

Bitter Rain

by

Issy D'Arcy Clark

Prologue

Sunset in Burma is a moment of pure, burning gold; a Midas-kiss. It's an end and a beginning, a time when searing grip of day's dynasty finally releases and life can relax into a new, cool era. In a country of clashing confusions it's a rare constant, happening each day at 6 o'clock with only the smallest seasonal variation, demanded by Earth's tilted progress. Because our sunlit hours were truncated, the demanding line of the equator acting as a scalpel to slice bright scenes from the canvas of our day, we lived at night, in the darkness of borders, folded behind the frame. If asked, I could instantly state the stage of the moon during its cycle, remembering the night before when I had stood on our rooftop balcony to gaze on it's cold, white face; a thumbnail, a colourless pomelo segment, the chalky white eye of a barbequed fish. The moon seemed as much a light source to my living moments as the sun itself, though I knew it's brilliance was borrowed.

If I could go back to Burma for a moment, just one, I would choose half past five on a February evening, moments before the sun disappears for the day. I would stand on Thein Phyu Street outside the entrance of the ruined Secretariat, that graveyard of ideologies, and watch as its sandstone cornices are kissed into glowing by the fleeing, golden light. I would listen to the ProBox taxis rattle by, hear the street vendors shout their wares ("mont-lin-ma-yar"), and eavesdrop on the conversation of the crows bedding down for the night in the palm trees overhead. I would smell the

heat of a sun-baked city and the tang of betel spit in the gutter. I would feel the warm wind from the Yangon River browse over my skin and watch as the sun slips behind the rooftops of forgotten Rangoon, a yolk tipped from its shell.

The monsoon in Myanmar lasts for six months and so the year splits evenly; dry and wet. At the start of the rainy season in May, the deluge of water can transform the streets from walkways to rivers in seconds. The thunder bellows so loudly, as if the sky overhead was cracking in two, and the lightening wakes you from your sweating dreams in a white-hot flash.

As the rains ravish the city, they leave behind a trail of carnage in their wake. Sheets of corrugated iron peel off from rooftops to dance in the wind like kites and open windows are left to slam and smash, sending down a carpet of glinting glass jewels onto the pavement below. People die in Yangon each year by stepping into puddles that have fallen electricity cables hidden beneath the surface, sending deathly pulses through the pooled water. During my last monsoon an old man, a woman and a young boy all died this way, each in separate incidents. The newspapers showed a photograph of the boy lying facedown in the water, one rubber sandal floating next to him. They dragged his small, sodden body out with wooden poles, but not before his mother arrived on the scene, tracing the steps her lost son should have taken on his way back from school. Three onlookers had to hold her back as she rushed, again and again, to reach him in that watery underworld.

These accidents are avoidable, but they happen every year.

By the final month of monsoon the rainfall is gentle, watering the country instead of drowning it, but when I left Myanmar in August of 2018, the rains were still murderous.

I can't go back to Myanmar at any time, dry or wet. All I can do is remember; remember the rains and the heat, the death and the ecstasy. Remember a time when I was a golden girl in a Golden Land.

1.

The August rain cascaded from the sky in thick, watery sheets. Overheard an endless, colourless canopy of cloud was knitted densely together. From where I stood by a roadside fruit stall, half sheltered beneath a blue tarpaulin sheet strung across bamboo poles, I watched as the dirty water flowed into the gutter and then circled hopelessly above the drowned drain. Cars travelled past in monotonous succession, murky white beasts parting the waves on the road, splashing my feet and passing on. The scent of smoke still clung to my hair and I was soaked with rainwater, sweat and tears.

The fruit-seller, a woman wearing a faded pink longyi with thanaka paste brushed hurriedly across her cheeks, saw my tears and touched my arm. She held out one of her tiny clematines as a gift, its dimpled skin glowing bright with water droplets. It sat in her proffered palm, a golden orb on a plump cushion, brilliantly warm against the dim, grey world. I looked at it, but I couldn't accept her kindness, couldn't even meet her eyes, and I turned away. Confused, she tried to reach for me again but I stepped back from her shelter to stand in the rain.

Across the street a white ProBox taxi pulled up and I saw Della's face at the open window. She shouted for me to get in and I ran to her.

As the door slammed I heard Della instructing the driver to take us to Mingaladon Airport and the taxi accelerated forward. I looked back at the woman selling fruit; her face blurred by the rain that fell between us.

Della was talking; "...you need to delete everything – delete your Facebook, delete your Instagram, your Twitter, Viber, all your email accounts—"

“What?” I couldn’t understand her, my mind was waterlogged and my limbs felt drenched and heavy.

“Do it! Now. Come on. Everything has to go.”

I blinked at her, confused by this sudden rush of action and demands. “Della, I can’t delete my email—”

“Portia you need to delete everything. Now! You have to disappear. Your Facebook, your Instagram, WhatsApp, Viber, your email accounts, Skype—”

“Della, I’ll never be able to contact anyone again, not you, not Zeyar—” I was panicking now, but Della cut across me.

“For fuck’s sake do it!” Her Irish accent, one I had always loved for its soft and melodic lilt, now seemed harsh and overpowering.

I did as she said, wringing myself into action and cutting the invisible strings that tethered me to my life with the tap, tap, tap of a finger. When I was finished she grabbed the phone off me and took it apart, snapping the SIM card and throwing it out the window into the oncoming traffic. She thrust a plastic zip lock folder at me – I remember recognising that it was the same brand that the children she taught used to carry their homework.

“Inside there is my passport, credit card, driver’s license and a note with all my details on it – including PIN number,” she said. “You need to memorize it all and then get rid of the paper. Your flight details are in there too. You’re flying to Bangkok and then getting a connection to Paris, then you’re taking the Euro Star to London. The security isn’t as tight on the train as it would be at an airport. I’ve booked it all and you need to memorize everything.”

“I can’t travel as you,” I protested. “I can’t take your passport and your credit card –”

“You will.”

“Del –”

“You will. Don’t argue with me on this Portia, don’t you fucking dare.” Della looked at me; her face was twisted with a fierce anger I had never seen before. “I’ve packed a bag of my things for you too,” she continued. “Change in the airport toilet and throw your old clothes away. There’s scissors in there too, cut your hair like mine is in my passport photo and you should be ok. It’s old and faded so it’ll pass. They’ll just see a white girl, they won’t question it. If not, there’s \$800 in the folder – start with offering \$500.”

She turned back to the taxi driver again and yelled at him in rapid Burmese, throwing a handful of blue-tinted 10,000 Kyat notes onto the seat beside him. The car jolted forward undertaking a line of traffic in the fast lane and then cutting ahead.

“Del –” I began to say. “I’m so, so sorry about this... I never thought that this would happen –”

She wasn’t listening; she was staring through the windscreen as if her eyes could blast the traffic from our path.

“Come on, come on...”

We were racing past People’s Park, tyres skidding on the thick pools of water overflowing from the gutter. I glimpsed the Shwedagon Pagoda, a lonely golden guardian of a storm-ripped sky. I closed my eyes and saw my life in flames. I saw Zeyar’s shouting face, I saw my hands blistering, saw the iron bolt glowing red, saw the smoke and the flames and the fear. The tears that flowed down my cheeks did nothing to extinguish the burning.

We got out at the international terminal and Della opened the boot of the taxi, pulled out her suitcase and threw it at my feet. She looked me. There seemed to be so much that she wanted to say, but she didn't speak.

"Del- I can't- All you've done..." I started to say. "I promise I'll pay you back. I'll make this right--"

She pulled me into a hard hug, tight and tense. I could feel the sweat on her skin, her pulsing heat, her strength as her body briefly covered mine like a protective shell. And then she pulled away, but stayed gripping my shoulders, holding me at arm's length. She was looking me in the face with hard, burning eyes that were furious and scared – scared of me.

"I forgive you Portia. I do," she told me. Relieved I reached for her, but she held me firm, looking me directly in the eyes. "But don't you dare ever contact me again."

Then she was in the taxi, the door slammed and it drove away. She didn't look back.

2.

"There are certain things you need to know about life here in Yangon," the girl opposite me said authoritatively, swirling her cocktail with a bamboo straw. "The expat scene here is kind of divided into different groups; there's the teachers first of all, then those who came out with big international corporations who all have cushy expat contracts, then the entrepreneurs, who are all racing to start something before anyone else does, then there's the Americans, the French, a few Scandis and, of course, NGO workers." She ticked off each of these on her fingers, listing the last

with a slight wrinkle of distain that was quickly masked, perhaps when she remembered the company that I was due to start working for.

“It’s not quite as divided as Alice is making out,” the boy beside her cut in, obviously hoping to reassure me. “Everyone just kind of mixes in together.”

“You should also be aware that at some stage you’re going to get sick, very sick,” Alice continued, ignoring him. “Hopefully you won’t get Dengue, but you’ll definitely get food poisoning. I get it for a couple of days at least once a month. Don’t eat street food; it’s filthy. You should also know that the local people here aren’t out to rip you off – it’s not like India or Thailand where any white person walking around has a giant target on their back. The people here are fair and respectful, mostly. You can haggle with taxi drivers or the stall holders in Bogyoke Market, but it will be over the difference of a couple of Kyat so don’t go in too hard.”

Her barrage of instructions, delivered like artillery fire, meant nothing to me. Yangon was a song without a melody and though her words were the sheet music, they placed in front of blind eyes.

It was 11th January 2015 and I had landed in Yangon four days ago, each of which had passed in a sweaty mess of confusion, despair, regret and euphoria. I was staying in a cheap, window-less room in the Cherry Blossom Hotel on Botataung Pagoda Road and was using the week before my new job started, in the marketing department of WWF Myanmar, to try to acclimatise

The heat and dirt of the city had struck me with a dizzying, southpaw blow. From the first hour-long taxi ride from the airport, when the driver had refused to switch on the air-con, his mouth brimming with a red liquid that at I first thought was blood, my English skin had remained sticky with the saline residue of old sweat and

the beading threat of new. Yangon was a slow, cramped city where cars inched along the overcrowded roads and people, endless people, leisurely threaded their way through the honking traffic. The intensity of the heat made walking anywhere unbearable and even if it didn't, the pavements were haphazardly laid with cracked slabs of concrete directly over sewers, rusting generators forcing pedestrians to d-tour onto the busy road and crowded street stalls selling fruit, jeans or quail's eggs. The broken streets seemed symptomatic of a broken age.

Each day I saw more and more of the secret horrors of Yangon; gutters clogged with plastic bottles, open defecation and an unknown, pervasive brown dirt that seemed to grow in the city like ear wax. Once, while walking in Yangon during the early evening I breathed in fetid smell of open drains and raw sewage. But then on the following night, when the heat of the day had burnt away and a sliver of moon gleamed like the chink in a black curtain, the fragrant scent of jasmine blossoms, sold in strings by roadside children, hung in the air like a peace offering.

Yangon had surprised me – shocked me, even. It was not the place of exotic charm and old-world beauty that I had seen in the hours spent Googling images from the safety of my parent's quiet home in Oxford. Instead this was a living, breathing city, one that was slowly waking up to the modern world around it and scrabbling to catch up. But though disillusioned, I was not ready to give in and besides, I couldn't.

There wasn't a singular moment when I decided that I would move to Burma, to gather the small seeds of my life and plant them in another piece of earth. In the same way that it's only possible to really see a star if you look into the blackness around it, I chose to leave home by looking at the nothingness I found there.

At my leaving party, held in a pub, a girl named Emily from the year below of our all-girls school, the kind of person who always looked embarrassingly delighted to be allowed into a group, sidled up to me shyly and told me that her cousin lived in Myanmar.

“His name’s Jamie and I’ve already told him that you’re coming out and that he needs to look after you,” she told me, eyes lit with the kind of excitement that came from feeling like she was, at last, filling a purpose. “I’ve given him your email address and he said he’ll message you soon. He’s got a girlfriend out there, her name’s Alice. She’s nice and really pretty but – but, not like you are.” She blushed crimson here. I understood poor, lank-haired Emily.

The idea that there were other people, around the same age as me, who had taken this step to live in a foreign land was not one I had considered. But there it was, that private school network in action, far-reaching fingers that spread across the globe, probing and pointing.

As I hugged my friends goodbye in the street, the cold January winds burning our cheeks pink, they all told me how brave I was, how much they admired me. But I just laughed and shrugged it off. Not so much brave as thoughtless, I assured them. But I knew I was brave. The kind of bravery that a fox has when it first bites down on its own, snared leg; the desperate, bloody bravery of maiming yourself free.

Obediently, Emily’s cousin Jamie had emailed me and we had arranged to meet for dinner, along with his girlfriend Alice. The three of us were sitting in a booth of a restaurant named The Elephant Bar & Grill in downtown Yangon. The walls were painted white and a network of teak beams raised the ceiling into a high triangular point above us. Copper fans spun overhead but they were clearly only for show as

discreet air-conditioning units were blasting out freezing air from behind the potted palms. Though Alice had adopted the mildly irritating tone of the fully initiated, I sensed that underneath her direct manner, she was actually trying to help me make sense of the frantic world I'd just arrived into. As we ate burgers, the first meal I had been able to finish since my arrival, Jamie and Alice told me about themselves. Jamie worked in real estate (a cushy ex-pat) while Alice had started a travel company (an entrepreneur). They both had the slight know-it-all manner but I found myself liking them. I wondered if Emily had told Jamie anything about my situation and how we had come to know each other, but on balance I decided not. Her meek, servile nature didn't seem like it had the capacity for that kind of power play.

While they spoke I studied their faces. It was true that Alice was not as pretty as me, but she was attractive in her own way; vulpine features emphasised by her rust-red bob of curls, sharp blue eyes and turned-up nose that seemed to lead her whole face to a point. Jamie by comparison was soft, with sandy coloured hair, large brown eyes and hulking shoulders cushioned by a layer of flesh, like a rugby player who had been injured and was off-sports for a few months.

They invited me to a barbeque they were having on Saturday and Alice told me she'd bring me along the next time she was having dinner with some of her girl friends. Jamie joked that could join the husbands and boyfriends instead and while I laughed I saw Alice dart him with a look of anger. I knew that she thought he was embarrassing himself, and her, while trying to impress me. I was particularly attentive to her throughout the rest of the meal.

Bitter Rain - Synopsis

Chartering the optimistic rise of Daw Aung San Suu Kyi's political party, the NLD, and their subsequent fall from grace following the news of the Rohingya genocide, *Bitter Rain* tells the story of modern-day Myanmar, through the eyes of a recent English ex-pat, Portia.

After a giddy year of partying, drinking and discovering "Burma", Portia is ready to return to England until the night of the election in November 2015, when the NLD take power and Portia meets the nefarious boy who has haunted her across the city, Zeyar.

Half-English and half-Myanmar, Zeyar is both an outcast and a renegade. Taking Portia away from the monotonous ex-pat world that she has become so bored with, he introduces her to another side of life in Myanmar. Mixing with the darkly glamorous generation of young adults who are the sons and daughters of Myanmar's corrupt political, military and business figures, Portia begins to understand more about the dark underbelly of the country that she is living in where human trafficking, bribery and political oppression are rife.

As Portia and Zeyar become closer, her suspicion about his involvement in these under-table dealings increases and she slowly becomes more entangled in his schemes as her perception of him swings wildly between vigilante and villain.

As the news of the Rohingya genocide hits headlines of the wider world, Portia's faith in the newly elected democracy is shaken and she is forced to choose a side; with Zeyar or against him.

Ignoring the warning signs, Portia places her faith in the man she loves, risking everything to follow him into darkness. As their plans unravel and the true horrors of Zeyar's world are revealed, she is forced to flee back to England, knowing that she will never be able to see Myanmar or Zeyar ever again.