

Moulmein by the Sea

The rain pounds on my teakwood roof for ninety-three days and nights without a pause. There is no end, and I can't remember the beginning. The rain is always there because it is the time of the monsoon. The monsoon in Burma is the loveliest time of the year; the flowering trees of red, purple, white and gold explode everywhere. The rain drowns the earth, and the earth overflows with color and wealth. Unbridled fertility is in the air, and everywhere children laugh, run, and play.

The seaport of Moulmein lies gently on the Andaman Sea which sprawls into the Indian Ocean. In earlier days, Moulmein was Burma's greatest seaport, its piers crowded with ships taking rice, teakwood, rubber, tea and oil to the world. I lived in Moulmein, Burma, in the early sixties.

In 1960, there were pockets of Westerners in Moulmein who remembered the old days—a handful of English and Anglo-Burmese, who were rubber and tea merchants; the alcoholic boat pilot who guided ships up the Salween River past hidden threats; the white women who had lived too long in a land where they didn't belong.

I belonged in Moulmein and on the land all the way down the Tenasserim to Mergui that nearly touches Malaysia. On the east and beyond were the jungles of Thailand. Around me were the Mons who had lived in Moulmein for centuries. In more than a dozen villages surrounding Moulmein were the Karens, an ethnic people, mainly Christians, who hated the Burmese. My job was not to get involved with tribal, religious, or political animosities. My work was to travel with books and films in English and Burmese to the villages of southern Burma and to give information about people and culture in the United States.

I visited libraries, schools, and villages to spread the word about the Western way of life through pictures, words, and films. When my

driver pulled into a village in our green Jeep, we contacted the *thuygi*, set up the movie screen and entertained the villagers for two or three hours.

It was a fine way to make friends. The youth and the elders seemed to love our books and our movies, and I liked to hear their laughter and feel their appreciation.

One night and one adventure shows how close our relationship was. At dusk, my Jeep spluttered to a halt outside of a small wooden hut on a rain-soaked track in front of a jungle village. I was alone as it was a Burmese holiday, and my boys had gone to the temple. I hollered “Helloa” twice, and a kerosene lantern waved in the open doorway. A small hand made a circling wave. Grabbing my sleeping bag, I ran towards the figure and into a dark room smelling of smoke, fish curry, and wet sandals. The orange flame of the coal fire flickered on a man’s face that was dotted with tufts of black hair. Near him was a woman huddled over three children. The woman’s hand reached out and touched my hand with a tin plate of rice and vegetable curry. Not smiling, she nodded. The message was clear:

“You friend—eat...”

I was tired from driving for hours in the dark on the narrow jungle track. After I ate, a small boy handed me a bowl of water to wash my fingers, and he motioned me to follow. Carrying my sandals and sleeping bag, I moved out of the light and into the darkness.

I don’t remember lying down. Later, much later, I drifted back into consciousness. My eyes opened, but I saw nothing—no flame, no sign or smell of time passed—only blackness and the deep roar of the monsoon. The air was heavy, warm, unmoving. My fingers groped the darkness hunting for the sleeping bag. My head turned, and I suddenly remembered that I was sprawled on the wooden floor.

My left arm trembled, tensed, trembled again. My fingers felt, rubbed a pulsating body. Not moving, not seeing, I opened my eyes. I wanted to see, but I could not. The blackness was immense. I tried to raise my head. My throat made an animal sound.

Instantly, a white glow shone at the edge of the darkness. The glow moved toward me, and I turned my head to see the bare feet of

the villager. A sharpness pressed against my thigh, then stopped. The man's arm rose high above the floor, and the lantern caught his hand. The hand was grasping the branch of a tree. Looped around the branch was a dark brown, yellow-banded ten-foot King Cobra. The creature had crawled into the hut and found warmth as it slept against my leg. One of the cobra's red eyes opened, closed. Very, very slowly as in a dance *adagio*, the man's brown arm moved back; then it hurled the cobra through the open window. The light of his lantern drifted away as he walked out of the room. The blackness dropped over me. I slept.

I was a guest in the home of a Burmese villager who treats every stranger as a friend. He may not be able to recite the steps of the Buddha's Eightfold Path, but he does follow the counsel of the Enlightened One to love and protect every living creature.

