

## THE FOURTH TRIP TO BURMA.

2012/7/26 TO 2012/8/??

Dear Fanny,

How many more times will I write to you from Burma? As many times as I visit Burma – and more, besides. How many times do I think of you? Many times... almost every day....

I almost did not begin writing this fourth account, but as before, I bought a local school notebook, knowing that the urge to write about Burma would soon grow on me... and it has. This trip, like the second, is a short trip. The first and third trips were executed and written on a grand scale, took place on the Irrawaddy River, and were unforgettable experiences, peak events, and hugely enjoyable. The second and fourth trips were shorter, came out of “failed other plans”, and dealt with side-trips. On the second, I had some loose time, and so I went on two side trips – to Patheingyi, then Moulmein. On this fourth trip, I hope to go to Gwa, Ngazun Beach, Pyaw (again), then back to Yangon. A rectangle....

As you well know, Fanny, we were supposed to visit Turkey, or Singapore together, but it did not work out. I hope your journey with ----- went well. On this trip, I imagine you a lot; we are traveling together, in all sorts of situations. Do remember this : Burma is here, and is waiting for us!

This was my first time in S.E. Asia during the summer. I had expectations of sultry, impossibly sultry monsoon weather. Actually, it wasn't that bad, although the rain-showers were a nuisance. I came to Bangkok, via Guangzhou and ----, as usual, and set up shop, as usual. For the first time, getting a visa for Burma was simple – the travel agent arranged it.

Bangkok is still my favorite rest-and-recovery destination. I do the same “trap-line” actions, each time : go on the “river-bus”, up and down the Chao Phraya River, looking at the same riverine scenery; buy used books from the usual backpacker bookshops, for those long winter evenings in XJ; have foot / neck / back Thai massage at the same places; get the same soy-milk and various juices at the same 7-11's; go to Shoshana's, again and again, for the same food; go to the same lunch-stalls or night-stalls, for the same food; visit the MBK mall to get the usual supplies; go walking around the same major temples and their courtyards; go to the same money-changer, travel agent, fan-seller, tailor. I like to come back to all of this : it calms me down; I do look forward to it, every and each year. Then, I go off on a trip, or come back to China for another round of teaching.

I knew from some time back that the next trip to Burma would be different. I could tell it in the air; I could feel it in my heart... and so it was. Just having the travel agent expedite my Burmese visa in 1-1/2 days, without my having to go to the Burmese Embassy on my own told me this year was going to be different ... and so it was. This was why my long-buried optimism decided to crawl out of the soul's winter, and slowly revive in the heat of a new Burmese summer.

In Guangzhou, I assured ---- not to be dismayed at her recent business setbacks, but to go on, using what she still has. She will. I have every confidence in her, from top to bottom. In her turn, she advised me to put behind me the sadness and desolation of my own setbacks and sickness of earlier this year. It was a fair counter-offer; so, I will. It took a few more days to become happier in the atmosphere of S.E. Asia, but in time, I felt better, and ready to look outwards again. So, thank you, ----. Every trip to her corner of China is worth it, even after the misery of letting an uncertain taxi-driver find his way from the airport to her doorstep over some of the world's freeways (in terms of finding one's way at night).

From the window of the Bangkok to Yangon flight, I could see floodwater everywhere. The fields were mostly flooded, the roads were barely out of it, and the skies were heavy and grey. Soon, I would get used to the waves of rain-showers, opening up onto the land with the reliability of automated flush-systems in a vast public irrigation system, never stopping until dry-season, and harvest.

The Motherland 2 Inn was full, so I went to the May Shan Hotel, near the Sule Paya Temple. Once booked in, I went to the Motherland 2 Inn, to book for a later stay. (It seems that if one "shows up" at a hotel, the beds are all taken; if one plans out by several days, then it is a bit easier to get a room. Also, I like going places during the "off" season, when the tourists are few, prices are lower, and nothing is going on.) I was glad that someone had previously booked a room for me at the May Shan Hotel. Very quickly, slow and fastidious cold-water showers became the favored little luxury of this trip. I then lay on the bed and stared up at the ceiling vacantly, glad to be alone, and completely removed from almost all forms of society and accountability. The physical presence of others was removed; now, I need to find a way to remove most of it from my mind!

I usually make mistakes during the early days of a trip, and this trip was no exception. I needed a bus ticket from Yangon to Thandwe (near the Ngapali Beaches), so I hired a taxi to take me out to the bus station – far from the city center – and back again. This was the bus station where I had spoken the infamous quip to another taxi-driver, "Baby! For you, the 'moment' is over." The traffic was very heavy, and miserable, so I just sat in the back of the taxi looking out at nothing, my eyes in a glassy stare. We got the ticket for the next day, drove back along the same roads, and came back to the May Shan Hotel. It was soon after that the hotel boss said to me, "Oh! We provide that service for you. You did not speak up and ask. Some guests do not speak out." How right she was, Fanny.... So, the next time I will ask the hotel to help by booking the next bus trip or hotel for me. Travel in Burma is a very slow and deliberate, painstaking and inertia-filled affair. It is like sailing in a lake of honey; nothing in all the world will make things go any faster. Yet, it is exactly this state of "living in the land of vibrant amber" that makes traveling in Burma so pleasing to me (assuming the next step of the journey has been booked for you). You just turn off your mind, and "live in amber".

That night, I had dinner in a Chinese restaurant, recommended by the boss of the May Shan Hotel, and not far from the Sule Paya Temple. Once again, it was raining, like a scene from "Blade Runner". I stepped out into the blackness, gingerly tip-toeing around

the puddles, with the umbrella pulled down over my head. The lights from oncoming cars met the rain-drops falling around me, making instantaneous, ephemeral bars of light, shutting me inside the black umbrella, and closing off forever whatever world the Sule Paya had to offer. Light reveals and exposes what is in the dark, but it can also serve to shut up one's entity inside the darkness. All one had to do was walk under the steady rain, with the umbrella pulled down low, and walk towards the oncoming lights of the traffic. In a flash, literally, the outer world went away ... disappeared.

I wandered alone in the black universe, alone with my thoughts, passing occasional figures – people without identity, going somewhere. The Supreme Court building was empty, shuttered for the night, silent, immobile, dripping rain in many places. Here, I could have been dreaming in the outer recesses of my mind, and not walking the night streets of a nation's capital, the rain tapping on my umbrella.

The dinner was good – stir-fried vegetables, bland, free of MSG and red pepper, bland and not aggressive. The restaurant was almost empty, save for the few staff and me. I felt I was in the waiting room of a railway station, at three or four in the morning. I ate, happy to be settled for a short while, happy to be alone with my thoughts, happy to be away from people who knew me. Softly, through the descending sleepiness, I heard the faint sound of the rain outside. It was waiting for me. I ate, paid, and walked back to the May Shan Hotel in the same rainy darkness, went upstairs, washed, and went into a half-restful, half-troubled sleep.

The bus ride to Thandwe, then Ngapali Beach took about 16 hours, over main roads the width of a wide suburban driveway. Think of driving up and down Apple Street (in Essex, MA), up and down, for 16 hours. Somehow, the “capillary highways” work, although they take a frightful beating from the traffic, and exact an even more frightful toll from those who are forced to do the “corvée” each year. As usual, the bus blared out KTV songs, and B-movies or comedy sitcoms. The landscape (while it was light enough to see) was flat, the road lined with trees on each side, and full of rice fields. In time, I went to sleep, dreaming of hills.

I chose the Memento Hotel, at Ngapali Beach, because it was cheaper than the others (\$25 per night). It being the “off-season”, the whole local economy was in hibernation, with very few tourists around. This was exactly my kind of place, Fanny! The monsoon rains swept in two, three or four times a day, never letting in a brief moment of clear skies. Before the rain, the wind; when a certain “natural switch” was tripped, down came the rain; the skies turned from middle-grey to heavy-and-dark grey. During the daylight hours, there was no electricity in the local bungalows, so this effect was even darker. The rain pelted down continuously, rattling the roof and streaming over the windows. I felt very dirty in my travel clothes, sweat-soaked for three days or more. At this time, cold showers were a happy luxury; washing all of me very slowly and very carefully was something that I looked forward to. How strange, that when wetness outside made daily life miserable, it was water which brought me relief. So, I washed two or three times each day. After, I lay motionless on the big and desolate bed, cool at last (as long as kept very still), and stared vacantly at the woven bamboo, tatami-like mats that were affixed to the roof. In my dreams, I visited a Japanese “ryokan” (traditional guest-house), walking upside-down from the ceiling, in an upside-down room floored in dark-brown and tan

tatami mats. If I moved, the vision would shatter, bringing me back to the real world at Ngapali Beach, ready to break sweat at the slightest provocation.... So, I remained almost motionless, trying not to move, or think, or look at anything save the woven patterns of the mats. The bed was cool and comfortable; the only sounds were the rain on the roof and the wind rattling the palm-fronds. If only I could cultivate the ability to switch on or off my restless thoughts!

The actual beach at Ngapali Beach was not very impressive. The sand was a tired, dirty-grey. Broken sandbags, from a few places where high seas had ravaged the sea-wall, lay here and there, partially buried in the sand. The beach itself was not very long. In the sand at the water's edge, and a little out to sea there were sharp and dangerous outcroppings of rock. High seas came upon the Burmese coastline, out of the grey, monsoon-obscured Bay of Bengal. No wonder the locals farmed their rice-fields now, while the seas pounded the coastline, and did their fishing work during the dry season!

This fourth trip to Burma is constrained by time. I would have liked to do more, see more, travel more, but there are not enough days. Oh well... another time, if there is one. I wanted to go up to Sittwe, and to Mrauk-U, but that will have to wait. Next time, I would like to return to the Memento Hotel and stay there for two weeks, alone, writing, and staring at the upside-down mats of bamboo tatami, for hours – even for some days. There is in me a savage hunger for isolation, for being alone, for being away from people, and I am sick and tired of denying it. Once I have fed my soul in this way, I will be better able to return to others – or never want to try.

The next bus, from Thandwe, going north to Taungoo, and then east to Pyay, took about 12 hours. Again, the English country lane meandered through the rising countryside. The land was very green, and the paddy-fields with the newly-transplanted rice-seedlings an even brighter, more vibrant green. Tethered cows and water buffalo munched and cleared away the weeds assigned to them. Their skins, and the vests of the herdsmen watching them were completely soaked.

In many places, the land looked almost empty and uninhabited. There were few cows, and even fewer people. Whole valleys seemed to contain nothing but upland rain forest. Here and there, one could see a few banana trees, a lone red-earth driveway following the ridges to a solitary, distant homestead, fog resting wrapped around the trees of early evening. I suspect, if we had stopped the bus and gotten out, the land would have appalled us with its silent, still presence. However, as with most buses in S.E. Asia, there was only the narcoleptic screeching of the TV plays and KTV music on the bus, throughout most of the night. Perhaps people fear the darkness, fear silence, fear the night, fear emptiness; they want to fill it in with something – anything to cover the embarrassment of their ephemeral mortality. Thus we drove on.

In many places – next to a rubber plantation, by a forest, at the beginning of a “tractor-trail” leading into the silent forest – there were little, hand-painted signs in squiggly-script Burmese. I imagined they said things like, “Army land! Keep out!” or “No trespassing!” Even as the bus passed through a landscape almost bereft of human activity, and the usual rural occupations, I had a clear feeling that the future of this land had already been decided, that tracts of land had been taken, chosen, and prepared for

occupation and development. I saw, in my imagination, special people, outsiders, an élite living here. Far from the eyes of anybody, they lived here; amidst the silent, almost inaccessible, fog-shrouded valleys, they planned the events of the rest of the world. Out of this silent land, they came to grasp control of the world – over time, unseen, unperceived, unknown. We had left this valley, and were into another drainage system, when night's darkness fell, and snuffed out everything. Yet I remembered....

Along much of this road – and others too – I could see many piles of broken limestone, stockpiled for the “corvée” work in the dry season. If these stones were carefully put together, like a huge jigsaw puzzle, then they made fabulously durable road-bed. Throughout the entire “Great Limestone Belt” of S.E. Asia, these hand-made mountain roads were engineering marvels – but at what cost and suffering! I wondered, where are the quarries that provided these stones?

We stopped at a small village, up in the hill-country, and had dinner. The local bamboo shoots and boar / feral swine were very good. Everything was very natural and clean-tasting. The one street through the small village – the “capillary highway” to Pyay – was muddy, wet, and obscured by darkness and harsh fluorescent lights combined. Inside the restaurant, the people were friendly and eating happily. Out in the street, in the light-darkness, pariah dogs moved about, now confident, now furtive. Beyond the thin strip of light and sound, food and community that was a mountain village, was the abyss of silence and darkness, challenged by nobody.

The bus moved on through the night, along the narrow mountain road cuttings. The bus windows were fogged up; the roadside vegetation grew very close to the pavement; the lights inside the bus were weak, and cast out a faint light on the passing vegetation. The results were imaginative. I felt I was in a submarine, looking out of the portholes at undersea forests of sea-kelp. Everything flowed and moved about, like undersea vegetation. Nothing was real any more; the bus ride had become a dream world. I was tired, and just wanted to go to bed, and forget buses.

In time, the great bridge at Pyay, over the Irrawaddy River, appeared, and at the far end, the bus driver told me to get off. What a surprise! A man from the Myat Lodging House was there on his motorcycle, waiting for me. How did he know where to meet me, and when? As the bus trundled into the darkness, down to Yangon, I got on the back of the motorcycle. We passed through the midnight streets of Pyay. I showered, and went to bed.

Pyay, I hope, will become my home for the last chapters of my life. “What do I hope for?” I hope for a quiet, sleepy town on the bank of the great river, the Irrawaddy. I hope for the balance of many factors : nearness to Yangon, and the outside world for travel and re-supply, yet isolation from that same world; quiet, provincial ways of life, yet the enthusiasm of ideas from the local university and grade-school students; silence at different times of day, yet the monotonous chant-preaching of the abbots in between; sparrows in the trees by day, proclaiming their small life, yet the unseen pigeons at night, huddled around the hotel's air-conditioner box outside my window, making life, and very noisily, too; dirt on the streets, and I-pads and I-phones on many tables; daughters from conservative families constrained by their father's “dictat”, yet a new generation, and those same daughters of Burma, taking wing in the morning winds of destiny; time to read books and to write, yet also to teach oral and writing English classes on a part-time

basis, for no money; a chance to live in a world of art, for in Burma, God used a heavy bristle-brush, and "paint" made of honey pigmented with all kinds of spices, executed in slow motion, yet also make my own art, to be written down and put in a box; a chance to watch the passage of time, of seasons, yet also to live in a world removed from time, from deadlines; a place to be hot and sweaty, yet also able to have cold showers when I want; a new environment in which to live and finally be myself, shorn of all the past and unreasonable constraints, yet also a place to fade away and die. There is indeed "a place for everything under the sun", dear Fanny, but I find it somewhat ironic that much of it should exist in the boundary-lands between two opposing environments, in the realm of paradox – my nemesis! I doubt anybody would ever follow me here, so I will go and do it alone, as usual, if I am able.

After sleeping for six hours or less, I got up. The hotel boss took me to two local breakfast places, for a split course meal. It seemed he knew many local people, for I saw him waving a lot as we darted here and there through the morning traffic and throngs of people going to work.

As requested, the hotel boss took me to visit a local English teacher, a man in his seventies, a full product of the 1940's British education system. We talked for a while, and then he referred me to another English teacher, who taught English classes out of his parents' home. Without this referral, I would have accomplished nothing of value in Pyay. I do not know if the second teacher and I even shook hands and went through the formalities of greeting. Within one minute, I was standing in front of his English class, and conducting a "free-talk" lesson. The students were three 16-year olds.

His class should stand as a model, as well as the teaching materials, the classroom, and the general atmosphere of the place. The students were keen to learn, although shy. The classroom was the enclosed veranda of his home; a table for ten people filled most of the available space, with the ten chairs, teaching area and electric fan barely fitting; a 3' x 4' white-board was fixed to the wall. The classroom instantly made me think of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century Irish "hedgerow" schools, where the country people learned Homer in Attic Greek, with the barest of facilities. For me, those Irish "hedgerow" schools were education's ultimate model. Yet this Burmese "hedgerow" classroom packed a real punch. The teacher's I-phone was able to connect with the "cell-phone Internet", and all kinds of information was able to reach the class in about one minute. I saw Google information, Wikipedia entries, a satellite image of my Maine state home (for the first time!), and my new web-site on the teacher's I-phone. I told him to buy an I-pad quickly, for his class....

In this matter of "hedgerow" schools – and also, "hedgerow" businesses – Burma is very similar to Indonesia. In both of these countries, you have very low-income populations, having to hustle to survive, operating out of near-shanty conditions; yet, with access to the Internet and some English-language skills, and a willingness to forsake their local and national prejudices, you have global-ready, outsource-ready, top-of-the-line business competition. Napoleon called Britain a "nation of shop-keepers". Today, it is the "one nation, under tarps" model in Indonesia, and the "hedgerow" schools and businesses in Burma who will prevail.

Once again, I say, there is no need for Burma to “go big, go monolithic, go glitzy” in order to achieve the false-Nirvana of “development” – like the Chinese are trying to do. Keep the current, “capillary” highways, although build, use, and maintain them well. Let there be mud in the streets, and old furniture in the school classrooms, but let there be an I-pad on the teacher’s desk for all the students to crowd around and look at. Let internal transport remain a slow affair, so as not to rip up the country with expensive, maintenance-hungry superhighways. Let people actualize themselves on the Internet, even if they will never visit Yangon, or abroad. Burma, like North Korea, and maybe also Somalia and Afghanistan, is sitting on a priceless national treasure. Having been excluded from the rat-race of development for the past few generations, these countries can “leap-frog” from zero to the cutting edge in a year or two... or less. For a good model, look at how the government of Namibia (S.W. Africa) asked Siemens to give it a world-class telephone system. The old models of “what it means to be a rich, modern, developed nation” are all worn-out, outmoded, and bankrupt. If the Burmese play their cards well – and are allowed to, by the others – they will emerge as a newly successful society.

These two days with the second English teacher were hugely important for me. It was “win-win” all the way – and I have traditionally never believed in “win-win” as a viable way of life. I enjoyed being able to teach “free-talk” classes in his “hedgerow” classroom, as I was able to get a glimpse into what I might be doing in Burma, should I take the plunge, and come here to live. If the students are willing to learn, then anything is possible. The second teacher had two classes that I saw – three 16-year olds, and five college students. Their English ability varied, but they were all keen to learn English. I think I taught each group twice, over those two days.

In return, the second teacher did many things for me. We went to a riverside tea-house for our own “free-talks”, because I like to work with the local English teachers too, and not just grade-school students and college-level students. He took me around parts of Pyay on the back of his motorcycle, showing me good areas to work and live in, should I come back for longer. The area around the university appears best. As for living, I could stay in a local hotel or guest-house at reduced rate, and go to Bangkok every three months to renew my visa. Perhaps at this stage, renting an apartment or buying a home is not a stable or practical choice. The second teacher also helped me to make banner-posters at a very cheap price – like in the last trip to Indonesia – and to find some good books. I would never have been able to do those things on my own. We discussed how to translate “Where there is no ‘lao wai’ : How to learn English on your own, on the go”, and decided it was best to go to Yangon for a Burmese translator.

However, the biggest decision was to start recording “audio-books” onto CDs, and have something that college students could use. Burma, it appears, does not have “audio-books” in English, or English-Burmese double-language type-setting / format. There are only about 20 printed, simplified, double-language books in the Pyay bookstore. The owner of the Pyay bookstore said she had not heard of any “audio-books”. Therefore, making educational curriculum (in this case, English-and-Burmese, double-language, by paragraph “audio-books”, for use on CDs), seems to be a very useful and interesting idea. The second teacher agreed to cooperate on this project, and find me a Burmese speaker, some recording facilities, and a place to “burn” CDs, should I come back.

I am very thankful, Fanny, that things worked out so well. For a brief recce. Into how I might use my retirement years in Burma, I learned a lot; the “local, outsourced knowledge” was very helpful. However, I am not yet ready to leave XJ.

The second teacher and I sat at our customary table at the river-side tea-house, watching life going by, and making plans. Boats pushed their way up the brown-grey waters of the Irrawaddy, moving ever so slowly. Barges laden with teak logs went down-stream. Now, most of the forest’s really big trees had been taken. Whereas before, around 2005 or 2006, the logs on the barges had been between four feet and six feet in diameter, now (2012) most were 1-1/2 or two feet in diameter. In time, there will be no more significant stands of original growth, old-wood teak. The rape of Burma was clearly visible to all river-watchers.

However, today, those thoughts were easier to put aside. The river-bank opposite Pyay was still green and wooded, with a fairly large white-and-gold pagoda halfway up the hill. The second teacher had wanted to take me there on the back of his motor-cycle, but I just wanted to “talk business”, and map out the course of our “audio-book” collaboration, housing issues, classrooms and students, and other conceptual or logistical issues. We got on well together, although at times, I knew I had said something off-culture (my fault), for I saw the ache of pain on his face. In Burma, the eco-system of “what is possible” is very thin and fragile.

I wonder, Fanny, what will be a possible future “chapter of life” in Burma be like? How will the days play out? Who will be my friends, and will there be friends, and not colleagues, contacts, or mere profit-takers? Will the pursuit of ideas sustain me in the long nights, when I lie immobile on the bed in a dark room, while the rain hammers the window-panes and the tree-leaves outside, drenching them? I think not, but I must go. I want the river of life to carry me to Pyay, just as the Irrawaddy River did. Since there is not a single person I know who would do this sort of thing with me, I hope I will do it alone, and do it well.

By the standards of many cultures, Pyay is dirty, poor, run-down, hot, wet and muddy or dry and dusty, poorly serviced, a semi-“backwater”, steeped in all three straightjackets of society, and more. Well, maybe this is true, but the people have been friendly. The hotel boss has been good to me, even though he racks up fees-to-pay from me. Yet, I must admit that people, as usual, are the peripherals of my life – except, perhaps, the students. As usual, it is isolation, ruthless simplicity of setting, peace and quiet, being alone but being surrounded by the non-involved voices of others, a venue for “life’s meaning” and “purpose” which are important.

Mud from hill-runoff goes onto the streets, and has to be scraped off the pavement, put into piles, loaded onto trucks, and taken away. Grit the size of pea-gravel remains on the roads, junctions and roundabouts; it is very effective in forcing the motorcycle riders to go slowly. People can move, but they must do so slowly, like candied apricots falling through treacle. The people are friendly, but within their abilities, their cultural norms, their own way of seeing



things. Woe to the traveler who tries to alter the “vibrant amber”, the existing realm of possibility, the thin margins laid down by reality! It would be better if he stayed home. One cannot – absolutely cannot! – push against the forces of inertia in this land. One must take what comes; be able to accept setbacks and failures; take graciously what one is given or served by others; budget more time and effort to do anything at all; arrive early and wait (or read a book), but allow the other person time to come; walk through life’s “treacle”, and get wet in the rain like everyone else, and not mind it. There is perhaps one place, and one place only, where it is possible to move forward in life, quickly and efficiently, and that is alone in one’s room, alone with one’s projects, and alone with one’s ideas, and alone away from others, and the problems of community!

However, when things are going well, the “doors are open”, and one can run-skip over the lily-pads the local culture gives you, then life appears good. Even in a “treacle-culture” like Burma, this is possible, and during my few days in Yangon – Ngapali Beach – Pyay – Yangon, it actually happened. For this, I am thankful.

I am glad I met several “people of destiny” on this trip, Fanny! All of them were helpful; they appeared at the right crossroads at the right time, and took me forward to the next “right place”; we made plans for the future, and even began a few projects when we were together. That such things unfolded, apart from me, is a miracle.

I hope that, should I have to leave XJ, or even China, then there will be another place, another people, another career, more projects, new ideas, meaning in life, contentment and satisfaction with what I have, and more. I also hope that we can advance your own plans, too, for now in your life, you are at the height of your abilities, your dreams are slowly unfolding, and you are ready to step forward into your evolving dreams. Fanny, the time is now; I hope you will be able to get up and fly, to go where you wish, and do what you want. After you read this letter, I hope we will meet again soon, to talk about “silly little things”, and laugh.

I arrived in Pyay in the dark, in the middle of the night. The hotel boss took me through the sleeping midnight streets of a silent town, perched on the back of his motor-cycle. Even the narcoleptic dogs were quiet. I also left Pyay in the dark, in the last hours of total night. It was an ephemeral, typically Burmese experience. I threw away my thoughts, realizing “the moment” was now, and I let “the moment” happen. The hotel boss’ motor-cycle pattered softly, somewhere in the back of my thoughts. The road to the city bus station was long, as usual. There was one star in the sky, and only I saw it. The skies were a strong black, made so by the single long-bulb, fluorescent light in front of each house. The neon “auras” rippled around the Buddha’s head in an otherwise silent roadside pagoda. Nothing moved; only we passed through the world of frozen, darkened amber, as a comet through space, watching the last silence of night before dawn. I remember the pattering of the motor-cycle, the bouncing up and down on the back seat, the hotel boss’ long hair tickling my nose, my two bags creatively lodged on the motor-cycle. It is an experience like this which will make me remember Burma, and not the tourist attractions.

The bus ride from Pyay down to Yangon was tedious and tiring, so I will say nothing.

It was raining heavily (again!) when I reached downtown Yangon, so I gave up shopping, and went straight to the Motherland 2 Inn. After a very short break, I went out shopping, on three last-day shopping trips. Lucky for you, Fanny! I got something for you.

In hindsight, I wonder why I did not rest more. After all, this was a holiday! However, you know me well. I could not rest; I was driven from within, and would not stop. However, one day was a country-wide Buddhist holiday. Everything shut down, all over the city. It also rained – a variety of rains, throughout the day. As a result, I accepted this enforced holiday and stayed inside the hotel the whole day. Why not? The Motherland 2 Inn is “better than home”; it is peaceful, clean and quiet; the staff are friendly and helpful; the food is good; I can escape the chaos of the city, and cocoon myself away from everything for a season. This is why I go back there again and again. Even though I like Burma so very much, it has a tiring, an almost corrosive influence on my soul – which is why the Motherland 2 Inn is like a shelter to me.

The following descriptions of small events in Yangon are “registered impressions”, fleeting memories from those three days, written later on....

I went out shopping in the light rain, without an umbrella. As is common in much of Asia, the crowds were in no hurry, and flowed slowly along the sidewalks, their umbrellas up and jostling each other, yet somehow shielding the people underneath. Walking along the concrete sidewalks in the Aung San market district (not the market itself), on a slow-moving and rainy day, is a supreme act of patience and skill – and I failed.

The concrete sidewalk slabs are thrust up at one or two corners, as if by “frost-heaves”. The rain comes down, regardless. Many people do not bother to try and keep dry; instead they wear flip-flop sandals, a “longgi”, a vest, and get soaking wet all day. Only when they return home at the end of the day do they wring out their clothing and dry off. As for me, I was morbidly averse to getting wet, especially on the feet. However, with the shoppers and common street folk of Yangon thronging the sidewalks, like a water-version of a Roman “testudo” flowing in both directions, I decided to get wet, and walk in the street.

Yangon always has a run-down, rain-drenched appearance; buildings exist out of one age and into another. It looks like someone who is barely keeping his nose above the rising water. Many of the off-street buildings stopped being painted years ago; now, they are painted by the effects of humidity – the peeling, curling flakes of old paint, ferns and epiphytes growing out of the cracks, a dozen forms of mildew, patches of unwashed dry-season dust. However, Yangon is very much alive, because its people keep it alive. Life is in the colors of people’s clothing, the meticulous carefulness with which small shop and vendor stalls are laid out and maintained daily. The thousands and thousands of “alms-bucket rope lines”, which the upper apartment dwellers use to pass food down to the monks below are a very visible reminder of daily social connections. Music is everywhere – much of it tawdry and traumatizing, or else enervating – but always, everywhere alive. The sidewalks throng with people; the streets pulse with traffic; the markets burst with eye-candy. The intense heat or heavy showers of rain drive the people

indoors, but only for a short while. When the streets are given over to the forces of nature, the people are inside, drinking tea, chatting, and carrying forward the force of life under their own roof, at a different pace. Soon, they will come out again, onto the streets, and into each other's life. Do not look at the buildings and infrastructure of Yangon to assess the city; rather, go to its people, and there you will find life in all its force.

Fanny, would you find a life here? I do not know how you would respond to the Burmese world.

The rain fell, and fell, and fell, as on that rainy day in "The Cat In The Hat". I did my shopping, arranged some other future projects, and prepared to go back to Bangkok, the center of things S.E. Asian. Fanny, I cannot wait to come back to glorious Burma, and I hope you will come with me!

It is now a year later (2013), and I am still thinking about Burma. The times are changing there, in many ways. Now, many foreign tourists are flocking to have a look; that means it is much too crowded and "chic" for me, right now. I came back home for a year, as the employment rules in China required "a year away". Burma is still in my mind; I think of places still to visit, and things to do. If it is not Burma, then it will, I hope, be somewhere else.

In terms of "places to visit", I would like to explore the Saigang area to the north of Mandalay. Not many people seem to go there, and it is really big. If possible, I would like to go to the far north, above Putao, and to the west, near Mrauk-U, and in the far southern coastline. I would like to "hide away" in Ngapali Beach again, and hear the waves all day and all night. Then there is Pagan, which I have still not explored. Forget the hot-air balloon trips at sunset! I would like to hire a horse-and-cart combination, and a driver, and just wander around temples, with no fixed purpose in mind. Should I live in MytKyina, or in Pyay, and make a new life there? I would like to find a quiet place (like Pyay), and just let a year flow by, at Burmese "slow speed". I want to be that piece of candied apricot, falling through a year's worth of treacle.

In terms of "things to do", there is the "audio-book" recording project. Once started, it could go on for a long time. Which books should be recorded? One local person said to me, "If you believe in my voice, I would like to record a book in cooperation with you." Where does that lead? Should I teach more English classes? Part-time work would be the best, with teaching mixed with audio-recording, travel, and just watching the days go by. Lest you (the reader, not Fanny) think my desire to just see life flow by slowly as weird, please know that more and more, I find the fast pace of life in the "developed" world unsupportable, and sometimes even traumatic. Burma is a suitable place for people like me, I think.

Perhaps it is time to buy a small "pied-a-terre" apartment in Bangkok, and use it as a home-base to live, work, and travel throughout S.E. Asia. I have been dreaming and hoping about this for so long, and I want to actually do it. Such an act will almost certainly demolish what vestiges of social and cultural identity that have survived in me.

I look forward to the next visit to Burma. Along with Portugal, Kyrgyzstan, China, and Thailand, it is one of my favorite places to be. As for you, Fanny, where do your feet long to take you?

