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# SELECTED MYANMAR SHORT STORIES

TRANSLATED BY  
MA THANEGI

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## Marriage

By Theikpan Maung Wa

Now, then.

I should write about married life, after pondering on it for so long; whatever backlash I suffer as the result, I alone have the reasonability. With all the millions of people on this earth, think of the millions of marriages. With all the creatures of the world, fish and fowl, think of the number of *their* marriages. Let us not bother with the few unmarried people: they are surely just a handful.

Western say that marriage is a partnership. Well and good, of course, I agree it is a partnership. Wife helps husband, husband helps wife. Our own elders say marriage is like tongue and teeth. Tongue and teeth cannot be apart, just like husband and wife, but accidentally the tongue can be bitten, right?

Sometimes it can be quite a bite and it can hurt like blazes.

Maybe our elders are right as it seems to me that there's a great deal of biting. Partnership is rare, for when the husband is out partying, the wife is praying at home and when he's at a poker game, she's at the monastery and when he's out boozing she is kneeling in front of a shrine. Well. *And* maybe when he's reading scriptures she's off to the movies and when he's fasting and praying at home, she's at the social club. He saves, she spends. He goes east, she turns west. And the tiffs can end up in court, maybe in divorce and Going Back Home to Mother.

Now, among these millions of marriages let us consider the marriage of Sub Divisional Officer Maung<sup>1</sup> Lu Aye and his wife Khin Than Myint. They both liked to read; they both enjoyed going to the movies; they both pray with devotion; they love music; they like staying home.

Now then, is that not pleasant? Does it not disprove the elders' words about teeth and tongue and biting? In this case, this biting situation of teeth and tongue cannot arise, wouldn't you say?

Wrong.

Let us examine this agreeable marriage.

Both like to read books and magazines. Which ones? The same.

But let us go into more detail: which chapters and articles of these publications does each like? Now the problem begins for he reads the essays, the editorials and the news. She prefers fiction. He said people who read fiction are immature. She retorted that only monkish men like essays. Not wanting to be thought monkish, he tried reading fiction but prefers stories with sad endings and said so. She likes happy endings. That difference alone would be enough to start a fight.

At each month drew to an end, she would begin to fuss about her subscribed magazines not arriving on time: if it gets later than five days, she would be angry with the publisher, the writers, the printer, the clerks, the postmen. Her fury would spread. Beware, all ye in her vicinity.

He would laugh at her anger. Who cared if that rag doesn't turn up, he would tease. A nice noisy fight would start. When his literary magazine was late, he would start to fret: he would interrogate the postman. Why? Why? He would ask plaintively, sometimes muttering aloud to himself. She would giggle and say: good, good, I hope it doesn't come. Now *that* was nasty. He could not stand it and there would commence another teeth-tongue battle that ended only when the magazine turned up.

On Saturdays they would go to the movies. When she said she adored the actresses Khin Aye and Khin Kyi he would hoot with laughter. That infuriated her. When he praised the actress he liked, she disagreed: how could he tell if she's any

<sup>1</sup> Prefix to a male name, mostly of boys but at times used as a sign of modesty for oneself. The stories of Maung Lu Aye are autobiographical..

good, how many of her films had he seen, anyway? On what basis did he think that certain actress any good? Another battle would begin.

They both liked music but let us examine that fact closely. He liked the classic songs, such as Deep Woods of Flowers or The Glory of Buddha.

She preferred pop songs. When he sang 'Deep Woods' in the bath, she would start beating on a tin can outside the door. However grandiose the music of a classic it could never hope to compete with a tin can. She said a mouse got into the tin and needed to be scared off. She said it with a giggle. He being a judge and since there were no witness for the prosecution, he could not say anything.

The next day, she started to hum her favourite pop song while sitting at her toilette table. Aha! He was sitting at his desk and immediately took up his walking stick and thumped it loudly on the floor. A mouse ran under the table, he protested when she complained. He laughed. She, not being a judge, couldn't care less about witnesses or proof and accused him bluntly of malice.

All the years of studying the law were of no avail. His studies could not save the learned judge from the teeth. They bite, and would keep on biting. Sigh.

(1933)

Close Proximity  
Journal Kyaw Ma Ma Lay



## Close Proximity

By Journal Kyaw Ma Ma Lay

The Full Moon of Waso was U<sup>1</sup> Po Sein's birthday; he was seventy five.

At dawn of that day his only daughter Ma<sup>2</sup> Thaw was cooking rice for the dawn *soon*<sup>3</sup> offering to be made to the shrine and to the monks. Ma Thaw has been doing the same thing for each of her father's birthdays to offer the Full Years' *soon*, i.e., to offer to the shrine or monks the same number of spoonfuls of rice as the years reached. As she lay in her bed just before getting up she reflected that father was now seventy five... where did the years go? She then remembered that her mother Daw Pan U would the same age in two month's time. Both of the same age and both healthy... apart from faded vision, neither has lost a tooth, their backs were still straight, and people of their community said that they must have bountiful merit.

The rain pounded down on the roof.

Dawn would soon be here and Ma Thaw was having trouble lighting up the firewood. Her eyes were starting to smart from the smoke. She was getting fed up with the flame that would spurt and then die down as quickly. She kept dribbling

<sup>1</sup> Formal prefix to male adults' names

<sup>2</sup> Prefix to female names, both adults and children. Not formal.

<sup>3</sup> Food offered to monks or at the shrine

kerosene on the firewood and blowing hard through a pipe but the damp firewood was slow to catch. With the sound of the rain she at first did not hear the pounding on the kitchen door. When she noticed she hurried to open it.

"How could you not hear the door? I've been pounding so hard and why is the door closed?" her mother Daw<sup>4</sup> Pan U scolded as she came inside. Even when scolding her mother's voice was not harsh.... it has a mewling sound that was rather shrill.

"Oh mother, I really didn't hear anything, it's raining so hard. I couldn't get the fire to light. I closed the door so the smoke won't blow into the house."

Daw Pan U looked at the smoking fire with her hands on her hips and jerked her chin at it in derision.

"You right. Look at the time, the rice pot isn't on the fire yet. I heard you get up ages ago...have you even washed the rice?"

Ma Thaw replied from blowing at the fire: "Yes, mother, it's washed, it's ready."

As Daw Pan U walked out to the toilet at the back Ma Thaw placed the pot on the stove. As she was washing the rice for another pot her mother returned and said,

"Do your own work; I can wash it by myself."

Ma Thaw did not reply but kept on washing the rice. Daw Pan U washed her face and then sat down to light the fire of another stove opposite from the one Ma Thaw was using. Ma Thaw put the pot of washed rice beside this stove and picked up a flaming branch from the first stove and approached her mother, who looked up from a bent position of blowing into the stove.

"And what do you think you are you doing with that?"

"The firewood's damp, mother, it's not going to catch for some time... so I thought this could help..."

Daw Pan U shook her head.

"Stop this rubbish; don't bring that fire to my stove. I can manage on my own... take it back."

Looking upset Ma Thaw tried to plead with her.

"Mother, I'm just worried it would get too late...it's just lighting a fire ...you're not using anything."

<sup>4</sup> Formal prefix to female adults' names

Daw Pan U was already losing patience at not being able to get her stove to be lit.

"See here, when did I ever touch anything of his? If I say I cut off someone I cut off everything connected to that person...I won't use it, so take it away and go."

Ma Thaw turned away. The two of them, backs to each other, tried to keep the fire going in their own stoves. Ma Thaw looked over her mother's stove, still not working, and heaved sighs of despair.

When Ma Thaw was ten years old, one stove became two in this kitchen ....one for her father and one for her mother. For twenty five years and with Ma Thaw now an old maid of thirty five, her parents had not spoken to each other. They lived in one house but had separate earnings and cooked their food separately. Ma Thaw cooked for her father and helped her mother in the kitchen. In their small two-storey wooden house, her mother has a small grocery in a room downstairs and Ma Thaw worked as a seamstress.

U Po Sein was originally from up-country and had arrived in this village to treat a small-pox patient. The disease had spread to most of the village so U Po Sein stayed to treat them and became a traditional doctor for the whole community who all felt dependent upon him. So that he would not leave, the villagers had made a match for him with a forty year-old seamstress, Daw Pan U, so Ma Thaw was born when her mother was past forty. By the time she was three, she still did not know U Po Sein as her father ... she would often wonder who that man was when she saw him, for he would be away treating patients in other villages and be at home only once in three or six months.

The marriage of the confirmed bachelor and the old maid did not work out too well: first, out of shyness they would not go together to the pagoda or monastery like other couples. Even after Ma Thaw was born they were still shy. By the time she was a toddler, their apparent shyness changed into bickering as soon as they saw each other.

Daw Pan U was frustrated with her husband that he always spoke abruptly, that he thought too much of himself, that he was selfish, fussy, unforgiving and contrary.

U Po Sein too was frustrated with his wife that she was stingy, did not get along with anyone, had too many things

### Our three main national causes

- \* Non-disintegration of the Union - Our cause!
- \* Non-disintegration of the National Solidarity - Our cause!
- \* Perpetuation of National sovereignty - Our cause!

### People's Desire

- \* Oppose those relying on external elements, acting as stooges, holding negative views
- \* Oppose those trying to jeopardize stability of the State and progress of the nation
- \* Oppose foreign nations interfering in internal affairs of the State
- \* Crush all internal and external destructive elements as the common enemy

### Four political objectives

- \* Stability of the State, community peace and tranquillity, prevalence of law and order
- \* Proper evolution of the market-oriented economic system
- \* Development of the economy inviting participation in terms of technical know-how and investments from sources inside the country and abroad
- \* The initiative to shape the national economy must be kept in the hands of the State and the national peoples

### Four social objectives

- \* Uplift of the morale and morality of the entire nation
- \* Uplift of national prestige and integrity and preservation and safeguarding of cultural heritage and national character
- \* Uplift of dynamism of patriotic spirit
- \* Uplift of health, fitness and education standards of the entire nation

## Selected Myanmar Short Stories

Translated by

Ma Thanegi



UNITY Publishing House  
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Sanchaung Township, Yangon.

going on, and was stubborn, ungrateful, self-centred, and unhelpful. They each kept their frustrations with each other bottled up and when Ma Thaw was ten it all exploded.

It was the day that U Po Sein returned home after about three months' of treating patients in the countryside. Early one morning, he had got off the boat at the jetty and walked home, carrying a woven box with his clothes and stuff, two baskets he had bought to use at home and a whole bunch of bananas. He had said he would be away for about ten days and as he then came home after three months Daw Pan U was sulky. As soon as she saw her husband entering the house, she went into the bedroom. When U Po Sein saw that, he dropped everything at the slipper-removing space<sup>5</sup>. First he thought he would call his daughter but remembering she would be at school, he fetched a drink of water for himself and dropped down tiredly into an easy chair.

After he had rested a bit he got up from the chair and shouted loud enough for Daw Pan U, still in her room, to hear: "Hey, box, hey baskets and bananas, go into the house, now, get inside!"

He was speaking as if these things were live entities. Daw Pan U knew that as long as she did not go out and take the things in<sup>6</sup>, he would go on being sarcastic and was determined to see who would give up first....it was not going to be her, that's for sure. She stayed put in her room.

Two women customers of Daw Pan U came in; U Po Sein was still ordering his things to get inside. It was really funny but rather than laughing the two women, realising their doctor was very angry, scampered away in fright. They hurried to the monastery where Ma Thaw was at school<sup>7</sup> and told her the news.

Ma Thaw ran like the wind from the monastery back to her house.

U Po Sein was determined to continue shouting out his orders so long as the stuff was piled outside his house; never

<sup>5</sup> A level space at the top of the stairs for people to leave their shoes before entering the house.

<sup>6</sup> It is a tradition for wives at home to welcome the returning husband and take the things from his hands, even on a daily basis.

<sup>7</sup> All through history and even now in remote places, monasteries are schools where monks teach children to read and write.

mind if he should drop dead from exhaustion. Ma Thaw could hear him from afar all along her way home.

She looked from her father to the piled stuff, trembling with fear and with tears welling in her eyes. Still in terror, she carried in the things one at a time. Only then did her father sit down in his easy chair, completely tired out. With his brow wrinkled and eyes shut tight he sat resting. After while he got up and taking down a longyi<sup>8</sup> from a clothes line and throwing it over his shoulder, walked off into the village.

Ma Thaw looked all over the house for her mother and finally found her in bed with a blanket pulled over her head. Ma Thaw called to her but got no reply. In a while U Po Sein came back; he carried pots and pans and wrapped in his spare longyi were bundles of rice, salt fish, dried chillies, onions and a bottle of oil.

That was the day that U Po Sein, with deep bitterness against his wife, declared himself no longer married to her and set up a separate kitchen. He cooked for himself until Ma Thaw grew old enough to do it for him.

Ma Thaw's rice pot boiled over; Daw Pan U was still trying to get her fire going.

Ma Thaw poured out all the water from the pot and replaced it on the stove to cook the last few minutes. She started to prepare the tray for the shrine offering.

"Oh dear, mother, there's no more palm sugar pellets left in father's tin, may I take a few from your shop?"

"There's no palm sugar left, there's only cane sugar slabs,"

While Ma Thaw took some cane sugar slabs from a tin from her mother's shop and was putting them on a plate, her mother was muttering irately.

"Well, I never touch *his* things but sure, *he* can use *mine*. When you were born, I wasn't even out of the maternity period<sup>9</sup>, and he asked me to give him back the gold bangle he had made for me from his fees and since that day I never saw it again. Gone! From that day I never asked a penny from him and I've been earning enough on my own to this day."

<sup>8</sup> Waist garment

<sup>9</sup> Up to seven days after birth, a time when both mother and child are considered fragile and vulnerable



Ma Thaw hurried to set the tray, making sure she was not forgetting anything and only half heard her mother; it might also be that she has heard the same words for over a hundred times from Daw Pan U and she got used to it. She was fed up with her life of being the buffer between her parents, not even getting married and she no longer wanted to listen to the same things over and over again.

"He sits there all dignified as the head of the household and does not want to use his money for anything and then he badmouths me, and I'm the one earning my own living. It's only because of you, you know, it's only because I worry about you that I have not left this house."

Ma Thaw could not waste anymore time to listen to her mother, and leaving her still muttering carried the tray on her head to the shrine upstairs. The shrine was brilliant with lit candles. Her father sat with his prayer beads as he waited for her to bring the offerings.

As Ma Thaw set the tray down on the shrine U Po Sein got up and asked her,

"Is the rice the full age number?"

"Yes, father, seventy five spoonfuls."

"And what are these?"

Her father peered closely at the small plates of food with his blurry eyes.

"Dates are in this plate, this is popped rice balls, and bananas, and candied winter melon, and tiny biscuits, and cane sugar slabs."

"Where did you get that from?"

"You've ran out of palm sugar so I took this from mother's shop."

Before Ma Thaw's trembling words ended, U Po Sein, frowning, had taken away the plate of cane sugar.

"Here, take it away at once. Don't put *her* things with *my* offerings. Take it away."

She did not take the plate her father was handing her but tried to ease things a little.

"It's not taking for free, father, I'll pay her for it."

"Free or not, I don't want it. Don't put it in here... take it away."

She could not openly rebel so she took the plate and set it aside.

"You know, daughter, before you were born we went to live with her relatives and they worked me without mercy<sup>10</sup>. They asked me to reap the paddy and I have never done anything like that before...my hands were all torn up and became infected, dripping blood and pus... she's not even grateful that I suffered like that, that inconsiderate woman."

Ma Thaw was trying not to get mixed up as she counted out seventy five spoons of water into the glasses and did not hear her father properly; it might also be that she has heard the same words for over a hundred times from U Po Sein and they were nothing new. Living as a spinster in consideration for her battling parents, she felt more wretched whenever she heard these words.

"Whenever I think of that time I feel like crying; it's only because I worry about you that I am still living in this house."

Ma Thaw placed the glasses of water on the shrine. She could not waste anymore time to listen to her father, and came downstairs; she must prepare her mother's offering tray.

In the kitchen Daw Pan U was pouring out the water from the rice pot. Ma Thaw hid the cane sugar she had brought down before she went into the kitchen. As she was cutting a pineapple for Daw Pan U, U Po Sein appeared at the doorway, looking alarmed.

"Daughter, where's my Zatar<sup>11</sup>?"

He was going to place his Zatar in front of the image before he began praying as he has done on every birthday, but he could not find it this morning.

"Father, you always keep your Zatar in the empty biscuit tin by your bed," Ma Thaw answered from where she was busy with the pineapple. Daw Pan U had not given a single glance at U Po Sein since he arrived at the kitchen door; she went on preparing her tray.

"It's not there... the other day I took it out and forgot to put it back. I left it on the tin and now it's gone."

Ma Thaw looked over at her mother, just in case she had seen it, but Daw Pan U acted as if she did not hear a word, and went on with her work.

<sup>10</sup> To ask someone to do menial work is insulting

<sup>11</sup> A palm leaf packet with astrological calculations made at a person's birth

"The biscuit tin is not in its own place, too, someone moved it when I was not there," said U Po Sein, his voice turning hard. Ma Thaw caught her mother's eye.

"The other day, it was raining so hard and nobody's home so I went upstairs to close the windows. The roof was leaking so I had to move some things," Daw Pan U said, addressing Ma Thaw and looking only at her face.

Ma Thaw was directly in line with U Po Sein; Daw Pan U was s between them. Ma Thaw left the pineapple and walked towards her father.

"Really, daughter, what a messy way to do things, not at all in order ...see, now my things are not in their own places."

U Po Sein said it directly to but through his daughter.

Daw Pan U's face hardened as she spoke up, looking at Ma Thaw.

"I moved it because it was going to get wet, am I to do nothing if it gets wet?"

"Well, if something is moved, it should be replaced where it was before, daughter." This was from her father.

"It was still raining so how could anyone replace it? It must be where it was moved. How can this be messy? How can this be not in order?"

Ma Thaw's face turned now to her mother's face and now to her father's, and when both were trying to speak at the same time her face moved this way and that, her eyes spinning.

"It's not there, daughter, I've looked."

Ma Thaw began to say, "I wonder if you, father, put it ..."

Before she could finish her sentence Daw Pan U broke in so she turned to her mother.

"What would anyone want to do with this thing? The other day, when Ba Win brought back the crude oil tin from the monastery, I heard someone saying he should give his Zatar another coat of oil."

Ma Thaw's eyes immediately flew to U Po Sein's face. Daw Pan U turned back to her work.

"What a disaster; I never gave my Zatar to Ba Win. I don't like anyone touching my things."

"Why should it be a disaster? If that thing is not in its place, he must have taken it. I only touched it to move it from the rain; don't think I even want to touch it."

Ma Thaw was always the medium they spoke through when they wanted to quarrel. Her heart began to beat faster while her mother spoke to her, jabbing a finger in her face. She had to do something to stop this from getting out of hand when they were just about to do an act of merit.

"Mother, perhaps Uncle<sup>12</sup> Ba Win went upstairs and took it himself, let me check on the bookcase downstairs."

She pushed past her father at the door and ran to see, U Po Sein following on her heels.

Ma Thaw felt a rush of relief to see the freshly-coated Zatar left out to dry on the bookcase. U Po Sein went upstairs taking his Zatar with him. Ma Thaw dared not go into the kitchen before her father was safely upstairs for if her mother kept on nagging he would certainly hear.

As she walked into the kitchen, her mother immediately said to her,

"Well, thank goodness he found it, otherwise he'd just keep on picking at me. Did you hear him, saying it's a disaster? Now whose disaster was it, may I ask?"

Her mother began nagging in her drawn-out way and Ma Thaw, fed up, walked straight out to the water tank at the back. While she went on cutting the pineapple she heard the sound of the triangular gong<sup>13</sup> from upstairs and her father begin his prayers.

"Lord of the Three Worlds, the noble, the enlightened and glorious Lord Buddha who have our eternal gratitude, our Lord of infinite wisdom..."

The dawn prayer sounded sublime and Ma Thaw concentrated on the feeling of reverence that welled up in her chest, even as her fingers went on cutting the fruit.

Afterwards she called to her mother, "There's popped rice, mother, do you want it for your tray?"

"He bought that popped rice with *his* money so why on earth should I put it with *my* offerings? I told you I don't want anything to do with him and you, why do you keep insisting?"

Ma Thaw gave a thump to her own forehead in regret that she had spoken without thinking. "How stupid I am," she

<sup>12</sup> Polite way of addressing any older male, related or not

<sup>13</sup> A gong struck to call the attention of all creatures that a prayer is to be said

scolded herself and dared not say another word as her good intentions had turned bad so quickly.

There was a separate shrine downstairs that was built when they had started having separate cooking arrangements. As she began lighting the candles on this shrine she heard U Po Sein's voice as he ended his prayers with a blessing towards all creatures.

"May all creatures have neither hatred nor enmity; may they have neither anxieties nor fears; may they keep themselves in well-being and prosperity."

On hearing this blessing Ma Thaw felt a sudden sadness rise up in her heart, as if she wanted to cry, and felt choked.

Daw Pan U was ready with her offering and struck the gong before commencing her prayers.

"Lord Buddha, I, your devoted disciple offer these towards gaining merit so that I might be free of the suffering of rebirth and hence enter Nirvana. I beg that you stride here on your blessed feet to accept my offerings, noble Lord Buddha..."

Ma Thaw went back into the kitchen, still feeling choked up, as her mother continued praying. Daw Pan U's prayer sounded beautiful, the way her voice pleasantly wove in a tuneful rhythm. As she listened she had a sudden urge to enter a nunnery and leave behind this wretched life of being caught between her two parents. The choking feeling rose to tighten her throat.

Her mother's prayer was ending with a long blessing.

"This body I call 'me', may it be well, body and mind; may it be free of danger, anxiety, and suffering. The celestials who guide this body, may they be well, body and mind; may they be free of danger, anxiety and suffering. Those I have seen, those not seen, all these creatures of the world, may they be well, body and mind; may they be free of danger, anxiety and suffering. Those who live far, those who live near, all these creatures of the world, may they be well, body and mind; may they be free of danger, anxiety and suffering."

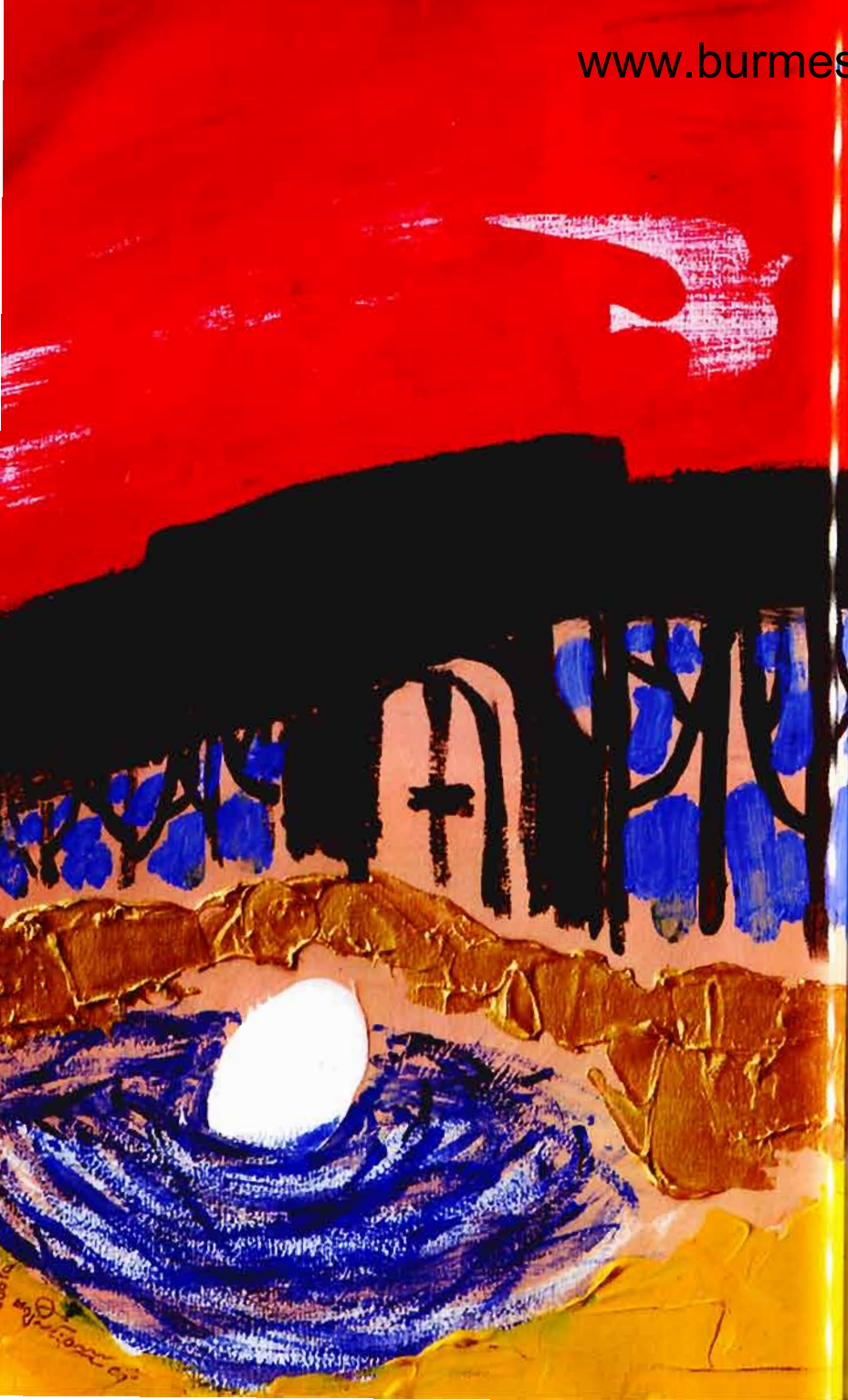
The last words of her mother's blessing pierced Ma Thaw's heart. She could not control the tears that fell rapidly onto her cheeks, one drop after the other. She was highly doubtful about her parents' goodwill.

She thought that in her father's prayer "May all creatures have neither hatred nor enmity; may they have neither anxieties nor fears; may they keep themselves in well-being and prosperity", she was not at all sure her mother would be included; and in mother's blessing for "those who live far, those who live near....may they be well, body and mind; may they be free of danger, anxiety and suffering," she didn't think it meant her father.

May all creatures be blessed, but not that person in my house!

Sandar Magazine, Issue 10, January 1970.

**Maid Of The Manor**  
Khin Hnin Yu



## Maid of The Manor

By Khin Hnin Yu

The whole household loved Tint Tint but could not stand Myint Myint<sup>1</sup>.

Their Elder Aunt herself never had a good word to say about Myint Myint. Tint Tint had to depend upon their aunt for everything so she behaved exactly as was expected of her. She often scolded her sister Myint Myint to do the same but she would not listen, she lived as she wanted. She lived freely and happily and Tint Tint, however, often cried in misery. She cried so often that Elder Aunt scolded her as often.

When their father died, Tint Tint had cried. When their mother remarried, she had cried. When her good-for-nothing brothers married young, she cried. Actually, after their mother remarried their life was suddenly chaotic and it was only because of their aunt that the two sisters had any security.

Even after selling off her farmland, Elder Aunt has enough jewellery left as her savings. She would loan out money at a high interest, a business in which the two sisters helped. Tint Tint had to take care of the pawned gold and diamonds.

Her aunt also wanted her to keep the Eight Precepts on fast days, as she did. When Elder Aunt goes to the meditation

<sup>1</sup> Myanmar names have no last, first or family names. Siblings are often given names that rhyme

centre, Tint Tint followed docilely, her brown shawl neatly crossed over her shoulders to sit quietly behind her aunt to listen to the sermons.

Elder Aunt would be very pleased with that.

"I like well-behaved girls," she'd say. "Be a good girl, Tint Tint, and when I pass away you will inherit everything."

Oh, blessed God, she was going to be an heiress, Tint Tint thought. Whatever happens after her aunt's death the two sisters would really have a secure life. Tint Tint was so grateful that she *kadaw*<sup>2</sup> her aunt every night.

She did not know if her aunt was tired of life, or afraid of it; she seemed to have no interest in anything to do with worldly enjoyments. There was a radio at home but they were not allowed to listen to music. Tint Tint was happy to fall in with her aunt's likes and dislikes. She has no interest in music nor did she even want to dream of pleasures. Myint Myint would jeer at her.

"Ma Ma Tint, *you* live like a zombie, I can't. Your heart will not survive. If you go on any longer like this, you'll lose all emotions."

"Come on, what would it matter if you can't listen to pop songs? Why do you want to do something she doesn't like?"

After some time, Myint Myint felt she could not even bear to face her sister or her aunt. She was bored to death when she had to go to the meditation centre and did not want to wear those brown clothes at all. It was also boring to stay home alone, and when she had to kneel to listen to her aunt talk she felt like a prisoner. And just look at Ma Ma Tint, you'd see her with prayer beads in hand, muttering "Buddha, Buddha"

"It's like living in a dessert at the height of summer, in this old house everything's dried up," she would mutter as she lifted up a mirror to peer at her reflection.

She powdered her face. She tried out many hairstyles, coiling, plaiting, twisted in buns, in curls. She would hum her favourite song that went "When a girl comes of age, she wants a sweetheart by her side..."

When her song got too loud, Elder Aunt would glare at her.

"This girl, she thinks too much of herself."

<sup>2</sup> Pay obeisance

But their aunt would not scold Myint Myint directly; instead she would complain to Tint Tint, who looking upset would run to her sister.

"Please don't do what she doesn't like; we can live like this only because of her. And you must admit she's not unfair..."

"You're a coward, Ma Ma Tint," Myint Myint answered shortly and turned away. Every time something like this happened between her Elder Aunt and sister, Tint Tint would cry. Whenever she cried, Elder Aunt and the servants would feel sorry for her.

But today Tint Tint was sobbing uncontrollably, for last night Myint Myint had eloped with her boyfriend.

"Yes, yes, go on crying, you cried when your brothers got married, you're crying because your sister got married."

On hearing her aunt's sarcastic words Tint Tint cried even more. She was surprised at Myint Myint; she had no idea when she got a boyfriend. No one in the house knew. She was more surprised that, living in this house so full of religious thought, her sister had wanted to marry at all.

"How foolish of her.... I wonder if she's having a hard time with her husband... Elder Aunt is so angry..."

She could only confide in the housekeeper Daw Thair.

"Please, Daw Thair, try and find out how she's doing. And tell her to come and see me secretly."

Daw Thair felt sorry for her.

"Well, she has chosen her own path, child, it's her fate. But I'll tell her if I see her."

Tint Tint felt restless, at all times worried for her sister. The hours she spent praying, wishing, telling beads... actually, even while praying, her mind was on her sister. She would forget the words of the prayer or the count of the beads.

Elder Aunt refused to look for Myint Myint. Tint Tint missed her sister but dared not ask her aunt to take her back. She was even afraid to cry openly. It's her own fault, she would moan to herself. She was surprised and frightened of the fact that her sister had the courage to let go of the security they have here and nowhere else.

She spent the whole of Lent offering food to the monks on their alms rounds and following her aunt to the meditation centre. Her hours passed quietly but in loneliness.

One day Daw Thair came into Tint Tint's room.

"Tint Tint, I saw Myint Myint in the market."

"Really?"

She got up, dropping the knitting in her hands. Her eyes misted with tears of happiness.

"Is she all right?"

"She's with child! I told her to come and see you this evening."

"What? With child?"

Tint Tint was amazed.

"But she might run into Elder Aunt this evening..."

"No, she told me this morning she's going out."

"So I'm going to see my sister!"

How cruel of Myint to stay away so long, she thought to herself. I always considered her a child, yet she herself is with child, soon to become a mother, Tint Tint thought.

"Blessed Buddha's glory, may she give birth easily..."

She began a prayer.

"Child, what burdens you carry," Daw Thair said, smiling, and left her room.

She longed for evening.

Only when she saw her aunt leaving the house could she heave a sigh of relief. She stayed in the kitchen preparing for tomorrow's offerings but her mind was unsettled. She was worried in case Myint Myint would appear at the front door.

"Ma Ma Tint!"

She turned, startled. Myint Myint was standing behind her. She has put on weight, looked happy and smiling. Myint Myint spoke easily as if nothing had changed but Tint Tint began to sob quietly. Daw Thair shooed out the young servant girls and left them alone. Only then could Myint Myint hug her sister and cry her heart out.

Myint Myint laughed and said, "Oh Ma Ma, you're always crying!"

"Yes, I cry, I cry because I'm so unhappy for you... you give me so much heartache..."

"Well, you create your own worries, don't you?"

"What?"

Tint Tint stared at her sister.

"You're making too much of it, Ma Ma..."

Tint Tint stared at her sister, not understanding what her sister was saying, with that peculiar smile on her face.

"What does your husband do? Is he a good man? Are you happy?"

"Now don't bother asking me these things, Ma Ma Tint, anything is better than living in this old house."

"What do you mean, better than here?"

"I mean it! Whatever happens, you should take some risks in life... your life is... so *dry*, you seem to have no life of your own. You're not living life the way you want. You're always terrified of Elder Aunt."

Myint Myint looked away from her sister who was staring at her with her mouth open, and her eyes fell on the back yard. The banana tree waved long leaves in the sunlight. She had struggled out from the bars of religion her Elder Aunt had caged them in them and had made her escape. The times when she had met her lover secretly under that banana tree, with dewdrops on the leaves sparkling in the moonlight. They had dropped onto her cheeks, like pearls. Myint Myint laughed out aloud at her recollections.

"You can laugh!" Tint Tint was still amazed at her sister's behaviour.

"What about you, Ma Ma Tint, aren't you going to get married at all?"

"How can I say I will or I won't, but it's something I don't dare do on my own. Who would want to marry me if I don't have anything? And they may just want to marry me because of Elder Aunt's wealth... so I wouldn't dare marry anyone."

"But it's not your money, why do you worry about that? And with marriage you can't be sure that everything will be fine, you need to take risks..."

"What? Take risks..?"

"Yes, they say marriage is an adventure."

"And if I should take risks, what if things turn out badly?"

Myint Myint stared coldly at her sister.

"You have so little courage. Oh well... live as you please.

I can't live like a slave even in a palace. I don't really know what your life is all about... you talk of religion and detachment but do you know what you are clinging to? You can't even enjoy music, and I won't live with restrictions like that. So, the way you're always obeying her, it's because of her wealth, right?"

Myint Myint's voice turned hard and tears welled up again in Tint Tint's eyes.

"No, it's not true, Myint... I have no attachments in my life... I have... I have... nothing to cling to."

She began to sob.

"Yes, right, cry then, just stay here and cry. I'm going, and I'll never come back. Look at you, all skin and bones..."

"You, too, Myint, you wait, after a few children you'll be all skin and bones, too."

"So what? I can give up my health if it's for something I can call my own. But for you... there's no meaning to your life."

Myint Myint was angry out of the love she has for her sister.

"Myint Myint, talk faster, your aunt will be back soon,"

Daw Thair called from the doorway.

"All right, I'm going,"

Tint Tint went on crying after her sister left. She did not stop to wonder why. She could only remember a few words of what her sister had said. She might cry her heart out but her siblings could not care less about her. After all, each makes her own path in life. What did it matter if she worried or not?

She heard her aunt return so she quickly washed her face and patted on some powder. It did not matter that her eyes were red, they often were.

She sat with Elder Aunt in the back yard, plucking petals from lotus flowers and then securing them with slivers of bamboo to form a peacock, meant for the shrine. It was nearly dark when they finished and the peacock looked so pretty her Elder Aunt was all smiles. Her aunt took up the lotus peacock to the shrine room upstairs and she followed to turn on the lights. The shrine was dazzling and magnificent under the lights, which passed through the petals and diffused around the images. The face of the Buddha image looked serene.

She sat down to pray but could not concentrate, her thoughts returning to her sister. She tried to meditate afterwards but try as hard as she could, her sister's words kept interrupting her thoughts. She wondered who could really see the truth... was it Myint Myint? Isn't life a wide ocean, where each and everyone have to venture forth on his own? Really, no one else

could help. But she has depended with all her life on her aunt. She was scared to leave this house without knowing what it was she was so afraid of. She decided she would live docilely under her aunt's restrictions.

"She just came to worry me, that girl," she thought to herself. "Her words are just making me confused."

She sat there trying to clear her mind of thoughts, to sit and meditate, as her aunt wished her to.

Myawaddy Magazine, February, 1954.

Muddy Blue Waters

Maung Theikha



## Muddy Blue Waters Maung Theikha

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Win Pe Myint, Ma Hmwe, Linn Wana, Mg Nay Kyi, Mg Di, Kyaw Phyu San, Moat Thone, Myint Maung Kyaw, Soe Naing, m. s. o, Maung Noe, Tin Maung Oo (Mdy), Than Myint Aung, Ba Htay Kyi, Nyein Chan Suu, Min Zaw, Pe Nyunt Wai, Zaw Mong, Moat Thone, Walone, Ba Khine, Win Iszudia, Maung Maung Thike, Ko Ko Naing, Tin Maung Oo.

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## Muddy Blue Waters

By Maung Theitkha

When the waters of the Ayeyarwaddy delta turn a muddy blue with the coming of the rains, it is time for old fables to be told.

"Sure, there's a ghost crocodile," said one man, "it comes right around this time of muddy blue waters."

"When it grows big enough that the head measures nearly five feet long it will go back to the sea," said another. "Then, it can even change to human form."

"But before it leaves it must eat at least ten men," added someone else.

Granny Thin Ohn, Aunty Than, Madam Gyan and their friends often talked about this crocodile, young girls with mouths agape in wonder sitting close to them. It could be true: no one had been able to trap one particular croc yet, it seemed almost supernatural. It has been dragging off geese, goats and cows, and now, even men!

Their village was on the river bank but not so near the sea that they would see crocodiles often.

Hereabouts crocodiles were never such a great danger but when the river swelled with rains and the clear green waters turned muddy deep blue, as now, for some reason the crocodiles would swim upstream. It happened maybe once in five or ten years. When the crocs came, blowfish came with them so when

you spot these little critters with black and yellow marks, watch out. And this year this particular crocodile came. The fishermen rowing past Kyar Island saw it first: it slid silently into the water from where it had been sunning on the bank. After that, it was spotted floating like a log near Let Swe Island, but on seeing the boats it sank into the water and disappeared. People began to talk of seeing it now here, now there.

"It's about 30 feet long, with yellow cheeks," said one.

"Looks like its head will soon be five feet long," said another.

The fisher folk were skilled in catching fish, prawns and crabs but none of them had any idea how to go about trapping a croc.

It soon showed its mettle: Old Man Bo Hte had his hut close to the river and has a shop for bamboo and thatch, getting them off the rafts coming from upstream. He also had a gaggle of thirty geese. One evening, while the geese were preening and cleaning their feathers just before bedtime, the crocodile came up and lashed out with his tail. He made off with a goose while the rest scampered shrieking up the bank. The people bathing nearby saw the croc: long and dark, with a yellowish patch on its cheek.

Three days later, it took a goat and five days later, a bull. U Kan Nyunt had driven his cart into the river to water his oxen and had stood there holding the reins while his matched pair drank thirstily. He failed to notice a 'log' floating closer. When it was near enough, the crocodile swept its tail at one bull. The roar of the bull and the snap of the jaws happened simultaneously;

U Kan Nyunt was left trembling in terror while the other bull galloped up the bank, dragging the cart and roaring in terror.

"Crocodile! Crocodile! Help! Help!" screamed U Kan Nyunt.

When people came running the crocodile let go of the bull and sank underwater. This time its prey had been too heavy to drag off but the bull was already dead.

It rained and rained, that fateful day.

The heavy rains of monsoon fell thickly and the dark clouds were like lumps of lead. Thunder rattled in the heavens. The Ayeyarwaddy River crashed its waves on the banks and

tore away cliffs. The small bamboo hut of ferryman U Tun was getting a true bashing from the storm in which he sat with his son Pay Thee. U Tun smoked while Pay Thee repaired some fishing lines. Pay Thee would rather be a fisherman, skilled as he was with both line and lance, but he must help his father ferry passengers across the river in their little boat.

"Son, our boat's going to be broken in two," U Tun remarked.

"Yes, dad, for sure it's going to break," Pay Thee agreed.

"We still have some extra pieces of bamboo left, haven't we? Let's try to brace the boat against the bank," U Tun decided.

The storm was still going strong when they came down to the water's edge carrying bamboo poles. U Tun stuck the poles into the thick mud and waded out to tie the other ends to his boat. The waves crashed and broke and the little boat tossed like a marble rolled in a tray.

"Hey, son, stick in a couple more poles", he shouted to his son.

The noise of the storm was so loud Pay Thee hardly heard his father. He turned to lift a bamboo and as he bent down there was a tremendous crash. With a scream, U Tun disappeared. When Pay Thee turned around all he saw were the roiling waves.

Three days later a boy bathing in the river disappeared. His frantic parents found his clothes in a neat pile on the sand. Then the stories started, whispered in all the villages along the river.

Granny Thin Ohn was having a time of her life, puffing importantly on a cornhusk cheroot, while the girls, shivering in fear, squatted by her side.

"This one here's Yellow Cheeks," Granny Thin Ohn told them. "The one I once saw had black cheeks. He used to terrorize these villages, oh, such a long time ago...I was just a little girl."

"Who caught Black Cheek? How?" Pay Thee could not help asking.

"No one did, child, his head became five feet long. Then he couldn't stay, he had to go to sea."

"Why not? Why couldn't he stay? Even big fish stay in these waters, don't they?" asked Kywet Ni.

"I said his head got longer, didn't I? Now what do you think happened to him?" Granny Thin Ohn paused to puff on her cheroot. The young people waited anxiously for her to continue.

"Well, there was a fisherman called Nga Tin," she finally continued. "One evening at dusk two men came to his hut. They wore black longyi and rough cloth around their heads like turbans. They asked Nga Tin if he knew of a crocodile called Black Cheeks. They said they catch crocodiles. And Nga Tin said, oh yes, yes! There's this black cheeked crocodile killing people...no one could catch him, and he knew where it was sometimes seen, a small island.

The two men demanded to be taken there at once. Of course, Nga Tin was afraid to go as it was getting dark. He asked them to wait until morning but they insisted, said this was the best time. Reluctantly Nga Tin agreed and rowed them to the island. Strangely enough these men had no nets, nor knives, no weapons of any kind. How would they catch a crocodile? Nga Tin thought maybe they would chant charms. When the boat came near the island, both men jumped into the water! Nga Tin watched them disappear under the waves..."

The girls edged closer to the old woman.

"Suddenly Nga Tin saw Black Cheeks rising out of the water...and supporting it on each side were two big, black crocodiles! Then they all three drifted slowly downstream towards the sea..."

"Oh! So the two men were really crocodiles...?" a girl asked.

"Of course, they came to fetch Black Cheeks."

"Did Nga Tin tell you that himself?" demanded Pay Toe.

"You, just like your father, always suspicious and asking questions. I said I was only a little girl then, who would bother to tell me anything? I overheard the elders talking, of course."

Many believed her tale but not Pay Thee and Kywet Ni.

Several days later it snatched away a fisherman setting out his nets.

So it was still around, people said, and not yet gone to sea. People began to say that it must be a supernatural creature to be able to evade capture and kill so silently. The rumors became rife that it was seen changing to human form. There were reports of several sightings.

Pay Thee, Kywet Ni, and Kywet Ni's grandfather everyone called Grand Uncle Nyan and a few others did not believe in the supernatural powers of the crocodile but they were a minority. The rest were by now of firm faith.

Grand Uncle Nyan muttered in anger. All his long life he had been an uneducated fisherman yet he detested the stupid beliefs of the simple folks.

"I wish I were twenty years younger," he thought. "I'd show 'em who's immortal."

"Kywet Ni", he suddenly called to his grandson, "If you die trying to catch that croc, why, I'd be right proud of you."

Pay Thee who was always thinking of his dead father began to practice throwing his lance... at snakes, at fish, at anything. The two young men decided to consult the schoolteacher. After all, he has read a lot and came from further down the delta; surely, he must know about crocodiles.

After a long evening with the schoolteacher talking on the differences between crocodiles and alligators, their geographical locations and breeding habits, they finally got around to the methods of catching one.

"I've seen men use short bladed knives," said schoolteacher U Myint Aung. "The blades have notches on them and at the other end they tie it to a short piece of bamboo. Here, I'll show you"

He made a rough sketch.

"Actually, it's better to tie the knife to the middle of a long rope instead of using bamboo ... one end of the rope you hold, and the other end is tied to dried gourds or hollows of bamboo, you know, as small floats. You hold on to your end but you have to be sure to hit the croc," the schoolteacher told them "Also, after throwing the knife, get down in the boat or it'll lash out with the tail."

The two young men ordered four or five thick blades with notches from the local blacksmith.

Soon there was another victim: a washerwoman, a widow with two young children. It was a sunny day and the sands glittered smooth like a sheet of silver. Two adults and some children were bathing not far from Ma Nyunt Kyi who sat with her pile of laundry. She hardly had time to scream: a swipe with the thick tail and she was dragged away in the huge jaws.

The two young men again went to the schoolteacher for last-minute instructions and advice. Pay Thee was good with a lance and Kywet Ni skilled at handling his boat.

It was the third day after the last victim that Pay Thee and Kywet Ni rowed slowly along Kya Island. For three days they had been drifting here, eyes alert like an eagle's. They continued to drift further downstream and soon they would reach the big town. Then they must paddle back, try somewhere else.

"Kywet Ni, there! There! Look!" whispered Pay Thee urgently.

Yes, there was the crocodile, sunning itself in the shallow waters near an island. Very slowly and silently they paddled the boat alongside, hardly daring to breathe.

Pay Thee, remembering the schoolteacher's words about the softer skin at the side of the crocodile took careful aim and threw his knife.

Quickly the two young men crouched down in the boat as the tail came up. Before it could lash again, Pay Thee was up with another blade and again another, that he sent spinning at the crocodile which was fast disappearing under the waves.

It rolled in agony as the blades sank deeper. The long ropes attached to the blades twisted around its body. The young men kept their eyes on the floats while holding on to the ends tied to the blades. They followed until the crocodile was exhausted and weak. They were patient.

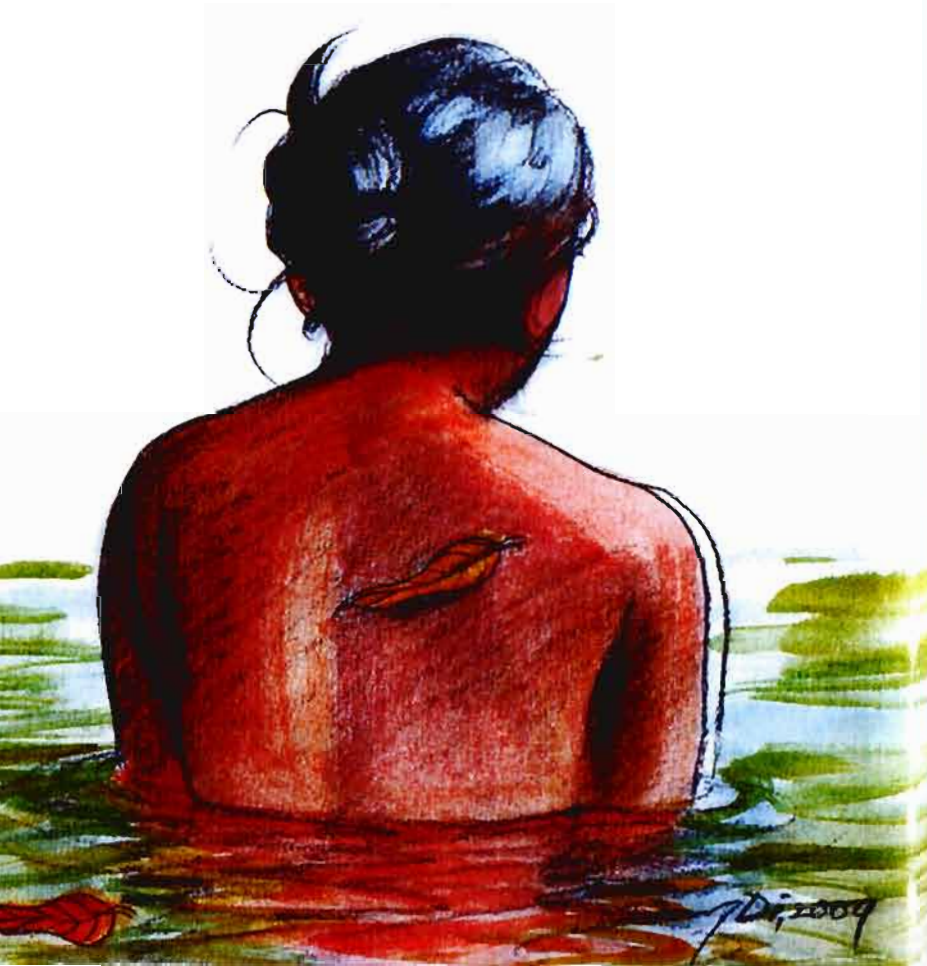
As their boat came in with the dead crocodile lashed to the side the villagers on the river bank very nearly tore away the cliff with their collective weight.

Pay Thee and Kwet Ni were grinning, and as happy were the schoolteacher and Kwet Ni's grandfather. They had proven the crocodile to be mortal after all.

Shumawa Magazine, 1983.

## Pleasant Pond

Htin Lin



## Pleasant Pond

By Htin Lin

Whenever summer school vacation and Thadingyut<sup>1</sup> come around, I longed to visit Ko<sup>1</sup> Khant's village.

After all, when I was a schoolboy I always went there during holidays.

His village was not that different from other villages of Myanmar but because of my friend Ko Khant, his village was vastly superior. Even in the blistering heat of summer he could make me laugh; he would tell me wonderful stories.

He was just an ordinary-looking, rough countryman but he had a dignity about him and a pleasing expression. He was friendly and had a great sense of humour. Everyone in the village liked him: they called him Elder Brother Khant or Younger Brother Khant as the case may be. He was a confirmed bachelor and as he was the oldest unmarried man he became the unofficial leader of the young lads of the village<sup>2</sup>. Up to the age of forty at this time of writing, he lived with his widowed mother. He would sometimes say,

<sup>1</sup> Male prefix to name of young men and older. Not formal.

<sup>2</sup> When the community has to organise night watchmen for fires or to work together for celebrations etc. the village lads and girls are ready-formed teams, each led by someone older who is still single.

"Mother would tell me that as a single guy I should be out having fun, so I had to go out but actually I'm no young buck, even my eye sight is going!"

He and I would loiter on the lane the village girls pass to fetch water, just to watch the pretty ones. He would tease all of them, calling them 'younger sister' or 'niece' according to age. None of them minded; they would joke right back or smile and cut their eyes at him. What a lot of girls he knew! How lucky, I would think in envy. But not all girls were nice to him.

"You, watch out now," one girl would say to him on sight.

"Hey, what's up, girl? Should I just tell everything to everyone in the village, eh?"

At his reply she would get madder.

"You dare! You just dare! I'll get ya!"

She was the only one who looked daggers at him, this young Ma Hla Aye, niece of U Thudaw, the Head of Ten Households<sup>1</sup>. I became curious as to why Ko Khant, loved by all, should be on such bad terms with this girl. When I asked him, he just chuckled sheepishly and refused to answer: "Aw, you don't want to know."

That only piqued my interest.

"C'mon, Elder Brother Khant, lets hear some enlightening words."

He would keep on laughing slyly.

"Its nothing, boy, I don't want to tell you. One word will unravel the whole thing."

"What whole thing? Please, *please*, tell me. Let me in on the secret."

He still refused to say anything but kept laughing as we walked on. I kept begging him so much that he finally said,

"Oh well, if you want to know so badly I suppose I'd have to break my promise and tell you."

He paused to light his pipe and then we both sat down under the shade of Thabye trees growing in a circle.

"It happened last Water Festival, y'know," he began.

He gave a few puffs on his pipe. I waited patiently.

"So, during the festival as you know all the villagers went to the monasteries to fast and keep the Buddhist precepts. Some mediated, some counted pray beads so no one's really left in

the village. We, y'know, us lads, we'd go from one monastery to the other as if we were deeply religious but we'd eat from the monks and the donors, and then we'd choose a shady spot to take a nice long nap after stuffing ourselves.

"Well, last year, Mother went off to the monastery early so I cooked and brought over her lunch. Afterwards, I felt too lazy to lug the lunch box back home so I thought I'd just nap at the rest house at the monastery. But I couldn't sleep with all these people around so I thought I would borrow a smooth mat from the monk and take it to a shady spot to sleep. When he saw me the monk thought I had come to keep the fast and first he was happy about it but not when I asked for a mat. He said to me, he said, so you're going to sleep like the dead, hey? No hope there, you go and sit and count prayer beads. If I saw you asleep I'd thrash you.

Well! What could I do? I said I wanted to but had forgotten by own beads at home so could I borrow his?

"He gave it willingly, quite pleased that I was being good. So what if I couldn't get the mat? I was not about to make him mad enough to thrash me, so just I took the prayer beads and slipped them around my neck and walked away. I had to find a spot far from the monastery; if that monk saw me sleeping he *would* thrash me, he's known me since I was a kid and I wasn't about to risk it. So I kept walking and walking and came to the pond on the southeast of the monastery, you know that pond, right?

"You remember how thickly the Thabye trees grow on the banks and how their branches lean over the waters? I thought I'd sleep under the tree but I saw a glimpse of yellow so I climbed up on a large branch hanging over the water. I couldn't easily be seen in the spreading branches. I leant back against the tree trunk, hung up my new shirt on a branch, not wanting it to get wrinkled, and I tucked up my brand new longyi up over my thighs. Phew! The breeze was so cool. I did try to count the beads but I didn't want to doze off and drop it so I placed it around my neck. Then, feeling good and comfy I was just about to..."

At that moment Ma Hla Aye came back for another haul of water and went past us stomping her feet hard on the ground and glaring at Ko Khant. He stared after her, murmuring, "I'd

<sup>1</sup> One rank lower than headman.



like to clip the ear of that little chit," and laughing softly to himself.

"Go on, Elder Brother, what next?" I urged.

"Well, I was just beginning to doze off when I heard someone walking into the pond," he said. "So I looked down and there she was, who else, Ma Hla Aye... heh heh"

He puffed at his pipe, heard the gurgle of spit in it, covered it with his palm and twisted the stem. He soon had it going.

"So, this girl thought she was alone and she came to bathe." He began to chuckle and not knowing anything I joined in.

"Are people allowed to bathe here? Isn't that the monastery pond?" I asked him.

"No, this is another one where anyone can bathe; it's just that everyone's away so it was deserted that day. The drinking-water pond is nearer the monastery."

"So, so, go on," I said.

"I peeped through the leaves, and she looked as if she did not bring an extra longyi," he said.

"Really! So? Then...?"

"Well its not so difficult, you just pull your longyi up gradually as you sink down into the water and when the water's up to your shoulders you pull your longyi over your head so it's kept dry," he said. "Then you toss it on a branch. She thought she was alone so she did just that and was swimming around. I was afraid she would see me and tried to keep still but a red ant got me on the leg!"

"Aha! You've had it!"

"I tried to rub out the ant but somehow I let go of the branch and I fell into the water. My longyi got caught in a branch and I fell without wearing anything."

I shouted with laughter. "You've had it! You've had it!"

"I've had it all right, she couldn't move from where she was and I couldn't climb out."

"So how did you manage it in the end?"

"Oh my god... I told her to keep her head under water and that I would climb out to get my longyi but she said she couldn't hold her breath that long. When I told her I would keep my head underwater while she fetches her longyi she didn't trust

me not to look. Actually, I really didn't want to keep my head down, y'know?"

"So what did you do?"

"Then I heard the monk scolding some kids and I got scared, in case he came upon us..."

He relit his pipe carefully.

"Then she started to accuse me of climbing the tree to watch her bathe, though I said I was there *first*. She shrieked at me, that little chit, although I explained and explained, and I was standing there in the water with the prayer beads around my neck. I wanted to laugh at myself but dared not. I was wondering how to get my new shirt and new longyi and when I made to move away to let her get *her* longyi she shrieked to me to stay still...so I dared not move."

Just then Ma Hla Aye came back with her pot full of water. I had no idea if she knew we were talking about her but I wanted to laugh so much I had to turn my face away and started to snicker. Instantly a quarrel broke out between the two.

"No at all, we're talking of something else," Ko Khant protested when she accused him.

"You *swore*! You'll be cursed with what you *swore*! Snake will bite ya and lightening will strike ya!" Ma Hla Aye screamed.

Ma Hla Aye, looking so pretty with Thanakha<sup>4</sup> plastered on her face, became so embarrassed she lost her footing and her pot fell from her head. She got really mad at that and began to hurl pot shards at us so we both ran for our lives.

As soon as we reached my house, my aunt showed me the letter from my mother saying I must come back home at once as my Grand Uncle and Aunt had arrived from Mandalay.

I packed hurriedly as I had to leave immediately for the railway station, which was 5 miles away. I wanted to ask Ko Khant to take me to the station in his cart so that he could tell me the rest of the story but he said, "later" so I left the village feeling rather dissatisfied. After that I hardly saw him again and when last year, Ko Khant came to town on business and I asked him, "Please, tell me how you got out of that pond," he

<sup>4</sup> Makeup paste ground from Thanakha bark, fragrant, cool and often worn as sunscreen.

was talking to my parents so he just smiled and said, "You still remember that! What a memory!" but told me nothing.

I was left with this unsolved problem of Ko Khant and Ma Hla Aye still waiting in the water and if I were to die right now, I'm damn sure it's not going to be an easy death.

---

Religious festival of lights in October

## The Visitor

Htin Lin



## The Visitor

By Htin Lin

It must have been at least five minutes since the front door-bell has been ringing intermittently. Le Le Swe, busy in the kitchen, heard it but she thought someone else was in the front room and had not bothered about it. The door-bell rings often enough with the newsboy shouting "Here's the paper!" before giving it a sharp press or the mailmen would ring before leaving the letters on the stoop and sometimes neighbourhood kids would reach up on tiptoe to ring the bell and run away shouting. Even if it were really a visitor, Ko Kyaw or the maid would answer the door. After a while, she suddenly remembered that Ko Kyaw had left early for work and that she had sent out the maid to the market. Curry pot in hand, she peered sideways out of the kitchen.

For a moment, she thought the person standing outside the grilled door was the ragman but rather, he looked more like a bandit out of the movies with unkempt hair, unshaven chin and ragged clothes. She felt a stab of fear and considered if she should show herself, or pretend not to have heard. Then the bell rang again, this time accompanied by a voice calling, "Hey, Mi Le, it's me!"

"Oh dear! Who's this person, calling me Mi Le?" she thought rapidly, as she vaguely sensed the familiarity of the voice. Now who would call her Mi Le, so intimately?

"Mi Le, it's me ....Po Htin."

The voice sounded impatient, and she heard the front door being rattled.

"Po Htin?"

She collected her thoughts and then gave a gasp of surprise. Putting down the pot, she hurriedly washed her hands and still holding the napkin went out to the front room. She took down the key from a nail tacked around a corner, while staring at the man outside the door.

He came in when she opened the door, and stood silently as she closed and locked it again. She stared in amazement at him.

"Now what happened to you? You look terrible..."

Po Htin did not reply at once; he lifted his arm to wipe the sweat from his face, and then said. "I broke out of jail."

She was very much startled and exclaimed aloud.

He peered around and asked, "Where's Ko Kyaw?"

She replied absently that he was at the office.

"He'll be back soon."

She still looked astounded. Po Htin walked through to the inner room and sat down at the dining table and gave a sigh. She stood, looking down at him.

"I'm scared, what have you been up to?"

"I just said the hell with it, and ran away?"

"Oh dear! .....what were you in for?"

"Don't know. Can't explain. I must have done something wrong."

"What? You don't know why you were arrested?"

"I told you I don't know...nearly died from exhaustion trying to find your place...looking like this...I wasn't too sure, just now. I had a glimpse of you, that's why I dared call out...what a relief!"

"I'm still in shock..."

"Don't be...I haven't eaten for two days, I knew I'd get something here...and I've nowhere else to go...even if I had, wouldn't want to..."

"How's Myaing? And the kids?"

"Don't know...don't ask! Just give me something to eat."

"Of course I will...can't I even ask about your family? You'll have to wait a bit for lunch...it's not ready yet. If you're too hungry, eat something else first. Ko Kyaw will be back in a

while, then we can eat together. D'you want to bathe? Why don't you? You're all covered with dust, really..."

"No, don't want a bath...just give me something to eat..."

She turned back into the kitchen, and putting the kettle on to boil, took out sugar and condensed milk out of a cupboard. Placing these on a table nearby, she returned to the dining room.

"Po Htin, you should take a bath, you know ...I'll put out some of Ko Kyaw's things for you..."

"Never mind...never mind...doesn't matter," he replied tiredly and as if he could no longer hold himself up, flung his arm on the table and resting his head against it, closed his eyes.

She half-murmured to herself "Po Htin, you really shouldn't be in this state," and turned back into the kitchen. Preparing to make coffee, she thought about her friend.

It seemed she alone knew what she meant by that remark.

At school, Le Le Swe had been a cleared-skin beauty with an enchanting smile. Would it be too much if one says that 99 out of 100 boys had been smitten by her looks, her smile or her slender body? Even Maung Nyan that nerd, who had no thoughts other than his books and who certainly have never before entertained the thought of a steady girl, even he had passed a love note to her. Unsuccessful, he had slipped in his studies and in his position in two or three exams, sliding from first, to third, and finally to fourth. This had so alarmed the teachers they had to give him a serious talk. How then could Po Htin be not among the hordes crazy about this girl?

"I'm not a saint, you know...course I like her a lot." This, in Po Htin's own voice, Le Le Swe had heard through the thin mat walling separating two classrooms, heard with her own ears as he was discussing her with his friends.

"Be a cinch for you to get her...she's such a close friend with you already."

"But...well...I love her like a kid sister."

At Po Htin's remark his friends gave a shout of laughter. One said.

"You're not a saint, that's for sure...you're a loser!"

"Oh well, I can't bear to tell her what I feel," she heard him confess. Since he was her close friend, they had believed he would get her one day. But he never said one word of love to

### A Note From The Translator

Myanmar has a long and rich tradition of literature that is mostly unknown to the world, since few translations are available. The collection here is a small selection from the wide choice available to the Myanmar-reading public. Due to lack of time on my part, I could not read the majority that was published; there are hundreds more that deserve to be presented to international readers, both short stories and novels. I beg pardon from those whose works were left out and I hope that better writers than I will do more than I ever could.

The structure and form of writing in English and Bamar (or Myanmar, which is both the majority race and the official language) in which the original stories were written, are somewhat different. English in general is generally concise, whereas Myanmar has a varied and at times flowery vocabulary. Some editing was necessary for the sake of clarity and for this I must ask forgiveness of the writers, since unlike in the publishing houses of the west we do not have a tradition of another person editing the author's work.

My appreciation goes to U Sonny Nyein of Swiftwind Books, for giving his permission to reprint most of these stories that first appeared in their quarterly publication "Enchanting Myanmar".

I have chosen these stories partly because they cover a wide variety of human life: marriages like tongue and teeth;

her. How then could she interpret what she had overheard? At first she waited and watched, even giving him a few opportunities to speak out.

But Po Htin, although he seemed happy in her company, stayed silent. As time went on they came to treat each other like true kin, intimate, familiar and friendly. Still, sometimes she thought him an ambiguity, sometimes she thought him a fool: neither, however, was correct. Anyhow, all through school, he was a big-brother figure she could always rely on.

Le Le Swe passed her matriculation and went to college while Po Htin failed and was left behind. When the exam results had been announced Po Htin came running to her. Instead of being depressed at his own failure, he was full of joy at her success.

"Of course you passed, you're so clever," he said, grinning. "If it were all texts to be learnt, I'd have passed, too, but this darn mathematics... I can never manage that."

It was true. He was so bad at math, he would say in class that 13 times 3 is 36 at which the math teacher had been heard to sigh and say that since even a third-grader knew his 13 times table, he cannot imagine how Po Htin had clawed his way up to the tenth. However badly he did in math, he was good at English and Burmese and he read a lot of novels in both languages. He also dabbled in poetry.

While she made coffee, Le Le Swe thought about high school days. Since Po Htin was the only boy to be on such friendly terms with her so her girl-friends, whenever they refer to him would call him 'hers'. He sometimes wrote poetry about beautiful ladies, and these were often circulated among their friends.

When other girls said to her, "This poem your ol' Po Htin wrote must be about you... he's in love with you for sure.", she did not know what to reply. Although she would retort that "there are so many beautiful girls in the world, how can you say he means me?" she would feel self-conscious. She was sure that he could and did appreciate beauty, and he must surely believe in love, too! Was it herself? Or someone else? That she could never discern. However, she did question him once:

"Now who's this *la belle dame sans merci* in your poems? Can't you even tell me?"

To which he had answered that there's no need for her to know.....

Le Le Swe made three or four slices of buttered toast and a mug of coffee and carried into the dining room.

Po Htin seemed fast asleep at the table.

"Po Htin, here's your coffee... get up, drink it up."

Po Htin just murmured yeah....yeah...but did not even raise his head. She reminded him again to get up and drink up, and then went back to the kitchen. She thought some more about him as she cooked.

Towards the end of her second year in college she had met Ko Kyaw. They were married just before the final exams. Ko Kyaw left college to work as a clerk and she likewise started work as a primary school teacher. Wanting to be together and without any means in hand, they had a hard struggle. When Le Le Swe wrote to Po Htin about her marriage he at once came down to Yangon. He had left school to help his parents and sisters at their shop. When Le Le Swe heard about Po Htin being in business, she shouted with laughter.

"Are you sure you know how to count out the right change?"

"Come on, Mi Le, this much I can manage." Po Htin had replied sheepishly. Of course at that time Ko Kyaw was still a stranger to Po Htin.

That time, Po Htin stayed about two weeks with them. In the afternoons with Ko Kyaw at work and Le Le Swe at school, he was left pretty much alone in the house. Sometimes he would also go out and the three of them would meet at dusk, to eat a meal cooked by Le Le Swe or sometimes they would eat out and see a movie.

It was unbelievable how much Po Htin was taken with Ko Kyaw. Le Le Swe would see him smile happily as he followed Ko Kyaw with his eyes. Ko Kyaw remarked that if she had not told him they were not blood kin, he could well believe Po Htin was her own brother.

Just before he left, he forced a packet and Kyat 500 on them, saying he would be upset if they did not accept. Really, at that time of starting a new life together they were in need of good, true friends. So Le Le Swe and Ko Kyaw felt rather teary as they accepted, feeling deeply grateful.

Po Htin was rather closed-mouthed. He did not write when he got home, in fact he never wrote. In this way they did not hear anything about him for two or three years. He came again, once. This time he stayed only one or two days at their place and they did not know where he was putting up the rest of the time. When he came he did not look as happy as he had the first time. It was as if he had something on his mind.

"How's business? Good?"

"No. Nothing's ever good."

"Perhaps your giving out the wrong change is draining the family fortunes?"

"No, no... I admit I'm not good at it, but business is just bad... hard times, just hard times."

"When are you going to get married?"

This he would not answer; he just held up his hand and said gravely,

"It's best for all if you don't ask me this," so Le Le Swe did not persist.

After Po Htin left she and Ko Kyaw talked about him.

"Since he said business's bad Ko Kyaw, remember that 500 he once gave us? Shall we return that?"

At that time Le Le Swe was a middle-school teacher and Ko Kyaw was a higher ranking clerk. Without any children they were quite comfortable. They had saved some six or seven hundred out of their salaries. They withdrew it from the bank in readiness to give Po Htin the next time he turned up but he did not return. Le Le Swe wanted to send the money by post but Ko Kyaw said that they'd better wait until they can give him in person since he might refuse to accept if they send it by post.

During the next three or four years both Ko Kyaw and Le Le Swe attended evening classes at the Worker's University and after obtaining their bachelor degrees were both promoted. Ko Kyaw became an executive, Le Le Swe a high-school teacher. Busy with their own lives they rather forgot Po Htin. They were almost completely cut off from him.

The next time Le Le Swe saw Po Htin was when she had to rush to her seriously-ill father's side. Ko Kyaw could not get leave of absence from his work, so she went alone.

Even though she grew up in this town, after six or seven years' absence she felt rather strange. Some relatives had become

complete strangers and remained aloof while others treated her as if nothing had been changed. Le Le Swe felt rather cut off but she did go to visit Po Htin.

Then only did she find out to her complete surprise that Po Htin was married and already with two children. His wife Myaing was also from this town but not from her set so she was a stranger to her. Ordinary in looks, Myaing seemed nice enough. She seemed uneasy talking to Le Le Swe who was dressed in fashionably and who was after all a wife of an executive and a school-teacher herself. Le Le Swe spoke kindly and easily to her.

"We are like kin, you know, Myaing; no holds barred between us. Next time Po Htin comes to Yangon you must come with him."

Myaing could only say "Yes", and kept on smiling. After she left the room to make coffee, Le Le Swe was able to chide Po Htin.

"You didn't even tell us you were married!"

"Cause I couldn't very well tell you! Well, I *was* going to say something. Last time I came down to Yangon, that was when I eloped with her," Po Htin added, laughing.

Le Le Swe looked dazed for a moment, and then asked in amazement,

"What? When?"

"I didn't bring her to your house... left her with an uncle."

"What a thing to do! Why couldn't you have brought her to our place?"

"No reason... I just wasn't feeling too good about it. It happened by accident."

They broke off as Myaing entered with coffee. They never again spoke about it, so Le Le Swe was uncertain how this 'accidental' marriage had come about.

When she got back home and told Ko Kyaw about it, Ko Kyaw said.

"Well, why not? These things can happen, you know."

"She's not bad-looking, and seemed nice enough, but..."

She did not continue, so Ko Kyaw looked at her. She seemed lost in thought, but noticing that Ko Kyaw was waiting for her words, said

"It's just that I feel bad about a friend of mine having to marry like this... I'd like him to have married freely, happily."

"Aren't they happy now?"

"Course they are! It's not that...but. I mean...I don't know if I sound sentimental, but I'd like him to have married for love."

"Well, by accident or by love, however he marries, I'm sure he'll grow to love her."

"I don't know how to say it, but...I don't much believe in that. Even love-marriages break up, I know, and accidental ones can last for life, I don't mean to talk about breaking up or lasting...it's not the question. I just think one should marry for love."

"Now what's the difference? Only at the beginning, perhaps..."

"There is a difference, Ko Kyaw...if one doesn't marry for love, you might say one can be happy later on, but I think it's like a life-sentence, a lifer adjusting to prison-life. Of course there are cases when people get used to prison so much they don't want to come out!"

"Whatever the reason, the main thing is to enjoy it, isn't it?" Ko Kyaw smiled and answered lightly.

"No, no...it's not the same. To be satisfied with whatever happens is like...like having a bargain life."

Then Ko Kyaw laughed heartily, saying that "Since your ol' pal is so bad at business, no wonder he has to settle for a bargain!"

Le Le Swe ruefully joined in the laughter and even agreed distractedly. It was true that Po Htin was not able to handle business so in life too he probably could not calculate anything of profit. Le Le Swe thought that Po Htin could not grasp even the most basic rule in life, that one gets something if one gives something.

This time, too, he must have done something illegal by accident and had been arrested. She sighed as she stirred the curry. She was unsure about what she could do for Po Htin. Even if it were against the law she must do something for him. But then there's Ko Kyaw to consider...they were truly like brothers but would Ko Kyaw be as broadminded about Po Htin as herself?

Ko Kyaw came home for lunch at 11:30. From the kitchen, Le Le Swe heard the car stop, and Ko Kyaw telling the driver to return at noon. He had his own key and she heard him reach

inside to unlock the door then shut and lock it after him. She heard him coming towards the dining room.

"What...who...hey, Le!"

Ko Kyaw did not recognize Po Htin who was still sleeping at the table. At the sound of Ko Kyaw's voice, Po Htin raised his head as Le Le Swe came out of the kitchen. Po Htin smiled up a Ko Kyaw.

Ko Kyaw recognized Po Htin only after a few minutes of hard staring. He looked over at Le Le Swe, his mouth open in disbelief, and she motioned him to join her in the kitchen. She told him all that she knew. Ko Kyaw began to frown with anxiety, scratching at his head.

"What a disaster! How can he hope to escape? Better to face the case in court and try to win it."

"What if he doesn't agree to that?"

"Come, now, that really..."

Ko Kyaw stopped, and looking intently at Le Le Swe, said, "I think I'll take a bath...get lunch ready, we'll talk about it later."

Passing through the dining room, he merely smiled at Po Htin, giving him a pat on the shoulder and went into the bedroom. In a while they could hear the sound of splashing water. Le Le Swe, bringing out one plate after the other onto the dining table, told Po Htin, "We'll discuss it with Ko Kyaw later, shall we?" in a consoling way.

Not long after, Le Le Swe heard Ko Kyaw calling her from the bedroom.

"It's bad business and no easy matter," Ko Kyaw remarked as he pulled on the undershirt she handed him. She did not reply, but thought that if Ko Kyaw said it was not easy, it certainly must be true. After a while, she asked, "Isn't there anything we can do?"

Ko Kyaw took up the neatly folded shirt from the bed and looked at Le Le Swe and asked, "Now, what is it that you want to do for him?"

Le Le Swe sat down on the bed, and rubbing her left hand with her right thumb, started down at the floor. Ko Kyaw finished buttoning his shirt and pulled on a longyi. He came over to lean against a chair near her and asked, "Where will he run?"



She looked up to say "He didn't tell me," then looked down again.

"It's all right if he can really go scot-free if we help him," Ko Kyaw said unhappily. Le Le Swe did not know what to say....her heart grew heavier, and heavier.

They did not realize how long they had been in the room for when they came out Po Htin was no longer at the dining table. They looked around but there was no sight of him. He seemed to have eaten the toast and drunk the coffee. They search for him all over the house.

The toilet door was not locked. Le Le Swe called "Po Htin! Po Htin?" in a low voice. Just then, the maid, returning from the market, called out from the front door.

"Oh, look! The front door's unlocked and wide open! Who left it like this?"

They both ran to see. They have often scolded the maid about keeping the front door locked, so that was why she was surprised.

Both Ko Kyaw and Le Le Swe ran out to the road and looked up and down. Traffic was busy as usual. As they glanced at each other's face, Ko Kyaw shook his head. Le Le Swe, with trembling lips, murmured, "Oh no....oh no..."

The maid, watching from the doorway as they came back in with unhappy looks, asked Le Le Swe what the matter was. Le Le Swe just gestured with her hand and Ko Kyaw said, "Nothing...nothing at all" and going into the dining room, sat down at the table. Le Le Swe did not sit down immediately but leaned against the back of a chair, uncertain what to do.

"Sit down, Le ....what are you staring at?"

Ko Kyaw had already piled rice on his plate and started to eat.

"I have to go back to the office, it's a busy time right now....can't afford to be late," he went on.

As she was still standing he said, "Come sit down, Le. Don't be upset, there's nothing we can do," he added as if to console her.

Le Le Swe, staring into space, just murmured, "No, it's not that..."

When he asked what she meant she did not seem to know what she had said.

Ko Kyaw said, "I know it's a sad thing...but it can't be helped. We can't do anything, you know. In any case, it might not make any difference to him, but just might land us in trouble with the law."

Ko Kyaw, eating heartily, kept up the chatter and Le Le Swe heard the words but was unable to connect any meaning to them. Ko Kyaw continued talking.

"The soup's good...that's why I like it when you're on holiday...the girl can't cook as good as this...you're a gem, Le."

Le Le Swe, gazing distractedly at the table, made as if to say something, her lips quivering. Then, smiling uncertainly, she sat down heavily to her meal.





## New Day Breaking

By Khin Swe U

### 1

The red lotuses were blooming fresh and jubilant with their constant drink of cool water. This pond was chock full of lotus and there were even the tiny variety. Their flapping green leaves on which small frogs play king of the castle waved in the breeze. Ma Ein willed herself to be as cool and calm as possible and said to Ko Toh,

"You know, last night they had to use the water from this pond."

"Let's not talk about that now," Ko Toh said. "The thing is, how are we going to inform the invited guests? We'll just have to wait until they come..." he ended, sighing in exasperation.

"Yes, I think Father, Mum, and Aunt are going to wait up the road for them...but they might have to wait half an hour or so. You should go join them, Ko Toh, but I think some will probably know not to come when they read the morning papers."

"Why did it have to happen now? If only it were two or three days later..."

"Better still if it's five or six, don't you agree?"

Not knowing why Ma Ein wanted to giggle. Only this morning she had chuckled to herself thinking of this and that.

It had annoyed to the extreme her maiden aunt who was wild-eyed and weepy.

"How could you laugh at a time like this?" she accused her niece.

"Should I be crying, then? I'd rather not, since there's nothing to be done," Ma Ein had retorted. Her words echoed inside the hollowness of her heart. There's nothing to be done, there's nothing to be done. It was true, was it not: there was nothing to be done.

The previous night, Ma Ein's house, the house of the bride of the wedding planned for today, had burnt to the ground. It had been a terror-filled night when the whole world seemed to have collapsed: a night of raging flames, flying red sparks, billowing clouds of dark smoke, exploding fuel tanks, screaming people, shrieking children...

## 2

What disaster suffered by Ma Ein and her bridegroom Ko Toh was a like candle in a forest fire.

Ko Toh had come running from downtown where he lived as soon as he heard the news. Covered with sweat his normally brilliant eyes under thick brows were clouded with concern. By the time he arrived the fire had died down somewhat, but leaving half of Ma Ein's house with blackened posts: ugly, crippled and desolate.

"They said the owner of the grocery store used a candle when he was closing up," Ma Ein explained to Ko Toh. "And he had all this inflammable stuff in his store! Cartons of matches, candles..."

Two-thirds of their row of houses and shops had gone up in smoke. The fire had started at 6.40 in the evening and was put out completely 35 minutes later. Within that space of time houses, shops and trees had vanished in the flames. It must be like watching a nuclear explosion on the news, Ma Ein thought. Ko Toh said with some emotion,

"What about our new cupboard and bed, are they gone!"

Ma Ein replied instantly, "Of course!"

For some reason she no longer wanted to mourn her loss. Ko Toh sighed again, this time more softly. The bridal bed and cupboard had been wedding gifts from her parents. Well, then, lifeless things also pass away, don't they, reflected Ma Ein.

"I'll get new ones," Ko Toh said.

"There's no need, really," Ma Ein protested. "We'll manage."

"Did your parents say anything about the wedding?" he asked.

"Not in so many words, nobody knows what to do."

"Oh well...damn! Everything's turned upside down!"

Ko Toh's anger rang in his sharp words. She saw her parents poking with sticks into the ashes of their home, a little way off from where she was standing with Ko Toh. Security men and some authorities were walking around, sheaves of papers and uncapped pens in their hands.

"Nothing to be embarrassed about the wedding," Ma Ein remarked. "Father's wasn't a rich gold shop owner, he's a carpenter, so his fortunes' in lumber."

"Are they very upset?" Ko Toh asked.

"Um?"

Although she had heard him quite clearly for a moment she was confused.

"Well, it happened to others too, you know," she finally answered. She heard Ko Toh sigh the third time. Manly, good-looking Ko Toh looked heavy-hearted about her family; she wanted to take away this burden from him.

Since midnight she had been trying her best to remain calm and light-hearted. While her mother was preparing the dawn food offering at the shrine, this time managing to get only a few guavas for it, Ma Ein had walked down to the pond's edge. The half-burnt leaves and smouldering garbage she saw there perturbed her but her head was clearer than in had been last night. The pond which the fire had ringed was like a little haven: cool and green and fresh with lotus. The soft breeze rushing across the surface was cool. The old Rain Tree with fragile pink blossoms leaned heavily over the water. The sun peered out from over the shady trees lining the opposite bank. She saw again how Ko Toh had looked last night, as he finally listened to her parents' urging him to go home and rest. She hoped the dark look on his face would clear under the rising sun. She had hoped that when he came back early this morning, his face would once again be as light as the dawn.

## 3

Her parents finally decided to postpone the wedding by two weeks but Ko Toh wanted to push it back for at least a month so that the replacement bridal furniture could be bought and preparations made for a nice ceremony. "It's Ma Ein I'm thinking of," he said.

"Really, there's no need," Ma Ein had protested. "Ko Toh, we can manage somehow."

A flicker of annoyance passed over his face. Ma Ein laughed and pretended not to notice. She kept repeating the words "there's nothing to be done" in her mind like a mantra. There were so many others worse off than her and what's to be done, after all? At the same time she tried to appreciate Ko Toh's concerns about having a nice wedding.

"You're not a cheap pile of veggies to be given away easily," he muttered to her angrily. "Don't you say anything foolish to your parents, who are only doing what's best for you."

"I'm just telling g the truth about not needing much, how can that be foolish?" she cried.

"You never realise what your words can lead to!" he retorted.

Now not only his voice but his face was beginning to be tinged with anger. Ma Ein kept smiling but she was not willing to give in.

"You know, I never want to worry about anything anymore, or to be afraid of anything. So, if we have a problem....or two...or three, then we'll face it. If we have houses, fine. Houses, pots, beds, cupboards, watches, if you have them, fine. If not, so what? We'll use them if we have them, we won't if we don't. The other day I read something in the Ngwe Taryi Magazine about a famous choreographer saying, "I have no wish to possess anything. If possible I would even like to wear borrowed shoes!" See how right he is, if you think of this fire!"

"Enough!!" Ko Toh roared at her. That was when they started to quarrel and nothing went right between them. Her mother, pushing firewood under a boiling kettle, called out to her "now then, girl, don't you be talking rubbish." Her father, puffing silently on a cigar stared unseeing into space. After Ko Toh went out to buy lunch, her father spoke to her mother as Ma Ein was trying to pull out some charred posts.

"What she said is true, you know. When disaster strikes, one must be able to face up to it. If there's no bed, sleep on the floor. No plates? Use banana leaves! No cupboard? Put your clothes in a basket. I'm not making light of it, Ma Htar Yin. Everything depends on your strength of mind; it's the most important thing. Some people get completely exhausted after walking a mere quarter of a mile, some whine if they have to do the washing up, some cry when they get a hole in the clothes from a cheroot spark."

Mother merely commented, "I don't know what to say to that, but you, Ma Ein, don't argue so much with Ko Toh. He means well. Even if you don't agree, keep quiet, you hear? Less words, less quarrels."

"Yes, Mother," said Ma Ein.

## 4

As Ma Ein stood watching Ko Toh absently kick at a burnt post, Po Htoo came up to them. He was the same age as Ma Ein, in his twenties and they have been playmates since they were babies.

"Only yesterday a palatial mansion of gold, and today alas! A pile of charcoal!" Po Htoo joked and made as if to weep.

Ko Toh said to him, "Hey, I heard your school books were all burnt."

"That's right."

"What will you do about your exams?"

"He...he.. what fun, eh?"

"Don't be a fool," said Ko Toh. "Are you going to give it all up? After all the special classes you took..."

"Of course I'm going to take my exams."

"Well then! All this fooling around.."

"So, am I to weep, then? If I cry would my books get unburnt? Cho Yi, she's been weeping and wailing the whole time, Ma Ein," he turned to her, "go cheer up your friend."

"Poor Cho Yi," said Ma Ein. "She's been working so hard."

"Well, what is there to do!" declared Po Htoo. Ma Ein felt like giggling: Po Htoo was reciting her mantra, too!

In a short time Po Htoo had uprooted all the charred posts. He would not stay for lunch although they pressed him, saying he has already eaten and was full.

"A pre-wedding feast, eh?" he teased them. "A feast on the linen of ash...though much as I desire I cannot more partake..." he sang.

Ma Ein laughed at him but catching Ko Toh's annoyed look faltered midway. This world could not be filled with suffering alone nor barred with criticism.

## 5

Her father and Ko Toh had chosen a date for the wedding: exactly one month and a week from today. This time, Ko Toh insisted, he would buy the bridal bed and cupboard. Ma Ein wondered why these two things should be so important in a marriage. When she unwisely interrupted the others' conversation with a remark about 'what if they all got burnt down again', Ko Toh was furious and Mother gave her such a smack on her back!

Aunt stoutly stood by her, declaring they should all go easy on the girl. All things are impermanent, aren't they? Wasn't it right not to get too attached to material things? Wasn't it what the Buddha taught?

Then Po Htoo had made them laugh by mimicking a campy queen whose gold chain had been stolen. This world is like a magician: making you cry one moment and laugh the next.

Po Htoo's elder brother had tried to snatch Ni Tut, a 12 year-old boy from the flames but could not save the boy in time. When he came to tell them the news he had a huge patch of burnt flesh on his chest, so red and raw that Ma Ein could not bear to look at. Mother wept for the first time, for after her own baby died a long time ago she had suckled motherless Ni Tut from her own breast. When she saw her mother weeping Ma Ein walked away towards the pond and began to cry softly.

"Where are you going?" Ko Toh called after her. She did not reply; let him think she was sulking if he wanted to.

Right now she had no bridal bed, nor a cupboard and not even a wedding costume. And she did not even want to marry Ko Toh. This world, this cruel world like a cruel man was pushing people into a crematorium, and Ko Toh was acting as if he were in cahoots with this world. She felt like throwing him right into the pool. If she told him, how mad he'd be! The thought made her want to giggle once more.

Just then a frog jumped from one lotus pad to the other and the red lotus flower swayed suddenly at the impact. A drop of water fell from the petals. This drop, even if it had been a tear fallen from the lotus, had not prevented the flower from blooming upright and strong, its stalk held erect like a slender neck. Ma Ein straightened her back, lifted her chin and held her neck erect, like the lotus. By the time she turned back towards her house her tears were already dry.

The Kindergarten Teacher

(A True Story)

Aung Thing

**The Kindergarten Teacher**  
**(A True Story)**  
Aung Thinn

love beyond the grave; the anxiety of mothers; the kindness - and unkindness - of strangers; and the snares of enticement and greed.

Mainly, I chose the stories for the spirit of the people of Myanmar they portrayed. Many people may not be rich but they live with contentment, humour, compassion and pride, in the face of grim reality. They are the real representatives of the country, the true treasures of Myanmar.

Enjoy.  
Ma Thanegi  
2008

## Marriage Theikpan Maung Wa



## The Kindergarten Teacher (A True Story)

By Aung Thinn

I was a lecturer at the University of Yangon since the early 1960s. Before that, I served about three years as a middle school teacher in my hometown of Taungdwin-gyi. At the risk of being thought boastful, I must say that I was considered quite a good teacher at both posts. Actually I had thought it was nothing much: one becomes known as a 'good teacher' without too much effort or talent. However, what I encountered on my trip home in 1963 shook me.

I arrived just as the schools reopened for the new semester and I realised I had been way off the mark with my evaluation of 'good teaching.'

Let me explain.

On that visit to Taungdwin-gyi, I liked to spend my time at the Shwe In Taung pagoda, where a little museum had been set up. I was one of the directors of the museum along with some of my best friends, so we liked to meet there in the evenings. On my way to the museum I would drop in at the primary school next to the pagoda to inform my friend, U Nyan Sein who teaches there, that I'd be waiting for him. He was also an art teacher but he also taught reading and writing to the newest children in school: the kindergarten.



One day I stood at the door of his class to tell him to come along to the museum afterwards. He was drawing something on the blackboard: I watched to see what it would be. His class of five-years-olds waited silently. After a few deft strokes they recognised a popular cartoon character, as I did.

"It's Master Tortoise!" they cried as one.

U Nyan Sein added a walking stick.

"He's holding a walking stick!" the kids chorused again.

Then, "He's smoking a pipe!"

U Nyan Sein turned towards his children. "One day, Master Tortoise was out walking, and who do you think he met?"

He turned back to the board and started another drawing at the other end.

"Master Rabbit!" the children shrieked in one voice.

"Well, Master Rabbit said to Master Tortoise..."

He seemed to be making up the tale as he went. I did not remember any of it as I just waved at him and left.

"You can listen, too!" he called with a laugh. I told him I'd see him that evening.

For two or three days I would just see him making drawings and telling stories so I asked him why he was not teaching anything.

"I can teach reading and writing anytime," he replied. "Yes, it's true, I mean it, but right now it's important that children enjoy school; they must love coming to school, not fear it. It's the most important step."

I reflected that it might well be true and the next day decided to spend more time watching him at work.

There was one young boy in the front row crying his eyes out.

He would not look at the drawings nor listen to the story: he cried steadily and without any sign of stopping. He would often glance out of the window and I saw an elderly lady, probably his grandmother, sitting under a nearby Tamarind tree.

After a while U Nyan Sein called out to the lady:

"Please go home, Daw Aye Thar, don't worry about him. As long as you're there I won't be able to stop him crying."

At this the boy's sobs turned to shrieks. The grandmother looked reluctant to move.

"This is awful," he said to me. "It's much worse handling these old dames than the kids."

Then he called to her "At least, please go around the corner where he can't see you."

The old lady moved away slowly. The howls of the boy shook the room.

U Nyan Sein went on with his story while the kid sobbed on. This went on for some minutes until U Nyan Sein paused to look at the boy with a slight smile on his face.

"Now, class, it seems this little boy could not use up all his crying, that's why he can't stop. Why don't you all cry so that it will be used up quickly?"

The other kids immediately went into a loud pantomime of crying: they sobbed earnestly, rubbing their eyes, howling in glee. The room rang with their 'sobs.'

The boy stopped crying in amazement, looking around in confusion. Then the other kids stopped. I could not help chuckling at the sight of it.

U Nyan Sein went on with his tale. After a while, the boy started again: and again the others joined him, crying together to 'use it all up.' There were no more tears from anyone, real or fake, after that.

The next day I went early to his class. That kid looked as if he had been crying but was not at the moment. Their teacher looked happy and excited. He called to the class: "Hey, today I'm going to give you some plums, you want them?"

"Yeessss!" answered the kids.

"Fingers up those who want plums!"

The little fingers flew up. The kid who liked to cry did not raise his hand but gaped up at his teacher: would there really be plums, he seemed to be wondering. So was I.

U Nyan Sein turned to the board. He drew a circle, and put a stem at the top. "Here's a plum...who first? You, you're the youngest...here it comes!"

He pretended to pluck the fruit from the blackboard and threw it at a child who pretended to catch it and ate it with a smack of his lips. The class roared in appreciation.

"Here's another!" He drew the next one and threw it. "Here's one that is not sweet," he said, "It's not very round, it's sort of longish. But anyway, see how sour it is."

The kid he threw it to puckered up his lips. "It's very sour!" The other kids screamed with laughter. There were loud cries of "Me! Me next!"

"And this one is rotten, it must taste awful", he continued, drawing a wobbly circle.

The kid he threw it to made the appropriate face.

The class of five years olds were having a time of their lives; the plum picking session was a great success.

The next day I learnt that a new step was being taken.

"Today, I'm going to buy plums from you, five at a time" he announced. "But only the sweet ones will get paid with a mark. I won't buy sour or rotten ones so you won't get a mark. Now see how a sweet plum is made.....here..."

He drew a very round circle clock-wise on the blackboard.

"And a rotten plum is this," he said, drawing the circle anti-clock-wise.

The kids made motions in the air with their little hands when he showed them.

"Like this! Not like this!" they chanted after him.

I wondered how he would check on writing anti-clock-wise, since he could not be watching all the kids at once.

A little voice piped up: "Teacher, he's drawing a rotten plum, like this!" his little hand waving in the anti-clockwise move.

His neighbour said, drawing in the air, "No, no, I'll write it like this!" making clock-wise motions with his hands. Aha, I thought, the kids check each other.

So *that* was all the plum picking was all about: the Myanmar alphabet is based on the circle and the letters are in that sense deviations of the sweet plum, a very round little circle.

The kids set to with a will, drawing 'plums' on their slates.

After writing five 'plums' each, they brought their slates for inspection.

"Now this is sour, next time I won't buy it," he'd say. "But this time

I will," and made a mark. The kid went away happy.

The little cry-baby came up shyly.

"Hey, you may cry a lot but your plums sure are sweet!"

U Nyan Sein told him. The boy scampered back to his place,

very happy, and I noticed that he came up often and happily, to show more plums.

The next day a new lesson started. He asked each one to stand up, and to announce their names. Then he drew a 'Ka' (First letter of the alphabet) on the black board.

"Now, you all have names...tell me your names, one by one...now that's a pretty name! What a fine one!...and what nice names you all have. Listen, *he's* got a name, too, it's 'Ka'...don't forget now, you like to be called by your very own name, right? So does he."

It went on like this all through the alphabet.

After seeing my friend at work, I was truly shaken; was I as good a teacher, was I doing as much good for my students as he is?

(1998)

BURMESE  
CLASSIC  
.COM

**Neighbours**  
Moe Moe (Inya)



## Neighbours

By Moe Moe (Inya)

"Dear, we're invited to have *Monlinga*<sup>1</sup> at a house two doors away; will you just drop in there on your way to work?"

"I'm late, Aye, you go. Then you'll get to know your new neighbours. Better you than me, you're a woman."

We had moved into this place recently and we were still strangers in the neighbourhood. We liked our privacy and the neighbours seem to be checking out our behaviour from afar. We knew that living in a close community like this would mean everyone getting into everyone else's' affairs, so we thought it would be best if we did not get too familiar. But then, when it comes to social dealings, we could not very well stay away, can we.

A lot of guests were already there as I went into the house holding the ceremony. Since I was a new face, the others turned as one to stare at me. The hostess came up to greet me, and gave me a place to sit. One lady already at the table stared hard at my longyi apparently to assess its worth, fashion and financial wise, before speaking to me.

"You just rented Daw Hla Myaing's house, didn't you?"

"That's right."

"Where did you live before?"

"Oh.... downtown."

"So, why didn't you stay on there?"

Someone interrupted with this blunt question. I tried to keep a smile on my face: I was going to be living among them, after all.

"After we got married, we couldn't find a place yet, so we had to stay in town."

"Oh, were you living with friends?"

"No, no...with my in-laws."

"Is that so? Then why did you move...didn't get along with your in-laws?"

Dear god. I never thought such a rude question would be hurled at me. I felt the smile leave my face.

"N..no....there were too many relatives there, and we wanted a place of our own."

Facing such curiosity I wanted to leave as soon as could. I did, after having a plate of Monhinga, saying I have a baby left at home with my maid.

I was apprehensive about living in this neighbourhood but I would have to try my best to get along with the community. Having a place of one's own was very difficult in this city and although we have been looking for a place to rent since before our marriage, our son was already four months old by the time we found this house. The landlords are usually fussy but since we were just the three of us and one maid, we were able to rent this small bungalow easily.

"Sister, is the sister of the house at home?"

I heard a call from outside; it was one of the ladies I had met at the morning feast, the one who had asked bluntly about quarrels with my in-laws. She was elderly, but kept herself well turned out and made-up so she looked younger than her years.

"I wonder if you have pretty new blouses, I'd like to borrow some for my daughter to copy the design," she smiled as she came in.

"Yes, of course, please sit down. I'll get some."

I invited her half-heartedly but she even followed me to the bedroom, not sitting in the living room as I had indicated.

To get it over with as quickly as possible, I dragged out three or four blouses out of my suitcase. She pretended to choose, but her eyes were roving around the room. Moving to a new house meant so many expenses that we had few pieces of furniture: we had no bed yet and we slept on a mattress laid on

the floor. She said nothing, chose two blouses, and came out to sit in the living room. She did not look as if she would be leaving anytime soon.

"Where do you live, aunt?" I made polite conversation.

"Oh, next door, don't you know?"

So it was she, screaming at her children every morning.

Picking up my son she asked how old he was,

"Four months."

"Hmm...big for his age...what does his father do?"

There she was again, bluntly inquisitive.

"He works at a printing press."

"Oh, a mechanic?"

"No, a proof reader."

"A what? A compositor?"

"No, he reads proofs."

She did not seem to understand, and the big bookcase overflowing with my husband's books did not seem to impress her at all. I did not bother letting her know that my husband worked at his parent's publishing house.

"How much do you pay your maid?"

The direction of her attack changed.

"Forty a month."

"Well, I suppose you must have a maid. Now what is your name again?"

"It's Aye Aye, Aunt."

"Is your husband's salary good enough?"

"Yes, not bad."

"Does he write?"

"Yes, a bit."

She just sat there, cooing to my baby. I was fed up; I knew the next round of questions would start again soon.

Just then, the maid called from the kitchen about how to cook the fish for lunch, and I excused myself and stayed back there. After a while she called good-bye and left. Thank god she did not follow me into the kitchen to inspect the food.

When I complained to my husband, he said I should relax and adjust myself to the neighbourhood. But it was not easy: there was Ma Ma Nu, who usually calls me if she saw me on the way to the bazaar to ask me to get her a chicken or something else. Not that she would give me the money then or afterwards. Only when I pressed with broad hints would she reluctantly

hand over some notes which did not cover the costs. Now I have learnt to lie:

"Oh dear, I forgot to get the chicken for you!"

Or, "I didn't see it anywhere in the market!"

"Now what are you cooking?"

Ma Mya Than strolled straight into my kitchen. Being almost the same age, we got together more often: going to the Government Shop to get our ration of rice or milk powder, for example. However, she already had five kids who usually came along, messing up my husband's books or pulling at my son.

"Nothing, the maid's doing it. Come, come to the front room."

I dragged her and her kids out to the living room.

"I came to show you this piece of nylon; it's only Kyat 37 a yard. One yard is too much for me so maybe we can take half each, for short-sleeved jackets?"

"It's only Ks. 40 in the market so the price isn't that cheap. Anyway the green colour doesn't suit me and you know I don't wear short sleeves."

"Oh, I buy everything that's new, it doesn't matter if I never wear it. Why, I have five kids and you have only one. Can't afford new clothes, eh?"

"Well, we prefer to eat well to be healthy, you know. And my husband buys loads of books."

I noticed that her kids were rather puny. With such different tastes and different views, I was hard put trying to be compatible with her.

Ma Tin Hlaing my neighbour on the other side seemed like a quiet lady. One day I went over to use her sewing machine. But she turned out to be quite a gossip for within minutes she had related to me most of the personal matters of the neighbouring houses.

"You know that thin woman living one house away from you?" she asked suddenly.

"You mean Ma Ma Nu?"

"No, the house next door to me...there."

I looked and felt guilty when I saw that woman herself staring out the window at us.

"Her husband's never home."

"Oh, does he work out of town?" I asked more out of politeness than anything.

"No, he's got a second wife...spends all his time there. Comes here once in a blue moon, doesn't even give her enough money."

"Poor thing! And she's rather pretty...how nasty of the husband."

"And that Ma Ma Nu, have you seen her husband yet, Aye?"

"No, I don't think so."

"It's that young chap....much younger than her. That's why she's always trying to look young, too."

"Oh, is that him? I didn't know...I thought he was a son or nephew or something."

I hurried home as I did not want to hear more.

Two days later I was sitting on the front stoop when Ma Mya Than came to chat and to look for non-existent lice in my hair. I protested that it was embarrassing to be doing that in full view of passer-bys, but she insisted.

Then Ma Ma Nu came up the steps, a sulky look on her face.

I wondered what was wrong.

"Do sit down, Ma Ma Nu," I welcomed her.

"No need; I'll say what I have to say."

As I stared at her in surprise, she went on in a furious voice, hands on her hip.

"Now, I heard that you've been telling people that my husband is young enough to be my son?"

I was silent with shock.

"You moved in a few weeks ago and think you can lord it over us? Look, I own my house, I don't live in a rented place and I've lived here longer than you. Don't think you can get away with bad-mouthing me. Keep your nose out of my affairs. You really don't know much about what I can do, can you?" she sneered.

"No, Ma Ma Nu, you're wrong; I didn't know anything. I just said I'd thought him to be a son or nephew. I said what I thought so what's wrong with that?"

First I was going to be polite but rising anger made my voice shrill.

Ma Mya Than entered the fray.

"Well, what's wrong with that, she's just saying what is correct!"

Then the battle changed to one between the two of them. I could not say what past resentments the two harboured but in no time they were hurling personal insults at the top of their voices. I saw the thin woman standing in the lane, looking on with an angry look on her face. I learnt later that she had eavesdropped on my conversation to sneak to Ma Ma Nu.

"It's so embarrassing! So embarrassing! I hate it here...I hate the sleazy people. I'm going to be like them if I stay...I've never ever quarrelled in my life, now look at what happened."

Every evening I complained to my husband. Every morning before he leaves for work I would urge him to find another house. He began to come home late and leave early: but I did not give up. Soon it worked: my husband said he had found another place.

We moved to a flat, not really downtown but nearer to it. My maid went back to her village and I was left to look after my son all alone. Where we lived before one of the neighbours could be relied upon to baby-sit so I had more free time. Now I hardly left the house.

Before my husband left for work I had to hurry to the market. The new neighbours seemed to have no interest in us so it did not seem possible they would baby-sit. They seemed to treasure their privacy more than we did. When we moved in, lugging pots and pans, nobody bothered to glance at us and even if we meet on the street we were like complete strangers.

One afternoon all of a sudden I felt ill with a high fever. I wanted to phone my husband but there were no public phones nearby. I knew my neighbour had one so I went to press their doorbell. Someone looked from the peephole, and opened the door.

"Please, I don't feel well and I need to call my husband. May I use your phone?"

The lady stood and stared at me silently. Then she said dourly, "Go ahead".

I made a hurried call, and with an even more hurried Thank you, left at once. The door was slammed behind my back.

In this new place I must admit I was thoroughly bored. No one made friends with us, and when they had guests for a function, we were never invited.

One Sunday, I was sitting chatting with my husband, when there was a knock on our door. We opened it to see my aunt who lived in the country, bundles in hand. As was her habit she started to complain loudly.

"What a time I had, looking for your place! As if it were war time and everywhere a mess. I forgot your house number so I had to ask by your name but nobody knew you! Even the people next door said they don't know. And they glared at me just for asking that, can you believe it? And what was wrong with your previous house, may I ask?" she went on.

"That place? Oh..um..this place is better, really, Aunt. There, people are so inquisitive."

"Well so what, then, it's like a big family wasn't it. They do give you help you when you need it, don't they?"

It was true; whenever I felt under the weather, Ma Mya Than would hurry over. Even Ma Ma Nu would bring over a bowl of soup.

My Aunt turned to my husband and jerked her chin at me.

"She's always so fussy, isn't she...not liking it here, not liking it there. There's no pleasing her."

I was silent. I had nothing to say and honestly, I had no idea what sort of neighbourhood I want to live in anymore.

(1972)

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<sup>1</sup> Rice noodles in thick fish broth



**The Trial**  
Pe Myint



## The Trial

By Pe Myint

The front room of the Headsman's house, temporarily turned into a court, was already packed with people sitting on the floor. Out in the yard they clustered in groups; some laughed among themselves, some chuckled, some discussed the case in furious tones.

Now this was no ordinary case and hence it was no ordinary hearing. It was an emergency hearing, and the 'judge' had no idea what he should call the crime. Anyhow, officials were getting ready to start the proceedings; the two defendants were present.

The crowd still chattered.

"Shameless jerk, should be jailed five years and kept there...that Kyaw Sein Oo. Who does he think he is, always wearing that torn pair of shorts and with that scraggly beard? Never did a day's work, drunk all hours." A matronly lady sitting on the floor of the front verandah muttered darkly.

"What clever chaps! Never knew anyone like 'em. They could be put on show in a circus tent." That with a chuckle from a short, fat man standing in the front yard.

"Clever? *Clever?* They *disgraced* our village. People will think that we're barbarians, that we're vulgar. Hang them both, that's what I say." A skinny old man nearby said with fury. He held a stout cane in his hand, for an unknown purpose. But if the judge were to hand over the defendants into his hands, you can be sure he'd rip the skin off their backs with that cane.

"All quiet! Silence! The hearing will begin!"

As chairman of the Judicial Committee, the headman shouted and thumped his palm resoundingly on the table. He looked to be in his sixties, stout and muscular. Even when he was young, he had wielded a cane to bring to order any uproar caused by the feisty young blades at the village fairs. He has a certain presence; people were in awe of him.

"Well now, Maung San Phyo, you begin; tell us what you saw, you're the eye-witness,"

The headman called out to San Phyo sitting in front of him. San Phyo himself was not a member of the administrative council, but he liked to be an active supporter of all doings of the village; he was an officious little man.

He stood up, nervously rubbing his short stubble of hair.

"It was like this, your Honour. I was not there when it happened, but I got there as soon as the fuss started. I saw the White Lady pointing at Ko Kyaw Sein Oo and Than Chaung, and talking angrily in her language. Then Ko Aung Thein who was staying in the same bungalow came up and asked her in English what happened. She said that that man must be insane, trying something like this on the beach in full view of the public; that he should be sent to the loony bin, and that Ko Aung Thein must inform the authorities. Then she went inside the bungalow. So I told Ko Aung Thein I'd inform the authorities, and so I came to you." He sat down.

"Oh, right then, any eye-witnesses who actually saw what happened?" the Headman asked the room at large, casting his eyes over the crowd.

Ko San Phyo again stood up to answer. "Yes, your honour, there was Ba Toke and Kyaw Aye, who just came back from fishing. They were there. They said they saw everything. Some girls picking shells from the rocks saw it, too."

The headman looked around the room and spotted Kyaw Aye.

"Get up, Kyaw Aye. Tell us what you saw."

Lanky, round-shouldered Kyaw Aye stood up none too steadily. He looked as if he has had a few drinks. He peered around the audience. He lived in the same village as the defendants after all, and they had often gone to the grog shop together.

"Yes, your honour, I was there, but at that time I was bent down, picking up the fish that fell out of my pouch, so I didn't see anything."

The two defendants bent their heads to hide their grins.

"Now, Kyaw Aye, tell the truth. San Phyo said you were very close to the incident."

"San Phyo wasn't there himself; its hearsay," Kyaw Aye retorted.

San Phyo immediately got to his feet.

"As I got there I heard Kyaw Aye saying loudly, Whiter than white! For sure he saw it." He turned to Kyaw Aye. "You said that, didn't you?"

The people laughed.

The headman cajoled, "Tell the truth, Kyaw Aye. It's for the sake of our village; don't lie, now."

Kyaw Aye looked around with a silly grin on his face. The headman's face turned hard; he was about to say something. Just then, Kyaw Sein Oo, one of the accused, got to his feet.

"Hey, Kyaw Aye, go ahead and tell them what you saw. I'll deal with it my own way."

"Talk, Kyaw Aye," the headman ordered curtly.

"Yes, your honour. I will tell what I saw. As I came back after fishing, near where it happened, I saw Than Chaung sitting with a bottle on some rocks. I wanted to get a drink from him and as I went up to him I saw Kyaw Sein Oo near the White Lady who was picking some seashells. So I wondered what he was up to. I don't know what he was saying, but I heard him say, "Berry byoo tee fool' in a loud voice. The White Lady looked startled and turned back towards the bungalow. And that chap ran after him and what do you think? He did it then and there."

Kyaw Aye was talking with great relish, waving his arms. He continued: "It was just as San Phyo said just now, whiter than white!"

A man in the audience was startled into making a loud exclamation, then fell silent, abashed.

"That son of a slut, talking without shame and relishing it. If he were not fishing, he'd be doing it with them, that's for sure", a woman remarked loudly. The audience tittered.

The headman held up his hand for silence.

"Now then, Kyaw Sein Oo, tell the truth. What possessed you to do such a thing, in public? Are you crazy?"

Kyaw Sein Oo got to his feet. His hair and beard were long and untrimmed; he was dressed in a dirty jacket which has long lost its original colour, and a much patched and darned dark blue trousers.

"I am not crazy, your honour, maybe a bit drunk, but not a lot, mind, only a bit.

I will explain".

He turned his back to the bench and faced the people with what dignity he could muster.

"Early that morning Than Chaung came to call me to go the grog shop."

"I didn't! I just dropped in," Than Chaung interrupted. He was a stocky, short man, rather shabbily dressed. He did not look up as he spoke, but kept his head bent.

"Yes, all right, he just dropped in, but anyways, we always go to the grog shop, so that's that. The other day we caught a number of lobsters, and handed over the money to the shop, and out of that, we pay for drinks and smokes...."

"Get to the point," the headman thundered. "Don't waste time."

"Well, we sat and drank and drank and we began to talk of the holiday makers...those girls, even the Burmese, and the white ladies, how their swimsuits seem to shrink every year, some are just two little bits of cloth tied with string! Even Ko Thar Yin said they're no bigger than his hand."

"Ah ha, so Ko Thar Yin's in it, too!" a wag called out. The headman glared at him.

Kyaw Sein Oo continued. "The other night, they were seen swimming, ahem, without wearing, *you know*. Everyone knew. Now is that proper? Is that good? We were not indulging in dirty talk, we were having a discussion from the point of view of keeping our culture safe, for the good of the village."

"Discussion? Culture? What discussion, the cheek of that ass" remarked a matron.

Kyaw Sein Oo continued.

"Then I fell asleep, and then Than Chaung woke me, and he said to me. Let's take a walk on the beach."

"Continue," said the headman.

"We saw a White Lady sitting on the beach. Another one walked up to her, and that lady wore a thin, white dress; the hem was right up to her knees. She walked pass us, picking up shells, ignored us. I said to Than Chaung, look at the way she moves. Than Chaung said, it does shake a bit, doesn't it. Didn't you say that, Than Chaung?" He turned to address his co-defendant.

"Yep, I did."

"And then I said, she's not wearing any undies. My eyesight's better than his, but he said it's impossible, what if the wind blows the dress, you know, she can't *not* be wearing anything underneath. He said at the very least she'd be wearing panties. So we made a bet, the stake's one bottle. So we walked behind her, but not too close. A gust of wind came up, but did not blow up her dress, it blew it against her, so we could see the dress cling tight against her, and we both saw that she wasn't wearing anything. That Than Chaung, he didn't want to lose a whole bottle, so he said maybe she has on a *very* thin pair of panties. That made me so mad that, beg pardon, sirs, I told him I'd go and lift up the hem, and that he is to watch carefully. If he's not sure even after that, I swore I'd box his ears. And so he said, if you dare lift up that dress, I'd pay for your drinks for one whole week. Did you, or did you not say so?" He turned to demand Than Chaung.

"Yes, I did, and don't worry, you'll get your week's worth."

"What despicable behaviour!" One old man called.

"So I followed her, and picked a few shells and I gave them to her. I think I must have scared her, for she turned and made for the bungalow. I stood there a moment, quite surprised, then I remembered my bet, ran after her and lifted her skirt. As I said, oh boy, it's whiter than white. But afterwards we didn't run away, we were celebrating my win at the grog shop, and when the elders called we came at once, didn't we? We're not rude, it's them who's rude, they come around wearing these bitty things and all. Anyway I admit to it. Please do what you will."

The judicial committee looked at each other's faces. They adjourned into the back room to hold a conference. They all agreed that they must ask the White Lady concerned what she wanted done and to apologize to her. They delegated this duty

to Aung Thein. When he went to look for the lady, droves of people followed as they wanted to see what happened. They followed Aung Thein back to the court when he returned with a bulky bag clutched in his hand.

He smilingly took out a bottle out of the bag and placed it on the table. It was a long necked bottle of wine, product of Italy.

He reported to the committee:

"I explained to the White Lady, that it wasn't a sexual attempt on her, that it was a bet, and about how the elders and the villagers felt so ashamed, and that they apologised. She said it's all right, at first she was frightened and angry, but when she sat down to think about it, she knew it couldn't be an assault, in broad daylight and on the beach, but couldn't understand what had happened. She wanted to know the details of the bet, and when I told her she laughed till tears came to her eyes. She said she's been all over the world, and nothing like that ever happened to her. Then she said to tell the two chaps not to bet anymore, and to give this bottle as her present to them. I said it's not proper to do that, but she insisted. She said people who drink are always grateful to anyone giving them a bottle, and they never forget such a favour and they'll never bother her again. So I had to take it."

Stunned, they all of them stared at the bottle of wine.

"Better not give it to them. Imagine what they will do to all other tourists!" One of the judges blurted; they all shuddered as one.

The sentences and announcement were delivered: the two to be locked-up for twenty-four hours, and no drinking for a month. If they drink, back they go into the lock-up, even if they had done nothing wrong. And as for other lads, they'd better not even think about doing the same thing, for the sentence would not be as light.

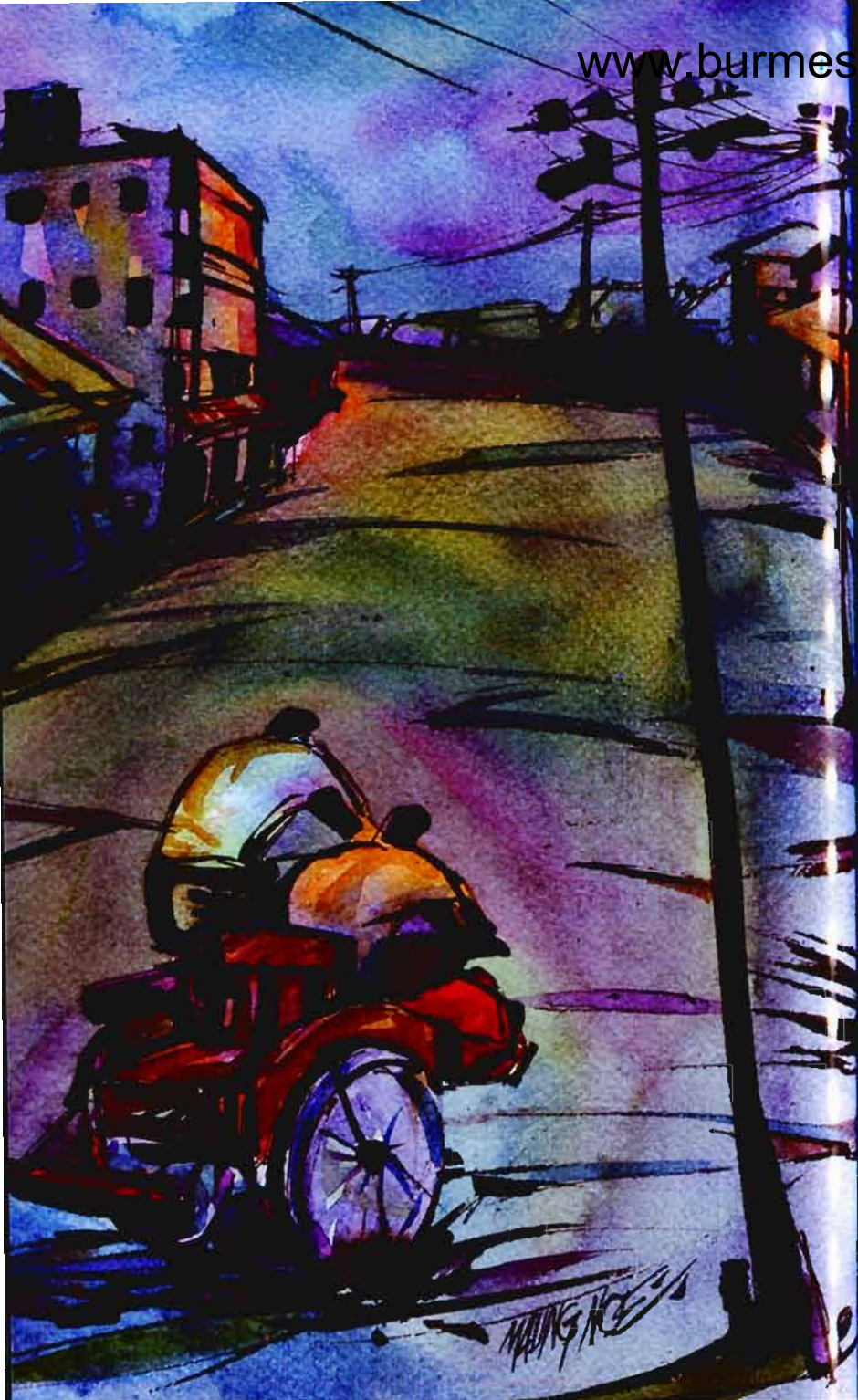
Everyone went home satisfied. The two were escorted to the police station by the judicial committee and the headman himself clanged the door shut and turned the key.

The bottle of wine, product of Italy, sat forgotten on the table.

(1988)

## Age Old Differences

Pe Myint



## Age Old Differences

By Pe Myint

By the time I got off the bus it was .9: 30 pm and dark. I walked towards the trishaw stand.

One of the trishaw drivers who knew me by sight asked me if I could wait until he has another passenger to share the seats and I said yes. If I rode alone, it would cost me eight kyat and if I waited for someone to share, it would be five. The combined daily fare for bus and trishaw was not too cheap. So if I can save three kyat why not?

"Okay, the next trishaw in turn come along," the chap who talked to me called out.

The trishaws had to take passengers in turn.

A young man sitting quietly on his trishaw got down and pushed his vehicle out of the shadows.

"Uncle, you can sit and wait on it," he said. Then he turned and called out to the darkness, "One passenger more, one passenger more!"

I looked at him. He was a slight, very fair boy, probably the same age as my son who was in high school. He did not look as strong as my son and he wore a rather frayed white shirt. I saw that the seam had unravelled at the sleeve.

But he somehow did not look as if he came from a poor family; he did not look as if he had led a rough life.

Now why was he peddling a trishaw, I wondered. Maybe his parents lost their wealth? How? Did his father lose his job? Or maybe he passed away? What about his mother; how many in his family, is he the oldest? Poor boy, is he feeding his whole family?

I thought of my own son, and felt a twinge of compassion. If it were my boy...if something happened to me, what would happen to my son? Look at this boy, so young, none too strong, and peddling a trishaw. How could his mother bear it?

I began to feel guilty about riding his trishaw. He would need to pedal hard to carry my rather heavy weight and with another passenger he would surely not be able to manage it, especially on that rise further down the road.

He kept calling for another passenger but he sounded calm and his voice was quite steady.

"Never mind, let's go. I'll go alone," I said to him.

He turned to glance at me and then pushed his trishaw onto the road. He began to pedal steadily, not hurrying. It looked to me as if he were used to this work.

Hmmm...not bad, I thought. He looked mature for his age. Good, that is good. I like people who have the courage to face whatever happens. I wanted to know more about him.

"How long have you been doing this?"

"About a year."

"I've never seen you before...oh well, I don't take a trishaw every day, only when I'm late."

He pedalled quicker just before we reached the rise so the trishaw went smoothly over it.

The vehicle seemed well kept. Sometimes the machine would be too old.

Now this boy seemed a good chap, not only feeding his family but looking after his machine as well. Is this his own trishaw, or is it rented from someone, I wondered.

I hoped that it was his.

"Is this trishaw yours?" I asked him.

He glanced at me and maybe he thought I was being too curious; he answered with a short "Yes."

I was feeling sorry for him, wondering if he could continue his studies, if he could study after doing hard work.....

"Are you in school? Which grade?" I asked him.

"I matriculated this year."

"Really! Did you get any distinctions?"

"I got four."

"Isn't that something? To get such good grades even when you have to pedal a trishaw. Why, other kids don't even pass while they are can afford to take extra tuition for all subjects. Well, well, you can't buy brains with money, can you? You look a clever chap."

He gave a laugh. "I did take tuition in all subjects, Uncle. I pedal only when someone is absent, just to get some exercise. I don't like sports, so this is just one way of keeping fit."

"So this is your parents' trishaw, then?"

He slowed down a bit. Maybe he felt that some explanation was in order.

"This is really my own trishaw, Uncle. I have four that I rent out. Sometimes one of my chaps would be ill or something, then I take my turn. That way I get to know these chaps well, and it's harder for anyone to cheat me. Also I get to meet all sorts of people: that's a good thing, isn't it, to get to know different people."

I felt a bit silly about all that compassion I had been pouring out for him. I looked up at him and now he seemed familiar... where have I seen him before?

"Wait a minute, where do you live?" I asked.

"The Goodwill Store, near the big market", he smiled as he answered.

I instantly understood the situation. The Goodwill Store was a row of shops owned by one family, all of them as fair skinned as this boy. There is a restaurant, a mini super-market, a shop selling pickled tea and snacks, a video rental shop and a paper copier shop. The whole family runs it. I had made a colossal mistake about him, but I continued to question him without losing composure.

"How many brothers and sisters do you have?"

"Five. I'm the youngest. My oldest brother works in the restaurant with my parents. That's the original family business. The other shops were set up when we grew old enough.....the supermarket belongs to my oldest sister, the middle brother has the video shop, the pickled tea shop is my other sister's and I run the Xerox machine. But I've had these trishaws since I was young."

"Since you were young? And you're not young now?"

"It's true, Uncle," he laughed. "I set up my first trishaw when I was ten."

I felt as if I'd been punched in the gut.

I am a writer who for years has been writing about economics and education, the need to work hard, to get ahead, what good business tactics are. I had written hundreds of articles, some based on material from international magazines and papers. I wanted the younger generation to learn about these things. Now with this young boy I've met my match; I felt humiliated and thought that he must be secretly laughing at me.

"Stop, here we are..." I was at my gate. I felt in my pocket and found a ten kyat note. "There you go, I have a ten only...don't bother about the change."

"No, wait, Uncle, don't do that." He hurriedly took out two kyat out of his pocket and handed them to me.

He looked at me for a moment and said,

"Please don't be offended, Uncle, you seem interested in me, so I feel I must explain...you see, when I'm peddling or when I'm working in my shop, I always take the exact amount. I never take more intentionally or by mistake. I never accept tips either.

In the same way I never give more than the exact amount due, not even one kyat or one pya more. You see, there's a saying that you take care of a kyat tens of thousands of kyat will take care of you. I live by that."

That little so-and-so was rather smoothly and politely giving me a lesson!

"All right, I admit it, you're a very clever chap. Goodnight, are you getting on home now?"

"No, Uncle, there's still time enough for another trip. Make hay while the sun shines, you know."

He turned back towards the trishaw stand.

"I'm off, sir!" he called gaily as he pedalled away.

Well, all right then, be off. You guys, go off to pedal trishaws, go off to open banks, expand businesses, plot and plan, make hay while the sun shines, get rich, get prosperous, and go on, take over all we have<sup>1</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> The author meant the Myanmar Chinese who have lived in the country for several generations.

I went into my house. Should I beat up my son nodding over his schoolbooks, to get him out of the house and start peddling a trishaw? Should I tell my wife to stop being a mere housewife and order her to set up a noodle stall or a teashop? Something must be done.

But then.... what if this turned against me? I could imagine the humiliation of having my wife shouting at me to not come home tipsy every evening....so I applied the brakes on my thoughts and crept meekly into the house as if I had not encountered anything remarkable on my way home.

Yin Khon Pwint Magazine, November, 1991.

Also included in his collection "*Lu Thone Pyitsi Yaung Thu Myar and other short stories*" which won the National Literary Award of 1995.



## The Wedding Reception

Nyi Pu Lay



## The Wedding Reception

By Nyi Pu Lay

The group of people dressed in their best stood in the narrow lane, necks stretching to catch a glimpse of the car coming towards them on the bumpy road. They could see it in the dust, rolling as slowly as if it were a horse-drawn cart.

This was the car taking them to the wedding. In their eyes the car rolled on the bumps as if it were a boat riding the waves.

When it was near enough for them to see it through the whirling dust, one of the waiting women exclaimed to the groom,

"Sein Hla, is *that* the car taking us to the wedding?"

Sein Hla smiled to himself. "Yep, it sure is. Why?"

"You said it's a *van*."

"It is a van, isn't it?"

It was, but just barely. The back end of car had been cut, remodelled and roofed; it was exactly the sort of car used for transporting vegetables from the jetty to the market.

But they could not be choosy: they were already late, and some of them must go early and hurry back in time to go to work. Anyway, in their part of Mandalay, there never has been such luxury as a car rented for the purpose of taking guests to a wedding. This time, the bride being the schoolteacher and all, and with the groom's best friend being the owner of a car, transport had been arranged as a wedding gift from the owner.

After making a five-point turn, the car was finally parked with its head towards the road. The first batch of passengers was the young girls who were in charge of handing out sprigs of flowers and cigarettes to each guest. They must be in their places before the guests arrive. There was an immediate uproar about who gets in first, who sits where. The driver obligingly shut off the engine, which shuddered like a malarial victim, before it died.

"Now where is that Sein Sein Aye? She's always slow... let's just see if she moves faster to catch a husband, then I'd tear her to pieces." Before the words ended, a bug-eyed girl dressed in bright red scampered up. Her make-up was exactly like the other girls'...its pink tones clashed alarmingly with her dark skin.

Uncle Than Sein and Grand Uncle Win Maung, as befit their age, had already installed themselves in the front seat.

"Oh, Uncle, take this child on your lap, she's Daw Aye Chit's little girl."

"Come, come, you can sit on my knee." The girl was overjoyed to be riding in the front seat and her wide grin showed off missing front teeth.

Sein Hla, the groom, tried to pack in as many as possible, for he did not want his friend making too many trips. Gas prices were not cheap, as he well knew.

The car began to look like a piece of candy with ants climbing all over it. It was indeed a happy scene.

To everyone's alarm the car would not start for a few minutes; then they were off in a cloud of dark smoke.

"Now, bridegroom, you'd better go change, what are you waiting for?"

"Well I'm just so busy seeing to things..."

"Never mind! Everything will be fine. You go change; it's your wedding day, man, look lively."

"Who'll look after the gifts?" one lady asked anxiously.

"Don't worry, Aunt, there will be someone...go change, Sein Hla."

The group of ladies who were left standing in the lane began to gossip.

"That red dress Sein Sein Aye's wearing, whose dress is it?"

"Must be hers, since she's wearing it."

"No, the dress is too big on her, must belong to her sister who lives downtown."

A quarrel broke out between two children about who was to wear the one pair of slippers belonging to both. Kywet Thoe, the best man, sauntered up, hands in the pockets of his jacket.

"Well now, how grand you look; you should look as spic and span as this all the time."

"Of course I want to, Aunt, but look at me, I'm a mechanic, covered with grease all the time. I didn't go to work yesterday, that's why I look this clean. Even then I couldn't get rid of all the grime."

He held out his hands.

"How is that old father of the groom? How is he, Kywet Thoe?"

"Better, thank god...we all thought he was a goner, when the invitations were already printed and all."

The old man had fallen ill all of a sudden and the neighbourhood had held its breath but now, thank god, he's on the mend.

When the car came back it had picked up the bride Mar Mar Tin from the beauty salon. Anyone in the neighbourhood who was not going such as nursing mothers, old people walking with canes and toddlers with grimy faces, they all came as fast as they could to have a look at the bride.

She did not step out of the car. Her hair was done in a high chignon, and the false tress that dangled on the side was darker than her own hair. The rhinestone hairpin sparkled. Around her neck she wore a gem necklace and a strand of pearls, and in photos they would surely look real.

Her face was pink with the western foundation. Not used to having false eyelashes glued on her lids she kept batting her eyes. The beautician had done away altogether with her scanty eyebrows: they had been shaved off and he had drawn a curvy line in its place in sea-green pencil.

There were comments about how pretty she looked and they all asked how much it cost, the name of the shop and in the melee they heard a piping voice of a girl: "She doesn't look pretty at all!"

Mar Mar Tin pretended not to hear but her knuckles were itching to rap the little brat on the head.

The groom was wearing a dark golden yellow *longyi* as near the golden colour of the bride's *htamein* as possible. He too seemed to have rubbed some powder on his face because it looked dusty. He tried to open the car door: it did not budge, even with the bride working the handle from inside. The driver, his friend, leant over and pushed it open. The back of the van was already packed with guests.

He remembered his turban only when they drove off. Never mind, he could ask his friend to bring it along the next trip.

"Ko Sein, how's Father?" the bride asked him.

"He's had a pee, but couldn't pass motion yet. I moved him to a sunny spot."

"Who's with him?"

"Ma Ma Than from next door's keeping an eye on him..... he misses mother, you know. He doesn't say so but I can tell."

He tried putting his elbow out of the window but the glass could only be lowered mid-way so he felt uncomfortable. He took his arm down.

He turned to his friend. "When father heard you're helping out with the transport, he wanted to come, too. Said he should entertain his own friends himself."

"How did you persuade him to stay home, Ko Sein?" the bride asked.

"I told him there'd be all three of us brothers and that we'll see that everyone's welcomed properly. Even then he asked to wear a coat, just in case someone drops in at home."

The wedding hall was filled with guests. The bridal couple live in the same neighbourhood so there were no strangers. As the car went back for the third trip two kids did not stay behind but went back for another ride; it was a treat for them. One kid started to howl because he could not go with them.

The ladies manning the gifts table were busy making a list of the presents, while eating cake and gulping down tea. The elders sat in a group, happily smoking cigarettes. The pop songs blaring out of the speakers mingled with the chatter and the audible clearing of throats as the guests ate the dry cakes. The room was filled with smoke and the scent of cosmetics and perfumes.

All the way back the guests discussed the wedding, the dresses and the cakes. The newly weds had already given pocket money to the young men. It is called 'Payment for

Stones', a sum paid off to avoid the teasing throwing of stones on the house that night. These guys trooped out joyfully for drinks and food. As for the girls they had promised to take them all to watch TV that night. The children overheard this and demanded that they too wanted to come along. The bride had agreed to keep them quiet but thinking about the one kyat fee for adults and half for kids at the house with the TV, she felt worried about having enough and stole a glance at the borrowed silver bowl holding the cash gifts.

Father had been eagerly asking news from anyone who returned from the wedding. As soon as he saw his son the groom, he asked for his potty. Sitting on it he asked detailed questions about the reception.

As Sein Hla cleaned up his father, the old man asked if it were true about the TV show. "What's the program?"

"Mandalay Dance Troupe, Father, yes, we promised the girls."

"Is that so? I want to watch it, too."

"I'll carry you then, Father, if you want to go."

He thought of the sulky face of the owner of the TV and felt a twinge of worry.

The program was a favourite and the front room of that house would be filled with the wedding party.

As the nights were getting chilly he dressed his father warmly in an old jacket. His brand new wife Mar Mar Tin had gone on ahead, carrying his father's folding chair. There were still traces of the morning's make-up on her face. As it had cost her all of Kyat 150, she thought that surely she must still look as nice as this morning.

She had the money for the show tucked in her bodice. Her new slippers hurt her feet so she was wearing her old pair. Besides, people sometimes steal slippers at such places where they must be left outside, so its better this way.

Sein Hla showed his father the potty he carried in a plastic bag. "Let me know anytime you need to pee, Father, no need to feel embarrassed, everyone knows you."

U San Tin the owner of the TV came out to greet Father when they arrived. He seemed happy to have a full house. He was rather strict and he did not allow any kids to eat snacks or throw plum seeds at each other. The audience sat on mats covering the floor. Sein Hla placed his father's chair at the

back. He himself sat on the floor holding the potty bag and his new bride sat close to him.

The program started. Well! How they enjoyed it all: the jokes, the songs, the dancing. It was as if they were all nailed to the floor.

They were still smiling as they took their leave when the show ended. Sein Hla lifted up his father and his face fell: the old man had peed, probably without noticing it. There was a small wet patch on the floor. U San Tin must surely notice! Sein Hla did not know what to do. He grabbed the brand new handkerchief Mar Mar Tin was clutching and made as if to wipe the floor.

"Never mind, my boy, never mind." It was an unexpectedly kind word from U San Tin.

They said their good-byes, apologizing. U San Tin squeezed Father's hand as they left. Mar Mar Tin paid for her guests, bargaining with a beating heart to let off four kyat. The TV owners agreed, he said, just for this night.

Mar Mar Tin carried the folding chair with the wet burlap seat wondering how she could keep the make-up on until tomorrow. Sein Hla carried his father, wondering about how this night U San Tin had been so nice.

The audience made their way home, talking about the show.

(1986)

## Cleanup Tin Win Yee



## Cleanup

By Tin Win Yee

Only when the visitor's back was out of sight did Khin Khin Phyu finally steal a glance at the things on the table. One visitor had arrived before she could put away the gifts the first had left, so the small table was nearly overflowing with stuff.

"Mom, what's that?"

"I wanna cake .... gimme cake."

Her two sons well trained in the protocol of staying away from guests, now scampered into the room.

"Now wait, now wait, you'll get some, just be quiet and don't grab."

At this definite promise of something to eat, the boys calmed down. She took up the blue plastic bag which the first guest had left "for the children": out came a large cake.

"Hurray! It's cake!" the younger cried out in glee.

"Dear, can you cut this up and give some to the boys?" she called out for assistance to her husband Ko Thant Zin, who had come in after seeing off the visitors to the gate. He threw a sidewise glare at her and scooping up the empty cups of coffee, headed towards the kitchen with the kids in tow, muttering, "All right! All right!"

Another package....it was butter cookies...another one, more cookies.

"Goodness, why do they bring so much?" Even as she whispered the words, she calculated that this lot would last the children for three days, at least.

As she reached for the orange-coloured plastic bag the last guest had left she knew that the flat, oblong package which came out must be an expensive longyi for Ko That Zin. He already had about ten brand-new ones so there was no need for her to buy him any, and apart from that, they in turn were able to make gifts of these to others, elders and superiors. Other people, she had heard, would even sell off such gifts. That's going too far, she thought, as she gave a sniff and sadly shook her head. She put the longyi aside without any desire to glance at the colour or design. But at the sight of the bag of dried prawns peeping out of the bag she could not control her joy: her moralistic thoughts vanished as she grabbed it.

"What lovely big prawns! Must be at least half a viss."

As she tried to guess the weight she suddenly realized that she had unconsciously let her greed run wild and as suddenly she held it in check, letting out a sigh and letting go of the bag at the same time.

It must be at least three years since they had been infiltrated with such good fortune...the same age of her youngest. She remembered the surfeit of presents as she had lain in the maternity ward. If they had been the kind of people to be overly eager for wealth, what a fuss they might have made of this tiny newcomer, as being a bearer of good-fortune!

But they were not that sort...they both detested bribes and so-called gifts. And considering themselves sophisticated enough, they never believed in superstitious prejudice. When her eldest was born on a Saturday morning after a difficult time, Khin Khin Phyu had not spared a thought to the old wives' tale that ill-luck comes with a Saturday's child. The hard labour was due entirely to her state of health and physical condition. There was no need for any prejudice against her son. Likewise, there was no need to herald the youngest as a child of good fortune. Somehow that very word "fortune" had come to mean something unsavoury to them.

As a matter of fact, this era of luck actually started when Ko That Zin was transferred and promoted to this present post. Before, it was true that friends and relatives were

constantly in and out of their house and Khin Khin Phyu was happy to offer whatever hospitality she could.

However, this recent popularity seemed somewhat strange to her. It became a chore to sit and chat with people she had never before seen in her life; and it made her uncomfortable when they brought cakes and clothing as gifts in return for whatever help her husband could give them.

At first, she would be so uneasy she would refuse vehemently. She was not sure whether it was just masculine taciturnity but Ko That Zin would merely say to the visitors, "Really, there's no need for all this"....just that, which she did not think was enough. After the guests left there would be the inevitable quarrel.

"You seem to enjoy getting these things....you never refuse them."

"Hey, I *did* say there was no need to bring them ....and you, however much you refused, it didn't make any difference, did it? They always leave the stuff."

"They're not just simple, honest presents, you know that...they ask you to do this or that, and then bring these things. That can't be called honest...you're not honest."

"Now, wait a minute....how dare you accuse me? Don't you dare say a word against my character."

"No, no....I didn't mean I like that...it's just for your sake. I'm clear of all this nonsense, there's nothing underhand about my work but you, since you were moved to this position...."

"I never expect anything in return when I help people, you know that. And I didn't give them any help that I shouldn't, I do only what I can, and do it fairly. They're grateful enough for that. Why, others would drag out their work slowly so as to make it look complicated, and some even ask quite openly for bribes...I'm not that kind."

"Well, it's alright that you help all you can, but I still don't think you should take these things."

"Hey, what makes you think I want to take them? Now you're going too far....how dare you say this about me? As if one little longyi was a bag of diamonds....all this damn fuss."

"Yes, I do fuss, so what, I earn my own way. I never stoop to bribes, there's never been anything like that in my family....we don't live on handouts."

"You bitch! What d'you think my family is like? Remember this....we're more honest than the whole lot of you put together....you're going too far."

When Ko Thant Zin started to roar she knew she had been too zealous in her attempt to clean him up and she quietly slipped away from his sight. Actually, she really wanted this man, *her* man, to be a character of such blameless integrity and honour that she could revere him....but in truth, well, this man of hers was not all that bad, is he?

He supports his family without any extra income from the side - or from down, up or above, for that matter. He would hand over his pay every month without a penny missing. He did not go to the cinema or soccer matches, did not frequent tea-shops, and the poor guy smokes the cheaper cheroots instead of cigarettes.

When she finally realized that there was no way to stem the flow of fortune, she eased her conscience by determining not to take too great joy or greed from the things. In turn, she would pass on most of the presents to other people. But during the past year, as handler of the family finances, she was, in spite of herself, able to calculate that the gifts helped in one way or the other with the rigidly controlled budget of a two-person income for a family of four.

"Bang...bang...bang!"

This was Khin Khin Phyi pounding Tayaw vines to mix a shampoo. The other ingredient, a large bowl of freshly boiled Kinpun fruit<sup>1</sup>, stood beside her with fragrant steam rising from the surface. She hoped no one would come calling today. Last weekend had been hectic with people coming and going so they did not have any time to wash their hair. Today is a Wednesday, but being a public holiday, she thought it would be convenient for a leisurely shampoo.

As she added more water to the Kinpun mixture she thought gratefully of her mother-in-law who regularly sends the Tayaw vines and Kinpun fruit for the half-kyar worth of shampoo she could buy from the market would hardly wet her own hair. She thought with pleasure of her husband's dark, thick and unruly hair curling down over his wide brow as she pounded the vines.

<sup>1</sup> A mix of Tayaw sap and Kinpun fruit is a traditional shampoo.

"Hei, Phyu Phyu, d'you mean to wash your hair on a Wednesday?"

At the sound of the shrill voice she turned around to see her landlady Daw Thaung peering across the wire netting that separated the rooms.

"Yes, why? Why not on a Wednesday?"

"Shampoo on a Wednesday, no luck comes your way," Daw Thaung quoted an old saying.

"Rubbish!" she muttered to herself, as she thought that not being in trade like Daw Thaung, why should she bother all that much about luck coming her way or not?

But considering the fact that the old lady had meant it kindly, she replied easily enough.

"We didn't get a chance to wash our hair last week, and our heads are getting really filthy."

"Well, I suppose you office people have to make the most of your free time."

With that Daw Thaung fortunately turned away.

As there had not been a peep out of the two boys or her husband for some time, Khin Khin Phyu went out to the front room to check on them. She saw Ko Thant Zin sitting with a book in hand, staring into space.

"Dear, where are the kids? You'd better check on them...I'm going to have a bath. I'll leave your shampoo in the basin."

Ko Thant Zin started as if from a dream, and looked up at her.

"I don't think I'll wash my hair today and why don't you wait until Saturday, too?"

"Oh, why? Your hair's starting to stink, and only this morning you told me to make the shampoo...now why on earth..."

With sudden realization she gave him a piercing look...as Daw Thaung's words "No luck comes your way! No luck comes your way!" began to echoed loudly inside her head, she stared in consternation at this man, her man, as with lowered eyes he puffed away furiously on a dead cheroot.



## Overture Khet Mar



## Overture

By Khet Mar

She washed her brushes and then regarded her painting critically: definitely too many hues of blue. Blue-grey monsoon clouds over the rippling blue waters of a river, on the far bank, dark green mountain ranges and a blur of red sky just at the top right edge.

That last ray of fading sun fell on the lone boatman rowing against the current, the muscles of his arms standing out prominently in the light.

An overall gloomy and dark piece of work but she had wanted exactly that. It might storm, it might rain, and one might have to row against the current, but then all one needs is the strength to row.

She went to wash her hands at the sink, running her wet fingers through her hair and re-tying the handkerchief tied around her hair.

"Aren't you done yet?"

The night watchman called from the door. In the silence of the late evening his voice boomed out. She gave a tired but contented smile.

"Yes, I'm just about done and I'll be out in a minute,"

"It's past nine already. I thought you didn't notice the time. The others have all locked up and gone, you're the only one left."

She took up her things, gave a glance at her painting and went out of the door, smiling a greeting to the old man.

"Good night!"

As soon as she was out of the building, the fresh icy breeze refreshed her in an instant. She breathed in deeply. Through the darkness she could see the lit golden spire of the Shwedagon Pagoda.

She turned left as she came out of the gate of the State School of Fine Arts. She wished she could go and sit by the Royal Lake not too far away and maybe spend half an hour or so, watch the night sky, feel the breeze, listen to the night birds. But...how could she. The night and the breeze and the bird calls would surely be disturbed by the leers of drunken men. It is bad enough that she was walking home alone this late. She could not help getting so absorbed in her painting that she usually stayed on after class, finishing her assignment which she was to do over two or three days. This headstrong streak was what brought her here in the first place.

She had ignored her mother's pleas to finish high school and had left her in their small delta village to attend the art school. She had found a place to stay in a nunnery not too far within the grounds of the Nga Htut Kyee Pagoda of Bahan. She did not mind the meagre lunches of beans and rice or in the evenings, a plate of almost stale leftovers. Each evening she would happily scamper up the steep steps leading to the nunnery where she has been allowed to stay because the elderly nun happened to be a distant cousin of her mother. The walk to and from school took half an hour as the steep climb wound around a hillside and past a small cemetery where, years and years ago, some minor princes and princesses had been buried in a family plot.

She would go over in her mind the lessons she had learnt each day as she climbed; she thought of those steps as symbolizing the stages of her progress. Where was she now? Not yet near the top, she knew. But just wait. One day.

She was grateful that some donor had paid for railings to be put up and she clutched at the metal bar as she started the steep climb, first taking off her slippers for one is not allowed to wear shoes on the pagoda precincts. From far up the hill, a dim glow of a 40 watts light bulb hardly gave enough light for her to see the steps. Suddenly she heard the shuffle of feet

behind her...she felt so tired she did not bother to look around. Well, someone's coming up the steps, too. She felt less alone. But then why should that make a difference? She has been going up these dark steps, alone, for a great many nights.

"Sister! Sister!"

Now whom could he be calling to? She did not turn around, but heard the footsteps quicken, and in the dark sensed someone coming up to stand besides her.

"Sister?"

She looked up; in the faint light she could see a young man. She felt a stab of...fear? Perhaps. They were alone on the steps and by their side stood the old tombs; beyond those, a cliff; in front, almost total darkness. And next to her stood a strange man. It was late: almost 10 p.m.

"What d'you want?" Her voice sounded harsh to her own ears. What should I do? She thought rapidly. Who can hear her if she called for help? She noticed that he was dressed decently enough, in a white shirt. He held a pair of velvet slippers in one hand. What should she do? What should she do?

"Are you going up there, sister?"

His voice was gentle and he calmly stood still. She could hear the rustling of the leaves from the trees towering over the tombs.

"Yes," she answered. It sounded harsher than the previous reply.

"The steps are so dark and you're alone, aren't you? I've noticed you for some time, going up there. Are you from the art school? Where do you have to go? I'll see you home. It's late."

She could not imagine what her eyes were saying as she stared at him. Is this a sincere offer or is it a trick? A deep silence fell, broken by a sharp chirp of a cricket. She shivered but gathered her thoughts to speak in a steady voice.

"Yes, I'm on my way back from the art school. I have to go beyond the pagoda to a nunnery on the other side."

"Oh...right up to the top, then beyond?"

She nodded. It seemed to her that his eyes widened. When he spoke it was halting..

"Th...then it means I have to come back alone...it's so dark, and those tombs! W...well, you're used to this place, right? Excuse me, I have to go."

He turned suddenly and ran down the steps. She glared at his back and then turned to make her way up again. After a few steps she stopped and looked down... by then he was already more than ten steps away.

"Hey!"

Her voice was loud in the stillness. Startled, he stopped and looked up. She smiled broadly; she hoped he could see that smile. She waited a few seconds before speaking, for a cricket had started to chirp. As soon as it paused she called down:

"Thanks!"

She turned at once and ran up the steps. She heard nothing from him: he must be rooted to the spot in surprise. After a while she heard him run down the steps. She smiled again, as she has done just now. She turned and looked down until the faint glow of his shirt disappeared past the bottom steps. She smiled again.

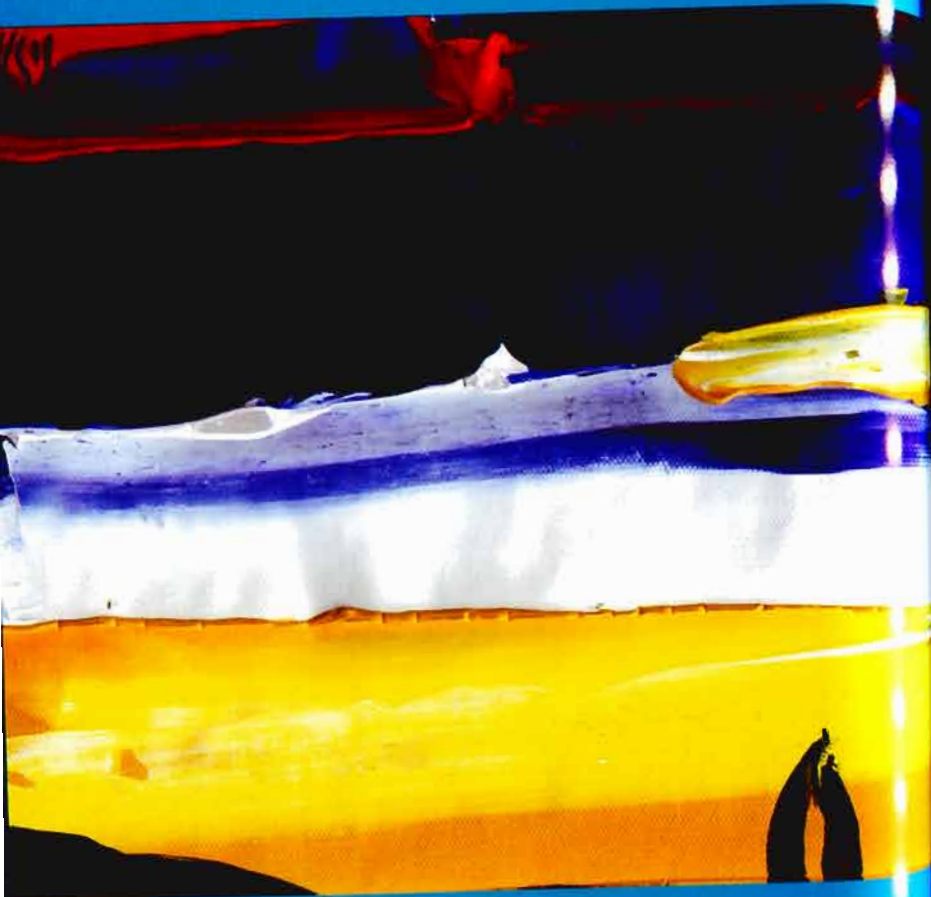
She could not understand why she kept smiling all the time, like this.

## Beyond Bone Turned To Ashes

Nu Nu Yi ( Inwa )

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<sup>1</sup> Although unrelated, people address each other as mother, uncle, aunt, nephew, niece, son etc. out of politeness.



## Beyond Bone Turned To Ashes

By Nu Nu Yi ( Inwa )

The circular train could be seen through the thick leaves; the orange coloured *pauk* flowers bloomed in profusion beside the tracks.

"Here you are... water spinach for sale!"

Old Uncle Hlaing's voice came out sweet and clear, and the way he ended with a long-drawn out note was somewhat unique. No wonder: his voice was used to classical songs with all ranges of notes and all methods of singing. If there were anyone who was once among his audience and had loved this voice they would instantly recognise it as belonging to the famous puppet singer 'Jasmine' Hlaing. But looking at him now, dressed in shabby, ragged and grubby clothes, with a yoke on his shoulders, who would believe him to be the once graceful, good looking Jasmine Hlaing, always with a smile on his face? Once, when he began a song, the whole field of people would go utterly silent, not making a sound; that era when fans had clamoured for him was long gone.

Old Uncle Hlaing clutched his yoke tightly; walking around in all weathers, under fierce sun and heavy rain, his vision is no longer clear. Oh well, it's been some years that, while waiting for the revival of puppetry, he has been selling water spinach so that his daughter and son-in-law would not mind too much that they are feeding him and his wife. Seeing

the *pauk* flowers he remembered a song about them and the cool season that he had sung long ago on stage.

He heard in his mind the man in the role of a servant saying to him, "Your command, my lord?" As Jasmine Hlaing manipulated the strings of his prince puppet with slender, soft fingers the corner of his pink turban had fluttered in the breeze. His wife Ma Shwe Hmyin sitting by his side and looking up at his face adoringly, would be ready to fetch him a drink of water or a cup of tea. Before his entrance, he would sit at his ease on the kapok filled cushion she had lovingly sewn for him. This wonderful wife who like a true soul mate had cared for him in every way... now she lay ill and bedridden.

None of their six offspring had any interest in the arts, none to follow in his footsteps. They lived by doing odd jobs, all of them scattered. The worst thing was that they all thought little of his talent. He would console himself saying that it was not their fault to be born without this interest but when they complained that he spoke with a classical performer's accent, or felt ashamed that he was once a puppeteer, he felt hurt. Whereas their mother Ma Shwe Hmyin had carefully tended the voice their children so hated.

When the children were still young, the marionette stage was already on the wane so they had both worked at all sort of jobs feed them; they had suffered poverty and hardship. Even now, he was still struggling, still being treated like a burden, still hearing insulting words. He heaved a sigh and shifted the yoke to the other shoulder; there were still two or three near-wilting bunches of water spinach left. He called out in the classical accent that his children despised so much: "Here you are... water spinach for sale!"

Early summer and it was already blistering hot. Hordes of mosquitoes flew in from the spaces between the bamboo flooring. Old Uncle Hlaing swiped at the mosquitoes with an old longyi and resumed massaging the thin calves of his wife. Long ago, after his performances, it was she who would massage him until he fell asleep; now it's his turn. Their daughter, heavily pregnant, was asleep already.

"Hey bitch, are you dead to the world already?"

Hearing his son-in-law calling from the road Old Uncle Hlaing hurriedly took up a lamp peered outside. His son-in-law was not alone; there was someone sitting in his trishaw.

Smelling strongly of liquor, his son-in-law approached Old Uncle Hlaing.

"Listen, old man, you know that prince puppet you're so fond of? Well, someone wants to buy it."

"Oh... my Lord Buddha!" Old Uncle Hlaing was shocked; his eyes flew wide. He heard a faint voice saying, "Dear, don't sell it."

This little puppet that was like his own self, he would never part with it until he died... he could never sell it.

"What are you staring at? You surprised that anyone would want to buy this useless thing? He's offering five hundred, you hear? Five hundred!"

His son-in-law held up five fingers and began to shout drunkenly. The man on the trishaw called out, "Yes, uncle! I'm offering five hundred. It's for some foreigners." Old Uncle Hlaing felt as if someone was squeezing his heart. The woven box containing his puppet was next to his wife; he took it up and clutched it to his chest.

"I won't sell! I won't sell at any price!"

Hearing his shouts his daughter woke up, alarmed, and took in the situation at once.

"Are you mad, father? Five hundred is a lot! With that we could repair the trishaw, we could get medicine for mother, don't you understand? Give me that puppet!"

Old Uncle Hlaing slapped at his daughter's hand reaching out to him.

He again heard, painfully, his wife's weak and trembling voice telling him not to sell.

"I don't want any medicine, don't give it to them." He looked in sorrow at his daughter and said, half sobbing,

"My daughter, don't you have any pity for your mother? Kill me if you must but please don't take the puppet."

"Never mind if he doesn't want to sell, don't force him, I'll find one somewhere else," said the stranger. At that the son-in-law stopped in his tracks.

Oh Lord Buddha, oh Lord Buddha, let them leave... let them leave at once...

His son-in-law swore and peddled off his trishaw. His daughter stomped her feet so hard as she walked away in anger that the hut trembled as if about to collapse. Daw Shwe Hmyin

looked anxiously at her husband with tear-filled eyes; Old Uncle Hlaing felt a stab of pain in his heart.

"My dear Ma Shwe Hmyin, my soul mate, you are still looking out for me..."

That night Old Uncle Hlaing could not sleep; he kept feeling for the box by the bed.

The smiling face of the little puppet prince 'jasmine' looked alive; its wavy-pattern *pasoe* of yellow, now faded, still looked good on it. The gold and silver threads embroidered on the turban still sparkled. The eyes of the old couple gazing at the puppet shone with love, and their faith in the art. This faith seems as if to flow right into Old Uncle Hlaing's fingertips that were gently fondling the strings and his gnarled hands began to move lightly as he sang.

"Together, together, we keep our faith.

Together, together,

We will cross to the far shore of eternity.

We pray to be as one,

Our love not lessened,

And let this earth be our witness."

He saw that Daw Shwe Hmyin's eyes, as she watched from her bed, were sparkling. His dear love, who so loved his art, she still finds joy in it. Whenever his daughter and son-in-law were out of the house he would perform for her and always, her eyes would light up. But seeing how frail she was, he wondered painfully if this would be the last time he could perform for her.

She could not even sing one complete but how she loved the performances. Thirty years ago when marionette shows were all the rage, just let a drum beat be heard and she'd be there in the front row. All through the night, absently nibbling on the popped-corn strand she was wearing in her hair in place of flowers, she was smitten with the young puppeteer Jasmine Hlaing of the famous Jasmine Kyaing Marionette Troupe. From that day every time that her well-to-do parents of up-country held a ceremonial feast, the guests were entertained by Jasmine Hlaing's troupe.

She and Jasmine Hlaing, who was as good looking as he had a wonderful voice, soon fell in love and eloped after one feast. They fled the up-country region and settled in the delta, and joined another troupe. After the boom of the puppet stage

faded, they did what they could to feed their children, all the while Daw Shwe Hmyin giving full morale support to her husband.

By the time the children were grown, Daw Shwe Hmyin, once a pampered daughter of rich parents, fell ill with life's hardships.

After Old Uncle Hlaing finished his song, she said, as always, "Your voice is still good, dear."

As usual her hands tenderly fondled the edge of the puppet's *pasoe*.

She said, "When I'm better, let's go back home to up-country."

Old Uncle Hlaing nodded enthusiastically. She went on, softly,

"I don't want to die here, I want to die there. Please, dear, have my funeral according to up-country customs."

Old Uncle Hlaing was painfully hearing the same words she has been saying since the day she fell ill.

The custom she was talking about meant that the funeral procession must be accompanied by a dirge, sung and played on simple instruments. The singer and players perform only for funerals, and not for auspicious occasions: those have their own. Those who could afford it would even have two musical groups, one at the head of the procession and one behind, a typical and uniquely up-country custom, not seen elsewhere.

This up-country lady, and so obsessed with song and dance, she wanted music even at her funeral, Old Uncle Hlaing thought to himself. But he did not want her to die yet... he wanted to make her well, and together they would try to revive their art; he wished he could still have some hope for that to happen.

Daw Shwe Hmyin's thin fingers were beginning to turn cold in Old Uncle Hlaing's hand; she struggled to breathe, trying to open her eyes. My lord, my lord... was this her last hour? Old Uncle Hlaing did not know what to do... should he run and fetch a doctor? That was not possible... he clutched the ten one-kyat notes in his other hand, and shook his head. Not enough, not even close. He could only do what he could... to softly recite the Buddhist sutras with his face close to hers. He gazed at her face as she listened quietly and tears welled up in his eyes. She moved her lips and struggled to speak.

"Dear, when I am dead I want a funeral like in up-country, with a dirge..." He felt a pain in his heart at her soft whisper. Only when he nodded several times did Daw Shwe Hmyin seemed satisfied, closing her eyes. ... forever.

He kept seeing her as she was, wrapping him in blankets on chilly night so that he would not catch cold and lose his voice; a basket of goods on her head, soaked with sweat and walking the streets; his tears fell drop after drop.

"My dear little Shwe Hmyin, there's no one like you... you took care of me all my life, my true soul mate. How can I fulfil your dying wish?"

"A funeral like in up-country," she had said but this was Yangon, the southern, modern city.... how could he manage such a thing?

Only when he heard noises around him and his daughter saying they must arrange things did he noticed his surroundings. His son-in-law was talking loudly and the little hut was getting busy with visitors. It was a funeral house after all, but there was no sound of crying. Well, for the other members of his family it would be a relief to be rid of a burden. Only for Old Uncle Hlaing and his puppet, it was a great loss. He looked up at his son-in-law and elders of the community approached him.

"Please, let me say something, please hire some musicians for my wife's funeral, to sing and play a dirge...like in up-country, she asked for it repeatedly before she passed away....just that, please."

"Hey, old man, what are you saying? What up-country, what musicians? We can't even afford a hearse so we are going to carry the body to the cemetery, just be grateful we live so near to it."

Against his son-in-law's vehement refusals, Old Uncle Hlaing pleaded again.

"I only want to fulfil her dying wish, please, can you try...."

"Stop it, stop talking. This is Yangon, it's just not done here, it's impossible...you can't have it, is that clear?"

Old Uncle Hlaing could only hang his head, speechless, as his son-in-law walked away.

"All right, let's go, then, where are the coffin carriers? ... come on, you guys."

At the sound of someone's urging, the funeral cortège of Daw Shwe Hmyin was made ready to depart.

"Wait, wait, I don't see Uncle Hlaing, where is he?"

"Now where did he go?"

His daughter pouted and looked around in irritation.

"This old man is such a problem. Never mind, let's go, we don't have time," said the son-in-law and the procession moved forward slowly. A few people followed in silence, a very dry funeral indeed in this city of Yangon.

At that moment there came a cry:

"Stop! Stop! Wait for me!"

Everyone looked around and saw Old Uncle Hlaing running towards them, a small drum, a stick and a pair of cymbals in his hands. Sweat pouring from his face, he ignored the people staring at him in amazement and took his place behind the coffin. Then he started to sing: a lonely, sad dirge to pierce the heart.

"To the grave I must take you

With noble monks for us to worship,

Together, let us, let us listen to their sermon

Together..."

"Mai Shwe Hmyin, my dear, my dear, I am doing my best to fulfil your last wish... please be happy...", he muttered as he played. His hot tears fell on the drum.

He did not hear the amazed whispers of the guests; he did not see the angry looks of his daughter and son-in-law. He did not hear them, he did not see them. The stick kept beating on the drum and the heartfelt song of the old puppet singer U Jasmine Hlaing floated in the air.

"Together, let us, let us listen to their sermon....."

Selected Myanmar Short Stories by Nu Nu Yi ( Inwa ),  
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# Once There Were Two Old Men

Ma Sandar



## Once There Were Two Old Men

By Ma Sandar

1

U Maung Maung Sein

"A few years over sixty is nothing, you know."

U Maung Maung Sein thought as he stood looking at his reflection in the full-length mirror. He may be over sixty, but unlike other men he was not bald, did not even have thinning hair, no rolls of fat on his neck and no pot belly. He thought that it must be due to the sports he played when young, that he should still be this fit and trim. But half his head was grey: with that he could do nothing and relied on hair dyes.

"With that blue T-shirt and a cigarette on your lips, why you look like a movie star," his eldest son liked to tease him.

"Now don't you go flattering your Dad like this, as it is he's not acting his age," Daw Tin May Sein remarked. She was never too sure if her husband behaved himself.

"Mom! Dad's over sixty, for goodness sake! He's even retired," their daughter would declare.

"What a thing to say, miss," U Maung Maung Sein smiled at his daughter's words.

Men are like the Yethaphan tree, he wanted to tell her, the older they are, the more fruit they will bear, but thinking it indiscreet he kept his mouth shut. If the wife, that old woman,

heard him he'd be in for it, she'd cackle like an old hen. Not that he is afraid of her, and not, as it goes in that song, that he loves her still. Once of course he *had* loved her, but now his consort, turned into a lump of lard figuratively speaking, made him sick just to look at her. He just did not want to listen to her nagging.

"Women are forever jealous; a sixteen-year old is jealous and a sixty-year old can be jealous, too," he had jokingly remarked once to his friends. The jealous suspicion was well-deserved as he knew...he was never the faithful type.

While he was still working, there had been many chances to be on familiar terms so to speak with young secretaries and if there were no chances he created them. There always was one or another chance for his heart to flutter in excitement. But reaching the age of sixty, he had to retire and as usual with pensioners, for the first months he felt bewildered and lost. He missed his work and longed for his romances.

Financially, however, there was no need to worry although his income was reduced. Their two sons were executives on a shipping line and his elder daughter was married to a son of his friend and their baby son was now three years old. The younger daughter having graduated from a University reposed at her leisure, painting her nails, trying out cosmetics, and thinking over whom to marry out of her suitors: a doctor, a master mariner or a car salesman.

U Maung Maung Sein has full faith in his daughter for all his children had inherited his pragmatic views: his daughter will choose the man who will be able to keep her in the most luxurious life-style. All of the three older children, before their marriages, had a lot of affairs but when it came to the crux of the matter all had chosen partners best suited to their needs.

The parents-in-laws of the oldest son lived in China Town and although barely able to converse in Burmese, owned three or four industries so they were filthy rich. The younger son was married to a doctor and her clinic in the suburbs is doing well. She need not depend on her husband's income and they could afford a nanny each for their twin sons. When the twins are older she would send them to the best tutors. With two incomes their family was rather well-off. Although they have not been able to afford a house yet, they already have a plot of land.

He could rest content that his oldest daughter could be reasonable and practical. While she was still in the University she had been rather attached to one poetic type and her mother had been worried, but not him. He had said, "She's intelligent enough" and as he predicted, when the time came she had gotten rid of that thin chap.

And what about himself? He had ignored Hla Hla and Mya Mya, the two girls he had loved in college because Tin May Sein's family was rich, rich enough to edge her sarong with diamonds, as the saying goes.

Her mother had draped her with diamonds and searched around for a suitable son-in-law and found Maung Maung Sein, with a brand new graduation certificate in his hands, looking for a suitable mother-in-law. Even before setting eyes on the bride he liked the look of the mother-in-law but when he saw the bride he like her even better, for she was fair and slender, gentle and lovable. He supposed he was much luckier than his friend Richard Ba Kaung who, like himself, had been on the look out for a rich mate, but his wealthy bride was dark, plumb and round faced. He on the other hand had been able to snare a bride who was nice and pretty plus a house, land, gold, diamonds and even a car to boot.

He had progressed from being a junior executive to a senior executive, father of four and has passed the adult years with ease and comfort. Now he is retired; his slender little wife has turned into a lump of fat and no wonder: morning till night she would be nibbling. The money earned by two private buses they owned went into her snacks, he thought.

"I'm sick of fatty foods", he would groan softly to himself every time he took a careful look at her.

One day at his friend Ko Ba Aung's birthday celebration he met other old guys; some of them were drinking, some eating, some talking, and all having a roaring good time.

"Now why is that sentence written in the children's learner, you know the one, 'One must not eat tender young gourd'?" Gourd should be eaten young, eh?" U Maung Maung Sein, daintily puffing on a cigarette, said smoothly.

"A ha! So you like tender, young gourd, eh?"

"Why, of course I'd love some tender gourd; I'll exchange it anytime for the fatty foods I get at home," U Maung Maung Sein laughed softly to himself at his private joke.

He might be in the third and last period of a man's lifetime but every time he heard a taped sermon or see someone telling beads or hear religious discussions on the need to discard material and sensual attachments in order to attain Nirvana, he would sneak away hurriedly. Instead of all this, he would rather listen to a pop love song by that pretty young singer May Sweet, telling her lover to play his guitar. "Must look for a guitar of my own," he smiled to himself.

"I've found one tender young gourd," U Han Win whispered to him as the party was breaking up. With a common interest they are fast friends and would pass onto each other interesting bits of news.

"Are you sure it's quite tender, it might be rotten inside you know. Not too good if I have to be treated for..... let's say, indigestion, at my age!"

"Now, now, I assure you it's quite fresh. But impoverished, so I thought only you could help out. You know I can't afford a lot."

U Maung Maung Sein mentally calculated his financial state. With income from the two buses and interests on his savings account, he has more than enough. They need not even touch the pension. But then, these incomes were fully accounted for and known by his wife.

But while still in service, he had been allowed to buy a Mazda B 600 van from the government, which he bought out of private funds unknown to his wife and had rented it out to his trusted man Ohn Lwin. Ohn Lwin could not afford to pay security for the car so he was overwhelmed with gratitude and every month would pay U Maung Maung Sein twelve hundred kyat. U Maung Maung Sein was grateful that Ohn Lwin took care of the car as if it were his own.

"No need to say anything about money, Ko Han Win, you know I pay readily for what I want."

He stubbed out his cigarette in the ashtray. There .... his heart already began to beat a little faster.

## 2

U Htwe Maung

"My knees hurt and there's no cure."

What a nonsensical line from the primer of his childhood, a line that kept running in his head. It has been quite some time

since he has been suffering aches and pains in his joints and indeed there seemed to be no cure. But then, one thing must be considered; he had never gone to this physician or that or had taken any expensive medication. Being a lower division clerk of small means, he could only afford to rub pine oil on his joints and now and then take an analgesic tablet, hoping to cure himself. For some time he has not been able to afford the pills.

"They say there's a good indigenous doctor in Yegyaw Road, Pa, let's try him."

His daughter so wanted him to see a good doctor.

"That sort of herbal medicine also costs money, child. He won't take a fee for the diagnosis, but we might have to buy 30 or 40 kyat worth of pills and stuff....if we go to him we have to buy his medicine, you know."

"We can save up for this 30, 40, Pa."

His daughter spoke thoughtfully. Perhaps she was thinking that the three of them could save on the food but if they do that, the fish sauce dish on their table would disappear and leave them with only a pile of salt to eat with their rice.

"It won't be over and done with after this 30 or 40 kyat. That would be the first trip. We'll have to keep on going until I'm cured... twice, three times...this has to be considered, too and it's not unbearably painful, I'm up and about, and eating, too, aren't I?"

The girl fell silent at his words. The younger daughter did not say anything. Not yet at an age to earn she could only help by grinding the pine roots on the circular slab for the oil. When he got back from the office and had a bath, he felt better with the heat of the pine oil penetrating all over his body.

U Htwe Maung often thought how lucky he was to have his two girls. He has such few relatives. He was an only child and his father had died young. It must be considered lucky that he was able to live with his mother until he was over thirty. He would turn over all his pay to mother and she would earn some more by making plum preserves and coconut candy. He had thought that they would live this way peacefully all their lives but his calm was shattered when she died.

Doing his own laundry, cooking for himself, making his own bed, and tears coming to his eyes while he longed for

mother in times of stress, he passed long, boring, lonely hours. When it became too inconvenient for him to cook his own meals he had started going to a food stall.

There he found a turning point in his life: he met the mother of his children who was a helper at that shop. To be truthful there was not much love or romance but he was getting tired of his lonely existence and she was getting fed up with perpetually moving here and there in the shop, shouting, "what will you have, brother, pork, chicken, beef curry, butter fish, sardine, tripe?" ... over and over again.

So, to make it short and to end their hardships, they got married. Only later did they find out that it was not making anything short and by no means was it the end... it was just the beginning. When the first child was born he was already forty-four and when the younger daughter came along he was forty-eight. He could not manage the upkeep of a four-person household on his meagre pay. However, when Ngathalauk fish were plentiful, his wife did not hesitate to cook a huge pot and peddle it in the bazaar; sometimes she would pickle green mangoes with lots of spices in a large bowl and sell it house to house.

It was such ill luck that three years ago she had died of an enlarged liver. Thinking of the burden of two girls he had cried like a child at the funeral.

"Don't cry, Pa, we're still here with you," the girls comforted him, when it was he who should be consoling them.

The eldest daughter who was in her teens when her mother died is now eighteen. He is not good looking and his wife little better but the two girls, taking the good features of each parent, are quite pretty. Without good, nutritious food, they are clear-skinned, have straight noses, large eyes and round cheeks that make them quite lovely. Without cosmetics and only shabby clothes their looks do not stand out so well.

Last year the elder had passed the eighth grade. He felt hopeful that she might be able to get a job and the girl asked around here and there and when two of her friends got work, went to these offices to inquire about her own prospects.

"I met one 'uncle' at May Khin's office, Pa. He said it won't be too difficult to get a job," she eagerly reported one day. They all gave blessings to this unknown uncle in gratitude.

Very soon she got a job. He has changed his official age to be younger but even then he was due to retire soon; he was nearly three years over sixty. He was so happy that his daughter was hired in the nick of time.

"I'll study hard and pass more grades," she said, determined to continue studying. Like her father she would not take any lunch to work but would eat her fill in the morning. If she had to take lunch she would have to make it look better than how they eat at home and that, they could not afford.

Tying back her short, shapeless hairdo with an elastic band, rubbing on Thanakha on her face and wearing shabby clothes she would go off to work. Looking at her U Htwe Maung felt miserable. Working in an office, he knew well how people behave, what they eat, how they dress. If uniforms were a rule, then they will compete about the cost of the material or about footwear or handbags or hairstyles or cosmetics. In a woman's world the list is endless. He worried that others might look down on his daughter in such a society.

"She's bearing up quite well," he mused happily at his cheerful daughter. However he was not able to be happy for long... he started to hear words of discontent from her.

"Can't even live like normal people," became her perpetual complaint. She saved up every coin, every bit, and bought herself a powder compact, rouge, and started to use them methodically and carefully.

"My, you look so pretty, sis," the younger was full of admiration.

"But all this is just cheap stuff, you know, if I could only use expensive cosmetics and wear good clothes, it would be so how nice!" the elder replied.

U Htwe Maung, looking sidewise at them, felt sick with despair. Missing their mother, tears welled up in his eyes. If she were here she might scold them not to be too fond of prettying themselves but he, being a gentle person always, and rather weak, never had the strength of mind to speak even firmly to his children.

One day she brought home some bottles of vitamins.

"This is Bevit, good for nerves, Pa, and this is Burplex, they are both vitamins and this is Cevit, vitamin C, you know Pa, good for elderly people."

"Where did you get them, now?"

"One friend of Uncle U Han Win, he gave them to me."

"What does he do?"

"I don't know, but they say he's rich and he says he feels sorry for me."

U Htwe Maung felt a jolt in his heart. He wanted to say that he well know how sorry that man felt but nearing a time when he would have to depend upon her pay, he could not say anything. Recognizing the danger that lay ahead, he felt helpless.

"Sis, look!"

One evening she came home loaded with bundles. The girls took out fabrics of such colours and materials, holding them up against themselves and giggling with joy.

"Did that uncle give them to you?" U Htwe Maung asked in a dry voice.

"Yes, Pa," she replied innocently. "He said he feels sorry I should be wearing shabby things when I'm so pretty," she went on.

"Are they gifts?"

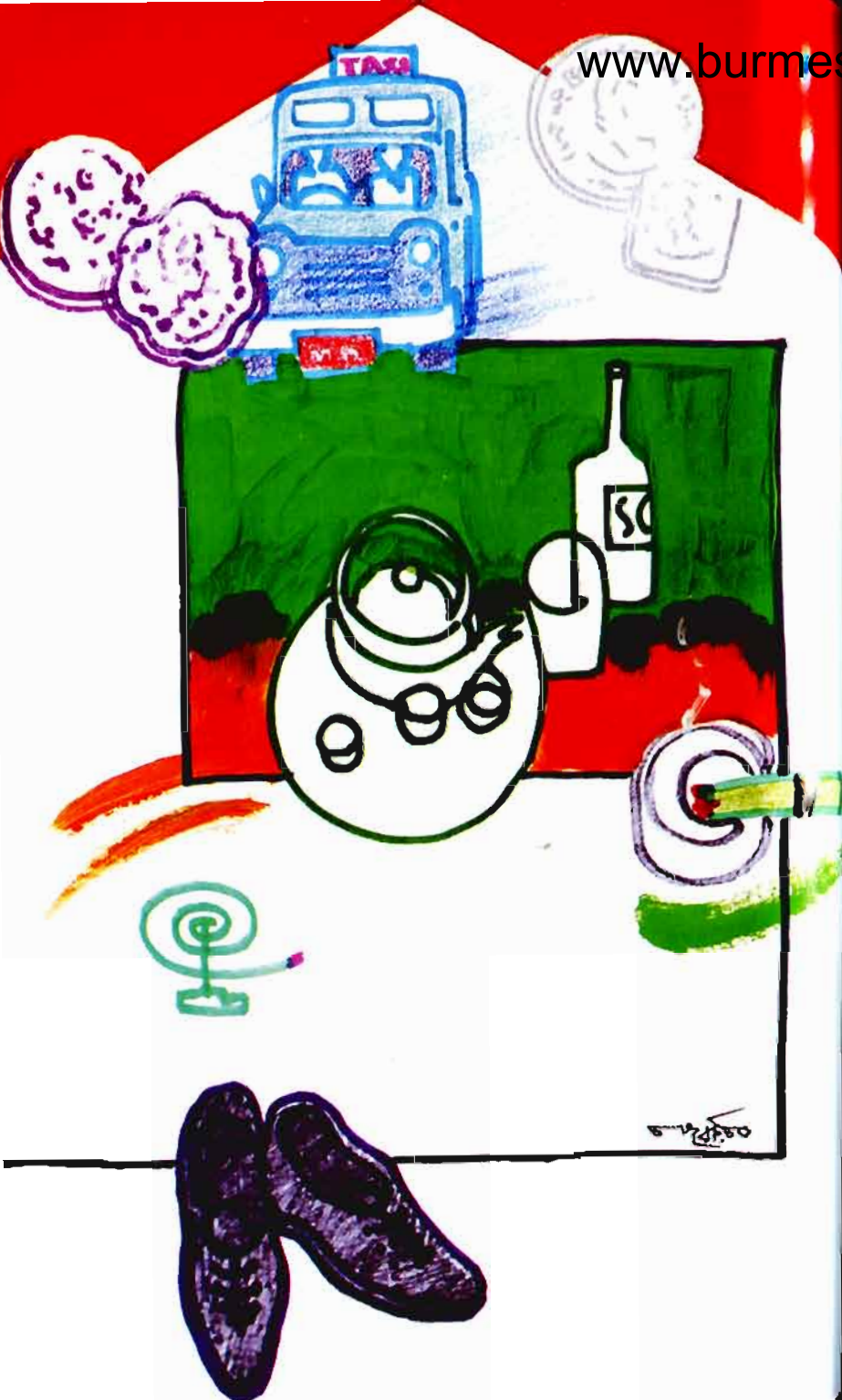
"Of course, Pa! He's so nice...he said he'll buy me more, too."

U Htwe Maung knew he should throw out and break the pill bottles and tear up the pieces of cloth but he did not move.

He felt his heart tighten; it began to beat faster, harder. He wished violently that his fast-beating heart would stop, suddenly and forever.

## Big Notes And Small Coins

Atta Kyaw



## Big Notes And Small Coins

By Atta Kyaw

1

It was not that I wanted to eat well, for I could afford it on my own; it was not that I was even hungry.

However, the hour was well past lunchtime. They knew that since that morning I have eaten nothing, for I have been driving them around since eight and by now it was nearly one in the afternoon. They were owners of a new house under construction in Golden Valley<sup>1</sup> and they had hired me and my car by the hour to do their errands.

They told me to drive to Ruby, a downtown Chinese restaurant. As they climbed down from my taxi, there was no invitation to join them as is customary when you hire cars for the day or long trips. It was assumed that as they are paying me my duty was to sit in my car and wait. As I said, I was not hungry but I thought I should eat something as it way past lunch time. I went into the restaurant and sat by myself at another table. They did not see me at first busy as they were, opening soda bottles or dropping ice cubes into their glasses.

As a waiter handed me a menu one of them saw me and our eyes locked.

<sup>1</sup> Exclusive and wealthy residential area of Yangon

"Oh, it's you... why don't you come join us?"

I knew he was asking only because he felt he had to and my reply sprang out of my mouth: "It doesn't matter, if you meant it you'd have asked me earlier."

His face turned dark and he looked away. I felt a flash of satisfaction.

## 2

Back at their construction site, they stayed behind and asked me to take the mason back to his house to fetch something. His house was in the poorer fringe of the satellite town of South Okkalapa and to reach it I had to manoeuvre through narrow lanes and pot-holed roads. His house was a small bamboo hut roofed with thatch.

"Please, come inside while you wait and have some green tea," the mason invited me in.

"It's alright, just take your time with what you have to do. No hurry," I replied, feeling *ah nar dei*,<sup>2</sup> and I waited in my car.

He went into his hut and came out in a minute with a cup of green tea and a piece of palm sugar on a small saucer. I felt very *ah nar dei* that he had gone to the trouble of bringing it out himself.

"Oh, I'm so sorry, why did you bother..."

"That's alright."

So I followed him back to the house and sat down, sipping his tea.

How warm was the green tea in the earthenware cup, and how sweet was the palm sugar on that enamelled saucer, its paint chipped in places.

\*\*\*

## 1

You could say we were friends, we have known each other for a long time.

I knew his wife and I was on very friendly terms with him.

Once he was swamped with errands and his driver fell sick. He did not know how to drive so he asked my help to

<sup>2</sup> Customary Myanmar politeness of not being a burden or give offence to others

drive his car. The whole day and evening we were going around town and when I finally drove him home, it was well past midnight. That was the problem, where was I to sleep? At that hour, there were no more buses or taxis and he said he could not let me take his car home. I would not want to take it either, it was a responsibility I did not want but he lived in the suburbs and I downtown. How was I to get back?

"Why don't you just sleep here," he said. So the decision was made and I entered the house after him. He yawned widely and went into the bedroom; there was no sign of the wife, she was probably asleep already.

There were only two bedrooms in his house: one where he and his wife slept, another one for his toddler son and the nanny.

He has gone into his bedroom, saying I should sleep here, but where? On the sofa in his front room with the mosquitoes, on the floor, or curled up like a dog by the door? He had said nothing more to me.

I waited to see if he would come out with a blanket or mosquito net but saw the light in the bedroom go out.

Phew.

## 2

I decided I would sleep in his car with the windows closed, which should give some protection against the bugs. At first I was comfortable enough but soon the heat and airlessness was making me sweat. Finally unable to bear it I opened the window a bit and just after I felt cool enough, in came hordes of mosquitoes. I was soon twitching and turning to slap at them, and scratching myself.

"Here, lad, use this... at least it should keep some bugs away."

It was the night watchmen who had been dozing in the garage, handing me a ragged cotton blanket.

"It's alright, uncle, I can manage." I did not want to take away his blanket.

"Nonsense, you won't get a wink, there are so many mosquitoes."

"But what about you?"

"I can sit inside my mosquito net, I have one," he said.



Still feeling *ah nar dei* I took his worn blanket.  
How comfortable it was, that ragged piece of cotton.

\*\*\*

1

His shop selling black-market goods was close to the taxi stand where I park my car. We were also black-market taxis, that is, private cars without a taxi license running a car hire service under police radar. Actually, I did not like him much, for he had that arrogant look on his face as if he were 'feeding all other people out of his own pockets'<sup>3</sup>, so I always kept my distance.

But once I had to buy a tin of black shoe polish from his store, to keep my tyres looking shining black and new. One needs to keep one's car looking good so that customers would prefer it to others. He asked kyat 15 and I tried to bargain but he said 15 was the last price, so I bought it reluctantly as I really needed it, but knowing I was paying too much.

The next day he walked over to my car.

"Can I borrow your shoe polish? I need to use a little of it," he asked. At the time I was busy with a fare who bargaining my price down so I just handed over the tin to him without a word.

I did not get it back for three days. When I asked it back, feeling somewhat *ah nar dei* to be impolite, he gave it back saying he forgot. He did not say thank you and even looked annoyed that I should ask for my own property.

When I opened the tin, I saw it was almost empty.

2

I was waiting by my taxi hoping for a fare when a beggar who was not too right in his head came up to me.

"Spare me some coins, mate, I want to get a cheroot," he asked.

When I dug into my pocket I found a quarter and dropped it on his opened palm. He salaamed<sup>4</sup> to me, and also clasped his two hands in homage<sup>5</sup>.

<sup>3</sup> A very common idiom

<sup>4</sup> Indian gesture of respect

<sup>5</sup> Buddhist gesture of respect

In a while, he was back with two cheap cheroots, sold at two for a quarter. One was clenched between his teeth, and one he handed to me.

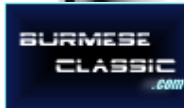
"It's alright, you keep it to smoke later," I told him.

"Doesn't matter, mate, I don't need it now...take it" he thrust the cheroot at me and ambled away.

I was feeling bored so I lit up and puffed on the cheroot. How sweet was the smoke, better than a Marlboro.

From the Rangoon University Annual Magazine of 1977-78.

**A Haunting**  
Ju



## A Haunting

By Ju

When the train pulled into the station it was only six but dusk has fallen. His only luggage was a holdall and a folded easel, and it would have been easy enough getting off but he had to wait some minutes for the pushing crowd to clear. His friend the photographer was waiting at the gate: they shook hands, happy to see each other after this long time, each not speaking but smiling happily. Both are in their forties; the painter, living in town, somehow looked older than his years; and his friend, here in the country, looked younger. They are both tall and rather lanky, and both heads are beginning to turn grey.

Come, there's a cart.....still two miles to go before we get to the village, his friend said, as they came out of the station. There's no other passenger; its mine, he added. My son drives it. I borrowed it today.

They passed through flat plains dotted with black palm trees. The sky near the horizon was bright scarlet and darker blue higher up.

It made a sombre scene.

As the cart rolled swiftly, they talked about work, families, and mutual friends. The cart slowly went up an incline: not steep, although high. On the top they could see the village nestled in a hollow.

The points of light from the houses looked like fireflies.

They came down the other side, passed through the village, and went up another hill. The house stood at the top, dark and aloof. At the far end of the big garden, a small stream meandered at the foot of an incline. There was no gate in the fence made of closely-planted cactus. The painter felt happy at the lack of a gate.

Doesn't your house look like one in a Hitchcock movie? he teased.

Yes, could be, his friend replied. Later on I'll tell you about its history....you'll be surprised. You play a part in it, too.

It was an old timber house with tiered roofs. The walls were dark with coatings of crude oil.

Inside the house in the parlour, what drew his attention immediately was a big photo: a black and white portrait of a lady, whose eyes stared at him with a piercing look, a daring look; a brash, proud, inquiring look. The face...it was a mysteriously lovely face. Soft tendrils of hair fell on her wide brow and the slender eyebrows were raised questioningly. Her eyes...the bright eyes seemed to pierce his very soul.

What a great photo, he exclaimed.

His friend smiled.

When he was introduced to his friend's wife and two sons, he glanced again at the photo. Of course, it's the wife, he thought. But she looks young, he thought. The photo looks as if it were years old, starting to yellow at the edges.

But the eyes of the wife are gentle, docile; they have none of the daring, piercing look of the photo. Why not? People change...she is still pretty, he thought, but with a maturity not seen in the photo.

Stay as long as you wish, his friend said. Lots of good scenery to paint...over there, near the cliff.

But I want to paint this house, he protested with a laugh.

His friend nodded.

I know. Even over twenty years ago I knew you would want to paint this house.

He looked at his friend in surprise. But, you said you came here only when you married...its not twenty years yet, is it?

His friend drew nearer, smiling. Listen, I have things to tell you but not here. Later.

That night they strolled out onto a little lane passing the house and down to a meadow. From there they could see the side of the house.

A window was opened in what looked like the master bedroom. It was an old-styled window, with an arched fanlight and louvered doors. Suddenly he realised that it was the same window that he had seen in the photo.

The eyes of your wife, he told his friend, they are so bright in the photo....

That is not my wife, his friend said.

His friend was not joking; his eyes looked old and tired.

I must tell you...but it's not something I can write in a letter and we couldn't meet for so long...the photo you saw, lets just say it's the first woman I loved. It's not strange you thought it was my wife; it's my wife's mother.

Oh? he exclaimed in surprised.

Yes, that is my mother-in-law. But at that time she was not my mother-in-law yet, he continued.

Consider it a fable, he went on. Twenty-five years ago, an eighteen year old boy fell in love let's say at first sight, with a woman. As you know I live about 15 miles from here, still a struggling photographer. But I come to this village sometimes, to take photos at weddings and festivals.

One day I was hired to take photos at a noviciation ceremony. It was to go on for two days, so I was to stay the night.

The first evening, I had some free time, so I took a walk with my camera and my tripod. There, that stream, I came to it, and saw the house...from about here. There did not seem to be anyone inside: it was all very silent and dark. I stood around, looking for the best view; I set up my camera there...over there.

He pointed to a space not far off to a clump of bamboo, the pointed leaves trembling in the breeze. The painter also saw his young friend, setting up his camera, looking at the house.

I remembered some of your paintings...windows like this one, his friend said. I thought I'd get a few shots for you to paint. I was looking through the lens and just about to click the shutter, when the window opened suddenly and that face...the most beautiful face I'd ever seen.

It was just like a dream...the window framed her upper body, making the picture complete. The eyes ...looking out,

searching, such bright eyes ..I was caught in their spell and I don't even remember pressing the button several times. The dark tendrils of her hair framing her pale little face...I kept shooting. I can never forget seeing a tiny mole under her chin and another at the corner of her lips. Then suddenly she disappeared; I waited, waited, still looking through the lens, waiting for her to appear again. She didn't.

My heart was thumping all the way to my lodgings. I couldn't sleep. I kept longing to see her again.

The next day, busy at my work, I heard about a death: someone at the big timber house near the stream had died last evening. I felt such a shock...god, if it were her...I asked desperately, who, who is it...they said, the old man.

I asked, her father, you mean? They laughed at me, They said I must have seen the pretty daughter already, what a fast worker. I felt happy, you know, for the people at that house sent a message to say they need a photographer. Really, taking photos at a funeral was at that time not quite done, but I accepted...I wanted to see her again.

The funeral would be in two day's time, so I went home, and returned later. Imagine how hard my heart was beating going up to that big house! I saw the temporary pavilion in front with the body laid out. There was quite a lot of people there and some of them told me how he died. He'd been bedridden for months, nothing very serious, just old age. They were surprised he died this suddenly.

But I wasn't interested; I just wanted to see the daughter again. One man pointed out someone to me: that's his only daughter, he said.

It can't be true; it was a young girl, not more than 15. Yes, quite pretty, a lot like the face I saw the other day, but no, it was not the same person. The girl had very simple, innocent eyes; the ones I had seen were piercing. I just had a glimpse, but I do know the difference.

After I while I met the person who had hired my services: I thought I would go mad; it was her, and she was the old man's wife. Seeing her up close, I searched her face... what loveliness, what beauty. I had thought she was in her twenties, but no, seeing her closely I realized she must be in her thirties. And her voice...just as I had imagined, it was husky and low.

I love her. I love her. I felt I could do anything to get her. But the gossip I heard about her was unsettling: when the old man fell ill, she had left home with a lover. She'd been gone for over two years and came back only this morning, after learning of his death.

See, she is now an heiress, how lucky for that lover of hers!

How could this be? This...beauty, this glorious face. I see daring and seduction in her eyes, but not cruelty, not lies. I could not believe it.

Taking photos of the ceremony that day, I secretly shot a lot of her face. I saw not a trace of tears in her eyes. I felt bad about that but the little daughter, how she cried! The mother didn't bother to comfort the child, but anyway she was very busy, I must admit.

The 'lover' wasn't present....but then, he wouldn't be, would he?

After the funeral I could have gone home, but I stayed. People stay overnight at funeral houses for a week to keep the house open and they play cards to pass the time. I don't know how to play, but I sat and watched. She played with the men from the village. I sat near her, and every time she raised those eyes at me...she knew. She knew I'd fallen for her. She knew she'd snared me.

She smoked a lot. I don't, but whenever I lit her cigarette she cupped her hands on mine, filling me with joy. I wanted to fall into her arms. When I closed my eyes, she smiled a little. I had to be careful about others seeing it all.

It's not so strange that an 18 year old boy should fall for a thirty year old woman, he went on, it's just strange how long it lasted.

I still love her, he added.

But she must be quite old by now, his friend said.

The photographer turned to face him.

No, no, she can never be old, she will always be thirty.

Then he gave a short laugh.

Were you ever able to.....um, have her? The other asked.

He was surprised to see his friend blushing, a forty-year-old father of two actually blushing, as he smiled sheepishly and gazed towards the house.

About a week after the funeral, he said finally, I went to give her the photos. All except the ones I secretly took of her, both the earlier ones and the ones at the funeral. I left them at home.

Looking over the photos and giving me the money, she asked, where's the rest? She knew I'd taken a lot of her alone at the funeral. How much for them, she asked.

I laughed and said, I'll give them to you...will you come to my place or shall I bring them? I said to her, I don't want anyone to see.

And besides, I said, I have earlier ones. At that she looked surprised.

So I told her that on the evening the old man died, I'd seen her at a window and that I had several shots of her. She looked alarmed; she asked harshly if I'd shown them to anybody.

I said, no, no, not a soul. She seemed relieved.

Two days later she came to my studio, and asked for both the photos and the negatives.

I kept one, the best, and gave her the rest, telling her that was all. She burnt them before my eyes. From then on she treated me like a friend.

I kept visiting her but she was seldom there. The daughter and one elderly aunt were the only ones usually at home. And when I saw her again, there was a man with her...her 'friend' she said, but I knew it was *that* chap. Quite a sleazy looking type. I heard that the old man left a lot but she spent it all...even had to mortgage the big house. She told me about that and then urged me to find money, save up.... as if she was hinting that I would get her if I could save the house.

So, I gave up my camera for a while and went into business, buying up the produce from the farms around here to resell.

Well, time went on, I was doing well, and she was still seeing that chap.

Then, from that one negative I kept, I finally made a big print, the one you saw. Only then I noticed...did you..? ...that vaguely, behind her, was a clock with the hands at ten past five. Well, the doctor had stated that the old man passed away at about five in the evening. The aunt had said no one was in the house at that time. But *she* was there, at that time. That doesn't concern me. But it was rather a coincident, she herself

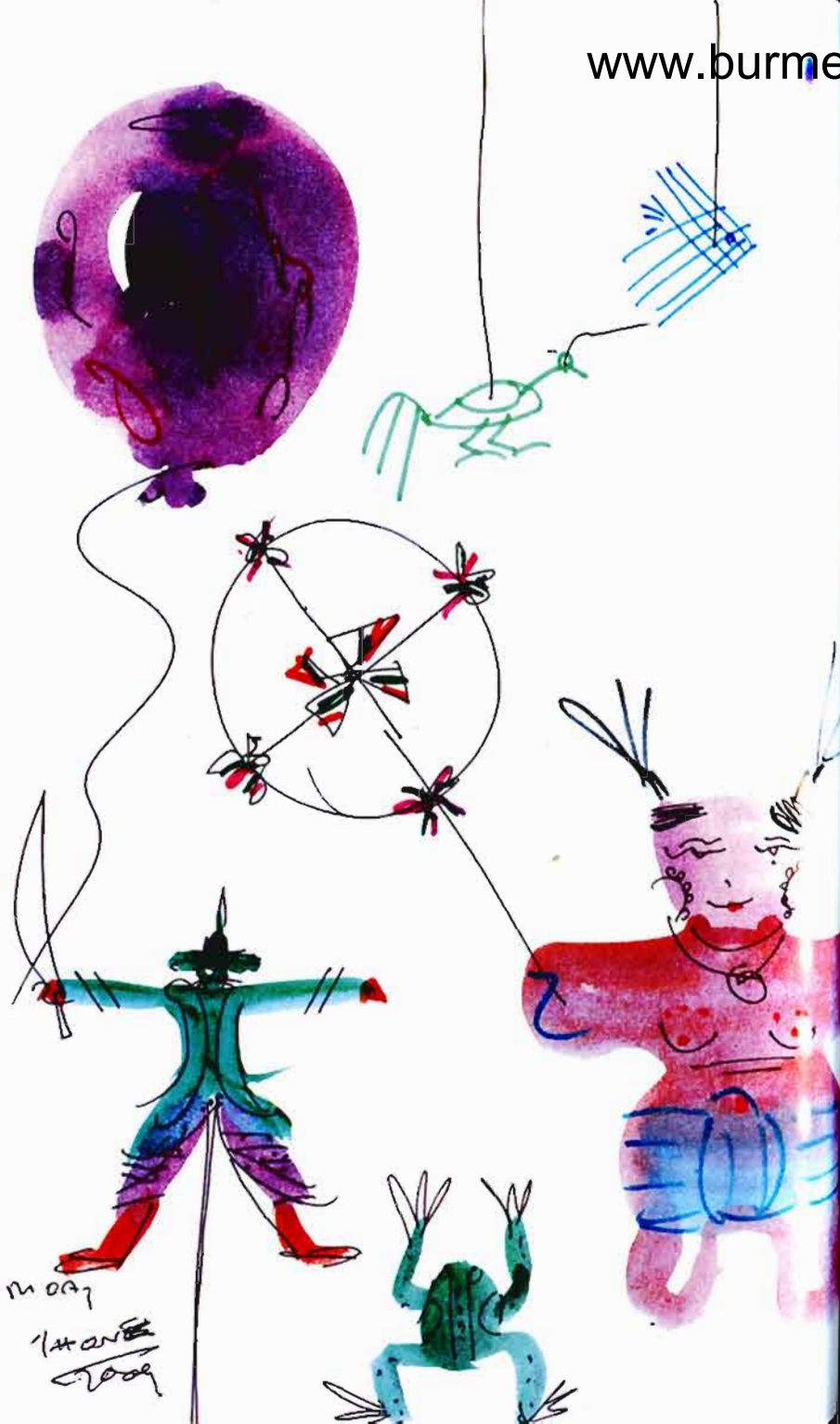
passed away not long after, at about 5 p.m. You know the cause of death? A miscarriage.

Well, you can guess the rest. I managed to save the house. The daughter, that sweet little girl, how she cried! She looked upon me as a close friend of the family. I married her, of course. I've lived in this house ever since and you know, I feel her near us; she's here. I dream of her often, I think it's her way of visiting me.

But, he went on, I'm sure she knew I would marry her daughter. And I know she is happy about that. And, he added wistfully, she will never be older than thirty now, will she?

(1993)

**Pwe**  
Khin Khin Htoo



Pwe<sup>1</sup>

By Khin Khin Htoo

"May you be full of fortune  
All those who hear our song  
From U-daya Village,  
In the District of Myingyan,  
On the banks of the Ayeyarwaddy  
We welcome you!"

As soon as Aye Thi and her friends heard the song, this song especially composed for their U-daya Village blaring out of the trumpet speaker hitched on the high branches of the Rain Tree, they were in ecstasy.

A welcome from U-daya!

This year their village was holding a pagoda festival, something they could not afford as an annual event. This year the peanut crop did rather well, and the elders decided to hold a rice-donation ceremony for the monks at the village pagoda.

Grandpa once told Aye Thi that to donate the produce of one's fields ensures the richness of the soil for the next crop. So it surely means a better harvest next year!

But whatever may happen next year, right now for this year's festival people are already busy: the adults collecting

<sup>1</sup> Festival, ceremony, show



donations and making cakes, youngsters like Aye Thi planning new clothes and dreaming about the theater troupe coming to perform for the celebrations.

Aye Thi has exhaustively gleaned two whole baskets of peanuts this summer and after selling them, she has bought a piece of material that this very minute was being sewn up by the village seamstress.

Her daydreams about her new blouse were shattered by her mother telling her to haul more water.

She went down to the river, empty pot balanced on her hip, and saw a crowd gathered already on the bank. She loves going to the river: it is a fun time for young girls to meet, with boys loitering nearby to play the flute and sing snatches of love song to them. Aye Thi strolled to the water's edge with her friends; her older sister is no longer allowed to do this chore, for she has become quite a young lady. Mother said next year Aye Thi must stop going for water as well, since she'd be near grown up with her hair long enough to tie back in a chignon, and not hang down in childish bangs like now.

"Aye Thi, go down to the general store: ask Daw Htwe Nyunt if the Jaggery palm sugar I ordered has arrived yet," her mother called.

Everyone in the village shops at Daw Htwe Nyunt's store, since she gives credit.

"Do you hear me?"

When her mother raised her voice Aye Thi had to move at once. Being the youngest, she gets screamed at all the time, she thought, apart from having to be at the beck and call of everyone. Her older brother had bashed her a few days ago for singing something out of a show she'd seen; how could she have understood it was a bawdy song?

She nearly bumped into Old Uncle Ba Chet, but managed to put the brakes on her legs in time.

"You rascal, nearly knocking me down", he scolded. Being one of the oldest in the village, he was always ready to scold and shout at people. Let there be a fight in the village and there he'd totter on the double to deal out punishment.

"Kadaw, kadaw, Uncle," Aye Thi asked pardons hastily and fled.

"Aunt Htwe Nyunt, mother asked if the palm sugar's here yet."

Daw Htwe Nyunt, busy with her scales, did not look up.

"Yes, it's here; take it with you. Wait while I jot down the bill."

She opened a greasy notebook and scrutinized Aye Thi's account.

"10 small baskets sticky rice,

8 viss of oil,

5 coconuts....."

Reading out the list she moistened the pencil tip with her tongue.

"Now I'll add 8 viss of palm sugar, alright?"

Aye Thi did not look at the bill; she dared not. The old lady might think she was being mistrustful and then she might refuse more credit. One has to be careful. They would pay later not with cash, but with bushels of peanuts.

Coming home with the basket of Jaggery on her head, she came across Koyin<sup>2</sup> Hsa Mi, leader of the village lads.

"Koyin Hsa Mi, are you *sure* there's a dance troupe's coming?"

"Yep, it's the Culture Kyaw Win Troupe from Mandalay."

Aye Thi skipped all the way home.

When the barge of the dance troupe arrived, the whole village was out waiting at the jetty. The stronger lads of the village tucked up their longyi into shorts and waded into the water to help carry the trunks. Aye Thi and the others gazed at the troupe members and tried to guess which ones were the leads.

Aye Thi was impatient to invite the dancers to her home. Would they like the country fare she had prepared, such as sticky-rice cakes, but then, she has some biscuits brought from town, and milk from their own cow.

"Stand back, Aye Thi, you're always underfoot", scolded Uncle Dwe Hla. Aye Thi moved back hastily.

She came home only when the barge has been completely unloaded.

"Oh Mother, you should see the boxes of stuff they brought. I saw the 'prince', too, sis, and the princess<sup>3</sup>, so pretty! Don't

<sup>2</sup> Meaning 'novice', it is also rural term of affection and respect for men

<sup>3</sup> Performers of stage, puppet or movie are called prince and princess

forget, Mom, I'm inviting the princess. For tea or lunch," she continued in a very serious tone.

"Well, yes, madam, you might as well feed the whole troupe."

In the afternoon Aye Thi went to check that the mat she has put down as her 'booked' seat was still there.

By dusk she was bathed, dressed and ready, her face made up with two huge circles of Thanakha applied to her cheeks<sup>4</sup>. She could hear the music from the show grounds as she moistened a finger and rubbed her ruby earring, which came out sparkling red, cleansed of the smeared Thanakha.

"Not done prettying yourself, are you? And you're not even a full-grown girl yet, Aye Thi. I see you're going to be a handful. Now go fill a water pot to bring along and don't forget a mat."

How like mother to make her do more chores when she's all ready and dressed.

When they arrived at the show the microphones were still being set up. They sat down on their mats and like all the other villagers, did not get up again until the show ended the next morning.

After one night's performance, the whole village had become friends with the members of the troupe. The dancers were invited to this house and that for lunch, for tea, for early dinners.

How Aye Thi adored the pretty actress. What big round eyes she has, in a face framed with curly, fluffy hair! She whispered the pretty name, Su Nandar Htwe, and wondered why her mother could not have picked a pretty name like that for her, too.

She had invited the pretty lady for lunch, and she came accompanied by three other minor dancers. Su Nandar Htwe had said she liked chicken, so there in the pot was Aye Thi's pet Golden Cockerel, killed this very morning by her brother. The honoured guest ate heartily of the chicken liver, but Aye Thi could not bear to look, thinking about her late pet.

Even her brother, for once, was generous with her.

<sup>4</sup> Cheek patches of Thanakha bark paste makeup are considered cute and worn by girls and children

"Sis, don't forget to serve the milk I got from *my* cow," he urged Aye Thi.

Aye Thi wanted to laugh; he'd fallen for the pretty actress, for sure.

"How kind you are, Brother, I shall never forget you all," the pretty dancer cooed to him.

Why, you should have seen that silly grin on Brother's face.

Such a silence there was after the festival.

She felt so miserable she could not eat for days. When she went to say good-bye at the jetty the pretty actress had tears in her eyes, just like on the stage.

When Aye Thi broke into sobs and plunked herself down on the riverbank Su Nandar Htwe comforted Aye Thi by saying they would be back next year.

Aye Thi could not visualize time stretching for one whole year: would they be able to hold a festival, would it be the same troupe, would the pretty lady be dancing? Aye Thi sat in misery as the barge drifted away. She sat there long after the bank was empty of people.

Tomorrow she must be back in the fields. She prayed that the next crop would be good.

"Aye Thi, I've been calling for ages; are you deaf?"

It was her mother.

"Go on, go to Daw Htwe Nyunt, ask her how much we owe over this festival; how many bushels of peanuts we are to give her."

In front of the store there was quite a crowd. Like Aye Thi, people were coming to pay their bills in peanuts. She hoped that after payment, there would be enough left over as seed... for next year.

(1999)

**Stone**  
Nay Win Myint



## Stone

By Nay Win Myint

1

I do not know if other villages have this tradition; but in Gon Zaung, a village in central Myanmar, they used to have this charming custom: when a boy was about to enter the monastery as a novice, another family in the village would take over part of the preparations. That is, they will bear the expense of dressing up the boy in borrowed finery so that he could be shown off with due pomp and ceremony, something his parents might not have the means to provide, or else have the expertise for it, as it also entails making up his face to look as beautiful as a prince.

Then, the novices in their finery would be paraded all over the village before making their way to the monastery. People would line the streets to watch and comment: now which novice looks his best? Who has the best clothes, the most costly jewels? Finally, the all-important question, who dressed him? The people would informally vote on the Best Dressed Novice of the year and come next noviciation time, the parents of aspiring novices would go to that person to ask for help, even those who could afford to do it on their own. Now *that* was high prestige for the make-over artists.... according to this custom of thirty years ago.

## 2

My mother Daw Thein had made quite a name for herself in dressing up novices. Well, not only she, but her sister Ma Chit Than and Younger Aunt Kyi who all lived in the same compound. Aunt Kyi was the make-up artist. She would have on hand packets of powdered foundation especially ordered from Mandalay. As for Mother, she who hardly cared about her own looks, would be so happy she could not eat, if she were requested to dress a novice.

Come noviciation time, their talk would be all about the dressing up.

"Ma Kyi, do you think you should sun the make-up powders? They smell of mold."

"Now don't you worry, Ma Thein, no need to dry it, I have to mix it with water after all. Now just you be sure about borrowing enough jewellery... there's not much time left."

"You're right... I wonder if we're too late?"

And all that was before anyone even came to ask for help.

Sometimes they would accept without seeing the boy, for the parents might drop in during an evening stroll and say something like this:

"Ma Thein, help us ...please... we just managed to scrape up enough cash for his robes and other necessities. Please do something to at least make him presentable."

At this Mother would be itching to accept, Aunt Chit Than would be smiling and Younger Aunt Kyi longing to unpack her powders to once.

But Mother would demure.

"Now then, don't think too much of us... have you seen anyone we've done? We're not that good, you know."

"Oh, come on, Ma Thein, at that ceremony for Ko Kyin Sein's sons, you did Ma Pe's boy from the West Quarter, didn't you? Why, he looked like a porcelain doll, so pretty! And the number of gold chains around his neck! So many of them, the weight just about broke his neck, didn't it? Well, then?"

Mother would beam with pride. Young Aunt Chit Than's eyes would shine and Younger Aunt Kyi would immediately open the lacquer box containing her powders and to show them off.

"Look, this is Hla Lay Sein brand; this is Kha Taw Hmee; this is Thin Kyu Kyu, this is Pa Pa Waddi. I don't use cheap stuff, you know, I have to send to Mandalay for these."

And she would offer a pinch of the stuff for the guests to smell.

After the parents left and before they reached the end of the lane, an excited conference would begin at my home... which colour costume to choose and whose horse to borrow, for the prince would need to be paraded on a horse, no less. There would be much discussion on who had the safest horse, which young man was most reliable to look after their 'prince', and what about jewellery?

The necklaces and bangles must be borrowed and they must be careful about not losing any of it. And the make-up! Oh, what about the costume... Ma Pe's son had been dressed in deep yellow and that colour goes so well with gold necklaces. And the socks must be yellow, too, of course. Get them from town if necessary.

The discussions went on daily, before they had even set eyes on the boy.

"The most important thing is jewellery.... we've got to borrow the stuff before someone gets their hands on it. Shall we start tomorrow?"

"I'm thinking, I'm thinking. This month alone we did three boys so I'm getting embarrassed borrowing from the same people all the time."

"But what can we do? You'll have to persuade them, you know you can. We've never lost anything, have we?"

"Of course not, but this is gold, you know, not stone."

"Everybody does it, I mean borrow, don't they?"

"Looking for gold" is literally what it was: Mother usually handled that duty.

All through the year they listened carefully to gossip about who wore what jewellery at which ceremony, and who made how big a chain at the goldsmith, and when. So mother knew exactly which houses to head for once she was out on that errand. The more gold she could provide, the more prestige on the novice's family, and on herself.

She would make the rounds, getting a necklace here, another there, and some bangles from yet another house. She needed at least ten chains for each novice. Even though she was not well off, people trusted her and she usually got enough.

## 3

This noviciation was a group project, one of the grandest ever held. Three novices from each of the ten quarters of the village meant thirty novices in all.

From our own quarter they were requested to do one novice, son of Ko Ba Than and Ma Ohn Yin. Ko Ba Than sold water he carried in a cart. They came around with their son in tow.

"Please help us, Elder Sister, on our own we can't afford to novitiate him, but now we can because it's a group effort. But they won't provide for the parade. Please dress him for us."

"Of course, you're from my own quarter, we must help. We might even get a necklace with gems."

Mother had noticed the wife of the new Township Engineer wearing one.

"Now where's this son of yours?"

"This one, here, his name is Nga Soe" the parents pushed him forward.

Mother's face fell first. Younger Aunt Kyi thought maybe her powders would not be enough. Young Aunt Chit Than definitely looked upset.

The boy might be a boy, but he was a large, stout boy, almost full grown. A bit walled-eyed into the bargain, dark as sin, and worse, he had thick pouting lips. And a face pitted with small pox scars.

Oh dear.

The conference that evening was anything but joyful.

"Would red lipstick make his lips stick out more?"

"How could I ever cover all the scars?"

"And his eyes..."

"I'd need pounds of make-up to fill in his scars, and camouflage his complexion!"

"I wish he were small and slender..."

There was no help for it; they had accepted the responsibility. Mother even went to the new engineer's wife, someone she has not met yet, to borrow the gem necklace. That lady had heard about mother's honesty, and lent her necklace willingly.

On the day of the ceremony, mother and her team were well armed: they had the gem necklace, nine gold chains, five pairs of bangles, five thousand jasmine flowers strung into

garlands and the make-up powder dissolved into a thick, thick paste.

They worked all morning and half the afternoon. Nga Soe had no lunch; neither did his dressers. Make-up artist Younger Aunt Kyi was sweating profusely as she could not quite cover the scars. She went through a whole box of matches, trying to draw the eyebrows with the burnt ends.

They loaded on the gold chains, the bangles, and the gem necklace. After having so many victories, this time mother's team looked about to cry when the parade started: for in spite of the glitter and gold, the boy looked undistinguished... *very* undistinguished.

Maybe Mother lost heart then and there. I remember it was the last time she dressed a novice.

## 4

Now both Younger Aunt Kyi and Young Aunt have passed away. Mother, now over seventy, has been living here in Yangon for twenty years. Sometimes she would talk about old times.

"It's not really Nga Soe's fault and it's not because of him that I stopped dressing novices," she said when I mentioned the last time she dressed up a boy. "I just got tired of the trouble..."

Then she chuckled.

"Poor Nga Soe! But you know, one can't polish a stone to turn it to a gem... I should have known a stone is just that, only a stone, and not a gem."

That phrase kept coming back to me over the years: "I should have known a stone is just a stone and not a gem."

(1995)

## One Mother Nyein (Shweli)



## One Mother

By Nyein (Shweli)

"Hpyu Ei, where are you, drat the girl, are you still in the river? Storm's coming up and the laundry's just 'bout to get all soaked!"

I called to my daughter as I pulled the clothes off the line, looking around for her. Sure enough, she was still collecting driftwood in the river...I've told her and told her enough times that she'd catch cold, she'd drown, especially in times like now when the river's in spate, but there she was in the Shweli River picking up the driftwood in the gathering storm. Her excuse was that it's easier than walking miles in the forest to get firewood, but it's the monsoon and a mother worries. Not that she's alone: the men from the timber rafts plus the villagers, all of them were gathering the driftwood.

As soon as I got back into the house, what would I hear but someone shouting for me:

"Ma Tin Cho, hey, Ma Tin Cho, your daughter nearly drowned! Someone went in after her or else sure 'nuff she'd be dead!"

I ran out of the house, my heart thumping wildly in my chest.

Two women carried Hpyu Ei between them with a crowd following on their heels talking all at once about how her hair



had got caught in some underwater branches and what with the heavy rain and wind she'd have drowned dead if a man from the timber raft had not dived in to save her, helped by some of his friends.

Oh god oh god. I owe her life to those men. I thanked them with a full heart, gave them tea, and asked them to visit us in the future.

I'll be darned, those men from the timber raft began to beat a path to my door. They had saved my daughter, so what could I do? Besides, they have the excuse of shopping at the small grocery shop I'd set up at the front. They were all tanned, dark as sin, but what a bunch of sweet-talkers they were. As they came from towns near Mandalay they're quite in step with the times, I should say. The boy who dived in after Hpyu Ei is called Aung Soe Khaing: my word, what a grand name.

They called her 'Little Sister' and me, 'Aunty,' in In-galait just as townies do. Well, well, I couldn't well be rude, could I, after all they were guests in our village. Poor things, so far from home and what a hard life they have, living, eating, and sleeping on the boat, soaking themselves in the river until they turn blue while lashing the logs together to form rafts. When they have a sufficient number of rafts, they'd be towed by motorboats until they reach Mandalay, the big city downriver. Then they'd get their pay and finally get some rest.

Can you believe it? I feel like I've been 'bitten in the head by a snake'<sup>1</sup>. My daughter Hpyu Ei and that boy Aung Soe Khaing, I heard they're in love! People has seen them cosily walking together by the river and when I heard that once too often I really clobbered that girl. She denied it, of course, as if I'd believe her; things like this, a mother is the last to know. I had never hit her so hard before, and she lay there curled up, crying her eyes out.

"If a thief admits he's a thief, the prisons will be packed full," I screamed at her. "You little bitch, there's no smoke without fire. Are men too scarce that you have to fall for someone like him? Your father and I think you're still a child but you want a man already?"

I cried, I screamed, I hit her, and Hpyu Ei was really beaten up this time. She cried buckets and of course I felt bad about it; which parent would want to beat up her child, tell me that? I'd never beaten her like this before but I had to, right or wrong, just to get it into her head that she could not do something like this. Well, to tell you the truth, she'd been acting unusual for some time, spent hours looking at herself in the mirror, and prettying herself. Honestly, it's so easy to spot people falling in love or committing adultery, they all begin to change!

That little bastard, he's putting on airs and preening himself, as if his looks were worth two pins. He should be ashamed to have such a grand name. I was so grateful to them that I had been friendly, allowing them to visit and he pays me back like this, eh? 'Standing in the cool shade of a tree and breaking off its branches'<sup>2</sup>, that's what I say, this ungratefulness. My daughter might have had to leave school after failing the eighth grade twice but she's worth much more than him. It was so stupid of me! Even my old man gave a searing comment: "So, wife, you were saying we should be so grateful to them, did you forget we have a daughter? Eh? You never think twice."

"So what? It's true we owe him our daughter's life, but that doesn't mean I have to give my daughter to him. If I'd known this would happen I wouldn't have let them put one foot in our yard."

If they changed, I had a right to, too, didn't I? Let alone inviting them in, I kept a stern face when I saw any of them. When they come to buy something, I'd say I don't have it even if I did. I watched Miss Hpyu Ei like a hawk and did not let her sit in the shop and I kept her busy with all sorts of housework. I did not send her on errands to the village anymore and if the younger kids could not be sent, I'd go myself, making sure my old man kept his eye on her. "I'll be back in a minute!" I had to cry loud enough for her to hear. Who knows what plots they might be hatching, eh?

Hpyu Ei was rather quiet, curled up in a corner reading. Well, I just hope she's not reading romances with eloping sweethearts, nowadays the trashy novels are full of such stuff,

<sup>1</sup> A very common idiom

<sup>2</sup> Idiom

and how could the writers be so irresponsible? Have they no care for the parents?

Seeing me like a cat on hot coals, my old man said to me, "What a fuss you are making for yourself, woman. Calm down, I'm getting dizzy just watching you."

You think I'd stand for that?

"Take some pills if you feel dizzy, but don't expect me to stay calm. You men don't care for your kids as much as we women do. I carried her for nine months, I can't let anything happen to her. You stay cool like a block of ice and wait until someone lights a fire up your arse."

That shut him up.

He's a quiet chap, my man, goes through life as if he's untouched by anything. Well, you can't do that with children, you've gotta play it hot or cool, rough or gentle. Not him! If he gets too annoyed, he'd just bash up the kids and that's that. Of course, I had already hinted to my girl that she'd better be careful or else her father might just get too annoyed.

Things got so bad I could not even pray with a clear head. As long as these timber rafts remain I could not let my guard down and they seemed to be taking forever, waiting for more logs, waiting for cane ropes, waiting for the trucks or boats to be repaired, I was fast losing patience. Oh god of the weather, please bring down storms and heavy rains so that my girl can't leave the house.

Now these bastards have taken to walking back and forth in front of my house singing love songs. And my girl, she'd get all excited and pretending to get a cup of water or looking for a fan or playing with the younger ones, she's make sure they could see her through the window. As if I'm a fool not to spot all that. I couldn't help it, finally I just screamed out abuse to them from the front door.

That roused my old man.

"Now then, that's going too far, screaming at other people's children like that. It's not as if your daughter's not in on it, too."

"Oh, I don't care if I'm going too far or not and just let her dare be in cahoots with them I'll make sure her life flies out of her body in a jiffy. She's only seventeen, is that the age to want a man?"

He lowered his voice.

"Woman, you'd better be careful what you say about seventeen being too young to marry," he warned.

First I had no idea what he was talking about and then it struck me, and my face turned hot. He turned away grinning like a fool as I glared after him.

That man of mine had the last word! I couldn't sleep that night, I was so furious. With all this worry about my girl, I'd forgotten that I too had married at seventeen. With my old man, of course, and I swear that if I am lying may I be struck with lightning but it was not because I was man-crazy. Why, we'd only been seeing each other secretly for four or five months, and then my mother found out, and she beat me up and said she was going to marry me off to that old bachelor Ko San Ya, who was financially better-off. My man kept asking me to elope, but I felt I was too young to marry so I thought I'd make sure not to upset either him or mother and just drag things out for some time.

Well, one night I was tying reed fronds to roof the house and who would appear, hiding under the tree by the fence, but him. I left my younger brother nodding off sleepily on the porch and went to see what he wanted. Then and there he grabbed my hand and forced me to elope.

"Don't you scream" he'd said, "I'll kill you and kill myself." He was waving a dagger in my face. That was what he meant about me not mentioning getting married at seventeen, but if the choice had been left to me, I wouldn't have married at seventeen. Now, if my girl should elope and say to me that I too did the same, what could I say then, tell me? It was his fault! His fault!

Everything's fine now! The rafts are moving the next day. I was happy about it, but it was a crucial time. My girl was not looking good and she only ate a bite or two.

That night I made sure I kept awake.

Once I heard something from her room so I got up noisily to drink from the water pot next to her door. Afterwards I tried to keep my eyes open but I couldn't help it, around one or two in the morning I fell into a doze. But surely a good spirit woke me: I sensed a movement in my girl's room and instantly ran into it.

"Mother! What a fright you gave me. I was just going out to pee."

Well, well, my little daughter. If a mother could be fooled by her daughter, history surely should be rewritten.

"Is that so? I was going for a pee, too."

We both went into the backyard and squatted on the ground. Afterwards, keeping her in front of me and holding up the lamp myself, we marched back into the house.

"Hpyu Ei, today let's cook some fish cakes. Come help me scrape and pound the fish, we should be finished early enough to take some to the monastery," I said to her the next morning, pretending not to notice her puffy and red eyes. I deliberately chose a dish that would take a while to prepare, so that I could keep her under my eyes. She was with me only because she was scared of me but her mind was elsewhere. When she heard the engines of the motorboats starting, she looked as if she would cry. She was pounding chillies in the huge stone mortar and about to hit her thumb so I had to warn her to be careful.

When the boats were just about to pass behind our house, she cried out suddenly, "Oh mother! A piece of chilli went into my eye!" and ran towards the water pot at the back, tears falling on her face. So, girl, someone with chilli in her eyes was also sobbing her heart out?

She scooped up some water and washed her face. Then, standing where I could not see her she waved her hand furiously at someone. I peeked out through a hole in the bamboo mat wall and saw that boy waving to her from the passing boat, using a piece of cloth which fluttered in the breeze.

Let them wave, let them wave. There's no harm in that. When these boys come again it would be next May, and within this one year a heart can change, people can change, life itself can change. I didn't worry anymore. Young love is like a fire of burning straw, it never lasts long.

My poor child, I'd better buy her that fabric she has set her heart on, enough to make a sarong as well. Never mind if it cost me a pretty penny, let her at least take comfort in something.

Shwin Pyaw Pyaw Magazine, May, 1989.

## Chit Khin's Poem

Nyein (Shweli)



### Chit Khin's Poem

By Nyein (Shweli)

The sun was hot that afternoon. It seemed hotter when the glossy magazine in Chit Khin's hands did not have a single article worth reading. She dropped it to the floor and stretched herself idly: then only did she notice the loud voices in the distance. In this weather, how could people have the energy to raise this racket? She pricked her ears which discerned different components of the ruckus: laughter, shouts, a few clapping hands, even some obscenities and singing, loud singing, coming nearer. Now what on earth...?

It was a song made popular by a famous dancer, sung with some discord and misplaced lyrics by a drunken voice. Chit Khin smiled to herself. Of course, it was Elder Uncle Htoo. He would replace the names in the lyrics with those of his neighbours whenever he came home drunk, egged on by the younger guys who would escort him home with applause. Sure enough he called to Chit Khin as soon as he passed her house and went into his own hut, the one just next to hers.

"Hei, Chit Khin, my niece, my writer niece, I'm not drunk, y'know, these chaps, these sonofabitches, sonsofapigs, these dogs and pigs, this whole bloody village, all me own relatives, y'know, they kept teasing me so I'm gonna drive 'em off, don't mind my swearing, you hear? Ar'm not swearing atcha, y'hear?"

My niece is the sweetest girl in the village, the prettiest girl, the best girl ever, y'hear?"

All other voices ceased when Elder Uncle Htoo arrived home. Chit Khin smiled again to herself. However inebriated Elder Uncle Htoo would try his best not to upset Chit Khin who lies for long hours on her bed. He felt sorry for Chit Khin that her health left her tottering weakly and as he and his wife have some interest in reading the three of them got along real fine, this sickly aspiring writer and he, talking about poetry and short stories and stuff. In spite of the age difference, they were pals.

Elder Uncle Htoo was sixty-four; his wife A-Daung was forty-seven and Chit Khin twenty-three. They were pals because of the shared interest, and Chit Khin would reply to any questions that "Yep, they are pals because they were of one mind, y'hear?"

They have lived next to each other for years and years, and are just like family.

A-Daung, named 'peacock' but none too good looking but with a beautiful heart, loved Chit Khin like a daughter; they had no children of their own. She would care tenderly for Chit Khin, sending her titbits of food the younger woman might enjoy, and especially, she would always send over some when she cooked fish with the tart Kin Pun Chin buds, knowing how much Chit Khin loved it.

And Elder Uncle Htoo loved his grog, his first love.

Whenever A-Daung got angry at his drinking and gives an ultimatum, "Will you get rid of your drinking or would you rather see me leave?", he would reply, thick-tongued but smart, "Why, instead of getting rid of my drinking I'll continue having you as my wife" so it never got anywhere.

No one in the village minded a sixty-plus man drinking, as it was true what he said, that he was related to everyone in this whole village of 'dogs and pigs' as he called them. Cousins, siblings, nieces and nephews, in this medium-sized village, only about one-third would *not* be his blood kin. He need not worry about footing his own grog bills nor need he worry about meals if A-Daung refused to feed him: he could drop in on any member of his extended family and h'd be fed. They would stand his drinks, feed him and escort him with song and dance

and if he fell over drunk in the middle of Main Street screaming obscenities at every man jack of them, they'd still carry him home on their shoulders.

When people piously keep the Buddhist precepts on fast days, he would say,

"Now why would I need to keep any precepts? I can leave 'em at the monastery gate after taking them. Why not? I'm a good man I am, aren't I, it's only sinners who need to keep vows and redeem themselves."

What could even the abbot say to this? Elder Uncle Htoo was his own nephew!

When he was not drunk, he was a lovely man who'd go about lending a helping hand, caring for others and he could converse with such literary tones that everyone simply loved him out of respect when he was sober, and loved him with sympathy when he was drunk. Even Chit Khin who detested drunks could love Elder Uncle Htoo.

That's all well, but such things are about relations outside of his home, and in his home there was A-Daung his wife. As Chit Khin's father often said, A-Daung was a gem among all wives to bear with all the nonsense of her husband.

They have one small boat, their most essential piece of property, as it is their livelihood. Once upon a time Elder Uncle Htoo fished and set lines and traps in the river but mostly he cast nets and also ferried people from this village across this Shweli River across to Kywai Chan Village. With all that work it was enough to feed the two of them. Elder Uncle Htoo's daughters by his late first wife now live far away. Now that he was getting old, A-Daung even took over the ferrying job. She would also transplant rice and do other seasonal farm work and earned a pretty penny to keep Elder Uncle Htoo in some, but not a lot of, the drink he enjoyed. Often she would just laugh when he came home drunk swearing all over the place. Even then Elder Uncle Htoo might steal some cash hidden away by his wife and lose it all at poker.

But if things went too far there would be quarrels. But, one thing nice about Elder Uncle Htoo is that however drunk he might be and all he might swear, he would never lay a finger on A-Daung. Well, just listen to how they fought.

"You have one foot in the grave and still you're wandering up and down Main Street reeling drunk, your longyi hardly

ever around your butt, have you no shame? Have you no worry that you just recovered from flu? I told you to take a bath to feel fresh after that flu but what did you do instead, get drunk..."

"Hei, A-Daung, shut your trap...I can't die from not bathing but I could get a cold from it and is that what you're doing, trying to get me ill and die? You think I don't know you are hoping to get in bed with ol' Ohn Hlaing? Yeah, go ahead, I don't mind if it's Ohn Hlaing, I like him, so don't worry, I'll make sure you marry Ohn Hlaing before I die off."

Chit Khin smiled the third time: and why not, this Ohn Hlaing was none other than her father, Elder Uncle Htoo's closest friend and that was why he was being dragged into the quarrel, just for fun.

"You old thing, don't say such terrible things, the neighbours will hear. Why don't you dig up your mother from her grave and marry her off to U Ohn Hlaing? You know, it's only because we were married young that I still tolerate you. If not I'd have left you long ago. You understand me?"

Well, yes, this was it, this "married young" factor that pleased Chit Khin so much. However mad A-Daung might get, in the end she would bring up this "married young" and end the conflict. Chit Khin felt that these two words showed the depth of A-Daung's love... like a thermometer or a barometer, maybe it was a loveometer?

Young it was. So young that Elder Uncle Htoo was almost twice her age. A-Daung was a virgin maid when she married him, a widower with two children. When girls in the village wanted to tease each other they would say, "May you marry a widower!" and sure enough A-Daung got married to one. When three of her elder sisters got married off, this girl nicknamed 'Daung' because she was so ugly was left, and there was ol' Elder Uncle Htoo, recently widowed. Her friends teased her about him all the time, and then even the adults joined in. A-Daung got so embarrassed she would run crying up to Elder Uncle Htoo and scream at him and beat him with her little fists.

"You! It's only because of you that people tease me! Why don't you go and die!"

He would laugh at her, saying, "Why, you little chit, it has nothing to do with me, I didn't say anything did I? Why

are you so upset? £ and sometimes he would rub away her tears tenderly. Well, then, to cut it short they were not made of wood, were they? They got married.

Now then, was that not poetic? That was why Chit Khin who liked poems called them the 'poetic couple.' The sounds of them calling each other, 'Daung, hey Daung?' or "K'Htoo, where are you, K'Htoo?" would drift pleasantly through her bedroom window.

They had eyes for no one else. Do not imagine that because of their age difference they would not look good together: why, with poor A-Daung all dark from the sun working as she did in all weathers, and ol' Elder Uncle Htoo acting like a young buck with his young wife at home, they look good together.

Surely a marriage made in heaven.

But that morning...

Elder Uncle Htoo was out in the front yard whittling a short paddle for the boat and

A-Daung was busy in the kitchen. She called out from stirring her pots,

"K'Htoo, did you take my money, 180 Kyat that I kept in the blue plastic bag at the bottom of the trunk?"

"No, I didn't. When did you put them there?"

Both their voices were somewhat sharp.

"Five days ago, five days. I was going to buy you a new longyi but I haven't had a chance to go to Inn Village so I was keeping it aside. Did you drink it all up with your bastard sons? Or did you lose at poker? It's one thing or the other."

Chit Khin sat reading in a reclining chair under the shade of the tree between the two houses. Elder Uncle Htoo looked sharply over at her but Chit Khin pretended not to notice.

"You bitch, I said I didn't take it. You were hiding it away to give to a lover, right? Don't blame me if you lose it and what longyi are you talking about?"

"Don't act like the animal you are, you ingrate, I keep telling you I hate stealing and you never listen, do you? You'll only listen when you're dead?"

"Why, you disgusting woman, you..."

"Thief! You're a thief!"

Oh dear, a big fire out of a spark!

A-Daung's money was indeed gone and it looked as if Elder Uncle Htoo was really innocent. This quarrel did not

sound like any of the previous ones and just as Chit Khin was struggling to her feet to make peace, Elder Uncle Htoo took up the new paddle and ran into the house.

"Elder Uncle Htoo! Elder Uncle Htoo!"

That was Chit Khin calling,

"Thud! Thud!"

That was the sound of the paddle hitting something,

"Help! He's killing me!"

That was A-Daung's scream. All three came almost simultaneously.

Chit Khin's heart swelled with fright and picking up a small box of balm by her chair, ran as fast as she was able into A-Daung's compound. As she went shakily up the steps she met Elder Uncle Htoo coming out of the house.

"How could you do that, Uncle, you've never hit her before!"

He said nothing but stomped away. In the house, A-Daung sat crying, covering her calf bone with her hands. Chit Khin applied the balm to the place that instantly swelled up and although there were no cuts, it was beginning to turn black and blue.

"Maybe some children came into your house while you were away and took the money, A-Daung," Chit Khin tried to console her but in her mind thought that this calf bone hurts so much when hit, that people call it the 'Divorce-the-husband-if-he-hits-you-there bone.'

Then and there A-Daung began to pull out her clothes and throw them into a basket.

"C'mon, A-Daung, people will laugh at you for leaving home for 180 Kyat. If you are still angry, I'll replace the money but please don't go."

"You don't know, Chit Khin, you just don't know how he is. I've tolerated enough all my life. It's just time for me to be free of it."

How could sickly Chit Khin prevent A-Daung from leaving? Struggling free of Chit Khin's hands she stalked out of the house, went down to the water's edge and into her boat. She rowed off so quickly it looked like an arrow let loose from the bow. On the other bank, she got out holding the basket in one hand and the paddle balanced on her shoulder with the

other, and began walking towards the village. She soon disappeared from view.

Well. So quickly had Chit Khin's poem vanish, in a matter of minutes.

One might accuse Chit Khin of not minding her own business but she felt weepy the whole day. She felt as if she herself has lost a battle. With everyone in her house gone off to work there was nobody to whom she could unburden herself and at least get some comfort. Her heart felt as if it were squeezed. She kept looking over at Elder Uncle Htoo's house to see if anything would happen but other than seeing him coming home staggering drunk and going straight to bed, nothing did.

In the evening Chit Khin could hear Elder Uncle Htoo doing something in the kitchen. Was he cooking dinner for himself? Was he eating? Chit Khin went to walk up and down like a robot at the river's edge.

Unlike other days the Shweli River did not look beautiful; neither did the teak log rafts floating downstream from the jungles up north. The motor boats and bigger crafts plying up and down all looked ugly to her. The vast, dark-green expanses of melon plantations on the sand banks did not look as lovely as they usually did. The emerald green of the corn and peanut farms on the other bank were the same. The flirty, happy voices of the young men and women bathing in the river did not sound sweet, like before. Today, even the breeze that blew across the water did not smell fresh.

An ugly sunset.

Darkness fell slowly and heavily. The voices stilled. There were only one or two boats left on the river. Even as Chit Khin's feet kept moving, her eyes were fixed on a spot to the opposite bank, on the road leading to the village where A-Daung had disappeared. Would someone walk out? How nice if it were A-Daung! But no one came. Now who's on that little boat coming here? There's someone... no, it was not A-Daung after all. It passed by Chit Khin and vanished into the darkness.

Wait, someone's coming out of the peanut bushes on the other bank.... oh it's a man, coming for his bath. He took off his longyi and wrapped it around his head to keep it dry, and he went into the water stark naked. Did he think he's alone out here? How shameless. Chit Khin, annoyed at the man not being

the person she was hoping to see, hoped a fish would bite his thing off.

Wait, wait, there seemed to be someone walking out of the village...it was dark but she could see it was someone. She stared hard but could not define which sex. If it were a woman let it be A-Daung, she prayed, and anyway the figure was definitely walking to the river, then it got into a boat and began to row across.

Yes, yes, it was A-Daung! For sure it was her! Her basket was right there in the boat with her. Chit Khin made to run towards the boat but before she could move she saw Elder Uncle Htoo jumping off his stoop and bounding to the water's edge. Chit Khin quickly turned back to her house. It was almost dark by now and she could barely see a thing but how beautiful the evening was, finally! If Chit Khin had remained there she would be the completely wrong brush stroke in this painting.

She heard steps going into the next house.

"I bought some good grog for you, K'Htoo, just a little, but good stuff."

"That's great! I just cooked some fish and Kin Bun buds and pounded some green chillies. Let's eat, woman, I'm hungry."

That was all. She vaguely heard more words but she no longer listened. In her mind she kept hearing A-Daung's voice saying over and over again, "We were married young, we were married young...."

Chit Khin had recovered her lost poem.

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<sup>1</sup> It is degrading in Burmese society for a virgin girl to marry a divorced man or a widower and vice versa

## Tender Is The Night

Kan Chun





## Tender Is The Night

By Kan Chun

Ko Thitsar (Mr. Faithful) turned on his side, from left to his right; he was still sleepless. It was midnight.

He could still hear Ma Nyo Seint (Ms Brown and Cool) who had started quarreling with her husband since nine and since then, she had not once repeated any of her arguments or her obscenities. Ko Thitsar thought gloomily that it was lucky he was used to loud heavy metal blaring from the tea-shop amps: her voice surely carried well over a mile at least. But Ko Thitsar was unfortunately only fifteen feet away as he lived next door.

He moved only recently to this new town where niceties of whispered quarrels and smothered curses seem to be unknown.

Ma Nyo Seint's husband Ko Than Chaung (Mr. Iron Rod) paddled a trishaw by day, and eased his tiredness at night by drinking. Ma Nyo Seint is a vendor in the market, so the couple saw each other only at night and then and there commence their nightly fights.

"Now look here, Ko Than Chaung...."

"Don't shout, I'm only two feet away from you..."

"That's why I'm shouting, so that you can move away, you!...you think I want to be that close to you? You don't care to lift a finger to work, do you?"

"What do you mean? I lift my damn feet."

"And how much of that money comes home, may I ask? If we had to rely on your money, we'd be long dead of starvation. Times when I'm not allowed by the municipality to set up my tray, there's nothing coming in. Isn't it just lucky we get credit from the corner shop?"

"Shut up, you...."

"I won't. I've been waiting and hoping for years you would somehow change; and to think we have six kids now, what all this waiting brought me. Now look here.."

"Yes, *what is it?* I'm listening."

"I mean, *look here!*"

"I'm *looking*, I'm *looking*. Now what?"

"I'm going back to the village tomorrow; we're through."

"Fine, go back then, go on, and take those darn kids with you."

"KO THAN CHAUNG!"

This scream was so loud that Ko Thitsar in the next room sat up in bed, alarmed.

"When you married me I was alone and when I leave you, I'll be alone. These kids are your property, I'm not taking them."

Ko Thitsar pricked his ears.

"Oh, you women, if the property means gold and silver you'll be begging for half, as your right. Now with the kids that both of us....."

"Shut up, Ko Than Chaung"

"I will not shut up, since you started this I have a duty to defend myself."

"Oh, but you easily forget your duty to feed us, right? It rained so hard today I couldn't go to the market so I had to pawn something."

"It was *my longyi* you pawned."

"And who bought it for you, pray? Do you think you inherited it with your father's fortune?"

"Shut up, you long-winded woman."

"I won't"

"I'll make you shut up, bitch."

"Try, then, if you dare."

Crashes and bangs indicated that the verbal battle had crashed into a more active one. Ma Nyo Seint, obviously with

the belief that winning is not everything but that participation is noble, seemed to have entered the fray most enthusiastically.

"BONG"

It was a stroke of metal upon metal from the fireguard on the street, striking the time: one in the morning.

Ko Thitsar thought he would go to the loo situated outside the house at the far end of the back yard, and lit a candle. As soon as he came out the backdoor, something big and black whizzed by his head, to land with a crash on the roof of Ko Than Chaung's house, next door. Was it a bird? Was it a plane? Was it a meteorite?

Ko Thitsar was still pondering, half out of the doorway, when Ko Than Chaung's voice roared out.

"Now who's the f---g coward, throwing stones? If you're so brave, come outside."

Ko Thitsar did not know whether to move forwards or back. If Ko Than Chaung came out he'd surely see him standing there.

Then a voice came out of the night: "Stop shouting, jerk, it's me, I'm brave enough to beat you up. I can't stand your f---g noise anymore."

It was the voice of Ma Kwe Ma (Ms. Lady Dog) from the next house. She continued:

"Really, it's gone on far enough. If you think you're so brave, bashing up your wife, come on out. No consideration for the neighbours who are trying to sleep. The neighbours considered *your* feelings, that's why they didn't say anything. But this has gone far enough."

The voice of another trishaw peddler, Ko Tet Tu (the Tet Tu bird) came loud and clear. "We all work, you know, the whole day. We're bone-tired and need our rest. You should at least have some consideration...."

Ko Than Chaung fell silent. Then only did Ko Thitsar dared make a move to the loo.

"Really, we can't even quarrel in peace and don't imagine I'm too happy with this.."

Close on the heels of this remark of Ma Nyo Seint came Ma Kwe Ma's shout.

"Well, you're not happy? Come on out, then."

"I meant my husband! I was talking to him!"

After that Ma Nyo Seint fell silent under Ma Kwe Ma's continuing voice.

"Well, talk during the day, then. If I hear any more shouting I'd really come in and bash you both. Hey, who do you think I am? Hey? If I think I'm in the right I'd kick the sky open."

She went on and on.

"Really, I can't imagine what kind of people they are. Going on at ten, at eleven, and now it's one. If they don't care for us at least they should care for old Daw Mai Ma, (Ms. Ladyship) who's so ill. That poor old thing can't eat, she needs her sleep. Do they think they live alone? Do they?"

Ko Thitsar felt peckish so he wandered into his kitchen and scraped some leftovers onto a plate. It was two in the morning when he finished his meal. He could still hear Daw Kwe Ma.

"It's not only seven houses losing sleep, it's about seventy. They should know we need our sleep. Even poor Pain Thay (Skinny) two houses down who has asthma, he coughs with his pillow stuffed in his mouth, poor thing, so he won't disturb the neighbours; but them! Such lack of consideration is *unforgivable*."

Ko Thitsar went back to bed. He could still hear Ma Kwe Ma's voice, although it was not, fortunately, as loud as Ma Nyo Seint's.

"Humans should behave like humans. It's easy to be a jerk. Hard to be disciplined. Hard to be polite. If you think this Kwe Ma is nothing, well, just try and find out, that's all."

Ko Thitsar tossed and turned in bed, again trying to sleep.

"Don't imagine I'm afraid of anyone. I don't mind showing what sort of a woman I am, if there are any takers."

Ko Thitsar tried sleeping on his back.

"People should have some consideration..." went on Ma Kwe Ma with unabated breath.

"BONG....BONG....BONG"

Ko Thitsar turned on his side.

"...some consideration for the neighbours...."

(1996)

## Mother's Merit

### Thu Maung



### Mother's Merit

By Thu Maung

Mother Nyo, as everyone calls my mother, is a devout Buddhist who does not pray long and loud every night. She is also not among the ones who attend sessions at famous meditation centres in order to reach a higher status of mind. She is also not the type to gather merit by giving Soon kyway feasts for monks and guests on a monthly or even a bi-yearly basis.

I would not like to make the reader think that I am being critical of those who do so: people live as they see fit and that is none of my concern. I merely wanted to talk about my mother.

Although she does not practise Buddhism in the ways I mentioned above, she in her own way lives her life with a charitable nature, a generous heart and a peaceful mind.

So, how does she do it?

She never, ever, reacts with aggression or bitterness to any suffering that she might encounter. She faces whatever Fate brings with serenity and would smooth things out with unruffled patience. For this people might think her weak, or as one who is in denial but I believe that her equanimity in the face of hardship is her way of meditation and her method of seeking a higher state of mind.

When one of her friends said to her, "Ma Khin Nyo, I always see you so busy you would hardly have time to sit at

the shrine to pray," Mother answered, "Well, as I cooked and cleaned I keep my mind on Buddha's teachings, don't I?"

That is how she prays.

Mother's charity is what I might call something for all beings and at all hours. Why?

She would often say to us, "Don't bother about buying diamond earrings<sup>1</sup> for me, just give me enough so that everyday I can feed as many people as I want."

Actually, she does not have a big family to feed at home as there are just six of us. But friends of my brothers and I, writers, poets, and painters and my movie-director father's crew and their families, treat our home as a place to come and go as they please, to eat up what food there is, or even just to drop in to use the loo at anytime of day or night.

Mother loves all this. She loves to feed people, not only people who drop in but if friends or acquaintances happen to pass by our gate, she would almost drag them into the house "Hey, come in and have a taste of what I cooked today," is something you hear from her all the time.

Two elderly men who sell brooms would often come into our neighbourhood and they always look tired, what with the load they carry and the hot sun. Whenever Mother saw them she would insist they come in for a meal, and would look on smiling with joy while they eat huge piles of food with relish.

"See how convenient for them to have a meal here," she would say to me, "it must be exhausting to walk for hours in the sun with their load, and I doubt if they make enough to buy their meals. When they eat here, they save a bit and I get the merit."

Once she and I were on a trip and our train stopped at a small station that express trains usually pass by. I heard Mother calling over a vendor and I thought she wanted to buy food so I did not take much notice. But when the woman approached I saw that she had two large bamboo baskets in her hands.

"Are these for sale?" Mother asked.

"Yes, ma'am," the old woman answered politely.

"How much, old mother?"

"Two kyat each."

"Give me both," my mother said and handed over the money. She never bargains when she shops. I think she earns

her merit this way and I notice that she never meets anyone hiking up the price.

Our space on the train became a bit constricted with the two huge baskets.

"Oh Mother, why buy them? You could easily get them in Yangon," I complained.

"Now," she said, smiling, "I couldn't get them for this price in Yangon and see how neatly it's woven, it's worth the handiwork already. I felt sorry for the old woman. When our train stopped I saw her sitting in the sun with just these two baskets and think of it, if she wove them herself, it would have taken her at least two days. For that she got only four kyat and maybe she's feeding a family from that."

I am aware of her views on generosity and have written about them in a few short stories, but Mother acts on it: she performs acts of merit that do not a ceremonial ritual.

"Hey, son, look over there," Mother pointed out of the window. There, with high steps belying her age ran the woman who had sold Mother the baskets, heading towards a line of huts far beyond the stalks of harvested paddy in the bare fields.

Mother's generosity gave me moments of joy like that or at times, pure mirth.

One Ko Yin, the older novice at the monastery comes around every morning to our neighbourhood on alms rounds and he and I are good friends. One day he told me something about Mother's charity, and this story I will tell you, combining the end of his story with the beginning of one I knew already.

One day Mother cooked a pot of chickpea and vegetables. She likes to experiment and that day used the vegetables usually meant for Chinese cuisine in this Indian-style dish. It did not turn out well so she added other vegetables and more water and thus landed with a large amount that could have fed the six of us for three days.

One young daughter of one of father's assistants who lives in our compound helps Mother around the house. She was dispatched with two bowls of her chickpea chowder one for her own house and the other for Mar Mar, who is another of the many people living in our compound.

"Wash the bowls and bring them back," Mother told her as she sent the girl O-Su Ma on her way. Soon she has sent chickpea chowder to the other five houses in the compound.

"Well, one dish more for their meal is not such a small matter to them, poor things" Mother said to me.

From this point let me conjecture what happened, the story to be concluded with the Ko Yin's end of the tale.

Our compound is bordered on three sides by three monasteries and our Ko Yin resides in the monastery at the back. Our Ko Yin would enter by the back gate and make his way to the front road through the compound. The first house he would pass is O-Su Ma's house, where by the time he arrives, O-Su Ma's mother Ma Sein has cooked, cleaned, dressed the younger kids for school and she herself bathed and freshly lathered with fragrant Thanakha bark-paste. Ma Sein is one capable woman. But she never thought much of Mother's cooking so when Ko Yin silently came to stand in front of her house with downcast eyes, she poured Mother's chickpeas into one of his tin cups on his alms bowl and rice into the alms bowl itself. Why not? It saved her giving away the food she has cooked with her own hands, right?

Ko Yin according to the rules of his Order did not glance at what was offered to him but went on his way and came to Mar Mar's house. Now, Mar Mar is rather different from Ma Sein. At any time of the day she is bedraggled and almost always unwashed. She is the type who would spend her husband's daily wage on bowl after bowl of Monhinga noodles in one sitting. She would idly lie around at home and call in any vendor who passes by; if she could get it on credit she'd buy an elephant.

As for neatness she is the type to 'take off, drop and dump', a term my Mother translated for me as taking of her clothes, letting them drop and with a flick of her toes dump them into a corner of the room. She left the housekeeping chores to her children so her house is naturally always messy. Her kitchen fire is never lit as she prefers not to cook but to get take out to live off whatever Mother sends. So when Ko Yin stopped before her house all she had was Mother's chickpea chowder and that she could readily put into another of his tins.

In yet another house lives U Maung Maung Hla whom we respectfully call Master Hla, a crewmember of my father's movie business. He is a deeply devout Buddhist. When Ko Yin arrived at his front door, he has his home-cooked food but so that he and Mother would share a merit, he donated Mother's

dish. In this manner, from the back gate of our compound to the front where my house is, all of Ko Yin's six tin cups were filled with Mother's chickpea chowder.

And to end our story with what Ko Yin told me in some bewilderment a few days afterwards:

"You know, that day I had a guest, a monk from the Shan State. At lunch he and I had no idea which tin of curry to eat first."

"Why, were there so many dishes?"

"Not at all, it's as if every house in your compound decided to cook the same dish that day, every house donated chickpea chowder!"

1980, January.

Pre Silver Anniversary Magazine, University of Yangon.

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'The biggest status symbol of a Burmese woman

**... And With Mercy  
And Blessings**

Ma Khin Lay ( Yangon Tekkatho )



.....And With Mercy And Blessings

By Ma Khin Lay (Yangon Tekkatho)

"Earn a pei<sup>1</sup> and give a pya<sup>2</sup>,  
Who can beat the generous Shan?  
Thick of waist and dark of skin,  
Who will want a Taungyi<sup>3</sup> maiden?"

Here comes the lively music from the leading car, as another batch of novices arrives to pay respects at the Spirit<sup>4</sup> shrine. Ma Lan wiped off the sweat on her forehead with her sleeve, and gazed out onto the street. Oh My! ... what nice looking novices! And in open light trucks, each a different colour .... the leading car can't be a Hilux<sup>5</sup>, it has a rather short bonnet and long body...

<sup>1</sup> The smallest denomination coin

<sup>2</sup> A bigger coin than a pei

<sup>3</sup> Capital of the Southern Shan State

<sup>4</sup> Spirits exist in both Buddhist lore and animist worship and of the same name 'Nat' although different from each other. The Buddhist spirits are guardian celestials, like the one worshipped in this story whereas animist Spirits are like ghosts, worshipped by the lower or uneducated classes..

<sup>5</sup> A popular Japanese car



"Eh, Toe Maung .... that car in front ....that long one, it's not a Hilux, what make is it?"

"Why should I know?"

Glaring at her son Toe Maung for his retort, Ma Lan retied her longyi more firmly around her waist. People sitting on the chairs in the truck to show off to the world must be the parents and sisters of the novices. How pretty the young girls looked! And the ladies about her age, they are wearing such lovely flowers in their hair: orchids, jasmine. Dear me, they look more like vases.

Leading the novices' convoy was a red Datsun truck ...eh, the novice on that would be about the same age as my Chit Sone, the one younger than Toe Maung ... about ten, let's say. How fair he is! And his make-up so carefully applied .... such round rosy cheeks reflecting the pink jacket he's wearing. And his eye make-up, why, it's not too gaudy like some others she'd seen, it's just perfect. And the rug on that sofa he is sitting on, how beautiful.... a peacock design in red and green.

And the two gold umbrellas<sup>6</sup> shading them, how they glitter .... the gold is reflected on his face ...and how smart the two escorts look, wearing shades, formal white shirts and jackets and identical red longyi in that design made popular by that young movie star. The two girls holding bouquets are dressed in red and pink, with identical round little chignons and puffy fringes .... the girl throwing the good-luck pop-corn all over the road, she looks a lot like the little chap ... must be his sister.

Oh ....oh...in the next green Hilux, the boy on that car is a little younger ... not as young as her own Bike Kwet, somewhere between Chit Sone and Bike Kwet ...about eight, perhaps ...my, he's even better looking than the other....a wee bit dark, but such round eyes ...and his escorts, they are wearing green longyi! The flower-bearers, too, are in wavy-design green silk, and that little girl scattering pop-corn is in a parrot green matched set.

After that, it's a yellow light truck...my oh my oh my ... what a cute boy ...I bet the same age as Bike Kwet ...but not

<sup>6</sup> Gold umbrellas are used in ceremonies to shade abbots or novices-to-be.

dark like him, certainly not, this one's so fair and plumb, with such sweet lips and round cheeks.

"Hey, hey, little baby novice, how many days will you wear the robes?" Ma Lan asked him in her mind. "What a little sweetie you are. Oh. Oh. What are you doing, trying to stand up? You might fall!" The escorts tenderly cradled him and made him sit still again. "Now then, a novice mustn't play, you know!"

In all three cars, this one is the youngest novice and the escorts are also younger ....such clear, innocent faces! Their hair is trimmed short and neat ...not like Toe Maung, with his matted hair and spots on his face! And how about this yellow rug draped on his chair ....no, it's not a rug, it's a fluffy shawl ... what a bright yellow! The girls in this car, too, wearing gold coloured silks and brocades ....not only that, mind, they wear glittering coronets on their heads, too.

The line of cars slowly passed in front of her. Even though it was not at all *her* merit-gaining ceremony she felt happy that others could do what she could not .... more than happy, satisfied.

She called 'Well done!' blessings, and wished that these boys would one day have scores of grandsons so that they too may be initiated to the Order.

The pop-corn being thrown, together with pieces of gold and silver paper and coins, fell on Ma Lan's head. She could hear the coins tingle as they hit the tarmac.... how sweet is the sound! She saw Bike Kwet getting too near the wheels to pick up a 50 pya bit and with her right hand, pulled him back roughly, cursing, but with her left reached hurriedly for the coin...

What a great number of *Ahlu*<sup>7</sup> this year!

Well, she had thought the same last year, didn't she ....thinking one year is better than the last and finding out next year that it's still better ...it's the same, every year. How they can give away, spend so much, .... what merits they must gain!

When can she hope to do this herself, with her sons riding on such grand cars? Oh well, never in this life can she hope to do that but at least she should one day be able to hire a couple

<sup>7</sup> Donating ceremony, with many monks and hundreds of guest fed breakfast or lunch

of buses and parade the novices. For that, she must try her best to save up enough to buy the eight requisites of a Member of the Order, and to hold a quiet little ceremony here at this very monastery in the presence of the abbot. She could be happy with that.

The important thing is for the grandparents to see her sons in the yellow robes before they close their eye forever. She herself has only her mother still living, but both of her husband Ko Mya Thaug's parents are still alive. Ko Mya Thaug's younger brother Win Maung had done his duty the year before last, his sons entering the Order.

The old man kept writing to them, "Now then, why don't you make Toe Maung a novice?"

Well, not only writing but sending verbal messages by everyone coming this way. Well, well, his first grandson is so dear to the old man ... loves him like life itself.

As for her mother! Every time Ma Lan needed money and asked if she might borrow - to pawn - the only silk longyi her mother has, she got the same answer: "I don't know when you will get this back for me and I must have it ready to wear when my grandsons enter the Order." Mother wouldn't let anyone touch that longyi.

Ma Lan's sister Mi Pwe has only one son, while she has three, Toe Maung, Chit Sone and Bike Kwet. She would dearly love to please the old folks but the situation seems hopeless. She has been giving excuses that they should wait until Bike Kwet is grown up to join his brothers but he is now nearly six. One whole year already has passed since he started school.

"Aunt...two sugar-cane juices, please."

"Yes, yes, you have to wait a bit", Ma Lan said to the two girls whose words interrupted her thoughts. She took out the two peeled sugar-cane stalks she kept soaking in clean water and ran them into the grinder. It reminded her that she always felt this desire to donate when sugar-cane is most abundant and she earns more. Other months she could barely give it a thought.

Looking over to the compound of the high school, she could barely see the red-brick building through the thick, yellow Ngu flowers. It was just like a picture, so colourful, yellow, red, and the green of the leave in patches, and when summer comes

with these colours, and the Ngu flowers bloom, then she would open her sugar-cane stall across from the school.

For one whole year before this time, her soup and noodle salad stall would be mobbed with the school children. When school lets out for summer she would shift out of the school compound to this place on the road by the side of the monastery and sell sugar-cane juice and then she would dream about her own Ahlu.

The monastery faces Winter Snow Lane that ran off the main street in front of the school. The single Flame-of-the-forest tree in the monastery compound is blazing with red flowers. East of the school there is the Spirit shrine, shaded with eucalyptus and cherry trees. The shrine is gay with fluttering coloured-paper pennants.

This period when sugar-cane is abundant, there would be many shops selling them by bundles. Her "Emerald-green Coolness" sugar-cane juice stall would always be set up under this spreading Thito tree, tables covered with squares of pink plastic on which she would stand bright bottles of lemonade, orange and plum juice. The low stools are dark with age. Every year exactly in the same place or as Toe Maung grandly says, "as customary."

Well! Talk about customary, it has been like this since he was six, about Bike Kwet's age now, and she has been selling noodles during the school year and sugar-cane juice in the summer. Now here is Toe Maung already fifteen, having failed the eighth grade once and his voice about to change, and with pimples sprouting on his face!

Maybe that is why he kept saying that when he is initiated, he would not wear the fancy glittery stuff and that he would feel odd, tall and gangly as he is. Huh! Does he think he's the son of a millionaire that he could afford to be dressed like that? What a laugh. If ever there's enough money, it's all she can do to buy the necessary items and have a quiet ceremony...fancy dress, indeed. What an imagination.

Oh, for sure he is imaginative, this Toe Maung ....he's the one who named this stall, "the Emerald-green Coolness"! Using coloured chalks he had begged from school, he had drawn the words in a pretty design on a bit of plywood. Even wants to set up the shop at nights, near the cinemas ....with two fluorescent

lights, a cassette player and sound boxes, if you please! But I can't afford all that, yet....

Ma Lan felt heavy-hearted about not being able to see her sons as novices, especially as she could not even afford a light for her stall. There was nothing else she could think of to earn more; there is no hope of getting an inheritance from anyone. Well now, she might win the lottery, the dream she had the other night was rather auspicious...she must go and see if the novice from the monastery who dabbles in astrology could interpret it for her so that she might get a lucky number.

"...my love, my darling,

If you want to meet, come see the show,

If you love me, raise your hand,

And let me see!

Let no one come between us

And in the moonlight, raise your hand,

And let me see!"

Words of a merry song pierced her consciousness.

"Hey, here they come! ....here's another!"

All the people at her stall, young and old sipping sugar-cane juice and the passer-bys, all became restless. They could distinctly hear the sound from yet another procession of cars turning into the road. The sound of drums, oboes and clappers went boom-boom; what a good loudspeaker, the sounds came out so clear and shrill. Ma Lan recognized the song: yes, it's the same one!

A long while back at a show in her village, the pretty dancer Yamin Kyi from the Shwe Man Thu Troupe had sung this song made famous by Dagon Khin Hla Kyi. She had given the audience a flirty look, dancing with her bosom and neat little rear thrust out, jerking her shoulders and snapping her fingers as she sang;

"If you love me, Yamin, Kyi, raise your hand and let me see,"

Goodness gracious, all the chaps who had raised their hands, not one but both! And what loud yells! My man Ko Mya Thaung was the worse ....huh! He didn't get anywhere near that Miss Yamin Kyi and so it was just this Miss Ma Lan who had taken up with him.

To be quite truthful I too was crazy about that movie star Zaw Khin in that movie they showed at the pagoda festival. Wearing shades, a leather jacket and with a cigarette hanging from his lips...my, how cool he looked! When they gave out playbills and she got one, how she had kissed his photo over and over again murmuring "My heart! Oh my heart!"

"Hey Mother! What are you staring at? I'm telling ya to lift the tray ...there's such a long line of cars....they say it's a group *Ahlu*...hurry up, Mother, all the people from the next street are coming out to watch."

Ma Lan surfaced from her thoughts as she heard the voice of her elder daughter Hla Chan. She lifted the tray on her daughter's head, the tray piled with sugar-cane slices speared into bamboo spikes in the form of posies. It must be true; the sign there said the Group Participation *Ahlu* of .....so and so department workers. She couldn't see clearly.

What a crowd! There must be about thirty five novices and the gold umbrellas, from afar they look like one single sheet of gold. There were only about ten cars, all jeeps, rather worn and drab looking, and nothing like the shining new Japanese cars of the first procession. The people on them, certainly they were by no means glittering or dazzling but what a satisfying turn-out! There is even a platform built on one large truck and a full orchestra on it, with dancers. That young dancer looks so pretty and dainty, in a yellow classical costume...what style! Almost as good as Yamin Kyi.

Speaking of Yamin Kyi both her daughters Hla Chan and Aye Bon look somewhat like that dancer, perhaps because she had admired her so much, and that man of mine, their father, said it was because Ma Lan herself looks like Yamin Kyi. Huh! What a thing to say.

And this Hla Chan and this Aye Bon are something else again; they want their ears bored, to wear court dresses and a jewelled headdress and to take one or two colour portraits at that Fuji Photo Studio! And you know what this Hla Chan said?

"If you can't manage to have my ears period, Mother, why, I'll save up 150 all by myself, and I'll go to that Princess Store and have them pierced my ears with a gun, Mother, that

I will do and I'll wear a plain golden pair or that glass one looking as real as diamonds, so there. I don't want any of that court dress and crown stuff that Aye Bon wants. Not me. Really, Mother, if I wait for you, why, I think I'd never get to do it, ever...."

And now just look at her, running into the crowd, balancing the tray on her head, her back so stiff and straight. Chit Sone, with only a few posies left on his tray exchanged it for his sister's. That Chit Sone, smart as a whip...as soon as he heard the music he had rushed out to the street with his tray.

That's why she had to see to it that the sugar-cane posies do not run out. As soon as the cars came up they must be ready. The cars always slowed to a dignified pace as they neared the shrine and one needs only to amble along by their side, right up to the shrine itself. It takes at least 15, 20 minutes to get there and longer if there are more novices; so almost 30 or 40 posies are usually sold.

Once, they actually ran out of the ready-made posies and so they just sold the sugarcane slices by the handful. What a sale that was! She remembered it was the *Ahlu* of a cheroot company owner or something like that; there was even one famous Abbot from Poba, in that huge saloon car right out front. There was a parade of people dressed as celestials, kings and nobles and about 90, 100 girls! There wasn't time to sit and watch as she just had to keep scooping up the sugar-cane slices the children's father cut for her and run out to sell 'em.

Those days the cost of sugar cane was not this high so profits were good. Now it's a hundred for one hundred stalks and even then it was a fight just to get as much as one wants. And the bamboo, it's now ten kyat! No wonder there's not much profit. Back in those days there weren't so many sugarcane juice stalls, either, so sales was brisk...even people from the market would walk over to Ma Lan's shop. Now such stalls are sprouting everywhere and, added to that, those boys coming up from the surrounding villages during the summer, at least 30, 40 of them this year. These boys would rent a small house for two or three months since they are free from farm work and then they'll open their own stalls all over town, and go back home with some goods, anything from packets of msg or cassette players, bought with their profits.

"Mother, here's some glasses...if you can, make some more juice."

"Yes, yes, I'll get to it..."

So saying she thrust two peeled stalks between the rollers, turning the handle with all her strength. Next time she'll have Toe Maung handle the machine and for a change she'll go out and sell; her arms are quite giving out. She can carry the tray of glasses right up to the shrine and of course pay her respects at the same time. "Bless us with fortune, good fortune!" As she turned the wheel, Ma Lan said her wish out aloud.

The cars are turning back from the shrine and she'd better go take another look at that dancer who looks so much like Yamin Kyi, on that big truck.

She could hear Chit Sone's shrill little voice through the music and song.

"Sugarcane posies! Sugarcane posies!"

And then beyond all that, Toe Maung's rather husky voice, "Sugarcane juice! Sugarcane Juice! Only a kyat a glass!"

May the boys sell lots of sugarcane juice and posies, she added to her wishes.

As she wiped down the plastic table top with a damp rag she looked out to the end of the street where another procession was entering. Only two novices, but quite a long line of cars...the two boys are riding in something like Hilux trucks but smaller...there were so many pretty stickers on their car! Behind the seats of the novices there was a large piece of plywood and colourful paper streamers hanging over it floated in the wind. In a green saloon car sat elderly people who seem to be the grandparents, holding the bundles of robes.

If only she could see their own parents carry the robes.

In her village it's an entirety different custom; the novices are paraded on horses or else men would carry the boys on their shoulders. The prettiest girls have the honour of carrying the ceremonial caskets of betel or flowers. Every girl is busy borrowing each other's longyi, trading jackets, stringing small flowers into garlands, doing each other's hair. Their cheeks are decorated with a patch of Thanakha bark paste. Ma Lan can still remember that as a girl, all year 'round she would go about with a shiny face, but my! For an *Ahlu* she would be caked with Thanakha from head to toe, as if she were covered with cement.

And when it is Padauk flowering time<sup>8</sup>, or when it's Gantgaw time, they would pin up the sprigs just behind their chignons. When there's a thump of the big drum or a wail from the oboe, Ma Lan would feel like crying, for no reason at all. She'd feel empty, her heart tight.

Well....her dear father .....when her brother Maung Kyan became a novice father was no longer living. Father's elder brother had walked in front, holding the fan with the alms bowl of the novice slung from his shoulder. Ma Lan had glanced often at him, missing her father and feeling teary. She had carried a rolled bamboo mat and bedding for the novice on her head. All the way around the village she had not been able to hold back her tears; father had insisted before he died that Maung Kyan must be carried on a horse and he had not lived to see the boy as he had wanted, there on that beautiful horse! And mother's tears had fallen as she held one end of the white cloth while elder uncle held the other to catch the hairs while the boy's head was being shaven.

Well, now, mother...she wants to see the same ceremony of her grandsons. Since Maung Kyan's noviciation more than twenty years ago, no religious ceremony has been held by her family. She is so determined to have one for her grandsons, poor mother ....she's getting along in years, and this is the only thing Ma Lan can do to repay for all that her mother's done for her. Mother would die happy.

Well...

"Ma! Here's Bike Kwet is eating the sugarcane slices!"

Aye Bon shouted to her as she trimmed the bamboo to make the posies. Ma Lan got to her feet, and turned to bawl out Bike Kwet. Just look at him! Sugarcane juice streaking his dusty face, his whole body grimy and messy.

"You little brat, you...you've already glutted yourself on the bananas discarded from the shrine...."

"Looking for my mummy's daughter-in law,

There she is, there she is!

Mother-in-law is looking,

Be silent now, be silent now, hey!

Boom-pa. Boom-pa-boom...."

<sup>8</sup> Padauk blooms only once a year, in April, in time for the water festival and New Year.

Now, now, these sounds are not from the main road; they came from the west, and let me see ....of course, it's that four novices who came to the shrine yesterday about two in the afternoon.

And how well she remembers the youngest novice, my, my, younger even than Bike Kwet; at the most four years old; round eyes, a straight nose, large ears.

No wonder she particularly noticed this group; they are from the Vitamin Bakery, and across the sides of their cars, it is written in English, the word 'Vitamin'. Not that she can read English; Toe Maung told her so.

The spinster sisters from the shop, of course she know them by sight....they handle the sales at their shop. They all wore kimono design longyi but of different colours: sky blue, mustard, moss green, lemon green, patterned with roses or orchids. When it's our turn, she thought, should I wear orange or shocking pink...?

"Fives glasses sugar cane," asked some girls at the back of the shop, from the other side of the wire fence.

"Toe Maung, five glasses of juice, please, son!"

Ma Lan shouted to her son, looking at the two girls and their companions dressed in classical style for an ear-boring ceremony. Her voice was jubilant.

How pretty the two girls are; if Hla Chan and Aye Bon were dressed up like that, would they look as nice? She saw them wearing a gold chain with the tiny gold bells, peeping out from behind the strands of pearls. They also wore pearl ear-drops in their newly pierced ears. Well, well, the younger girl is carefully drinking up the sugar-cane juice through a straw, perhaps not to smear her lipstick

Someone called to them, "Hurry up, Kaythi, Naychi, they're going to shave the boy's heads, come or else you went be in the photos."

There, under that jack-fruit tree, they've already wetted the head of the oldest boy, and the monk is beginning to shave it. And that one over there, scooping up the water out of that huge brick tank, and soaking his hair all by himself, is that the second or third boy?

Ma Lan looked carefully around the monastery compound. At the extreme southern end are the grandparents, holding up the white linen square to catch the hair of the oldest; the two

spinster sisters and another pair are doing the same for the next novices. Lastly, the parents for the youngest son, that cute little round-eyed big-eared baby; why, he's screaming!

"Don't wanna! Won't cut hair!"

"No, no, son, they won't cut, they'll shave"

"Don't wanna shave!!"

Twisting and turning and kicking out, and with such fat tears rolling down his baby cheeks! Looks like he's terrified of the razor.... perhaps Bike Kwet might behave in much the same way....

"Now then don't move your head, the razor's so sharp it'll likely cut off your head."

"Make the hair wetter .... slowly, please, sir."

"Hey, you big boy, why that pucker on your face, big boy that you are?"

"How nice and green their heads look now!"

"Bring some turmeric powder, hurry!"

"Now, now, let it be ... looks better as it is, green like this."

"Take that young one to a barber shop; let them use the clippers."

"Well, you can photograph it just as well when its all done, just pose him with a razor held to his head."

The voices around the youngest novice rang from under the jackfruit tree. The two photographers were kept busy, their flashguns popping.

Afterwards Ma Lan hung on the fence, staring into the monastery, and the small wooden building could be seen clearly from where she stood. She could even see the thickly gilded Buddha image on the shrine. Inside the monastery, the walls gleaming with crude oil, the four freshly-shaven novices knelt in a row before the Abbot, folded robes held in their hands against their brows.

The smallest novice was wearing shorts; how cute this little critter looks, his shaven scalp so green setting off his round little face and his little ears seeming to flare out more widely! Such bright round eyes he has... if only it was Bike Kwet in his place.

Even the abbot seemed taken by him, asking him all these questions!

"Now how many days well you wear the robes, then?"

"Tree days."

The little chap does not seem to know how long three days is; when he gave his lisping answer, the abbot, monks and the people burst out laughing.

"Never mind, I'll give you a novice's name, and then you can leave the Order and go home, what?"

"Don't wanna."

Again a loud burst of laughter.

"All right, then, stay here if you wish. Now then, can you do without eating any rice in the evening?"

"Yes."

"Really? What will you do if you get hungry?"

"Eat noodles."

There was another uproar of mirth. What a smart little child. Ma Lan held onto the wire fence with both hands as she laughed so hard that her sides actually ached.

"How right...how right", the abbot nodded his head as he smiled. "What a good answer...you won't eat rice, but you'll eat noodles, eh?"

"Yes."

"Don't say yes, say 'As stated'"

"As stated."

"And you must call your father and mother, Daga gyi, D'ga ma gyi...now, try calling them that?"

"Da da gyi, Da da ma gyi."

The laughter thundered; just think, Da da gyi, Da da ma gyi!

"Now then, now then, this isn't getting us anywhere, present me with the robes, and repeat after me... Lord, that we hope to enter the state of Nirvana where all suffering ends, take from our hands these robes and with mercy and blessings on us, take us into the Order...."

Dear, dear....how good it sounds as they recited together.

"I'm sure the older ones had memorized it, but has the littlest novice learnt the requesting of the robes they must recite individually?"

"Yes, reverend sir, he memorised it, he can say it all by himself. Ask him, sir."

"Well, well, say it then."

How clever this little boy is ....what a good brain! He said it all by himself, so fluently. Just like Bike Kwet, who's also right smart.

This verse of requesting robes, why, no one had ever taught Bike Kwet. He had been brought along to the shop starting this summer and what with running into the monastery to look each time there's a ceremony or just listening from here, he knows it all already. Dear little Bike Kwet....

"Thy servant will refrain from taking life..."

When Bike Kwet and others are noviciated, we must invite elder uncle, send him the fare in any way we can...he would so love to come....

"Thy servant will refrain from cheating..."

On that day, we'll have to feed lunch to close relatives...perhaps tender pork curry, a salty relish, and clear soup of sour leaves...how the novices will glut themselves on such a treat!"

"Thy servant will refrain from eating past the hour of noon..."

I must persuade them somehow to stay in the Order at least seven days; that boy Chit Sone is so fond of playing, it will be quite a job to make him behave that long....and he'll probably get into fights while doing his alms-begging rounds...

"...refrain from sleeping on a high or luxurious bed..."

And just before the ceremony I'll have to keep them under lock and key and not allow them to go out anywhere....year-before-last, that son of Ma Chit Mai, just two days before the ceremony, didn't he drown-dead in the stream behind the village? Sad thing to happen...

"...from handling gold and silver."

And by tradition one wants an orchestra...if we can afford a parade, we might hire the Sein Mingala Music Troupe; don't you scoff at this troupe...players are all handymen and porters from the market, but they'd played for many feasts. And that fella, Maung Man...can just see him now dancing in drag!

The words of the Ten Precepts kept coming and fading in her ears. She sighed softly when the prayers were finished. To see the novices each in their robes made her feel as if it were her own sons. Her heart fluttered. Just look, the four of them...how noble they look. She felt ecstatic, joy and contentment mingling

in her mind, feeling such a chaos of emotions, as if she warned to weep, to laugh, to shout. She visualized her three sons in the place of the four novices and her throat tightened.

That excuse to Ko Mya Thauung's father about Bike Kwet being too young yet....he isn't so young anymore, really. Bike Kwet ....little boy Bike Kwet ...he's now six.

Now then, what's this voice? Ma Lan turned to look.

There lay Bike Kwet on his back on the huge pile of discarded sugar cane husks, his legs waving in the air, as he bent and straightened his knees in time with claps of his hands. He was reciting the entire verse for the requesting of the robes; not only without a mistake or a falter, but so fluently...well, keep on reciting, my son, your oldest brother Toe Maung did the same when he was just a little older than you, and now he's nearly full grown.

Bike Kwet's shrill little voice became louder.

"Lord, that I may hope to enter the state of Nirvana where all suffering ends, give thy servant the robes from thy hands, and with mercy and blessings, take me into the Order..."

□ □ □

## Biographies

### Theikpan Maung Wa

Real name U Sein Tin, he was a member of the Indian Civil Service serving as Deputy Commissioner in Myanmar during the colonial days. In the early 1920s, with two poets he started a new trend in writing known as Khit San, 'Testing the new age,' a watershed in Myanmar literature. Their efforts marked an end to the classical traditions of flowery language and subjects that were limited to important or noble issues. He wrote over four hundred articles and twelve books including a diary of his student days in Oxford. His autobiographical character 'Maung Lu Aye' is one of the classics of Myanmar literature.

Theikpan Maung Wa passed away in 1942.

### Journal Kyaw Ma Ma Lay

Born in 1917, she grew up in a delta town Bogalay. After her marriage she published a weekly 'Journal Kyaw' with her husband, the famous late editor U Chit Maung. Both are known with the prefix of their journal's name. Ma Ma Lay was one of the most admired writers in Myanmar literature and her popularity has not waned with time. Her books and short stories, many considered classics, have been translated into English and other languages including the novels 'Not Out of Hate' and 'Bloodline' and the biography of her husband, 'A Man Like Him,' published in 2008 from Cornell University.

Journal Kyaw Ma Ma Lay passed away in 1982.

### Khin Hnin Yu

Born in 1925 in a delta town of Wakema, in her youth she was very active in patriotic organisations under the colonial British. Her first short story was published in 1947 under the pen name Khin Hnin Yu. From the late 1940s onwards when her novels first came out, her works generated a big influence on generations of young Myanmar women. In 1961 she won the Sarpay Beik Hman Literary Award for her first collection of short stories titled 'Reflections in the Mirror'. In 1995 she won the National Literary Award for her novel 'My Kyar Hpyu.' She has written sixty-seven novels and over one hundred short stories.

Khin Hnin Yu passed away in 2003.

### Maung Theikha

He first began to write short stores in 1956, and since 1979 he wrote mostly on the lives of fisher people. From those stories, numbering over 26, he gained much acclaim from critics and readers alike. His characters of the fisherman A Ba Nyan, and his grandchildren Kywet Ni, and Putu Ma are much-loved characters in Myanmar literature. 'Muddy Blue Waters' was the last short story he wrote.

Maung Theikha passed away in 1982.

### Htin Lin

Born 1919, he has been writing since pre WWII. He wrote many short stories and articles in both English and Myanmar and translated 12 novels to much acclaim including works by Albert Camus. He received the National Literary Award in 1974 in the translation category with Kipling's 'The Mawgli Stories.' In 1991, he again received the National Literary Award for his novel 'Return to the Emerald Fields.'

Htin Lin passed away in 1996.

### Khin Swe U

She is the daughter the famous writer of colonial times, Maha Swe. She has published over forty novels and about a hundred short stories. Her most famous novels are on the patriotic struggles of the young Myanmar men and women during the colonial days. As a girl she was also active in patriotic activities. Her short stories are on social issues, relationships and the need for integrity in the face of adversity.

Khin Swe U lives in Yangon.



**Aung Thinn**

He was born 1927 in Taungdwin Gyi, a town in Central Myanmar. He obtained his Masters in 1972 from Yangon University. For many years he was a faculty member of the Myanmar Department of Yangon University. His first article was published in 1959.

He is a well-known and highly respected educator, literary critic and writer. He has published over forty books on various subjects.

Aung Thinn lives in Yangon.

**Moe Moe (Inya)**

Her writing career began while she was a university student in Yangon living in Inya Hall. Her first novel 'Pyauk Thaw Lan Hmar San T'wah' published in 1974 won the National Literary Award for that year. Most of her novels received the acclaim of both readers and critics. Her themes are straightforward and objective views of the life of Myanmar women in contemporary society. Altogether she has won four National Literary Awards, three for collections of short stories.

Moe Moe (Inya) passed away in 1990.

**Pe Myint**

He has written and translated over fifty books and hundreds of articles on self-help, sociology and psychology, as well as biographies, collections of short stories and novels. In his fiction his tone is satirical without malice. He won the National Literary Award in 1995 for his collection of short stories titled 'Lu Thone Pyit Si Yaung Thu Myar' (Merchants of Consumer Goods). He won the prestigious Shwe Literary Award given by the Shwe Amyutay Magazine in 2007 for a collection of essays titled 'Sar M'thin Ya, Sar M'hput Ya, Sar Oke M'shi Say Ya' or 'Let there be no learning, no reading and no books.'

Pe Myint lives in Yangon.

**Nyi Pu Lay**

He was born in Mandalay to parents who were well-known writers, editors and journalists, Ludu U Hla and Daw Ahmar. A prolific writer, in 1989 he published his first short story collection, another in 1990, and the third in 2002. His first novel was published in 2002. In his stories he likes to portray unexpected, quirky or ignored vignettes from the daily doings of ordinary people.

Nyi Pu Lay lives in Mandalay.

**Tin Win Yee**

Born in 1964, she is a librarian of the Universities Central Library of Yangon. She has written numerous articles on library science but unfortunately only a few short stories. Her love for poetry led to writing monthly reviews of poetry for the prestigious Moe Way Literary Magazine for a period of over two years.

Tin Win Yee lives in Yangon.

**Khet Mar**

Born in 1969, she started writing professionally at the age of twenty. She has published a novel, a collection of essays and a collection of short stories, the last with three other women writers. Over a hundred short stories, thirteen novelettes and three serialised novels of hers have been published in various magazines.

Khet Mar lives in Yangon.

**Nu Nu Yi (Inwa)**

Born in 1957, Nu Nu Yi grew up in the beautiful ancient city of Inwa. Her first short story published in 1984 created a sensation among readers and critics alike. Since then she has been a successful writer, and has published over twenty books including twelve novels, over one hundred short stories and more than fifty novelettes. She won the National Literary Award for her novel 'Mya Sein Pyar Kamayut' in 1993. Her novel translated into English under the title 'Smile as they bow' was short-listed for the 2007 Man Asian Literary Prize. Her themes are on the life of the ordinary people and the grassroots level society of Myanmar.

Nu Nu Yi (Inwa) lives in Yangon.

**Ma Sandar**

She is an architect and the two careers flourish side by side. Her first novel 'Nge Thu Mo M'thi Ba' or 'Innocence of Youth' on the life of students of the Yangon Institute of Technology, was an instant hit when it came out in 1972, when she was still an undergrad at the YIT. So far, over fifty of her short stories, two novelettes and thirteen novels have been published. She won the National Literary Awards in 1994, 1999, and 2002. Five of her novels were made into box-office hit movies including her novel 'A Yeik' or 'Shadow' on childhood traumas.

Ma Sandar lives in Yangon.

**Atta Kyaw**

His main works are non-fiction articles and books on social and health issues, including sex education for and psychological profiles of teens, western etiquette, good parenting and marriage counselling. He has another nom de plume 'Pseudonym', and both names appear regularly in major magazines and weeklies. His other books are travelogues, short story collections and translations such as Mahbubaini's 'Can Asians Think?' and Alan Paton's 'Cry, the Beloved Country.' His skill in the Bamar (Burmese) language makes him one of the best translators.

Atta Kyaw lives in Yangon.

**Ju**

Born 1958, she is a medical doctor, a profession she no longer practises. Her first novel 'A Hmat T'ya' (Remembrance) published in 1987 was an instant best-seller. Generally, the theme throughout her fiction is about young women standing on their own feet without much dependence on the men in their lives, which reflects the reality of many Myanmar women, as by tradition they never had any restrictions on education or work. She has published seven short story collections and twenty novels, many of which were made into box-office hit movies. She has written numerous articles on the environment, and is a keen advocate of keeping the world clean and green.

Ju lives in Yangon.

**Khin Khin Htoo**

She became a published writer in 1993 with a short story 'Let me wear a flower in my hair'. She has published numerous short story collections and articles. Her novel 'Ma Ein Kan', serialised in the Shwe Amyutay Magazine is eagerly awaited each month by her fans. Readers and critics agree that her masterpiece so far is the collected vignettes of her relatives living in up-country villages; the first and second printings sold out within weeks. Titled 'Anyu Thu Anyu Thar Kyama Hswe Myo Myar' or 'My Relatives of Upper Myanmar,' it won the prestigious Tun Foundation Literary Prize for 2006 awarded by the Tun Foundation Bank.

Khin Khin Htoo lives in Mandalay.

**Nay Win Myint**

He has written many short stories and articles and has published several collections of short stories. He also translates English novels into Burmese. He won the National Literary Award in 1992 for his short story collection 'Hset Hna Kyoe' or 'Twelve Strings of Witchery.' He won the prestigious Shwe Literary Award given by the Shwe Amyutay Magazine in 2006 for a novelette titled 'Kywe Pwe' or 'Buffalo Dance'. His second National Literary Award for 2007 was earned with his short story collection '16 Little Houses'. A number of his short stories have been translated into English, Japanese and Indian. His masterpiece so far is considered to be his essay on a country charity feast, 'Taw Ahlu.'

Nay Win Myint lives in Mandalay.

**Nyein (Shweli)**

Born in 1951, she has been writing numerous short stories and articles although she was left severely handicapped after an accident in 1967, and could only hold a pen with great difficulty. Her collection of short stories 'Gandara Kyar Pwint Myar' or 'Lotus of the Desert' won much acclaim when it came out in 2000.

Nyein (Shweli) lives in Mandalay.

**Kan Chun**

Born 1946 in Mandalay, he is a man of many talents: as a journalist, painter, cartoonist and writer. He has published thirty-four books including novels, collected short stories and on various subjects ranging from general knowledge to humour. As a painter producing exquisite water colours, he has participated in many group shows and has held four solo shows. His short stories are wry but compassionate comments on the quirky behaviour of people, no doubt born out of his cartoonist's sharp mind.

Kan Chun passed away in 2009.

**Thu Maung**

Born in 1951, he is the son of U Tha Du, a famous movie director and writer and Daw Khin Nyo, a retired headmistress, both well-respected and much-loved in the artistic and literary

communities. Thu Maung is an Academy Award-winning actor and famous singer as well as a writer. He has published over forty books, including novels, translations and collections of short stories and essays. He also writes poems, articles on Buddhism and the movie industry.

Thu Maung lives in Yangon.

**Ma Khin Lay (Yangon Tekkatho)**

Born in 1959, she took her pen name Ma Khin Lay (Yangon Tekkatho) in honour of the time she spent at Yangon University or 'Tekkatho' for her Bachelor of Science degree. Since 1985 when she began to write professionally, she has written over forty short stories. In her work she shows a compassionate and sensitive knowledge of her subjects. Her selected short story collection was published in 2003 under the title 'The tale my grandchild told me of six ducks.'

Ma Khin Lay (Yangon Tekkatho) lives in Taung Gyi.

**Ma Thanegi**

She is a free-lance writer in English who was born in Myanmar and educated at the Methodist English High School and the Yangon State School of Fine Arts. So far, many of her articles and a dozen books in English have been published and a few had been translated into French and German. Although she is not a professional translator she has translated into English the classic biography 'A Man Like Him' by Journal Kyaw Ma Ma Lay and 'Cooking with Love Myanmar Style' by Nan San San Aye.

Ma Thanegi lives in Yangon.

Talk about the Myanmar chronicle, and the almost immediate response is, "Ah yes, *The Glass Palace Chronicle*." And if the person making the response is not Myanmar, his reference is almost certainly to Pe Maung Tin and Luce's translation of the *Chronicle*, not to the Myanmar original.

- *Tun Aung Chai*

Professor and Member of the Myanmar Historical Commission

THE GLASS PALACE CHRONICLE  
OF  
THE KINGS OF MYANMAR

TRANSLATED BY

PE MAUNG TIN & G.H. LUCE

Stories and Sketches of Myanmar

by

Khin Myo Chit

(Global Warming & World Climate Change)

ကမ္ဘာကြီးပူနွေးလာနေမှုနှင့် ကမ္ဘာ့ရာသီဥတု  
ထူးကဲစွာ ပြောင်းလဲဖြစ်ပေါ်လာနေမှု

သံအမတ်ကြီး ဦးလှမောင် (ဘောဂ)

သစ်တောများပြုန်းတီးလာမှု၊ ကာဗွန်ဒိုင်အောက်ဆိုက် အလွန်အကျွံ ထုတ်လွှတ်မှု စသည်တို့ကြောင့် ကမ္ဘာကြီးပူနွေးလာသည့်အတွက် နောက်ဆက်တွဲ ကြုံတွေ့လာရသော ရာသီဥတု ဖောက်ပြန်မှုများ သဘာဝပတ်ဝန်းကျင် ယိုယွင်းပျက်စီးလာမှုများနှင့် ပတ်သက်၍ အချက်အလက်များ၊ ကိန်းဂဏန်းများ၊ သုတေသနပြုချက်များ ပြည့်စုံစွာ ပါဝင်သည့် စာအုပ်

