

# The Road to Myitkyina

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‘How I will cherish you then, you grief-torn nights’

*Rainer Maria Rilke ‘10<sup>th</sup> Elegy from Duino Elegies’ translated by Edgar Snow*

‘Beauty is meaningless until it is shared’

*According to the character Flory in George Orwell’s novel ‘Burmese Days’*

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The jade Buddha image in the Shwedagon Pagoda is sculptured from one piece of jade mined in the Hpakant region of northern Myanmar. It is 99 cms. high and weighs 324 kgs. The face is ethnic Burman, pugnacious, most unlike the classic, aquiline features found in countless pagodas of Myanmar.

It is dawn. I am standing in the temple that houses the jade Buddha inside a glass cage. There are no temple walls and I can view the throngs of people swarming the Shwedagon terraces. A dozen other people are in the temple, sitting on the stone floor, praying and chanting. The different melodies and tones of the chanting vibrate off each other, creating semi and quarter-tones and contra-melodies. In particular, the higher, shriller tones of the women, who are by far the majority, are punctuated by the slow, rhythmic drone of an old man sitting amongst them. He is wearing a small, white towel to cover his head, a white robe and both outstretched hands count the beads of a pearl rosary. A woman nearby sings from a large scripture placed centrally on a cloth in front of her between a spectacle case and shopping basket. She occasionally turns the page, the flowery, voluptuous Burmese script lifting off the paper as if in levitation.

I am seduced by eddies and ripples of chanting, wisps of incense singeing the sense of smell, the blaze of gold unfurling in the increasing light. Euphoria pervades the transcendent air. The small, black, round eyes of the jade Buddha look on, arcane, unyielding and yet forgiving. I am in a trance.

A few hours later, I am sitting in a café in downtown Yangon, eating dry toast and drinking coffee mix. Sanda, who had held my name up on a cardboard placard at the airport the day before, greets me. He is trying to sell me his services as a guide. At first, I am disinterested, answering his queries in mono-syllables. He is persistent.

Then something strange happens. My logical brain and any sense of responsibility for myself is paralysed. Sanda's staccato English is unnerving me.

'Many problems on road. Dry season. All Burmese travelling too.'

I am aware as I can be, which is not much, of government travel restrictions. I am also aware that my spoken Burmese is non-existent. I feel a vague sense of panic, unable to assess Sanda's suggestions and advices. I mention Hkamti in the far north of Myanmar and Mrauk U in the far west, places remote enough to excite my imagination.

'No bus,' Sanda prods, 'fly back Yangon twice.'

Not only is my rational mind in suspense but there is also a willingness in me, shadowy and pervasive, to participate in loss and failure. It is like I am saying, 'Sanda, take care of me even though I know you cannot take care of me, be my guide even though I know you cannot be my guide.' I look at Sanda's face, the deep-set eyes, the square jaw, the ethnic features of the Burman plains. I am transfixed by the heavily stained red and brown teeth from constant chewing of *kunya*, the betel leaf and areca nut.

He is now writing dollar numbers on a scrap of paper. They might as well be Monopoly numbers considering how my reasoning powers have crumbled. I am succumbing to fears and anxieties, known to me since childhood, that there is no-one who can and will look after me and moreover, a sense I am not able to look after myself. These fears are also now clouded by a conceit, that I am much older now and I know what I am doing. As I hand over a wad of pristine, unfolded, unmarked US dollar bills, I am aware of the crisp, ever so slightly coarse texture of the paper but not of their value. My naivety is paramount. I have done no calculations, reached no conclusions. It is simply protection money.

Sanda prances off, quipping about making some repairs on his car. Slowly, in his absence, my logical brain and fragments of the travel research I have done start to surface. 'What about the road to Hkamti? Didn't the Government Information Office say downtown Hkamti and the river were OK but not the countryside?' Sanda returns, proudly showing a 6 cm. bolt he has replaced in the wheel of his car. I ask him about permits for the road to Hkamti and he grins, 'Nothing to worry about. I read paper every day.' Another kind of panic emerges,

that nothing is going to plan, a feeling of having done the 'wrong' thing. I stare fascinated at Sanda's betel-stained teeth, a pitiful effort to distract myself.

It is settled then. I do not need to worry about anything, all is being taken care of. In fact, I have lost myself in an act of contrition or remorse for the past, repeating karmic dramas of uncertain origin. I feel I have betrayed my trust. I didn't need to do or acquiesce to anything but the fear and panic that I couldn't cope had overwhelmed me.

Sanda shows up at the scheduled time at dawn two days later and is eager to set off. I learn we are going to Taungoo, his home town, which is only a few hours away. Apparently, his 83 year old father is sick in hospital. I say I am sorry to hear that and also ask when he thinks we will arrive in Hkamti which is much further north than Taungoo. 'Tomorrow,' Sanda asserts, waving away doubts with a flourish of his hand. I know 'tomorrow' is impossible, Hkamti is too far, but decline to protest. The sun is rising after all, it is a new day, I am being taken care of.

He has brought along a family friend to help with the driving whose name sounds something like 'torture'. I apologise for my poor ability to grasp the Burmese phonetics, repeating Totwoi's name several times before getting close. Totwoi is younger than Sanda, boyish, burly, unable to look me in the eye without turning away. As we drive through the dusty haze of Yangon suburbs he buys some pale yellow orchids from a street vendor, and hangs them on the rear-view mirror with a quick, reverential bow and clasp of palms. The music on the car radio has a devotional, *kirtan* quality, drifting in and out according to the aerial placement, mixing in with the endless honking of horns. The sweet smell of orchid fills the car, harmonies caress the heart, an auspicious day.

Later in Taungoo, we go on an excursion. We have been joined by Sanda's 9 year old son, Htway and set off for Kawmudaw Paya, a countryside pagoda outside of town, reached by driving through the newly built, gaudy red and yellow Sin Gate Arch, commemorating the reign of Bayin Naung 500 years previously when Taungoo (then known as Katumadi) was the capital of Myanmar. I wander alone around the pagoda. Many of the Buddha images are neglected, one of them, an almost life-size depiction of Gautama Buddha sermonising to a group of *arhats* is covered in dust and cobwebs, the paint peeling from the stone statues. Even here, a small picture of the head of a Buddha, placed on the exhibit many years before,

exudes beauty and grace despite its rough, pockmarked condition. Amongst the *maulsari* and frangipani trees, their flowers glittering in the bright sunlight, I search in vain for a pillar rising from a stone footprint which locals circumambulate in the belief that their personal problems will be resolved. I ask Sanda where it is. 'Taken away – for repair', he replies. I roar with laughter.

Soon after, we sit together in a beer garden by Kandawgyi Lake. Sanda orders some side dishes and a beer for me and Totwoi. He doesn't drink alcohol because of a 'health problem' and invites me to touch the side of his neck which seems slightly swollen. I decline. We toast each other and sit back watching the yellow paddle-boats on the lake. Even though it is a serene afternoon, Sanda frequently lapses into a kind of despair, not obvious, but tangible. Is it his father in hospital causing anxiety, or his neck or something else? He doesn't seem interested in talking much apart from abruptly issuing an order to Totwoi, or his son or a waitress sweeping leaves nearby. His voice is clipped, strident, the glottal stops, frequent in the Burmese language, enhancing the terseness.

There is something paradoxical in Sanda, manifest in his gait which can look like the shuffling of a beggar and at the same time, the authoritative, dignified pace of a monk who has been practicing the *vipassana* walking meditation for years. His face too can sometimes resemble the stern, clear gaze of the jade Buddha but immediately dissemble into the maniacal grimace of a gargoyle. I watch his son, Htway. He is a few months older than my own daughter and reminds me of her, the fine, slender limbs, the good posture, the playfulness and innocence, most of all, the mysterious repose in the eyes when momentarily there is nothing to do. Then Htway runs off to the lake where there is a playground or hides in the concrete thrones perched on the edge of the lake, a crude nostalgia for the royal days of the distant past.

All is still, there is little conversation. I take photographs with my super-sharp 75 mm prime lens, mostly interested in trying to capture the innocence and sensitivity of Htway. There is no thought now of having done the 'wrong' thing, of 'participating in loss and failure', the moment is abundant, encapsulated in the light reflected off the lake, in the shimmering of leaves overhead.

Later, in Sanda's house, I meet his wife, landlady and neighbours. Everybody is flitting about in the dusk. Pride of place in the living room is their altar, laden with pink and white chrysanthemums and yellow roses. By the side of the altar, I pick up a toy Kalashnikov and gesture towards Sanda with it. 'Need it tomorrow,' he jokes, 'in Myitkyina', a town in northern Myanmar on the way to Hkamti. After I eat, alone as they eat later, I say my thanks to the family and as a parting gesture, gather everybody at the front of the house for a family photograph. Everybody is pleased, I am pleased, a sense of fulfillment prevails. 'You are a good man', I say to Sanda, in all sincerity. The decision to accept his offer as a guide is apparently vindicated. The family photograph embodies that vindication, the playful victory sign from Htway, the demure smile of Sanda's wife, the relaxed grin of Sanda himself. It is the last photograph I can take with this camera in Myanmar.

I was uneasy leaving Yangon about my camera batteries. One battery, which I thought should be full, was empty. Perhaps I had mixed it up with the other identical-looking battery. Now, a day later, well before dawn, I am restless about this battery as I had put it in the charger the night before to top it up. I check it in the camera. The tiny signal, a dull, flashing, red icon is simply stating 'Your camera is useless now.' The charger has drained the battery, not charged it. I get the same result with the other battery. Both batteries are dead.

I feel nauseous. I have been using the camera and the images produced from it as a way of awakening my spirit, as a way of redemption. My attachment to the images produced by the camera is now raw and that attachment is creating suffering. It is one of the simplest Buddhist truths. I vaguely realise that, just as with my arrangement with Sanda, I have set myself up almost deliberately, stubbornly, for distress. I have brought to Myanmar cheap Chinese batteries and charger, leaving Olympus equipment in my Australian office. Numbness washes over me. I feel cut off from my spirit, a puppet, devoid of life.

The first light of dawn filters into the teahouse of the guest house. Pinks and blues push through the horizon in the fields visible through the window. On the table, an array of fruit and sweetmeats are neatly laid out. I stare at the table, wrestling with recrimination and disbelief. The mind jangles with blame, then feeble spurts of hope, pathetic and adolescent. Maybe I can find new batteries in Mandalay? Maybe something, somewhere, will ease the pain? Maybe I can just be, without this torment of wanting what I have not got?

I go outside and take a picture of the rising dawn with my phone camera. The image is hazy, pixelated, palm trees discernible in the pink mist. Is that good enough, I ask myself scathingly, still shocked by my addiction to this type of situation where I am forced inwards, forced to demand my surrender to non-attachment. I have no choice but to abandon my plans with the Olympus camera.

When Sanda arrives to pick me up I tell him about the batteries. He waves his hand, 'Mandalay – many shops'. He is eager to leave and as well as Totwoi, he has brought a woman who is sitting in the front passenger seat. Sanda doesn't say her name or introduce me, unlike how he introduced his neighbours the evening before. He vaguely explains she is related in some way to the generals and we may need her at roadblocks.

On the highway to Mandalay, I am pensive. I look out the car window, mechanically registering the forests, hills and gleaming pagodas. In downtown Mandalay, flocks of shaven-headed nuns, mostly young girls, group on street corners. The startling beauty of their garish pink robes and blood orange trousers, contrasted to the industrial noise and grime of Mandalay, momentarily shakes my apathy. We seek out various camera shops where vendors repeat the specification, BLN-1, BLN-1, and then shrug their shoulders. Finally, a Chinese shopkeeper who seems knowledgeable shakes his head, 'No Olympus in Mandalay', he says emphatically.

'Let's go,' I say to Sanda, with barely enough energy to say the words aloud.

Leaving Mandalay, we cross the wide Ayeyarwaddy river. Sanda points out the glittering array of pagodas on the forested hills of Sagaing. The gold, white, green and blue scintillate in the afternoon sun but I have no passion to respond to this panoply of beauty. I am struggling to relate to the claustrophobia of the back of the Honda hatchback, sitting next to the relentless betel-chewing and juice-spitting of Sanda and Totwoi, the constant asking of directions, the sensation of having taken the wrong road.

The road north soon deteriorates, becoming a narrow band of crumbling asphalt, forcing much of the crowded traffic into the potholes of the dirt strips alongside. All kinds of traffic compete for the asphalt, from coaches and trucks to legions of motorbikes to agricultural

vehicles carrying precipitous loads. Dust percolates in the soft brown and orange hues of early evening.

I ask Sanda when he thinks we will reach Myitkyina, the original destination of Hkamti having already been dropped. Since the earlier discussion about permits, I have read that the rebel conflict around the jade-mining area of Hpakant, between Myitkyina and Hkamti, is highly active and there is no chance of foreigners being allowed to approach the town. Moreover, Hpakant is a lawless town, rife with casinos, drug-runners, gun-runners and other criminals. I am sure now that Sanda is either ignorant of or deliberately misleading about what he knows or doesn't know about the road through to Hkamti or even Myitkyina.

'10 to 11', Sanda replies.

'There's no way we'll reach Myitkyina by then, ' I say, 'more likely it will be 2 or 3 in the morning.'

'No. When night comes, road empty, can drive fast'.

'That does not sound good, Sanda', I add disconsolately.

Dusk closes in and there is little electricity in the villages that we pass. They stop the car to stock up on betel leaf supplies and quickly swallow Red Bull look-alike energy drinks. In the fading light, the ramshackle, wooden shacks of tea-houses, whisky houses and snack vendors are depressing. On the road, the Honda is already having trouble negotiating the potholes unless it slows down completely. Overtaking is becoming more and more difficult, not helped by the fact that the driving wheel, as in the majority of Burmese vehicles, is on the wrong side of the car. The large trucks and buses continually force the Honda off the road.

It is now night and I can't find any relief from my frustrations. If only I could see the joke, laugh at my ridiculous situation! The Tibetans have a saying, 'whatever it is, bring it to the table.' I feel so listless, I can't even reach the table. The recriminations I felt the day I made the agreement with Sanda have resurged. The road is so rough in places, particularly when there is road and bridge building, that the Honda has difficulty making any progress. Each time the undercarriage hits a rock, Sanda emits a grunt, a strange mixture of alarm and resignation. More than once, the potholes are so deep that he can't drive forward. The engine squeals and eventually after reversing and re-trying, he scrapes through.

'Sanda', I protest, 'your car is not up for this trip.'

'My car – my business', Sanda replies. The tone is belligerent, he too is upset.

'You should never have said you could do this trip,' I argue.

'We made an agreement', Sanda snaps.

'Yes, and the agreement was to go to Hkamti but your car is not good enough,' I retort.

'We go back Mandalay', Sanda says decisively.

'I don't want to go to Mandalay, we go to Myitkyina', I reply without knowing why.

It seems there is no going back.

Sanda drives northwards, in the Myitkyina direction. He mentions something about his father in hospital and that I am only thinking about myself. I am taken aback. I don't know whether his father is in hospital, he has told me so many half-truths by now, either intentionally or not, I don't know what to believe any more. I am so vulnerable that I have to look at the selfishness he is accusing me of. It seems absurd but perhaps he is right. Then the fact that I paid him several hundred US dollars to get to this hell-hole just exacerbates the absurdity. He is now driving fast, recklessly, on the dark road. I tell him to slow down, that he is risking our lives. What would his beautiful son do without his father, I suggest, drawn into an emotional game. Yet it is not a game. I think of my daughter, our love for each other and what she would do without her father.

The road is getting dangerous. Extreme hazards recur frequently. I am beginning to hallucinate, particularly when the camber and direction of the road is so hard to detect that the car slows down to a crawl. In places we come to a dead end amongst piles of rubble, tar drums and trashed foliage, strewn with metal and plastic garbage. This much is discernible in the car headlights but beyond the headlights, all is shadowy, flickering and uncertain, dips and small ravines coming into view for a split-second.

We arrive at a fork where the right fork dips into darkness and the left fork spins through rubble. We take the left fork and reach a 30 metre bridge spanning a ravine. Many of the wooden slats in the floor of the bridge are missing, leaving gaping holes over a foot wide. We all get out of the car except Totwoi who takes over the driving wheel. Suddenly a large truck, also travelling north, appears out of the darkness and takes the right fork. In the truck's lights, a rough trail through the ravine is visible, first down, then up, a trail the truck

manages with its engine raging, a trail the Honda would have no chance of completing. Totwoi edges the car forward across the bridge, following Sanda and the woman. I am slow to get started and find myself walking along the planks in darkness, reaching into my pocket for the light from my phone. It is a situation where what seems at first to be an innocuous setback becomes a matter of survival. Auras of *preta*, *nats*, sirens, a pantheon of underworld spirits hover around my being, tempting my fate. I honour their presence without lifting my eyes, my focus fixed on the wooden planks and placement of my feet.

Back in the car, everybody is rigid with fright and fatigue. Finally, we drive into what seems a ghost town in the eerie, fluorescent light. 'Where are we now', I ask, imagining we have reached Myitkyina. 'Katha', Sanda says. I look up Katha. It is about halfway to Myitkyina from Mandalay and it is 3 in the morning. The guide in my phone, apart from informing that Katha is where George Orwell spent years as a policeman, recommends the Eden Hotel. Sanda finds some figure in the gloom and gets direction. We wake up a boy in the foyer who shows me a spartan room. The last thing I do before collapsing on the mattress is look out the window. Sanda and his companions are chattering in the car. I wonder where they are going to sleep.

After a couple of hours of restlessness, filled with ghostly dreams, a murky dawn filters into the room. I peel back the dingy, lace curtain. Condensation glazes the window. I rub the wet glass and peering below into the gloom make out Sanda's white Honda by the side of the road.

The situation is hopeless, no attempt to rationalize or gloss over it can work. I have to take responsibility for the breakdown of trust in myself and in what existence provides. It is time to face the truth. I realize this implies a forfeit of money not to mention being put in the situation I was trying to avoid when accepting Sanda's offer, that is, of being alone in remote corners of Myanmar, finding my own way. It always comes to this point. Staring at the car through the window, I recognize clearly that when there is no hope, when there is no way forward, that is when I trust existence the most, when my thoughts and actions are not based on fear and hope but on the *dhamma*, the eternal law. I gather my jacket and valuables, go downstairs, past the sleeping boy in the foyer and across to Sanda's car. All

three are sleeping in the car, Sanda is curled up in the boot. He looks at me incredulously. I realize my fascination with his betel-stained teeth has gone.

'Sanda, give me back some money. You can go back to Taungoo, spend time with your father,' I say calmly.

In an instant I can see he is attracted to the idea but does not want to give any money back. In sum, I have already given him a good part of my Myanmar budget, US\$700 and 200,000 kyat (\$US200), for a two week hire.

'How much', he says.

'400 US dollars', I quote, knowing there is little chance of an agreement.

Sanda takes out his wallet. It seems he only has 50 US dollars and offers me this and what he says is 100,000 kyat which on counting is only 40,000 kyat.

'Why have you got so little money,' I protest, 'how were you going to pay for the trip?'

'You not worry about that', Sanda snaps.

'But where is the rest?'

'Taungoo'.

I am standing in the street with the money he has given me, still shocked by how little he is carrying. 'You are not being truthful', I say, pointing to the notes, 'you said there was 100,000 kyat, there is only 40,000.' At this point, Sanda's frustrations take over, 'you stealing my money, we go to police'.

The mention of police is deeply troubling. Despite the clarity of purpose when I stepped out of the Eden Hotel and approached Sanda's car, I realize again that the situation is out of control and I could soon be trapped in a never-ending sequence of incarceration, both mental and physical, trying to explain to Burmese police the inexplicable with the background of Sanda's hysterical gesticulations and accusations. Instinctively I realize also there is no going back. 'OK,' I say, climbing into the back of the Honda, 'let's go to the police.'

Sanda hesitates and then relents. 'I give you 50 US dollars and 100,000 kyat and you go,' . I nod my head and he starts trying to round up some more kyat from his companions. Totwoi has nothing but the woman who has not looked at me once in the previous 24 hours

can help out. I get out of the car without a word. The impulse to say ‘thank you’ is amazingly strong but I haven’t the heart.

After packing, I walk slowly through awakening streets to the Katha jetty. Despite the weight of my backpack, I am feeling light. The sun is rising on the far, uninhabited bank of the Ayeyarwaddy. I buy a ticket for the fast boat to Bhamo. Soon I am sitting at a breakfast stall near the jetty eating *mohinga*, egg and spices. On the same bench, a young woman with her two little boys and her mother, are eating the same breakfast and she pours me some green tea with a restrained, gentle smile. The jetty is full of bustle but all is radiant and peaceful, the endless doubts and frustrations have disappeared. The disbelief at the batteries debacle, the mental contortions about hiring Sanda, all the blame games I have targeted at myself are a device to bring me to this joy and gratitude. There is nothing to do, nowhere to go and it is enough, there is no desire. I take out my phone, open the camera app and take a picture of the jetty. On playing back the image of silhouettes against the river, I can only think of one word, ‘glorious’.

Walking along the four-by-two plank upwards from the muddy bank of the jetty to the boat, I am still entranced. In a grinding crescendo of noise from Burmese pop songs playing on loudspeakers and the rattle of diesel engines, the boat pulls away from the shore, weaving a passage through the sandbanks, the floating debris, across turgid currents. This is then the journey, to recognize pain, to recognize that desire and attachment are the source of pain, to recognize that it is possible to be free of pain and then **to be** free of pain. I feel that in my life I am repeatedly weaving a passage through sandbanks and floating debris, across turgid currents. I am longing for open water.

Minutes later the boat to Bhamo is free of sandbanks and all the smaller fishing boats and with a roar goes full throttle into the vast, calm waters of the Ayeyarwaddy.

Open water.

On the far shore a red silk cotton tree is visible, majestic in its isolation, the leaves glinting, speckled against the cloudless sky. My blood rushes, the pores of my skin bristle. The boat hums. ‘*Gāte gāte paragāte .....*’, the words trail off into silence.

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## Glossary:

1. Although all incidents are true, names of people have been changed in the interests of fiction.
2. Place names in Myanmar can be spelt in many different ways when transliterated to English , pronounced something like as follows -

-*Kandawgyi* pronounced *Kan-dor-jee*

-*Myitkyina* pronounced *M-it-chee-na*

-*Hpakant* pronounced *Pak-an*

-*Hkamti* pronounced *Kam-tee*

-*Mrauk U* pronounced *Mrow-oo*

3. Some Asian words in the text are retained in italics as in –

- *kunya* (Burmese) – a mild stimulant, the betel leaf and areca nut chewed with slaked lime, possibly tobacco, and various herbs and spices

- *arhat* (Sanskrit) – Gautama Buddha’s original followers

- *kirtan* (Hindi) – devotional singing

- *maulsari* (Hindi) – a sacred tree, Spanish cherry, *mimusops elengi*

- *vipassana* (Pali) – meditation focusing on the breath

- *preta* (Hindi) – the ‘hungry ghosts’ known throughout Asian cultures (the term ‘hungry ghosts’ is derived from the Chinese ‘*egui*’) to be pitied or placated

- *nats* (Burmese) – the Burmese version of ‘hungry ghosts’, spirits who previously died a ‘green death’ (a violent death) and worshipped at shrines everywhere throughout Myanmar

- *dhamma* (Pali) – the eternal law of existence

- *mohinga* (Burmese) – national dish of rice noodle in fish-paste soup, herbs and spices, traditionally eaten for breakfast

- ‘*Gāte gāte paragāte .....*’ (Sanskrit) - From the *Prajna Paramita* (Heart Sutra). The complete line is ‘*Gāte gāte paragāte parasamgāte bodhi svaha*’ essentially untranslatable. A possible translation could be ‘going, going, going on beyond, always going on beyond, always becoming Buddha’ or alternatively, ‘gone, gone, totally gone, totally completely gone, enlightened, so be it.’ (N.B. ‘*gāte*’ is pronounced like ‘gah-tay’)

# Mud Map of Myanmar

