doesn't ask them.'

'Herr Friedrich on Roman spitoons, Gräfin von Spitball on the local aristocracy. That's what Europe's big on – memories. It hasn't got a future, but what a past! There's something decadent about nostalgia – I mean, really diseased.'

'Charlie doesn't like Germans,' said Lois. 'No one likes them. For fifteen years, all I've heard is how inefficient people are in tropical countries. Guess what the big complaint is here? Germans are efficient. They do things on time, they keep their word – this is supposed to be sinister!'

Flint said, 'They're machines.'

'He used to call Malays "superslugs",' said Lois.

'And Germans think we're diseased,' said Flint. 'They talk about German culture. What's German culture? These days it's American culture – the same books, the same music, the same movies, even the same clothes. They've bought us wholesale, and they have the nerve to sneer.' His harangue left him gasping. With a kind of mournful sincerity he said, 'I'd consider it a favour if you did a lecture. We have a slot tomorrow – there's a sewing circle that meets on Thursdays.'

He was asking me to connive at his deception, and he knew I could not decently refuse him such a simple request. I said, 'Doesn't one need a topic?'

'The white man's burden. War stories. Life in the East. Like the time the locals besieged your consulate and burned the flag.'

'All the locals did was smile and drink my whiskey.'

'Improvise,' he said, twirling his wine glass. 'Ideally, I'd like something on "America's Role in a Changing World" – like, What good is foreign aid? What are the responsibilities of the superpowers? The oil crisis with reference to Islam and the Arab states, Are we at a crossroads? Look, all they want is to hear you speak English. We had to discontinue the language programme after the last budget cuts. They'll be glad to see a new face. They're pretty sick of mine.'

Lois squeezed my hand again. 'Welcome to Europe.'

The next morning, trying sleepily to imagine what I would say in my lecture – and I hated Flint for making me go through with this charade – I was startled by a knock at the door. I sat up in bed. It was Lois.

'I forgot to warn you about breakfast,' she said, entering the room. Her tone was cheerfully apologetic, but her movements were bold. At first I thought she was in her pyjamas. I put on my glasses and saw she was in a short pleated skirt and a white jersey. The white clothes and their cut gave her a girlish look, and at the same time contradicted it, exaggerating her briskness. Tennis had obviously kept her in shape. She was in her early forties – younger than Charlie – but was trim and hard-fleshed. She had borne no children – it was childbirth that left the marks of age on a woman's body. She had a flat stomach, a server's stride, and as she approached the bed I noticed the play of muscles in her thighs. She was an odd

apparition, but a woman in a tennis outfit looks too athletic in a businesslike way to be seductive.

She was still talking about breakfast, not looking at me, but pacing the floor at the foot of the bed. Charlie didn't normally have more than a coffee, she said. There was grapefruit in the fridge and cereal on the sideboard. The coffee was made. Did I want eggs?

'I'll have a coffee with Charlie,' I said.

'He's gone. He left the house an hour ago.'

'Don't worry about me. I can look after myself.'

Lois's tennis shoes squeaked as she paced the polished floor. Then she stopped and faced me. 'I'm worried about Charlie,' she said. 'I suppose you thought he was joking last night about the ambassador. It's serious – he hasn't accomplished anything here. Everyone knows it. And he doesn't care.'

Almost precisely the words he had used about her: I wondered whether they were playing a game with me.

'I'm his volunteer speaker,' I said. 'That's quite a feather in his cap.'

'You don't think so, but it is. He's in real trouble. He told the ambassador he was thinking of taking early retirement.'

'Might not be a bad idea,' I said.

'He said, "I can always sell second-hand cars. I've been selling second-hand junk my whole foreign service career." That's what he told the ambassador! I was flabbergasted. Then he told me it was a joke. It was at a staff meeting – all the PAOs were there. But no one laughed. I don't blame them – it's not funny.'

I wanted to get out of bed. I saw that this would not be simple while she was in the room. I could not think straight, sitting up, with the blankets across my lap, my hair in my eyes.

Lois said, 'Can I get in?'

I have always felt that if a person wants something very badly, and if it is not unreasonable, he should have it, no matter what. I usually feel like supplying it myself. Once, I gave my hunting knife to a Malay. He admired it; he wanted it; he had some use for it. Generosity is easy to justify. I always lose what I don't need.

I considered Lois's question and then said, 'Yes – sure,' convinced that Charlie had not misled me: something was wrong with her.

She got in quickly, without embarrassment. She said, 'He's mentally screwed up, he really is.'

'Poor Charlie.'

We lay under the covers, side by side, like two Boy Scouts in a big sleeping bag, sheltering from the elements in clumsy comradeship. Lois had not taken off her tennis shoes: I could feel the canvas and rubber against my shins. Her shoes seemed proof that Charlie had not exaggerated her mental state.

'He thinks it's funny. It's me who's suffering. People pity mental cases – it's their families they should pity.'

'That's pitching it a bit strongly, isn't it?' I tried to shift my hand from the crisp pleats of her skirt. 'Charlie may be under a little strain, but he hardly qualifies as a mental case.'

'A month ago we're at a party. It was endless – one of these German affairs. They really love their food, and their idea of fun is to get stinking drunk and sing loud. There's no social stigma attached to drunkenness here. So everyone was laughing stupidly and the men were behaving like jackasses. One of them took my shawl and put it over his head and did a Wagner bit. And there was this Italian – just a hanger-on, he wasn't a diplomat. He suggested they all go to a restaurant. It's two in the morning, everyone's eaten, and he wants to go to a restaurant! There was a sort of general move to the door – they're all yelling and laughing. I said to Charlie, "Count me out – I'm tired."

'"You never want to do anything," he said.

'I told him he could go if he wanted to. He gave me the car keys and I went home alone. I was asleep when he came back. There was a big commotion at the front door – it was about five. I go to the door and who do I see? Charlie. And the Italian. They're holding hands.'

I almost laughed. But Lois was on the verge of tears. I felt her body stiffen.

'It was awful. The Italian had this guilty, sneaky look on his face, as if he'd been caught in the act. I saw that he wanted to drop the whole thing. He wouldn't look at me. Charlie was grey – absolutely grey. He wasn't even drunk – he looked sick, crazy, and he kept holding this Italian by the hand. He told me to go back to bed.

'"I'm not going back to bed until he leaves," I said.

'"This is my friend," he said. His friend! They're holding

hands! He dragged the Italian into the house and I really wanted to hit both of them. Charlie said, "We're staying."

'"Not him," I said. "He's not staying in my house."

'"You never let me have any friends," said Charlie, and he starts staggering around with this other guy. I thought I was dreaming, it was so ridiculous.

'"I don't care what you do," I said, "but you're not taking this creep into my house." Then I got hysterical, I started screaming, I hardly knew what I was saying.

'Charlie said, "All right, then, let's go." And off they went, hand in hand, out the door. I don't know where they went. I didn't see Charlie until that night. He looked terrible – I don't even think he'd been to work. He hasn't mentioned it since. And you deny he's a mental case.'

Listening to her story, it struck me that I hardly knew Charlie Flint. He was as frenzied as anyone in the embassy, and he had a theory that the embassy wives were going to start an insurrection, but our relationship was mainly professional. I knew nothing of his personal life beyond the fact that he drank too much; that fact applied to everyone I met in the foreign service. I regarded his determination to stay out of Washington as a worthy aim. He wasn't ambitious. And he had prepared me for his wife's oddness.

I replied to her in platitudes: Don't jump to conclusions, things will settle down, and so forth. What else could I offer? I did not know her well, and I was in bed with her. I said, as an afterthought, 'You're not suggesting he's gay, are you?'

'Do you think I'd care about that?' she said. 'You've been in the bush for two years, so you don't know. But being bisexual is a big thing in Europe these days. Everyone's gay. The men think it's fashionable, almost masculine – proof that you don't have any hang-ups. They're always hugging each other, holding hands – God only knows what else they do, though I have a pretty good idea. I'm telling you, Europe makes Southeast Asia look civilized. I get propositioned about once a week – by women!'

'Are you tempted?'

'No,' Lois said, 'I tried it.'

'With a woman?'

She nodded; her whole body moved, and she wore a curious half-smile. 'A German chick. About nineteen. Very pretty. It

didn't work out.' She made a face. 'Charlie wanted me to. That's why I didn't take it seriously. I thought it would encourage him in his craziness. Now, when I think about it, I just laugh.' She shifted sideways on the bed, propped herself up on one arm and said, 'How come you're so normal?'

'Everything is human.'

'You're making excuses for Charlie.'

'Charlie has a conscience.'

'Don't you?'

'I don't know. But I know that the lack of it can make some people look fairly serene, even harmless and normal. Charlie hasn't hurt anyone.'

'He's hurt me!' Lois cried, and I felt her shoe. 'I'm sorry,' she said. 'I didn't mean to kick you. But what good is it saying, "Everything's human and everything's normal"? We were in Indonesia, India, Malaysia – yes, things were normal in those places. But Europe's different. And I'm telling you, I can't handle it.'

I felt sure she was mistaken, but I didn't want to contradict her, since she appeared to take everything as a personal attack. She saw Charlie's drunken hand-holding as an affront to her, but this casual mention of *a German chick* – wasn't that equally odd? She didn't appear to think so. I understood why she was lying to me, though it was not in character for her to belittle Charlie. Adultery is a great occasion for lying; the wife in another man's bed usually talks about her husband.

I said, 'I'm glad I came to Europe. I had no idea it was so lively. It makes Ayer Hitam seem rather tame.'

'Where are you going after this?'

'Up the Rhine. I'm leaving tonight, after my talk. I'll be in Düsseldorf for a few days.'

'Are you staying with Murray Goldsack?'

'Charlie gave me his name. But I'll probably stay in a hotel.'

'Charlie gave you his name,' Lois said bitterly. 'He would. We were up there three weeks ago. Another disaster.'

I didn't want to hear it, but she had already begun.

'The Goldsacks have been there about a year. She writes poetry, he's big on painting – he'll show you the gallery he opened. It's full of pretentious crap – stupid, simple, neurotic blurs. Doesn't anyone paint people anymore? The Goldsacks don't have any children. In fact, when they got married they

signed a contract saying they wouldn't have any kids and deciding who'd get what when they split up. They assumed they'd split up eventually – Murray will give you all the statistics. They're very modern laid-back people with a house full of crap art and heads full of crap opinions. Over dinner, they told us how they keep their marriage alive.

'Get this. They play games. Like "White Night". Sue puts on a white dress, white slippers, white everything. Then she cooks a white meal – mashed potatoes, steamed fish, cauliflower, chablis. Murray wears a white suit. Then they get drunk and go to it.'

'That doesn't sound so odd,' I said. She was not lying, but repeating a lie.

'They also have Black Night, Red Night. Or Indian Night. She puts on a sari, cooks a curry, they burn incense and run through the *Kama Sutra*.'

'Tell me about Eskimo Night. Do they rub noses?'

'Be serious, will you? Murray was telling me about it – we were in his living room. As he was describing these dressing-up games I noticed he was filling my glass. This little squirt was trying to get me drunk! I was feeling pretty rotten, and he was annoyed that I wasn't drinking fast enough. So he pulled out some pot and rolled me a joint. I once tried some in K.L., but it wasn't anything like this. My brain turned into oatmeal. Then I looked around and didn't see Charlie. I was panicky. "Where's Charlie?" I said. Murray looked at me. "Oh, he's with Sue."

'"Where are they?" I said.

'He pointed to a door – the door was closed. I said, "I've got to talk to him" – I don't know why I said it. Maybe it was that stuff I had just smoked.

'Murray said, "Don't go in there. They don't want you to."

'"How do you know what they want?" I said. He sort of chuckled. I said, "Hey, what's going on?"

'He had a really evil look on his face. He said, "You really want to know?"

'Then I knew. I wanted to cry. I said, "My husband's in that room with your wife!" He said something like, "So what?" and put his arm around me. I pushed him away and stood up. He got mad at me – he was really peeved. He tried to grab me again, and I hit him. He said, "Hey, what's wrong with you?"

'What's wrong with *me*? This man's a cultural affairs officer in

the United States embassy. He's supposed to be a diplomat, he gives lectures, he makes statements to the press, he writes reports – or whatever they do. And he's peeved because I won't cooperate with his wife-swapping! It was too much. After an hour or so, Charlie and Sue came out looking pretty pale and pushing their clothes back in place. We all had a drink and talked about – Jesus, we talked about Jimmy Carter and the budget cuts. The next day we left. Charlie wouldn't talk about the other thing – the monkey business.'

Lois was silent for a while. Then she turned over onto her side, her back to me. I got up on one elbow and, seeing that she was crying, I put my arm around her to comfort her.

She said, 'Hold me tight – please.' I did. She murmured, 'That's nice.'

What now? I thought.

She said, 'Charlie never pays any attention to me.'

'I can't help liking him,' I said.

Lois said, 'I'm married to him,' and then, 'Don't let go.'

'I feel a bit silly,' I said. 'Should we be doing this?'

'I get nothing,' she said. 'Nothing, nothing. This isn't a life.'

'You're going to miss your tennis.'

She twisted away from me and heaved her legs up.

'What are you doing, Lois?'

'Getting these damn shoes off.'

I said, 'I'm supposed to be having lunch with Charlie. I couldn't face him. Please don't take your shoes off.'

'He doesn't care,' she said.

Another lie: for all his frenzy and occasional deceit, there was no man who would have cared more about his wife's infidelity. Remember, they had no children to encumber their intimacy, so they were like children themselves – such couples so often are.

'That seems worse,' I said, resenting her ineptness.

She pressed her back against me, moving her skirt sinuously on my thighs; and still facing away she uttered a despairing groan.

'Then just hold me,' she said. 'I'll be all right in a minute.'

When she got out of bed her pleated skirt was crushed and her socks had slipped down. She brushed herself off, adjusted her socks, and tucked in her jersey. She looked as if she had just played her match and been defeated.

She said, 'I feel very virtuous.'

'I don't,' I said. Then she was out of the door. I thought: *She is insane.*

Charlie was late for lunch. When he arrived, I looked for indications of the craziness Lois had attributed to him. But there were none. She needed to believe he was crazy, in order to make excuses for herself.

He said, 'Do you really have to go to Düsseldorf after the lecture?'

'The lecture was your idea,' I said. 'If it wasn't for that I'd be on the train now.'

'You're welcome to stay as long as you like. Lois was hoping you would.'

I said, 'I don't think there's much I can do for her.'

'Fair enough.' He seemed gloomy and almost apologetic, as if he had guessed at what had gone on that morning between Lois and me. I did not want to upset him further by telling him her wild stories. He said, 'I'd leave this place tomorrow except for one thing. This is the first place Lois can live a normal life. I'm staying for her sake. Believe me, it's a sacrifice. But there are good doctors here. The best medical care. That's what she needs.'

'I understand.' I could not say more without revealing that I pitied him.

'You'll like Düsseldorf. Goldsack's a live wire. A very bright guy – he's got a big future in the foreign service. He'll make ambassador as sure as anything. His wife's fun, and I think I should tell you – she's an easy lay.'

That was the first clue I had that Lois might not have been completely wrong about Charlie. And it made me all the more eager to meet the Goldsacks. I left immediately after my lecture, and two days later was in Murray Goldsack's office.

'Flint cabled me that you were coming,' he said. 'I've been looking over your bio. It's really impressive.' Goldsack was small and dark, in his early thirties, and he looked me over closely, giving me the strong impression that I was being interviewed and appraised. He said, 'I wish I had your South-east Asia experience. My wife keeps saying we should put in for a tour there.'

'You might be disappointed.'

'I'm never bored,' he said, and made it sound like a reproach. 'Flint said you might be available as a volunteer speaker.'

'Other people do it so much better,' I said.

'Give us a chance to entertain you at least,' he said. 'We'd like to have you and your wife over for a meal. I hope you'll both be able to make it.'

'If my bio says I'm married, you've been misinformed.'

Goldsack laughed. 'What I mean is, I'd rather you didn't come alone.'

I said, 'I know an antique dealer in town. He's a lovely fellow. Now, he's someone you might like to consider as a volunteer speaker.'

'Wonderful,' said Goldsack. He jumped up and shook my hand to signal the meeting was over. 'I'll leave a message at your hotel with the details.'

That was the last I saw of Goldsack. There was no message, which was just as well, because there was no antique dealer. I thought: *Poor Lois.*

RECEPTION

The best telegram I ever had said this: CALL ME TOMORROW FOR WONDERFUL NEWS. I had twenty hours to imagine what the news might be. And I delayed for a few hours more. I wanted to prolong the pleasure. I loved the expectation. How often in life do we have the bright certainty that everything is going to be fine? Months later, I told someone about the telegram. She said, 'It would have driven me crazy with impatience!'

I was more than patient. I was almost fulfilled. I could have waited a month. After all, a reliable witness had assured me that it was wonderful news.

Travelling alone through Europe, I had just left Germany for Holland, where the telegram awaited me. I liked the Dutch. They were sensible; they had been brave in the war. They still tried to understand the world, and their quaint modernism had made them tolerant. They behaved themselves. It was a church-and-brothel society in which there were neither saints nor sinners, only at worst a few well-meaning hypocrites. Vice without passion, theology without much terror; they were even idealistic in a practical way. They were unprejudiced and open-minded without being naively enthusiastic. They had nice faces. Their pornography was ridiculous, and I think it embarrassed them, but they knew that left to its impotent spectators and drooling voyeurs it was just another sorry prop in sex's sad comedy.

In Amsterdam, where I could have chosen anything, I chose to be idle. I smoked a little hash, talked to Javanese in their own language and was reminded again how 'colonial' and 'bourgeois' are full of the same worthy illusions, like the solidity and reassurance of plump upholstered armchairs in a warm parlour. I sat and read. I ate eastern food and slept soundly in a soft Dutch bed. Each night I dreamed without waking – it had

never happened in Ayer Hitam, where nights were racketty and hot.

It was winter. The canals froze. Some people skated, as they did in the oldest oil paintings on earth – moving so fast that the swipes of the speed-skaters' blades made a sound like knives being sharpened. Gulls dived between the leaning buildings and gathered on the green ice. The small frosty city smelled of its river and its bakeries, and beer. I went for long ankle-twisting walks down cobblestone streets.

At last, almost sad because it meant the end of a joyous wait, I made my phone call. The telegram had been informal – a friend in the State Department. I had tried to avoid guessing the news: expect nothing and you're never disappointed.

She said, 'You've got London.'

This was London, this reception. A month had passed since the telegram. The party invitations had my name on them ('*To welcome* . . .') The guests had been carefully selected – it was pleasure for them, a night out. For us, the embassy staff, it was overtime. I did not mind. I had wanted London. In London I could meet anyone, do anything, go anywhere. It was the centre of the civilized world, the best place in Europe, the last habitable big city. It was the first city Americans thought of travelling to – funny, friendly, and undemanding; it was every English speaker's spiritual home. I had been intending to come here for as long as I could remember.

And this was also a promotion for me: from FS-5, my grade as Consul in the Malaysian town of Ayer Hitam, to FS-4, Political Officer. My designation was POL-1, not to be confused with POL-2, the CIA – 'the boys on the third floor,' as we called them at the London embassy. I was only a spy in the most general and harmless sense of the word.

It had been a mistake to walk from my hotel to this reception. My hotel was in Chelsea, near the Embankment; the party was at Horton's, Briarcliff Lodge, in Kensington. London is not a city. It is more like a country, and living in it is like living in Holland or Belgium. Its completeness makes it deceptive – there are sidewalks from one frontier to the other – and its hugeness makes it possible for everyone to invent his own city. My London is not your London, though everyone's Washington, D.C., is pretty much the same. It was three miles from my