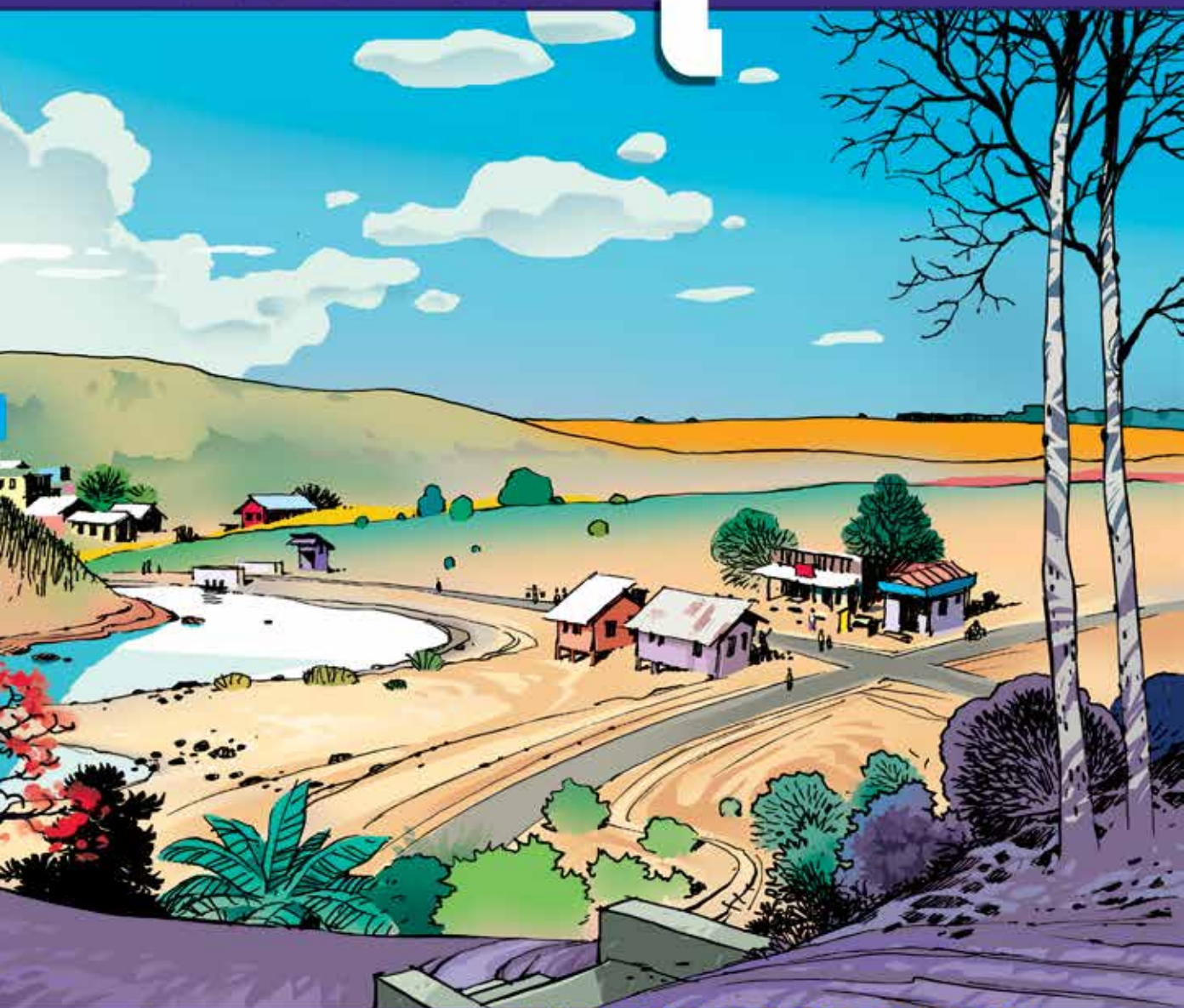


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**THE CROSSROADS**  
BILL HARRISON



# **THE CROSSROADS**

**BILL HARRISON**

**APRIL 2015**

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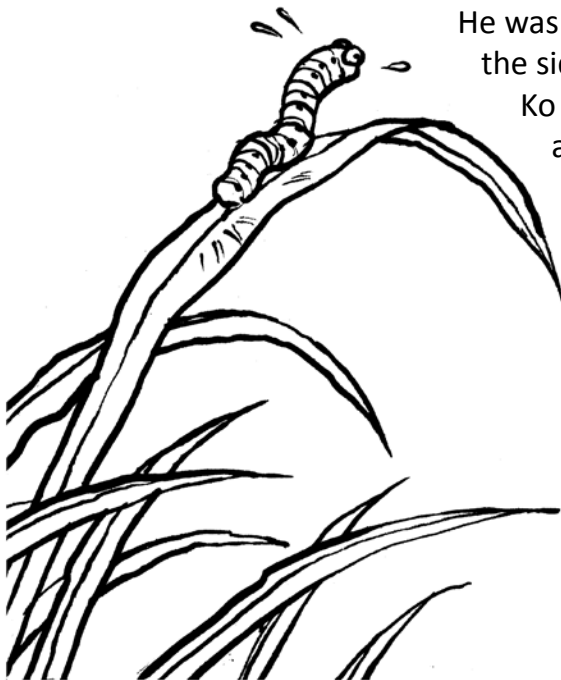
# THE CROSSROADS

## 1 FROG

The frog indented as new paragrap. It was a lazy, hot November afternoon at the intersection of Thazin and Padauk Roads, known as the CrossRoads. The frog had wandered up from Monsong Lake and started to cross Thazin Road towards the aromas worthy of inspection. At SMILE, a new corner tea and snack shop, Ko Win delivered sweets and strong sugary coffee to customers at a small roadside table. There was another smell, a little bitter, emanating from *The Cloud*, a health care shop located next to SMILE.

The first human to notice the frog crossing the road was Ko Thant. He was draped lazily across his bike at the sidecar stand on the corner.

Ko Win noticed Ko Thant looking at something on the road. Thin Thin,





a young woman applying nail polish to a customer at *The Cloud*, saw Ko Thant and Ko Win staring at the frog and she did the same.

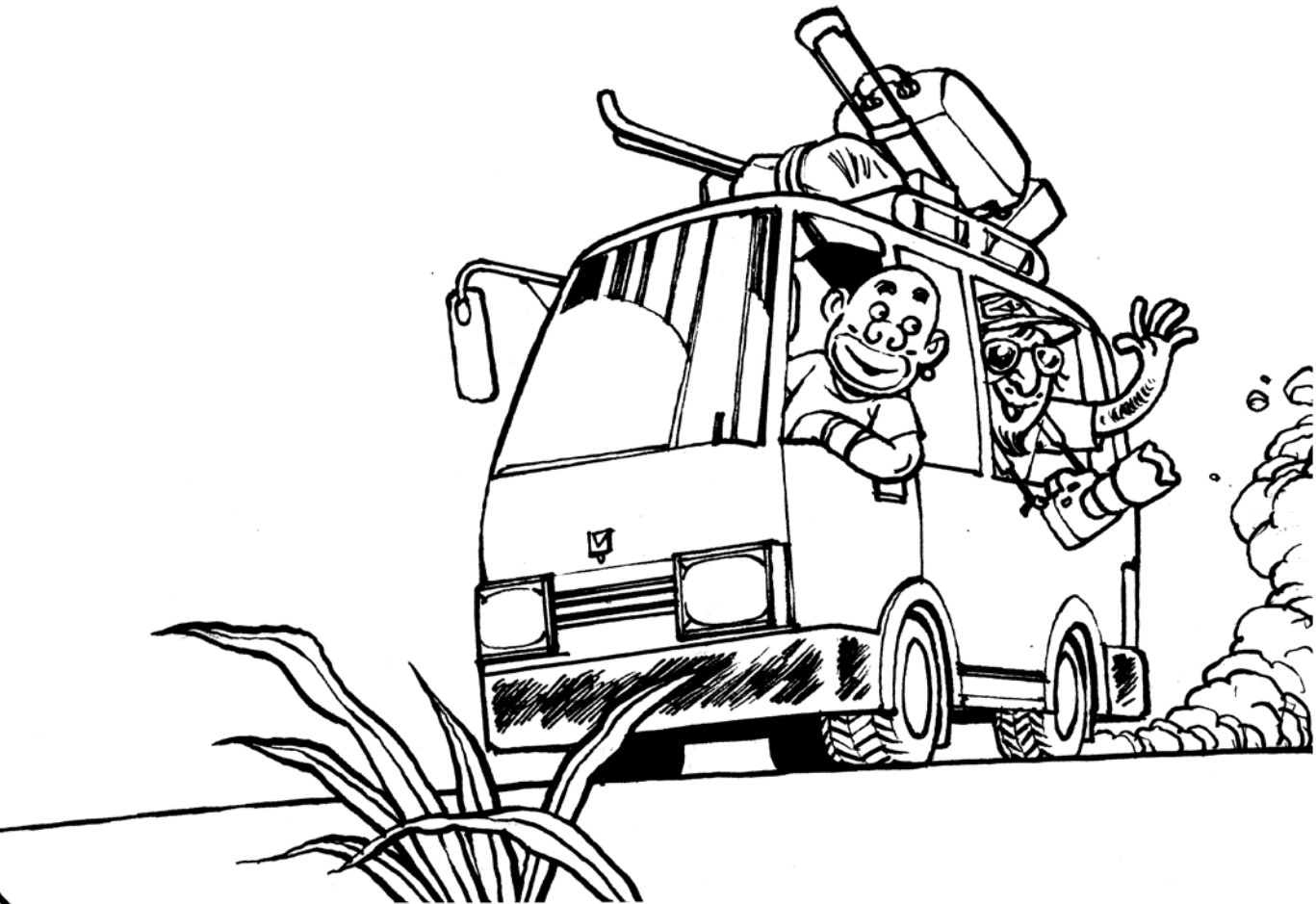
Slow steady hops as the frog crossed, oblivious to the noise from up Thazin Road, away from the lake, where a brightly painted Myanmar Tours van approached the CrossRoads. In the seconds that followed, the three humans simultaneously grasped the implications of the converging journeys. The van and the frog did not. This could be close. This would be close. A hop. Another hop. A rush of speed and tires and tourist laughter from inside the passing van. No more hops. No more frog.

Ko Thant looks at Ko Win. "Before your shop, there was nothing to lure him across the road."

Ko Win glanced at the van heading towards the lake.

"Before Myanmar Tours, he would have been safe."

Thin Thin winced. The color of the nail polish she applied matched the stain on the road.



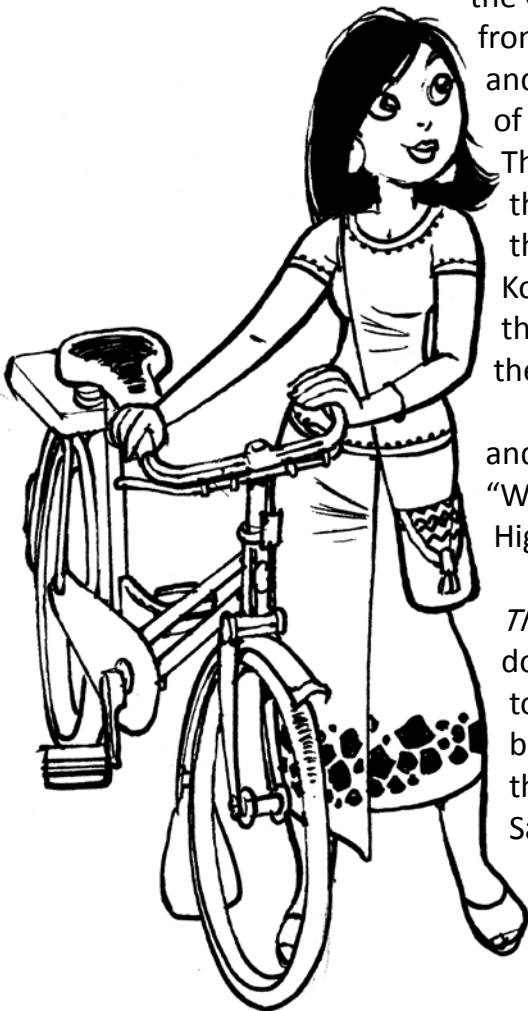
## 2 CLOSING TIME

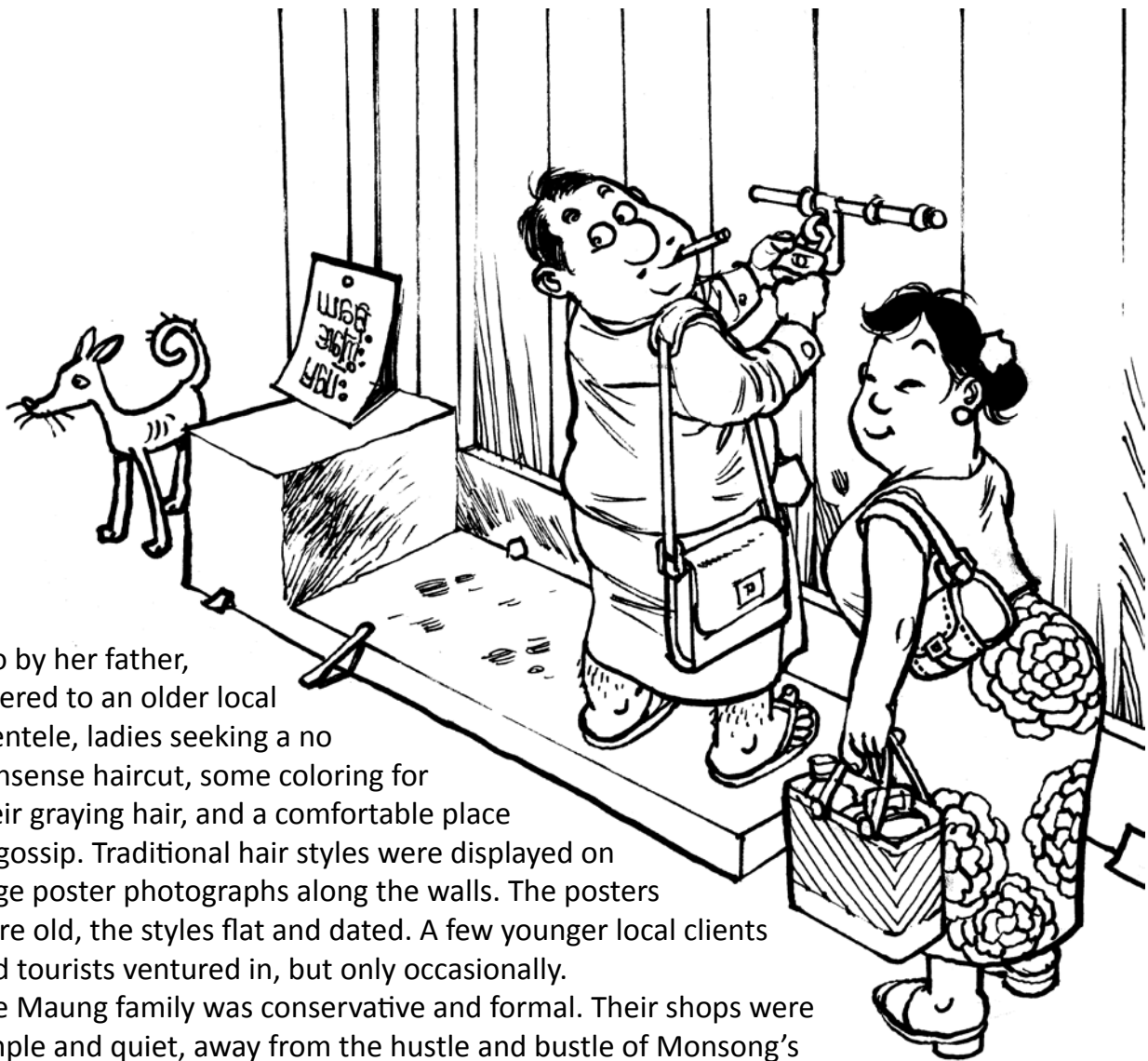
Most of the shops around the CrossRoads closed at 6pm. Across Thazin Road from SMILE and *The Cloud*, Thiri, Ko Win's aunt, and U Maung, his uncle, locked the doors of their fabric shop and hardware store.

The Maungs, in their late forties, opened their businesses in 2003 on property that had been in their family for many years. Ko Win locked the door at SMILE and the three met for a few minutes, as had become their habit, to recap the day.

U Maung surveyed the tourists and locals still out and about. "We may extend our hours if this keeps up. High Season is coming."

Thin Thin locked the front door at *The Cloud*. Before heading home on her bicycle down Padauk Road, she nodded and smiled to the Maungs. The three returned her gesture before looking towards SALON, the beauty parlor next to the fabric shop where Sanda, Thiri and U Maung's daughter and Ko Win's cousin, would stay open until 8pm. Sanda's SALON, built 10 years





ago by her father, catered to an older local clientele, ladies seeking a no nonsense haircut, some coloring for their graying hair, and a comfortable place to gossip. Traditional hair styles were displayed on large poster photographs along the walls. The posters were old, the styles flat and dated. A few younger local clients and tourists ventured in, but only occasionally. The Maung family was conservative and formal. Their shops were simple and quiet, away from the hustle and bustle of Monsong's commercial center down near the lake. They noticed that the improving political and economic situation in the last couple of years was bringing tourists and local shoppers up their way in greater numbers. U Maung and Thiri sensed an opportunity and when Thin Thin recently opened *The Cloud* across the street, they inquired about her grandmother's adjacent building at the intersection. Their nephew Ko Win was working part time at the hardware store. He was a high school graduate with limited job prospects, but he was a willing worker with an outgoing personality and an engaging smile. The area seemed ready for a tea and snack shop. Ko Win, who attracted friends easily, should be able to draw young customers, and Thiri could show him the ropes. Nabeelah, Thin Thin's grandmother, agreed to rent the small building, which required only minor improvements in the kitchen. Business in his first month at SMILE was good.



### 3 THE CLOUD

Two large round- bellied cast iron pots, black with fire and age, sat side by side on the stove in the kitchen at *The Cloud*. Also side by side, grandmother

and granddaughter. Today they would focus on the pot on the left and the recipe for a Pa Ya Say, or Ayurvedic, skin cleanser.

“First the water,” Nabeelah said as she and Thin Thin watched and listened as two gallons began a low vibrating rumble and moved towards a full throttled boil. “Make sure it’s a full boil.”

“Next the oil,” Gannie stirred with a long wooden spoon. Only Thin Thin called her Gannie. “Back to that full boil.”

“Now the herbs.” On a cutting board next to the stove sat little piles of shellac, turmeric, vetiver, sandalwood, dashmool and a host of other herbs. These were added to the boiling water. Wait a while until the concoction reduces. Add goats milk and sesame oil and boil some more. Finally the main ingredient, a saffron infused liquid. All this left to cook for a couple of hours. The resulting reduction, a bitter smelling oil, great for the skin.

With the smell at its most pungent, Gannie closed the window which opened onto to the SMILE courtyard next door, where customers enjoyed lunchtime snacks. The smell filled the kitchen and Thin Thin backed away from the stove.

Gannie smiled, “That smell is what makes it work.”

“My customers like how it works, but they don’t like the smell so much. Can we add some sweet smelling herbs?” Thin Thin knew how popular the sweet perfumes were with the girls at the drug store downtown

where she sold cosmetics before opening *The Cloud*.

Gannie smiled again with a nostalgic tilt of the head. She was traditionally trained by her father nearly sixty years ago. She never would have thought, nor dared, to make such a suggestion to him. But she kind of liked Thin Thin's willingness to do just that. Mostly, she liked Thin Thin's spirit, enthusiasm, initiative and youth. Nabeelah even tolerated her short and stylish curly hair, subtle but sort of sophisticated make up, which included thanakha, and the trendy blue jeans and red high top converse tennis shoes. The boys in town also liked her looks.

"We never thought much about our customers in the old days, it was just take your medicine." As the smell dissipated, Gannie opened the window.

Thin Thin noticed Gannie's concern for the SMILE customers. "Well, my girlfriends and I never think much about our neighbors these days... it's all about us."

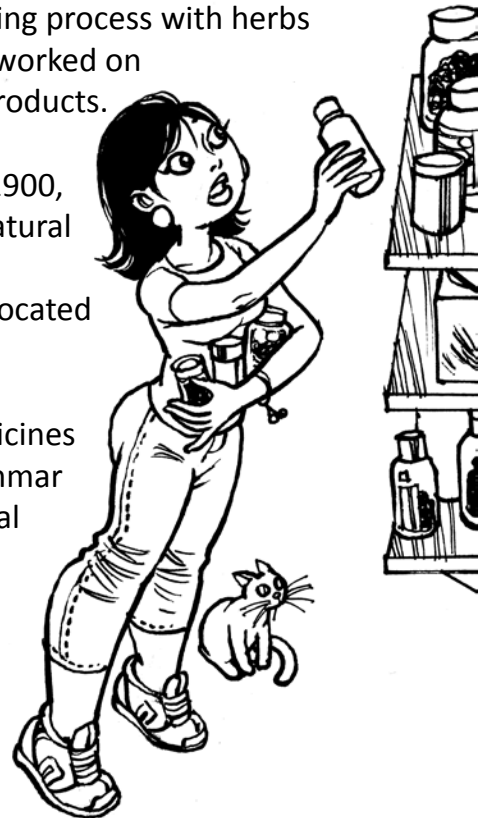
The two enjoyed this new ritual. Twice a week Nabeelah would come to the shop around 11am and leave at 4pm. One day they would make the facial cleanser, the next day the shampoo, a similar bitter boiling process with herbs like hibiscus, soapnut and Indian gooseberry. Thin Thin worked on the customers, usually outdoors, and sold the bottled products.

Nabeelah was happy to be in the background, passing the family traditions down the line. Her father, born in 1900, was formally trained in the Muslim Unani tradition of natural medicine at a University in Mandalay. For over 50 years, he ran a successful clinic out of their family compound located a mile down Padauk Road next to the mosque.

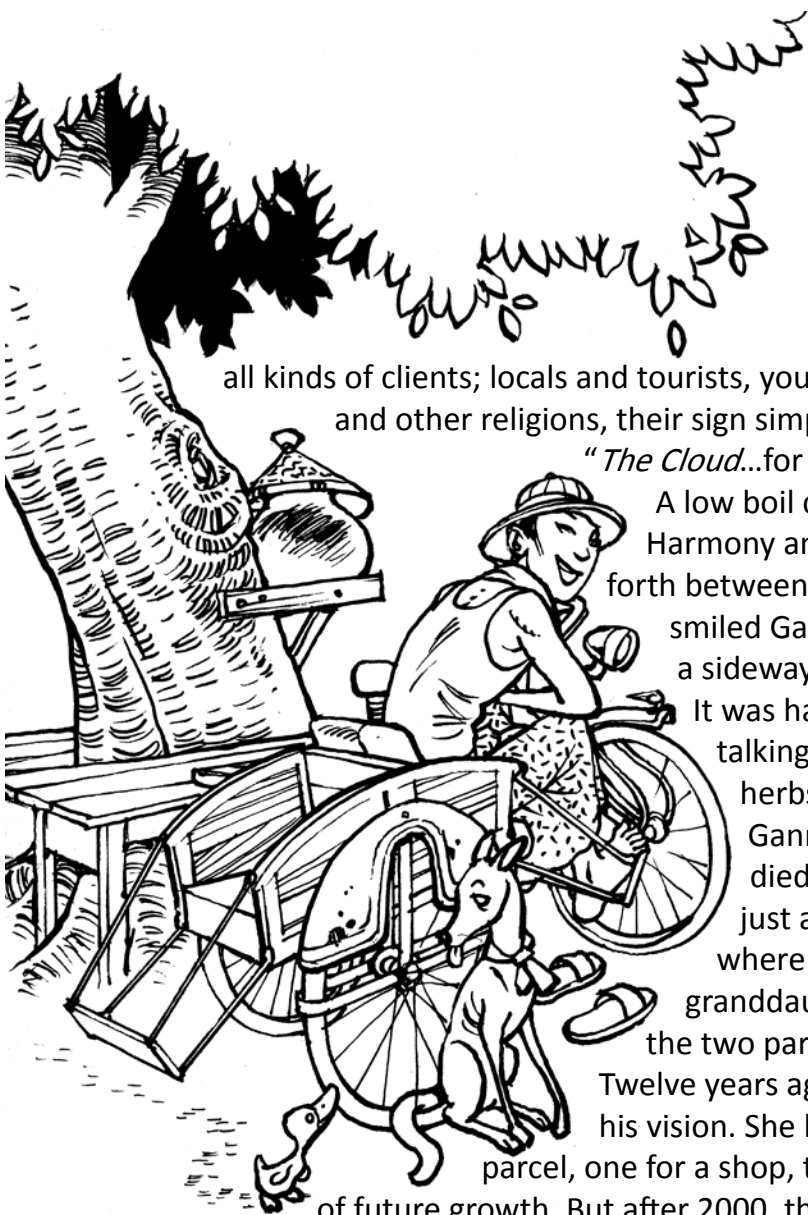
Nabeelah's brother, ten years older and her only sibling, was born in 1925. He was not interested in natural medicines or business, gravitating instead towards politics as Myanmar wrestled with the legacy of World War II and the removal of England's colonial yoke. So Nabeelah became the Unani standard bearer, unusual for a woman.

When her brother died in 1990, she became not just the matriarch, but also the leader of the family.

With the opening of *The Cloud* and the desire to attract







all kinds of clients; locals and tourists, young and old, Buddhist, Muslim and other religions, their sign simply read

*"The Cloud...for all your Pa Ya Say needs"*

A low boil continued, "Be patient.

Harmony and energy must go back and forth between you and the pot,"

smiled Gannie. Thin Thin stole a sideways glance.

It was hard to tell whether Gannie was talking to her, to herself, to the magical herbs or to a combination of all three. Gannie's mother, a quiet housewife, died in 1965. Her father died in 1977, just after he bought the property where his daughter and great granddaughter now stood. He thought the two parcels would have value someday.

Twelve years ago, Nabeelah decided to test his vision. She built a small structure on each parcel, one for a shop, the other for the possibility

of future growth. But after 2000, the general economy in Myanmar, and Monsong, got steadily worse. Locals had no money to spend and few tourists visited the lake. In 2005 she closed the shop and retreated to the family compound. A couple of years ago things started turning around. Thin Thin was a bright and feisty young woman. She only had a high school education, but she wanted to be more than a cosmetics clerk in someone else's drugstore. Padauk Road had been widened and their property now fronted an active crossing. The intersection became known as the CrossRoads and the name was used when giving directions around Monsong. It even had its own sidecar stand.

Thin Thin persuaded her grandmother to try again. Health products yes, but with cosmetics to add a modern flair. They opened *The Cloud* three

months ago and things were going well. Standing over the old family pots with her granddaughter at her side, Nabeelah allowed herself to unlock reveries from the past and hopes for the future.

#### 4 SMILE

SMILE had good prospects. The corner parcel facing the CrossRoads was an ideal location. Locals and tourists liked the casual feel of the spacious outdoor seating area with its two shade trees. In times of rain, there was a covered porch and a few small tables inside near the kitchen. The menu was simple for now; coffee, tea, soft drinks, sweets, and snacks. If things got busy, Thiri, who kept a sharp eye on the proceedings from the front window of her fabric shop just across the street, was happy to lend a hand. She made a bright SMILE sign, which was prominently displayed next to the sidecar stand.

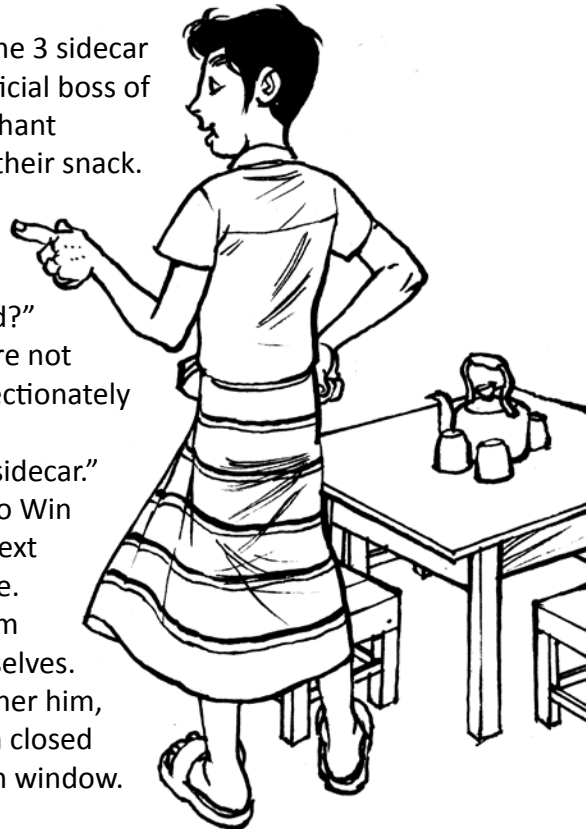
Ko Win quickly developed a friendship with the 3 sidecar drivers; especially Ko Thant, the outgoing and unofficial boss of the little transportation enterprise. Ko Win and Ko Thant watched two girls walk down towards the lake after their snack. "All the beautiful young women I bring to your doorstep," said Ko Thant "and what do you have to show for it?

Isn't it time you found a bride? Or at least a girlfriend?" "Don't worry about me. Worry about yourself. You are not getting any younger," shot back Ko Win. Ko Thant affectionately patted the seat cushion of his bike.

"I'm married to my sidecar."

Nabeelah and Thin Thin were good landlords. Ko Win was pleased that sometimes his customers filtered next door to *The Cloud* for facials or to get their nails done.

Nabeelah and Thin Thin purchased coffee from him when they could easily have made it for themselves. The occasional smell of the bitter herbs did not bother him, but he appreciated the gesture when Nabeelah closed her kitchen window.



**5 RIDE HOME**

At 4pm the heat was stifling, both in the kitchen and out. Too much standing over a sweltering stove for a seventy eight year old grandmother.

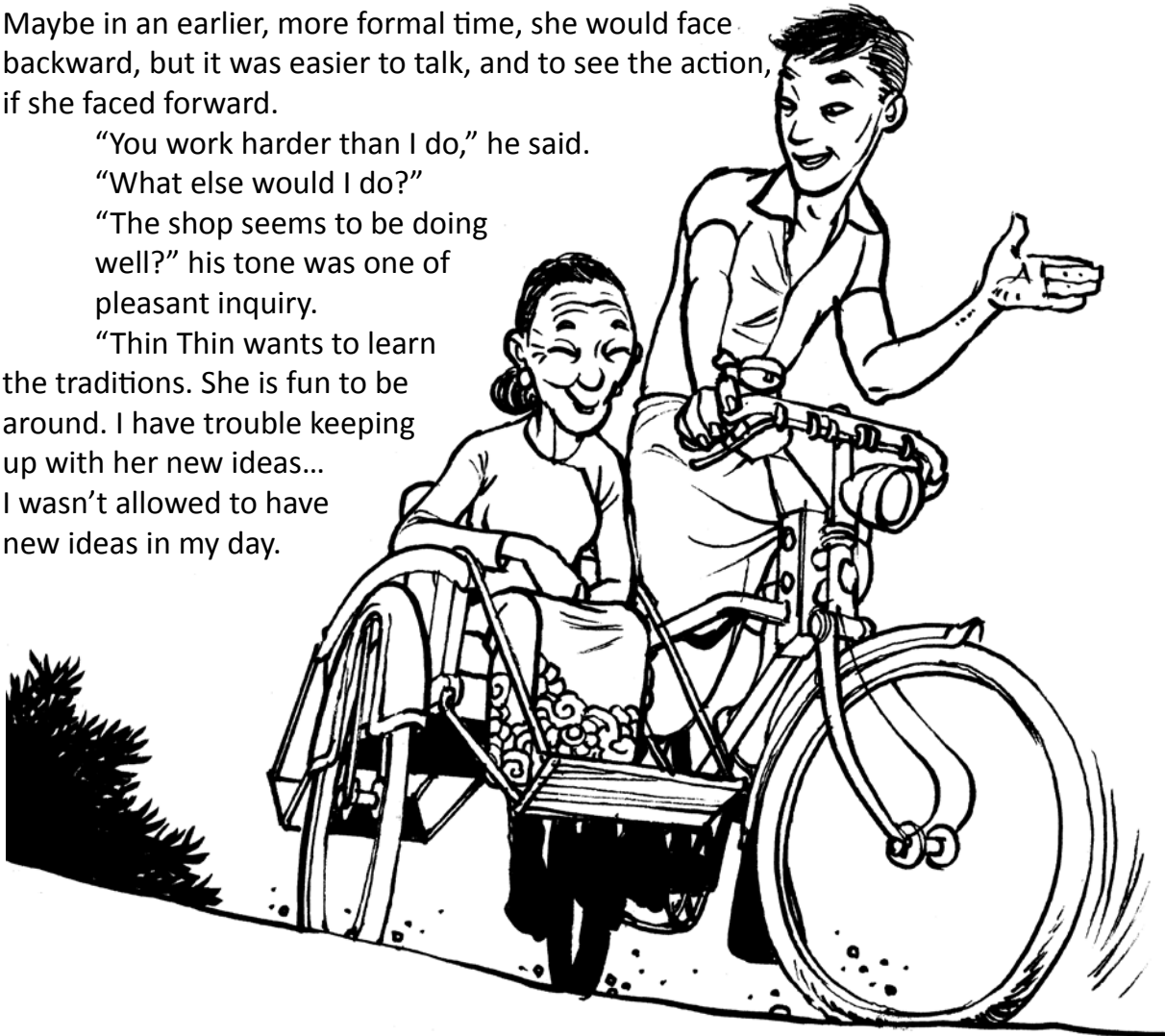
"It's nice to ride. I'm not as young, or as strong, as I used to be," Nabeelah said to Ko Thant as he flipped the cushion and helped her up to the seat. Maybe in an earlier, more formal time, she would face backward, but it was easier to talk, and to see the action, if she faced forward.

"You work harder than I do," he said.

"What else would I do?"

"The shop seems to be doing well?" his tone was one of pleasant inquiry.

"Thin Thin wants to learn the traditions. She is fun to be around. I have trouble keeping up with her new ideas... I wasn't allowed to have new ideas in my day.





But things are different now,” she said, without rancor.

He nodded, “Things are changing. More people. More business. I want to be optimistic. Have you seen hope like this before?”

She was silent for a minute. “There were hopeful times when I was Thin Thin’s age, before 1962.”

He turned towards her. “Before Ne Win and the long nightmare.”

She was surprised by the quick response from this uneducated sidecar driver who wasn’t even born until seventeen years after 1962.

Ko Thant’s parents owned a tiny plot of land 80 miles east of Monsong. They struggled to feed themselves, Ko Thant and his two younger sisters. After seventh grade there was not enough money for him to stay in school. He came to Monsong in 1993 at fourteen, looking for work so he could continue his education. He found a job as a sidecar driver, but any extra money was sent back to his parents. His rented sidecar was his classroom and his riders became his teachers. Twenty years passed. He was able to buy his sidecar and rent a tiny room, but there was no time or money for more school. He did manage to send small amounts of money home every month.

One sister died, the other married a shiftless man but soon returned to live with her parents. Visits home were so difficult for all that he stopped returning over ten years ago. His parents loved and missed him, but felt it better for him to focus on the future, not the past. He reluctantly agreed. He did not burden Nabeelah with all this personal history.

“I think I’m like you,” she said. “I’m optimistic. One more try for me. Why not? We could use the money.”

They arrived at the Nazim compound. Ko Thant argued, but she insisted on paying for the ride.



**6 MONKS WALK THE STREET**

Four monks left the monastery, Ywa Oo Kyaung, down near add the manastery the lake at the base of Thazin Road. Two were familiar local faces, two were from out of town and had not been to Monsong before. They would participate in the upcoming Kahtein Parade and today's walk would familiarize them with the route. The Parade would start down by the lake, head up Thazin Road past the CrossRoads and end at the Bandstand, Monsong's public gathering spot. Shops of all kinds lined the route, along with guest houses and restaurants. The businesses were almost all owned and operated by Burmese Buddhists. There were some Chinese owners and operators. *The Cloud* was the only Muslim shop on the route.

As the four monks neared the CrossRoads, they stopped at SALON to chat with several older local women who were gossiping on the bench out front. It was good natured banter as the women, known to the local monks, giggled in embarrassment at the curlers in their hair. The next stop was the sidocar stand, where they talked with Ko Thant. Thin Thin was seated outside *The Cloud* marking prices on small cosmetic bottles.

She was immediately aware of the monk looking past Ko Thant and staring directly at her. There had been talk in the mosque and at the Nazim family compound over the last couple of days that monks would soon arrive in Monsong. Nabeelah was inside tending to her pots. As soon as the monks passed the CrossRoads toward the Bandstand, Thin Thin walked inside and closed the door.

**7 ANOTHER RIDE HOME**

Ko Thant had been driving Nabeelah home twice a week for three weeks. They knew each other well enough to both be uncomfortable with what happened earlier in the day with the monk and his cold stare at Thin Thin. After a minute or two, Nabeelah broke the ice.

“I guess it was only a matter of time.”

Ko Thant looked straight ahead. “It was a surprise to me.” He turned to her. “We’re all the same. Everyone I drive is basically the same. Why are they doing this?”

She paused, as if deliberating with herself, then spoke slowly. “The monks have always been activists...and nationalistic. They see themselves, rightly most of the time, as protectors of the country. During the British times, during Independence struggles, in 1988 and 2007, they led the cause. My brother worked with them for Independence.” She felt tired, and old. Was it even worth talking about. She continued.

“A few of them see all these foreigners coming into the country. They’re afraid of the change, the loss of purity. They want the people to be afraid of change. Religion and race are the easiest way to stir emotions, especially fear and hate. ‘Muslims taking over the country’. The military is even more resistant to change. They have the most to lose. They push a few sympathetic monks into hate speech and the rest of the monks stand by and let it happen, afraid to say anything.” She stopped, fearing she had gone too far.

“Why can’t we all just get along,” Ko Thant said.

“We did get along in my family, going all the way back. For my father natural medicine was all about peace and harmony. My brother worked with U-Razak, who was killed along with Aung San in 1947. Aung San was assassinated by a Buddhist, not a Muslim.” Enough, she said to herself.

“They asked me to put stickers on our stand and on all our sidecars. They said it would be merit making, honoring the Buddha. A lot of the drivers believe them. I said no.” They were at her gate.

“The last time we rode together, I said I was optimistic. I don’t know.

Maybe they will just go back home.”As he helped her down, she looked tired, and anything but optimistic.

“Maybe,” was all she could muster.

## 8 THE CUSTOMER

Sanda stepped outside for a breath of fresh air, relief from the metallic smell of the chemicals marinating on the scalps of two customers inside. She saw the backs of two women passing her shop and recognized one as a customer. They were heading to *The Cloud* for facials.

“Do you want to try a shampoo?”

Thin Thin asked as she finished the facial.

“Why not.”

After the shampoo, the customer asked

Thin Thin what she did to make her own hair so curly and stylish.

“The herbs in the shampoo give it spring and body.

My young customers from my time at the drugstore downtown introduced me to new styles.”



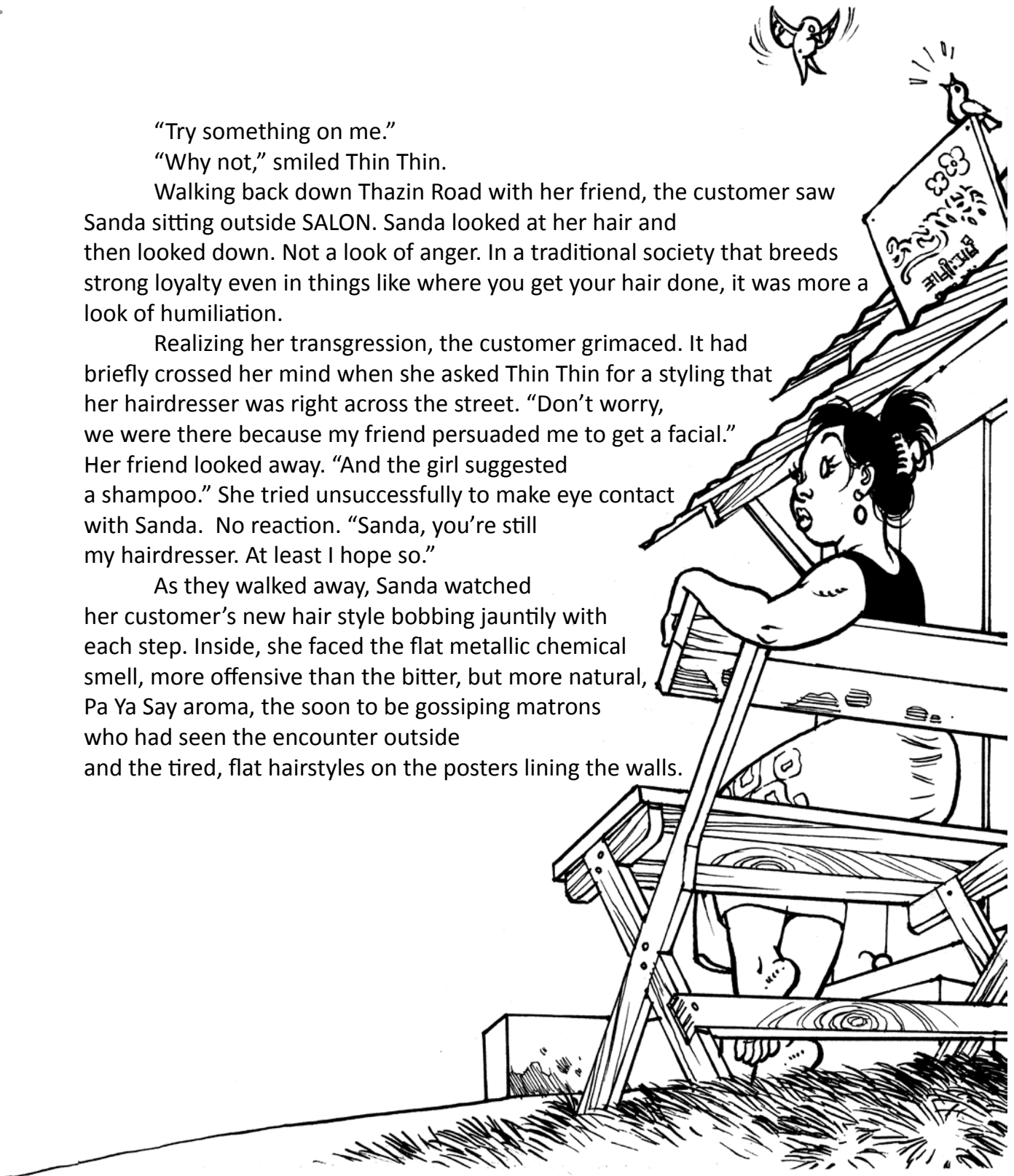
“Try something on me.”

“Why not,” smiled Thin Thin.

Walking back down Thazin Road with her friend, the customer saw Sanda sitting outside SALON. Sanda looked at her hair and then looked down. Not a look of anger. In a traditional society that breeds strong loyalty even in things like where you get your hair done, it was more a look of humiliation.

Realizing her transgression, the customer grimaced. It had briefly crossed her mind when she asked Thin Thin for a styling that her hairdresser was right across the street. “Don’t worry, we were there because my friend persuaded me to get a facial.” Her friend looked away. “And the girl suggested a shampoo.” She tried unsuccessfully to make eye contact with Sanda. No reaction. “Sanda, you’re still my hairdresser. At least I hope so.”

As they walked away, Sanda watched her customer’s new hair style bobbing jauntily with each step. Inside, she faced the flat metallic chemical smell, more offensive than the bitter, but more natural, Pa Ya Say aroma, the soon to be gossiping matrons who had seen the encounter outside and the tired, flat hairstyles on the posters lining the walls.



**9 STICKER**

The next day Ko Thant made his way back up Thazin Road around 3:30pm. He had no rider so he pedaled leisurely, bantering with the shop owners. As he approached the CrossRoads, he saw nobody in the shops. It was curious, even at this quiet time of day. He stopped at the sidecar stand and looked around. The view from here was imprinted indelibly on his brain, many hours of gazing at his surroundings while waiting for riders. It didn't take long before he saw it. It was not in an obtrusive spot, low on the outside wall and below an overhang at the corner of the SALON.

The sticker was small, but sounded its presence like a spotlight searching the night sky. It must have been attached after he left at 2pm. His sidecar friends usually gave some sort of welcome. Nothing like that and it was quiet all around. The shops were not closed, but no staff in site and no customers. Not at SMILE, *The Cloud*, the hardware store, the fabric shop or SALON.

Soon there was activity on the street. Locals drove by, or walked by, stealing a look at the sticker, confirming the news that had spread like a tsunami in the last half hour. There were a few other stickers in town, but none in this area. The tourists remained oblivious to the situation. Within minutes a car came traveling fast down Padauk Road towards the CrossRoads from the direction of the mosque. It stopped before the corner and two young men that Ko Thant and the other sidecar drivers did not recognize walked through the empty courtyard at SMILE to the front door of *The Cloud*. Thin Thin and Nabeelah stepped outside. Thin Thin put her bike inside and padlocked the door.

Nabeelah and Ko Thant looked at each other. It was nearly 4pm and Ko Thant was waiting to take her home. She paused. Neither spoke. They didn't need to. They knew everything had changed. The car made a U-turn and moved quickly towards the family compound with the two women in the back seat.

**10 NAZIM FAMILY COMPOUND**

Like most buildings in the immediate neighborhood, which flooded during monsoon, the Nazim's homes were built on stilts. Nabeelah's house, personally constructed by her father in 1934, the year before she was born, was spacious and neat, fine teak with a thatched roof and large wooden shutters opening on all sides to capture the breeze. Papa had a brother and sister, for whom he built smaller cottages behind the main house. The compound's back fence ran along one wall of Monsong's only mosque.

With the older generations gone, two families of cousins, nephews and nieces occupied the two cottages. One housed an unemployed widower and his two sporadically employed sons in their late twenties, the other a couple with boys 16 and 18 and a 21 year old girl. The wife ran a small store around the corner at the entrance to the mosque. Thin Thin lived with her unemployed father and mother in Nabeelah's house. From early on, Thin Thin's passive and melancholy mother, Nabeelah's daughter, ceded responsibility for Thin Thin's upbringing to the child's grandmother. Nabeelah's husband had recently died of cancer and the care of Thin Thin was a welcome way to fill the void.

Papa's generation all worked in natural medicines. With his passing, the business dried up, leaving just enough to support Nabeelah's direct family. The Nazim's practiced basic Islamic precepts- no alcohol, halal diet, marry within the faith- but they weren't considered devout Muslims. They stuck together as a family, got along with their Buddhist neighbors and gathered every Friday evening at Nabeelah's for a family meal.

By 5pm everyone was assembled in the long living room at the main house. The cell phones registered the rapid updates like popping popcorn. There were seven males on one side, five females on the other. Nabeelah was the last to join. She was the leader of both family and business and normally called the shots. But this wasn't a normal occasion. This was religious and racial, areas where men usually reigned supreme.





“It has reached our area, I knew it would,” from Thin Thin’s father. It was unusual for him to speak, much less to lead off, but he was the oldest male and therefore felt obligated.

“They are saying you stole a customer,” said one of the older cousins, just off the phone.

“I wasn’t trying to steal Sanda’s customer. I gave the woman a shampoo...she asked me to style her hair like mine...I didn’t cut her hair.” Thin Thin realized that she was speaking slowly and carefully choosing her words, something she rarely did. From the moment she saw the sticker on the SALON wall, she’d been examining her conscience. It was not black and white. Yes, she’d seen the customer at Sanda’s on earlier occasions, but they had not met and they did not speak of Sanda or the SALON during the facial cleansing. Mindful of the SALON, Thin Thin had deliberated when planning her business whether to just sell shampoo and not give shampoos. As the business unfolded, the customers often asked to follow a facial treatment with a shampoo. Thin Thin fell into the habit of asking them if they wanted both services. A new business has to work hard to please new customers. She didn’t seek out this customer. She didn’t steal her from Sanda. But she had to admit to feeling a defensive combination of anxiety and guilt, like what she did wasn’t



really wrong, but could be seen as not really right either. Thin Thin didn't share this self-reflection with the group.

"No way Ko Win runs his business on our property, in our shop, while his cousin has that sticker...we should tear it off," said one of the male cousins.

"This was done on purpose, just before the Parade...for everyone to see," Thin Thin's father again.

Along with Thin Thin's anxiety, the temperature rose in the room, particularly with all the shutters closed. It almost felt like they wanted to magnify the problem, not solve it.

"There is a group down at the monastery, it looks like four monks from out of town are there," another male cousin repeating the update from an incoming phone call.

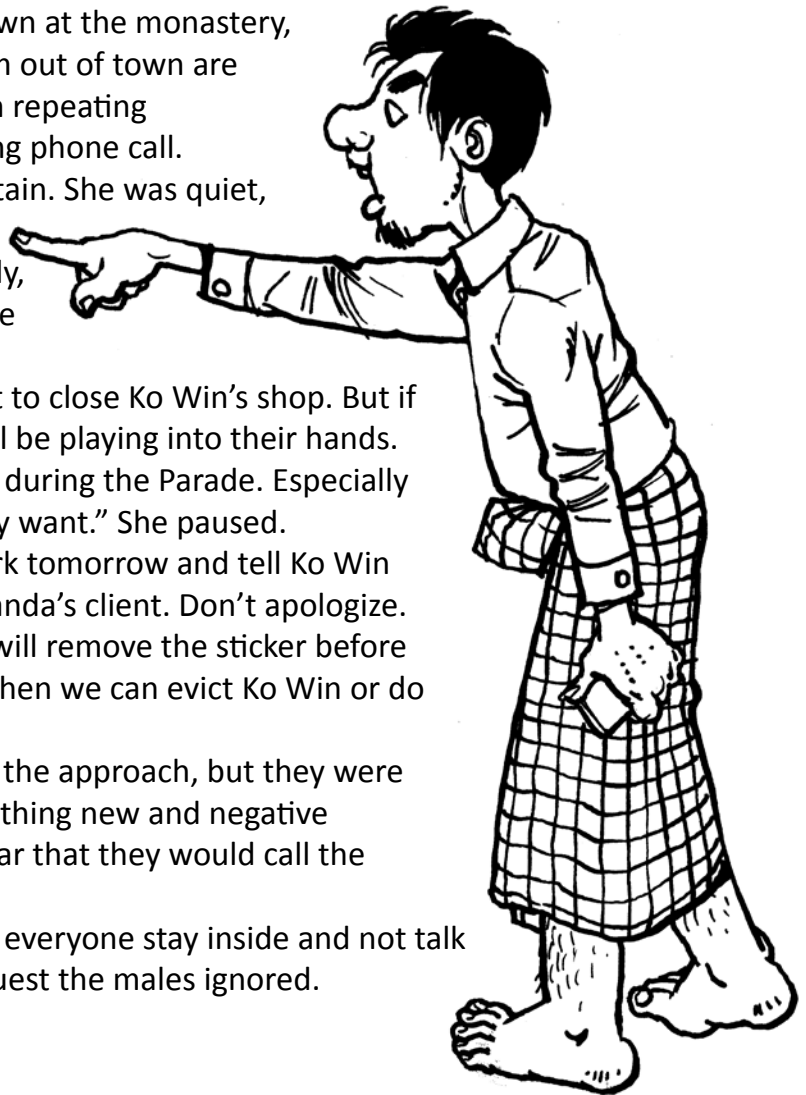
Nabeelah was uncertain. She was quiet, like the other women.

This must be played carefully, but caution and reason were not what the men wanted.

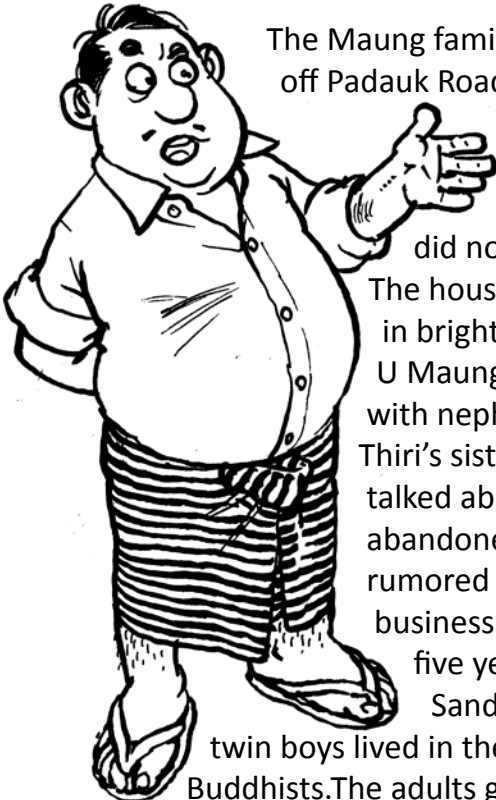
"We have every right to close Ko Win's shop. But if we react too quickly, we will be playing into their hands. Everybody will see it closed during the Parade. Especially the monks. That's what they want." She paused. "Thin Thin should go to work tomorrow and tell Ko Win she wasn't trying to steal Sanda's client. Don't apologize. Just explain. Maybe Sanda will remove the sticker before the Parade. If she doesn't, then we can evict Ko Win or do whatever we decide."

The men did not like the approach, but they were not ready to defy her. If anything new and negative happened, they made it clear that they would call the next shot.

Nabeelah asked that everyone stay inside and not talk with their friends. That request the males ignored.



## 11 THE MAUNG NEIGHBORHOOD



The Maung family lived in a small neighborhood on a lane off Padauk Road a little over a mile from the CrossRoads in the opposite direction from the Nazim compound. Their two houses, smaller than Nabeelah's but larger than the Nazim cottages, did not have stilts, unnecessary on the hillside location. The houses were similar looking to Nabeelah's, but painted in brighter colors.

U Maung and Thiri shared their house with nephew Ko Win, whose mother, Thiri's sister, died a few days after he was born. No one ever talked about Ko Win's father, who turned to drink, abandoned his son and escaped to Yangon, but it was rumored that he had been stealing money from the family businesses. He had not been heard from in twenty five years.

Sanda, her husband Ye Htut, and their nine year old twin boys lived in the adjacent house. All the neighbors were Buddhists. The adults gathered at U Maung's house at 7pm. The nervous Sanda, normally at SALON until 8pm, was present.

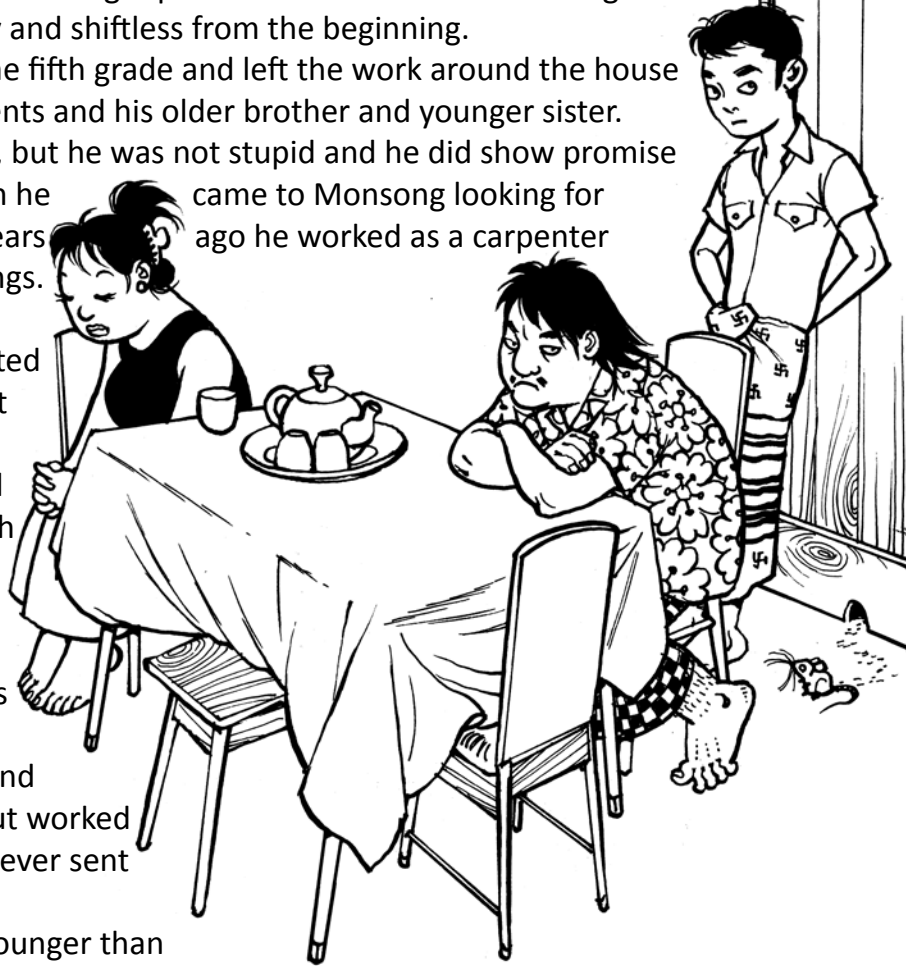
"You should have told us before putting that sticker on my building," U Maung looked at Sanda, then at Ye Htut.

"Blame me if you want. No one is going to shame my wife. Not a Buddhist, not a Christian, not a Muslim. Especially not a Muslim," Ye Htut spat out the words. "That girl stole a customer. The monks warned that this would happen," he looked at Sanda, who looked at the floor. Sanda saw, like Thin Thin, some potential for conflict with *The Cloud* opening across the street, but she never said anything to anybody.

Ye Htut was, like Ko Thant, 34 and came from very poor farming parents

who would never leave their meagre plot 100 miles north of Monsong. Unlike Ko Thant, Ye Htut was lazy and shiftless from the beginning.

He quit school in the fifth grade and left the work around the house and in the field to his parents and his older brother and younger sister. His parents were illiterate, but he was not stupid and he did show promise in woodworking. At fifteen he came to Monsong looking for opportunities. Over ten years ago he worked as a carpenter on a house near the Maungs. He saw Sanda walking by almost every day and started smiling at her. She was not attractive, but also not unattractive, and she liked his rough good in his rough good looks and his apparent interest, not knowing that his real desire was for her parent's money. In the ten years since they were married and the SALON opened, Ye Htut worked less and drank more. He never sent money home.



Sanda, two years younger than Ye Htut, was always shy and quiet. An average student, she was liked in school but did not stand out among her classmates. After high school, she displayed little interest in the hardware store or fabric shop. She liked cutting her friends' hair, so U Maung decided to set her up as a hairdresser. U Maung and Thiri had strong reservations about Ye Htut, but Sanda was smitten. They reluctantly supported the marriage and bought the young couple a small house next door. Ye Htut was unemployed at the time and contributed nothing towards the purchase. He did some carpentry work to improve the house in the beginning, but those efforts soon stopped. U Maung and Thiri saw him as an albatross, but they were devoted to Sanda and the twin grandkids.

Ye Htut spent most days sitting with similarly unemployed friends on the benches down by the lake near Ywa Oo Kyaung. They passed the time drinking and complaining about their fate rather than looking for jobs. Last night, knowing that his reaction would be even more volatile if he heard from someone else, Sanda told Ye Htut about the incident with the customer. This morning his friends worked him into an alcohol fueled indignation and aimed him at the monastery, where he would get a sympathetic ear to the injustice wrought on his wife's business. Without consulting Sanda, he attached the controversial sticker on the SALON wall around 3pm.

"We have to protect ourselves or they will run us out of our own town," Ye Htut dropped three stickers on the table. "These need to go on your shops tonight."

That wouldn't be the only reason you would get run out of town, thought Ko Win. Ye Htut's reputation grew over the years as a nasty drunk. There was no criminal record, but the police knew about him, especially after he beat a man senseless in a drunken brawl about three years ago. They would be happy to see him gone for good.

Ye Htut wasn't the only one willing to stir up trouble. Outside, Ko Win's friends were gathering. Everyone in the neighborhood knew about the customer problem and about the sticker.

"Ko Thant told me there may have been a misunderstanding," Ko Win said. "Thin Thin got picked up by two guys, relatives I think, before I could talk to her." Ko Win was uncomfortable, he preferred to please people, not to stir up trouble. But the peers he most wanted to please were outside. He wanted this meeting to end so he could join them.

U Maung did not want trouble. He felt for his daughter, but not for her husband. He was suspicious about the monks from out of town.

"We're not putting on any more stickers tonight," U Maung picked up the three stickers, ignoring the angry reaction from Ye Htut. "Ko Win will question Thin Thin in the morning about this so called "customer misunderstanding" and we'll go from there. But he didn't demand that Sanda and Ye Htut remove the existing SALON sticker. He told Ko Win not to join his friends outside on the street. Ko Win reluctantly obeyed.

**12 DAY BEFORE PARADE**

Ko Thant and his fellow drivers arrived early at their sidecar stand. There were lots of customers and supplies to ferry around town in anticipation of tomorrow's Kahtein Parade. The morning air was cool and filled with energy. The heat would come later.

Ko Win and Thin Thin both opened their shops by 9am. The sticker was still on the SALON wall.

"Do you have anybody that will need rides tomorrow? It could be crazy," Ko Thant making small talk just to get a conversation going. "You should both have a big day."

No reaction from Ko Win or Thin Thin. He returned to his buddies, thinking 'what the hell, it's none of my business anyway.'

Both Ko Win and Thin Thin were given strict instructions the night before at home. Both were hesitant to take the first step. A moment later, not surprisingly, the first words came from Thin Thin.

"I saw the sticker. Word is flying around that I stole your cousin's customer."

"That's what I was told," said Ko Win.

"Do you believe it?"

"I don't know what to believe."

"I do facials and shampoos." Thin Thin waited but Ko Win said nothing. "I didn't cut her hair. I didn't suggest a new style. She said 'comb it like yours', that was all there was to it."

"Did you know it was Sanda's customer?" he said.

Thin Thin felt a knot in the pit of her stomach. Again, like last night with her family, she was watching herself think, watching herself choose her words, speaking slowly.

"I may have seen her at the SALON. I never really thought about it...I didn't ask her to come to my place...I wasn't trying to steal Sanda's customer."

The ambiguity of her response did not satisfy him, but Ko Win asked no more questions. He didn't, and she didn't, know the next step. So they went into their shops and pretended to prepare for today and tomorrow.

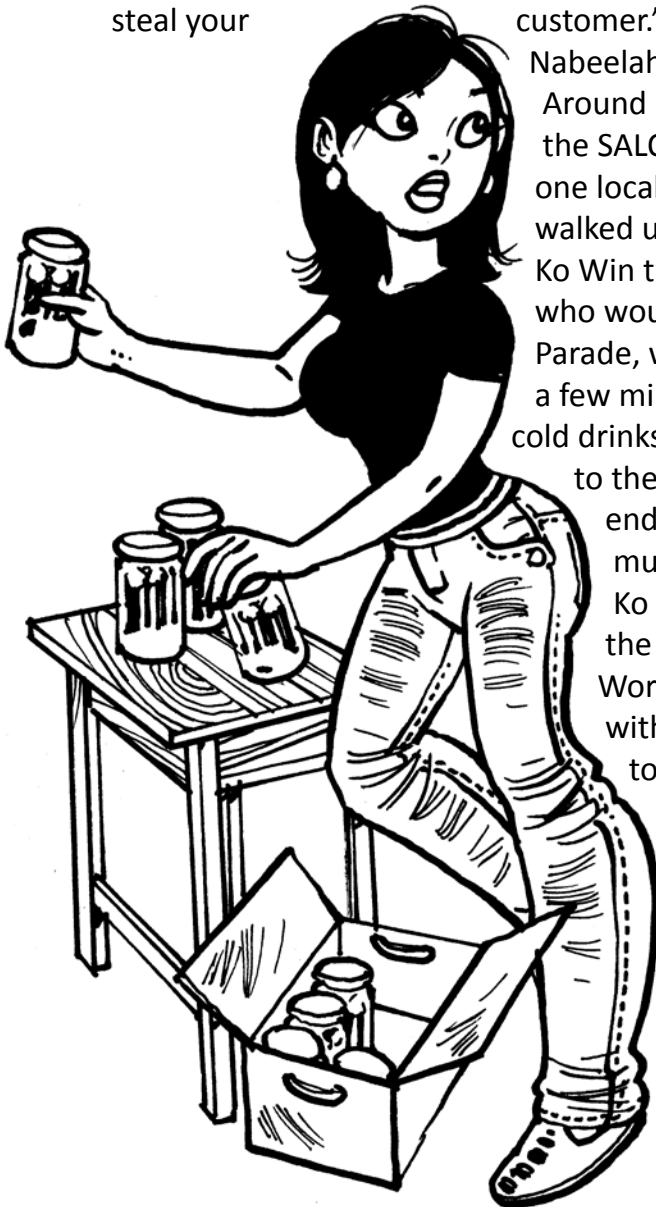
By the time word went from Ko Win through U Maung and Thiri to Sanda, it came out as "she said she wasn't trying to steal your customer, but she knew it was your customer." By the time it got to Ye Htut down on the benches at 11am, he heard it as "she knew it was your customer and she was trying to steal your customer."

Nabeelah did not show up at *The Cloud*.

Around noon, Ye Htut was seen sitting outside the SALON. Shortly after that, two monks, one local and one from out of town, walked up Thazin Road to SMILE. They told Ko Win their group of ten monks, who would be marching in tomorrow's Parade, would like to stop at his shop for a few minutes of rest and shade and cold drinks before going past the CrossRoads to the Bandstand, where the Parade officially ended and where they would have to spend much time in the sun with the large crowd. Ko Win didn't know what to say and the monks took that as a "yes."

Word got to the Nazim compound within minutes after the monks' visit to SMILE. Nabeelah's diplomatic approach had failed. The men would now be in control. They did not consult Nabeelah before they chose her son to give the strict instructions.

After her father's call, Thin Thin called not Gammie, but no answer. Time was short. Reluctantly, she walked next door to Ko Win and said. "Your lease will be



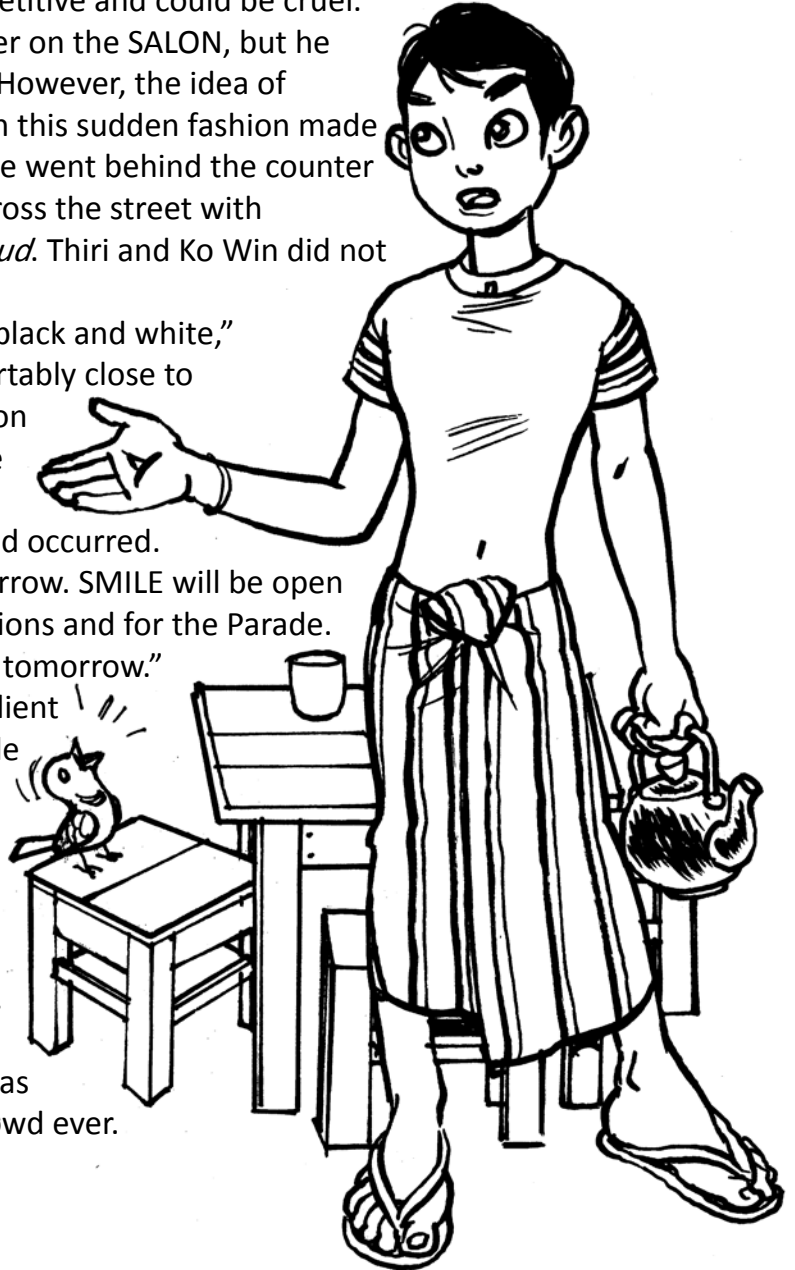


cancelled after today. We will put our lock on the shop tomorrow morning.”

Again Ko Win made no response. He crossed the street, alive with pre-Parade activity, to the hardware store. U Maung had not been particularly worked up by the heated debate over the “stolen” or “not stolen” customer. He had many customers who had prior allegiances when he first opened his hardware store. Business was competitive and could be cruel. He wasn’t happy with the sticker on the SALON, but he placed the blame on Ye Htut. However, the idea of Thin Thin cancelling the lease in this sudden fashion made his businessman’s blood boil. He went behind the counter to a small safe, then walked across the street with a document in hand to *The Cloud*. Thiri and Ko Win did not accompany him.

“Look, it is right here in black and white,” brandishing the lease uncomfortably close to Thin Thin’s face. “No cancellation without a 30 day notice.” There were exceptions for theft or intentional damage. Neither had occurred. “Ko Win has reservations tomorrow. SMILE will be open for business, for those reservations and for the Parade. We will talk again the day after tomorrow.”

Ko Thant was driving a client when Ye Htut was sitting outside SALON earlier and when the monks visited SMILE, but was back at the sidecar stand to see U Maung march across the street. He knew he had some catching up to do. Tomorrow would be a hot and beautiful day and the Parade was expected to draw its largest crowd ever.



### 13 PARADE DAY

Even at 7am there was excitement in the air, especially at the CrossRoads. People were converging from all sides to get a good vantage point for the Parade. Women and children in their finery. Little kids ran in excited circles. You could hear the music coming from down by the lake, you could smell the treats the street vendors offered along the route. Time for some fun.

Ko Thant stood in the middle of the intersection, the traffic cop everyone knew and liked. He worried about yesterday's events, but he saw no new signs of trouble this morning.

A beautiful day to celebrate the improving fortunes of the country. The town and the people, but signs of trouble





## THE CROSSROADS

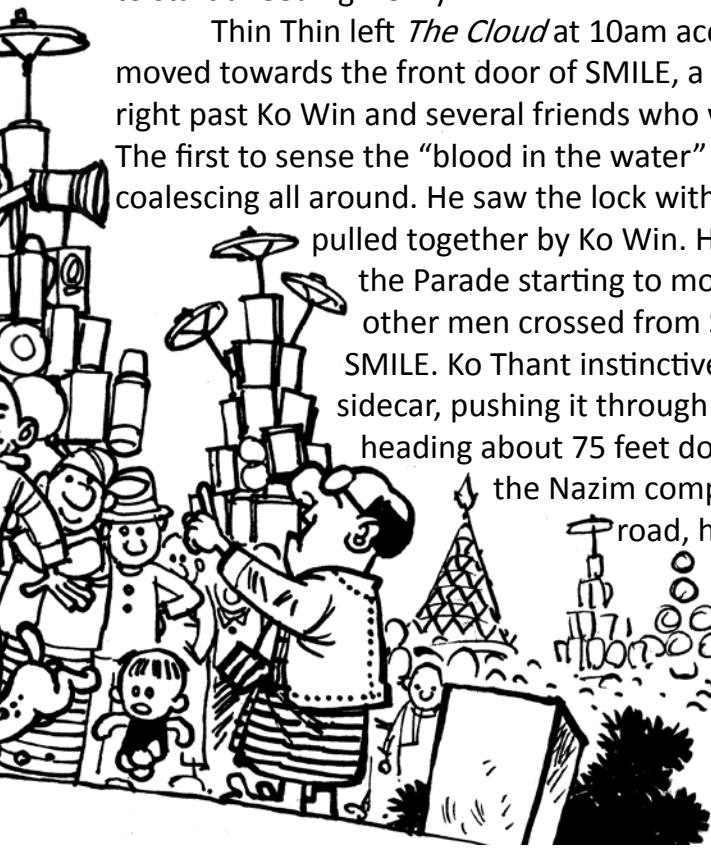
He allowed himself a bit of guarded optimism.

The swirl of Parade-goers made it easy to miss a parallel gathering. Young men, boys really, on foot and on bicycles were always a part of community celebrations, their brash behavior tolerated, almost encouraged. In addition to the firecrackers they often carried, they were the fireworks, adding an element of movement, surprise and even a little danger.

A group of about 8 Muslim boys were glad for the decision taken last yesterday at the Nazim compound to padlock SMILE. About fifteen Buddhist boys were pleased in their opposing belief that SMILE would be open and welcoming a particular party of ten monks. Another smaller group, older and normally congregating down on the benches near the lake, would sit in front of SALON.

The scene unfolded like a deep sea adventure movie with colorful, friendly and playful fish mixed in with a swarming cast of predators like shark and piranha. Darting here and there, all brushing past one another, the dance increasingly frenetic. The music getting louder, the tempo faster, adding agitation and excitement...just waiting for a burst of blood in the water to start a feeding frenzy.

Thin Thin left *The Cloud* at 10am accompanied by two male cousins and moved towards the front door of SMILE, a large padlock in hand. She walked right past Ko Win and several friends who were setting up tables for the monks. The first to sense the "blood in the water" was Ko Thant, who felt danger coalescing all around. He saw the lock with Thin Thin and the tables being pulled together by Ko Win. He saw and heard the leading edge of the Parade starting to move up Thazin Road. Ye Htut and three other men crossed from SALON to the courtyard in front of SMILE. Ko Thant instinctively grabbed the handlebars on his sidecar, pushing it through the crowd at the intersection and heading about 75 feet down Padauk Road in the direction of the Nazim compound. Pulling the sidecar just off the road, he ran back up and around the side of SMILE and heard a shattering of glass in a display case in front of *The Cloud*. A boy sprinted past him towards the CrossRoads



and the two young men accompanying Thin Thin gave chase. Ko Win and Thin Thin stood close to one another, frozen in uncertainty.

“COME... NOW,” Ko Thant shouted at them. He never shouted. He grabbed each by the elbow and moved rapidly toward the sidecar. “This way. QUICKLY!”

They reached the sidecar and Ko Thant pushed Thin Thin into the front facing seat and Ko Win scrambled into the back facing seat. Ko Thant pushed off and angled the handlebars down Padauk Road away from the CrossRoads, zig-zagging to avoid the celebrants, who were oblivious to this unfolding drama.

Seconds later, there was a sickening thud, like the sound of a heavy stick hitting a ripe melon. The sidecar almost tipped over, then the handlebars jack-knifed and the bike jolted to a stop. Thin Thin saw it first, then Ko Win turned around. Ko Thant lay motionless on his left side on the pavement. His eyes were closed. You could already see the nasty raw spot where the rock struck him behind and above his right ear. He was bleeding from the wound. Thin Thin and Ko Win struggled off the sidecar to assist Ko Thant.

“Get help, call an ambulance, get the police,” shouted an older man standing nearby who heard the rock strike and saw the driver collapse.

The man moved quickly and knelt beside Ko Thant, whose head twitched in a disturbing involuntary jerking motion. He placed one hand under Ko Thant’s head to stop it from banging against the pavement, and the other on his shoulder to minimize the spasms. A crowd circled in a combination of concern and ghoulish curiosity. The rock, the size of a large clinched fist, lay next to Ko Thant. Surprisingly soon, you could hear the cry of an approaching siren.

Two Muslim men grabbed Thin Thin and ran her down a side street, away from the crowd. Three Buddhist men wrestled Ko Win in the opposite direction. A few in the crowd just down the way at the CrossRoads sensed that something was happening behind them, but they couldn’t tell what. Here came the Parade, moving up Thazin Road towards them and demanding their full attention.

Twenty minutes later, as the monks passed SMILE, they saw their empty table for ten, but they did not stop. They had just been told of the incident down Padauk Road and they could hear a distant siren. *The Cloud* and SMILE looked strangely vacant and in disarray... a clear sign that the monks did not need to stop. Their mission had been accomplished.

The sound of music faded as the Parade moved toward the Bandstand, allowing the crowd at the CrossRoads to hear the now almost quiet moans of the siren as Ko Thant's ambulance headed past the Nazim compound and the mosque towards Monsong hospital.

## **14 HOSPITAL IN THE AFTERNOON**

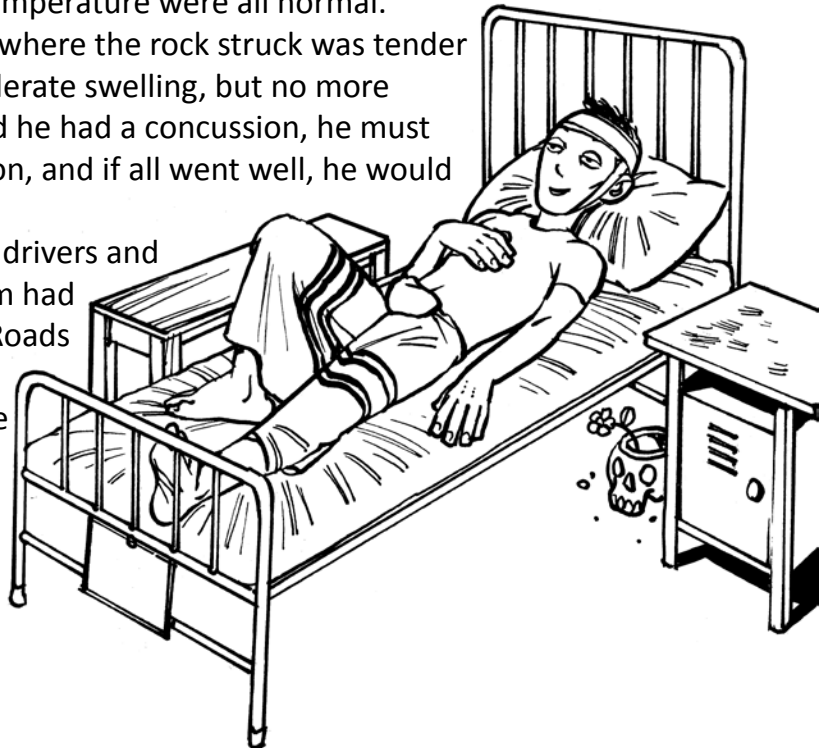
By the time the ambulance arrived at the hospital, Ko Thant was conscious and the bleeding had stopped. Monsong hospital was more like a clinic. It was small and primitive, fifteen beds but no X-Ray, MRI or other modern equipment. The two young doctors had little advanced medical experience. The nearest real hospital was twelve hours away in Mandalay.

"I'm fine," said Ko Thant, "I don't need to stay."

"You were unconscious, and you have a big contusion on your head," said the doctor.

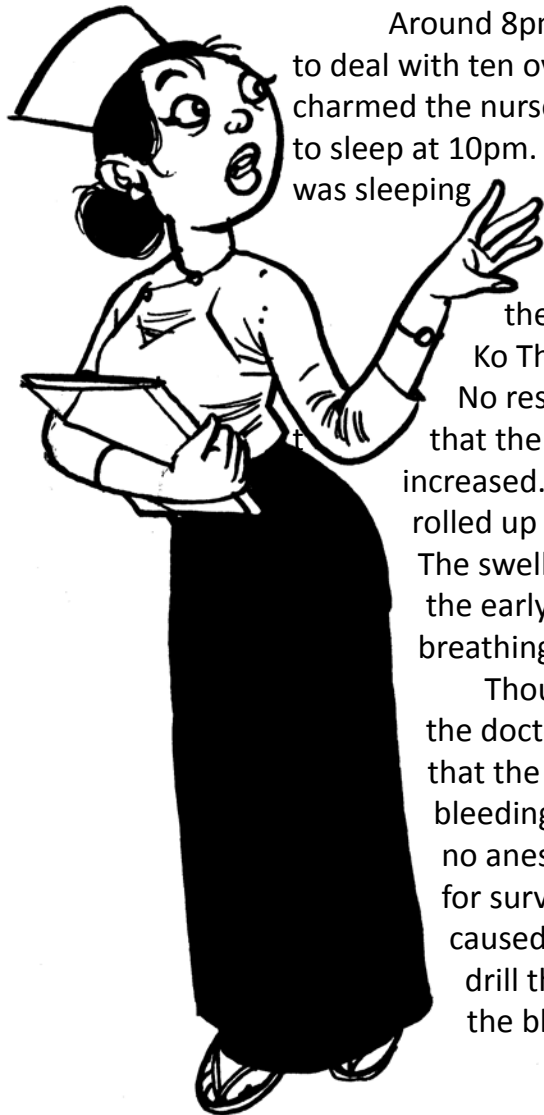
Ko Thant was lucid, he knew his name, his age and the day of the week. His blood pressure, pulse and temperature were all normal. The wound behind his right ear where the rock struck was tender to the touch and there was moderate swelling, but no more bleeding. The doctors concluded he had a concussion, he must stay overnight, under observation, and if all went well, he would be discharged in the morning.

Ko Thant's fellow sidecar drivers and other young men, most of whom had been swirling around the CrossRoads earlier, waited expectantly outside the hospital. Word came from inside that Ko Thant was talking, even laughing, and he would probably be released tomorrow morning.



Relieved, the group dispersed. Word got back to the Nazim and Maung families. The police would look for the perpetrator, but with a little less intensity given Ko That's apparent improving condition.

## 15 CRISIS IN THE NIGHT



Around 8pm the doctors went home, leaving two nurses to deal with ten overnight patients. Ko That entertained and charmed the nurses and they fed him a small dinner before he went to sleep at 10pm. At 2am a nurse making the rounds saw that he was sleeping and breathing normally. The moderate swelling on the wound site seemed about the same.

When the doctors arrived around 8am, they walked the ward, checking on the patients. Ko That was still sleeping and they gently shook him. No response. Another shake, no response. They saw that the swelling at the wound had dramatically increased. They maneuvered him over onto his back and rolled up his eyelids. His right pupil was badly swollen. The swelling had come slowly and undetected during the early morning hours. He was unconscious, his breathing shallow, pulse fast and blood pressure low.

Though they lacked training in neurology, the doctors knew from experience with injured soldiers that the swelling at the wound and the closest eye meant bleeding inside the brain. They had no operating room, no anesthetics and no time to waste. The only option for survival was to relieve the pressure on the brain caused by trapped blood, the only way to do that was to drill through the skull, insert a plastic tube, and drain the blood.

The hospital made and fitted prosthetic devices for land mine victims, a procedure that sometimes required drilling into the bone. They had an old electric drill and some new whiskey, the classic field anesthetic for soldiers. A nurse quickly shaved Ko Thant's head around the wound. Infection from the drill and from the plastic tube posed the most danger. There was alcohol for cleaning the wound site, the drill bit and the plastic tubing, but no antibiotics to fight off infection.

Ko Thant was alone. All the other patients had family members with them in the ward, feeding them and sleeping on the floor alongside and under their beds. His parents had no way of learning about the crisis. They would not have known how to get to Monsong. Even if he could, Ko Thant would not call for them, knowing the hospital would demand money they didn't have. His sidecar partners had left him last night, hearing of laughter and a morning release. The nurse who didn't detect his worsening condition in the night looked helplessly at the doctor.

"Will he die alone?" she whispered.

"We all die alone." Hardly consolation from the doctor.

They shook Ko Thant into a semi-conscious and confused state so they could force whiskey down his throat. With all the staff restraining him, a quarter inch drill bit quickly ground through his skull. It sounded like it was penetrating teak. A rush of blood that had accumulated between the skull and brain escaped. It looked like a crime scene. The nurses tried to wipe the blood that was everywhere, the doctors quickly inserted a three inch plastic hose, cut from a feeding tube, through the drill hole and into the brain.

Ko Thant somehow survived the crude procedure. The swelling in the right eye and at the wound site receded and the plastic tube was successfully drawing blood. He was groggy and agitated, but his breathing slowly returned to normal. All they could do now was clean the wound site as best as possible and cross their fingers.

When the sidecar friends came around 10:30am to pick up Ko Thant, they were asked instead to stay and give blood for the transfusions he would need if he survived the next 24 hours. The doctors didn't say so, but they were not optimistic.

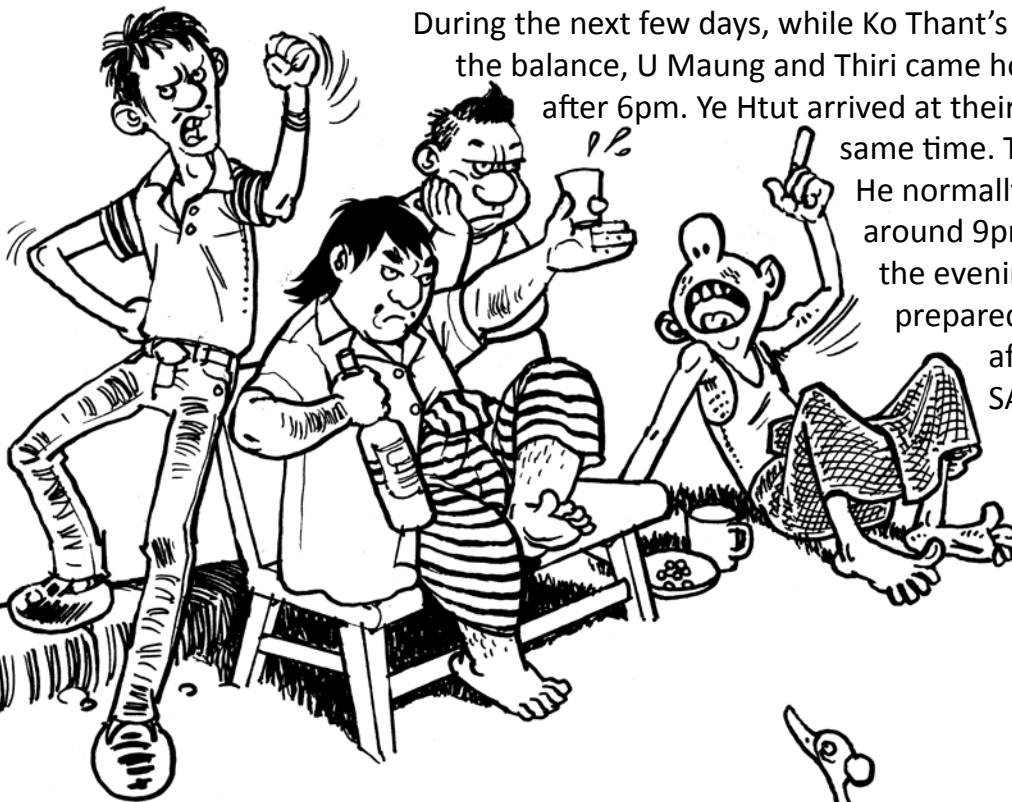
## 16 BUDDHISTS WAITING

Word spread fast of Ko Thant's grave situation. A fragile calm hung over the CrossRoads as everyone waited for news of his fate. Discussions on what to do next went into high gear at U Maung and Thiri's house.

"If you won't let me try to open SMILE, at least let me work in the hardware store," implored Ko Win.

"Absolutely not," U Maung said. "I don't want rocks thrown at my shop, or Thiri's, or Sanda's. And I don't want your friends milling around, stirring up trouble. You will stay at home."

During the next few days, while Ko Thant's life hung in the balance, U Maung and Thiri came home shortly after 6pm. Ye Htut arrived at their house at the same time. This was new. He normally came home around 9pm to eat the evening meal prepared by Sanda after her 8pm SALON closing.





U Maung, Thiri and Ko Win did not appreciate his presence, but he would not be denied, would not miss any deliberations. He would stand firm against a repeat of what he considered U Maung's weak and conciliatory approach as well as his refusal to place stickers on the three shops. Ko Win prepared the meal, which Thiri considered good practice for a budding restaurant manager. Sanda and the twin boys joined them for dinner at 8:15pm, where conversation was sparse and did not include any of the incendiary subjects. After eating, the kids went next door to bed and the serious discussions started.

The Maungs all assumed the rock thrower was Muslim, as did the vast majority of the community. The discussion of options ranged from doing nothing...to re-opening SMILE...all the way to serious retaliation. U Maung and Thiri were, not surprisingly, at the more reasoned end of the spectrum. Ye Htut wanted violence, an "eye for an eye." Sanda was impossible to read, she offered no opinions and cast her eyes downward whenever Ye Htut spoke. Ko Win was torn between his obligation to U Maung and Thiri and his need to please his more radical and agitated friends, who found ways to influence him during the day while U Maung and Thiri were at work. But in general, he didn't like conflict, so he mostly listened. U Maung insisted that any course of action should wait on the condition of Ko Thant. SMILE would remain closed for now, as long as *The Cloud* did the same.

The conversations on the benches down by the lake got more heated by the day. Retribution should be the approach. Fire would be the weapon, tried and tested in many prior religious and racial confrontations. Alcohol fueled the discussions. SMILE, the Buddhist teashop, would burn to the ground first. Like the identity of the rock thrower, it would be easy to persuade everyone, police included, that the Muslims lit the fuse. As Ye Htut and his friends saw it, the fire at SMILE and the assault on Ko Thant justified what would come next, attacks on *The Cloud*, the Nizam compound and the mosque. Properties, including religious properties, might burn, people might die, but the survival of the Buddhist and Burmese way of life required drastic steps.

**17 MUSLIMS WAITING**

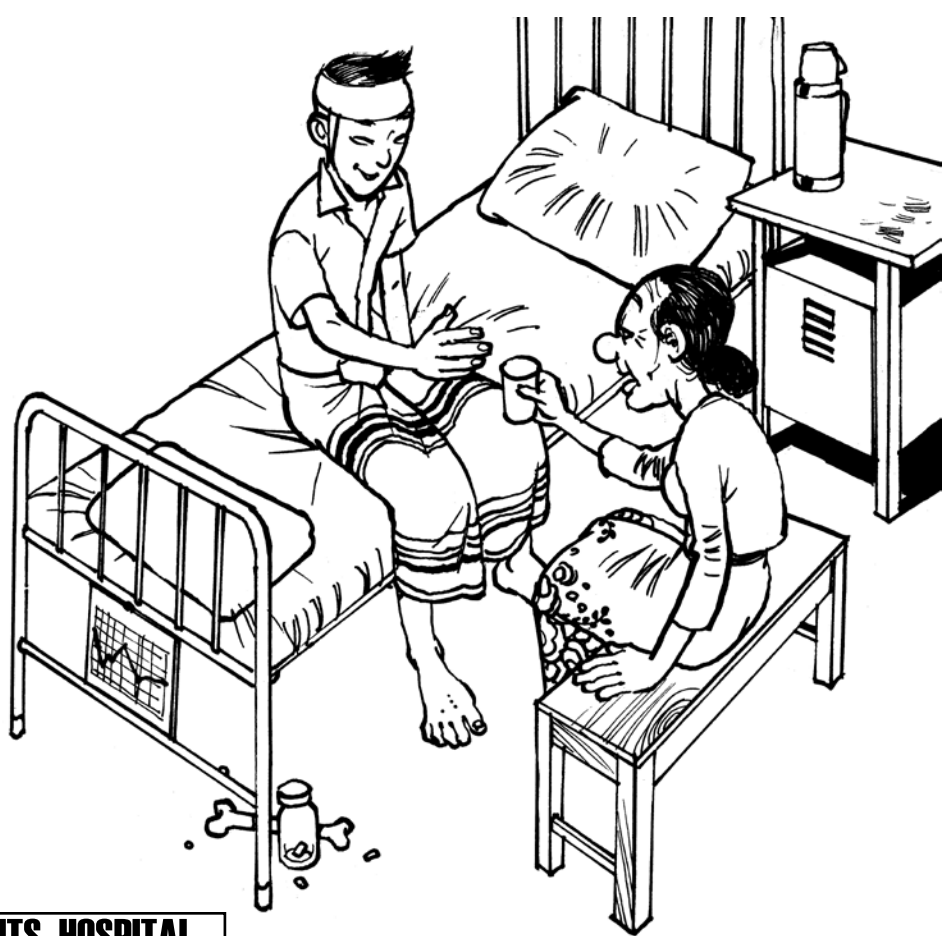
Heated meetings also took place at the Nazim compound. On the night they met after the sticker went on at SALON a week ago, the men did most of the talking, but Nabeelah decided on the course of action. This time the men were determined not to repeat her diplomatic approach of talking rather than acting. They felt their delay had allowed the monks to arrange for a gathering on their property during the Parade. That action, even if only planned, was provocative and humiliating. And the sticker still hung as a taunting gesture on the wall of SALON.

They all believed the rock that hit Ko Thant was intended for Thin Thin and was launched by a Buddhist. After all, look at the shattered glass at *The Cloud's* display case; that rock was thrown less than a minute before Ko Thant was struck. The hot headed young men, advocating a radical not approach; mirrored their Buddhist counterparts. Thoughts of fire, in this case the target would be SALON. The adults knew the futility of that approach; their two shops, their houses, their mosque and their families would not survive if the SALON burned. Probably their only realistic option would be to evict SMILE and open a Muslim business in its place.

"A rush to action does us no good," said Nabeelah. "Let's see what happens with Ko Thant."

The men would wait, not because she asked them to, but because they didn't know what else to do. In the meantime, they would keep *The Cloud* closed and a watchful eye on their properties and their families.





## 18 NABEELAH VISITS HOSPITAL

In the week since the surgery, the swelling had stayed down and Ko That's vital signs were near normal. What the doctors feared most was infection from the primitive operation and marginal sterilization techniques associated with the drill and the blood transfusions. The nurses cleaned the drainage site as best they could with alcohol and gave him aspirin, which was all they had. He was clear headed and talkative. Because he had no family members in attendance, his driver friends were allowed short visits, during which they fed him tea and gossip.

No one at the compound knew of her visit, not even Thin Thin. The men would have forbidden it. She left home in the early afternoon, without specifying a destination.

"I'm an old family friend," Nabeelah told a nurse as she entered the hospital. At least he has a family friend, thought the woman. Nabeelah looked just like any another little old lady.

The patients and their families paid her little mind as she passed them on her way to Ko That's bed at the far end of the ward.

Ko Thant brightened and sat up at the sight. They sat quietly for several minutes. Nabeelah exuded a sense of tranquility.

"I miss our rides," she finally said.

"So do I," he smiled. "I think you will be driving me for a while."

Nabeelah pulled a thermos and a small bottle out of a cloth shoulder bag. She poured powder from the bottle into a cup and stirred in hot water.

"Mana sudarsham....good for fevers and infections," passing him a cup of dark and oily liquid.

He smelled the concoction and winced. "Disgusting."

"This took me a long time to make. Over 30 ingredients," she pretended a look of hurt but her smile gave away her amusement.

"Word will spread that you are poisoning me. And from the smell, I believe it." He looked warily at the strange brew.

"If it's bitter, that means it's good for you. It will reduce your fever and restore your balance....and your sanity."

"Seems like a "kill me or cure me" recipe." He took a gulp of the foul tasting medicine and shuddered. "Poison for sure." He was kidding, but others, like Ye Htut, would have suspected her of just such a poison, a Pa Ya Say alchemy.

"Does it contain shellac?" asked Ko Thant, with a sly look.

"Yes," she said, surprised.

"Shellac from the beetle. Beetles are used to suck brains from the skull. I hope you aren't trying to do that to me."

"Where did you hear that nonsense? Obviously the medicine hasn't yet restored your sanity."

"From one of my sidecar professors," smiled Ko Thant. Nabeelah admitted, only to herself, that there was some truth to the use of the beetle technique in ancient times.

"My father was particularly proud of this medicine. He told me that in addition to its medical benefits, it brings peace and harmony and everyone should drink it.

They talked for a few minutes about nothing in particular. She asked if he was eating. He said yes. She felt his forehead and nodded in satisfaction as she stood up to go, leaving the small bottle of powder, enough for three more Pa Ya Say doses.

**19 KO WIN VISITS HOSPITAL**

A few days later, Ko Win went unaccompanied to the hospital, taking a little package of sweets. He examined the wound, where the swelling was almost gone.

“Did you see who threw the rock?” Ko Win asked.

“No.”

“I think it was meant for me,” Ko Win said.

“It doesn’t matter.”

“Doesn’t matter? What doesn’t matter?” Ko Win replied.

“Doesn’t matter who threw the rock and who got hit.”

“Why doesn’t it matter?” Ko Win was confused.

“We are all the same. You, me, Thin Thin, the rock thrower.”

“If we are all the same, why are we throwing rocks at each other?”

Ko Win said in exasperation.

“We’re all afraid. Of each other, of ourselves, of the past, of the future. We’re all out of balance, spinning around, thinking the rocks will act as a shield to protect us.”

“Sounds crazy to me,” immediately on saying this Ko Win felt guilty, since the rock might well have affected Ko Thant’s sanity.

“You may be right.” Ko Thant glanced at the nightstand and the small bottle. “This powder is supposed to help me regain my balance...and, come to think of it, my sanity.”

Ko Win looked over at the bottle and recognized it, having seen similar ones in the glass display case at *The Cloud* that was the target of the first rock thrown on Parade day.

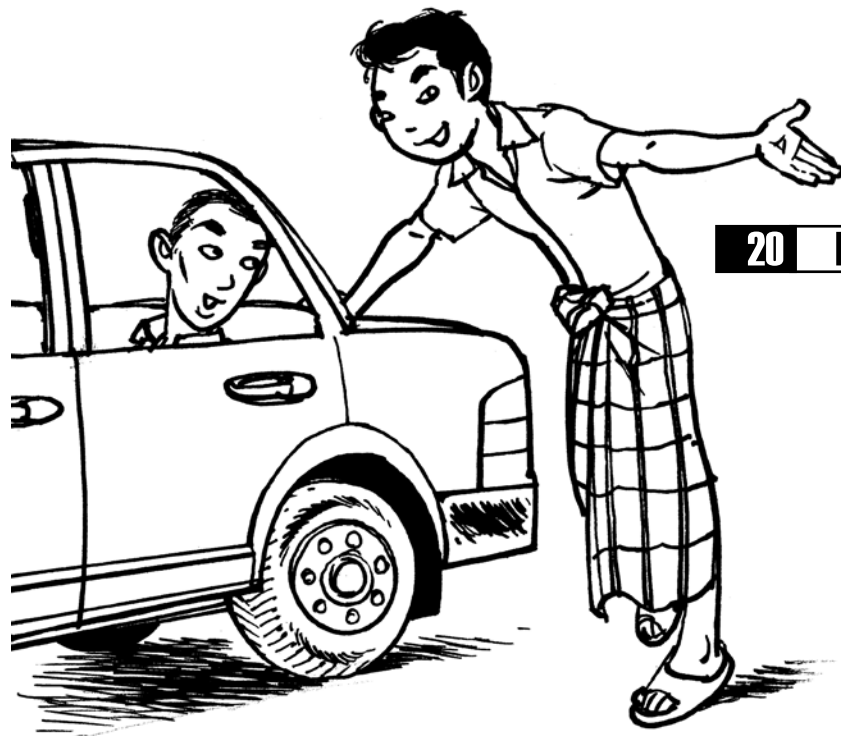
Ko Thant again, “I was told it was medicine. Listening to myself, it might be Yah Bah. As if to balance his thoughts, he tasted one of Ko Win’s sweets.

“So what’s next?” from Ko Win, hoping a practical question would end the philosophical talk.

“I hope to go back to the CrossRoads soon. Catch the High Season. Find a lot of tourists and locals needing to go here and there. Needing me to take them here and there.”

“We all want you back,” said Ko Win.

As he got up to leave, Ko Win noticed his small sweets box from SMILE and the powder bottle from *The Cloud* standing side by side on the otherwise empty bedside table. It was a lonely sight.

**20 KO THANT LEAVES HOSPITAL**

They kept it quiet. Ko Thant's sidecar friends picked him up in a taxi at the hospital around 2pm, the time when Monsong settled down for an afternoon rest.

“Just a short stop. Just to take a look. It's on the way,” pleaded Ko Thant.

Ko Win was in the back room at the hardware store and thought he heard familiar voices. He was right. Ko Thant's cab was stopped in front of

the sidecar stand. Ko Win quickly crossed the street and peered in the car window. Ko Thant looked small and frail in the back seat, but he was smiling.

“Welcome back,” said Ko Win.

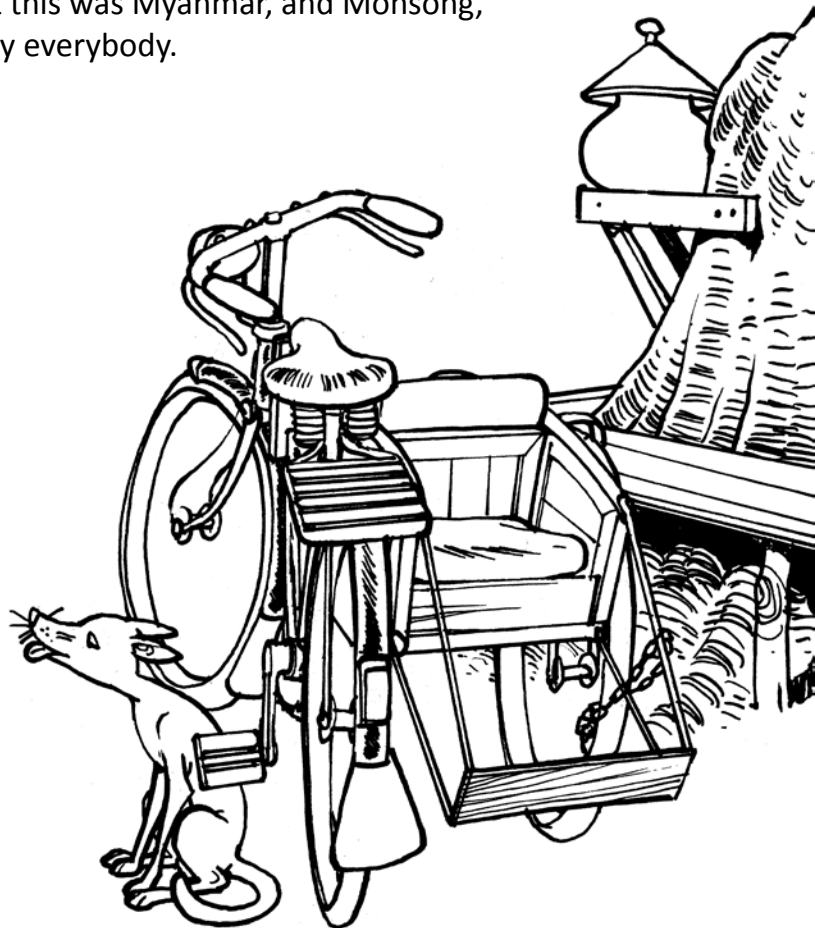
“Thanks, but not quite yet,” returned Ko Thant. “The doctors aren’t happy that I left this soon, so I promised them I would rest for at least two weeks at home. But I can still catch the High Season.”

Ko Thant noticed that both *SMILE* and *The Cloud* were closed but he didn’t say anything. Ko Win saw him also look at his sidecar which was chained to the leg of the bench at the sidecar stand.

“Do you want me to put it inside my shop?” Ko Win offered.

“No thanks. I think it’s safer out here,” Ko Thant smiled, but not entirely in jest.

The cab had paused for less than five minutes before heading to Ko Thant’s tiny room up beyond the Bandstand. No one, except Ko Win, appeared to notice the stop, but this was Myanmar, and Monsong, where everything gets noticed by everybody.



**21 CEASE FIRE ENDS**

Why was it the opposite of what one would expect and hope for? Ko Thant survives, everybody should be relieved, the anger would subside, things could slowly return to normal. Instead, his appearance wakes the sleeping beasts. In his absence, there was a dark quiet. His return flips the light switch and all the noise and poisonous plots jump up in bold relief, like an amusement park ride through a haunted house.

From the sidecar stand Ko Win watched the cab go through the CrossRoads, up Thazin Road and past the Bandstand towards Ko Thant's tiny apartment, his recovery room take out home with apartment, his recovery room. Ko Win looked over and saw U Maung and Thiri watching from their open windows. Instead of returning to the hardware store, he walked down Padauk Road towards home. Before he got halfway, two friends showed up on bicycles, demanding details of the CrossRoads meeting. At the same time, Thin Thin's cell phone rang at the Nazim compound. Someone had seen the cab passing the Bandstand. By 2:45pm only Nabeelah was still in the dark, and only because she was taking a nap.

Ko Win's friends, against U Maung and Thiri's orders, followed him inside his house. They couldn't help themselves. Ko Thant would live. They were glad. They had waited. But his injury could not be forgiven or forgotten. A price must be paid. Now was the time.

A similar but more intense scene unfolded as word reached the benches down by the lake. The poison inside Ye Htut's head, instead of dissipating like Ko Thant's, had grown over the last two weeks, as if he was the one with a brain injury. It would not be controlled or contained. It spread to his bench mates and beyond.



**22 THE PHONE CALL**

There would be a meeting at the Maung's tonight for all five adults. Ko Win realized that his own sense of relief at seeing Ko Thant was felt by most others as the opposite, a call for revenge.

Ko Win could not erase the image of the frail Ko Thant, slumped in the back of the cab, surveying the CrossRoads and his sidecar stand and hoping that he could soon return to work, hoping that things would get back to where they were before the rock. Revenge was the last thing Ko Thant cared about. He almost died trying to stop the petty feud between Ko Win and Thin Thin, but that feud was a symbol of a larger and much more sinister and senseless conflict. Ko Win realized Ko Thant would not survive as the centerpiece of the dangerous storm that was coming fast. How ironic that Ko Thant would be the victim once again. He was not religious, political, aggressive or mean spirited. He represented hope, not anger and despair.

Ko Win suddenly saw that he could no longer just sit on the sidelines and listen. There was no more time to worry about pleasing others. Something must be done. Time to act.

"Thin Thin, this is Ko Win," from a private spot behind the Maung house.

"I guess you heard Ko Thant is out?"

"Yes"

"We need to talk...right away."

"How 'right away'?" Thin Thin walked into the bathroom to escape curious ears.

"Tomorrow morning. 9:30am."

"Where?"

"The cold drink stand behind the Bandstand. You know where I mean?"

Everyone old enough knew from their teen-age years that the woods behind the Bandstand was the best place in town for any chance of privacy. Many a first kiss.

"Yes, I know where it is," her tone as if he had asked something obvious, like where

Monsong Lake was located. The place held its adolescent memories for her too.

"Don't tell anybody," he hung up before she had a chance to respond. Normally she would never meet alone, anywhere, with Ko Win. His tone of voice told her she should break the rules.



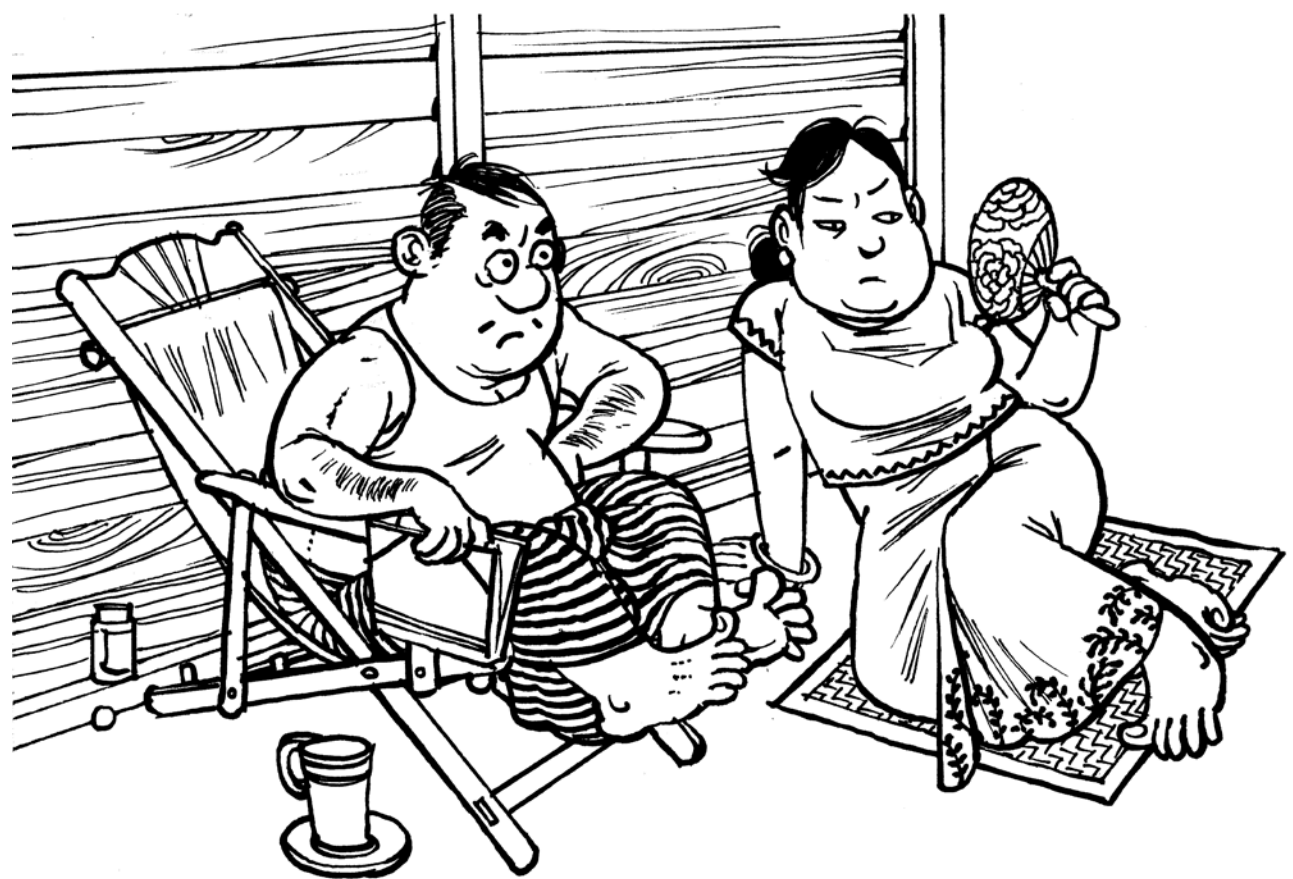
**23** **BUDDHIST PLAN**

Things had returned over the last two weeks to their routine in the Maung household, with meals not including Ye Htut and Sanda, but U Maung and Thiri were not surprised when Ye Htut showed up at their house at 6:30pm. He wanted to make sure there were no discussions without him present. He had been drinking. Everyone would eat here tonight and they would talk after dinner. Without prompting, Ko Win resumed his earlier role and started preparing dinner. Thiri, not wanting to sit with Ye Htut until Sanda arrived, joined Ko Win in the stifling kitchen. U Maung and Ye Htut sat in the gloomy silence of the living room.

After dinner, with the kids in bed next door, Ye Htut took control. He was more sober, but no less agitated.

“Nobody in the family will be involved. No way to trace anything to us. No additional stickers on the walls of our buildings,” delivered by Ye Htut as if he was reading a practiced speech.

“A fire at SMILE,” and, in an added twist dreamt up in the poisoned atmosphere of the benches, “A fire at SALON.” He paused for effect. “Who else but the Muslims would burn down two Buddhist businesses?”



And something else he thought up just this afternoon.

“In honor of Ko Thant’s recovery, fire for the sidecar stand and his sidecar. A second Muslim attack on him.” Another pause. Don't worry. “We can help him rebuild immediately and get him a new and better sidecar.”

Ye Htut didn't add the natural follow on, but he didn't need to. Revenge for the fires would come quickly from sources not connected to the Maungs. *The Cloud*, the Nizam compound, the mosque would all suffer a similar fiery fate.

“When the smoke clear and the Nizams are gone from Monsong,” he said, “we can rebuild the SALON. Friends will buy the Nizam property, SMILE will come back bigger and better and it will be a Buddhist CrossRoads.”

If there was any doubt in Ko Win's mind about this being the moment to act, the addition of the sidecar stand and sidecar as targets of fire erased it. And the presumption of Ye Htut planning SMILE's future was more than galling.

It was late. U Maung and Thiri were frightened by Ye Htut. Sanda made eye contact with no one. There was nothing to be gained by more talk tonight. It was like a nightmare, but without the sleep. For once Ko Win was glad not to join his friends on the street outside. He was scared too, and filled with a newer

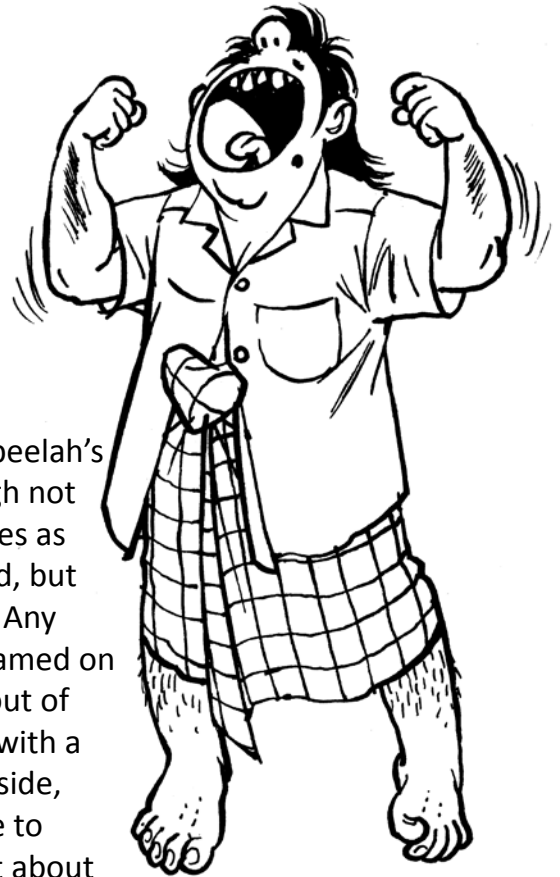
and greater hate for Ye Htut, the anger fanned not just by tonight's outburst, but even more by a secret Ko Win had been carrying for the last three days.

## 24 MUSLIM PLAN

After dinner the adults gathered in Nabeelah's living room. The young men had a similar, though not quite as virulent, intensity in their eyes and voices as

Ye Htut was displaying down Padauk Road, but even they knew that their choices were limited. Any violence, any property destruction, would be blamed on them and the revenge would be swift and way out of proportion. Grudgingly, young and old were left with a modest approach. The police were not on their side, but the authorities had to at least pay lip service to keeping the peace. Best for the Nazims to forget about removing the sticker, it was better to guard the CrossRoads buildings around the clock, keep *The Cloud* closed and formally cancel the SMILE lease as quickly as possible. After time, open again without a Buddhist tenant. If something new and bad happens, all bets were off and it would be "an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth."

Nabeelah and Thin Thin were quiet. If Nabeelah was curious about why Thin Thin did not speak to her before or after the meeting, she did not let on. Thin Thin wanted to say something to Gannie about tomorrow morning's meeting with Ko Win, but she was sworn to secrecy.



**25 COLD DRINK STAND**

Nobody was at the cold drink stand at this time of the morning. Built many years ago as a portable cart with wheels, it turned into a permanent fixture here behind the Bandstand, across a small footbridge in the low scrub growth next to a path leading up to the hills which overlooked the lake and the town.

“Have you ever been here?” Ko Win ventured.

“I wouldn’t tell you if I had,” she said with a quick, clever smile.

Ko Win was never the initiator, especially with Thin Thin, but now the stage was his.

“After I saw Ko That yesterday, I got this feeling that something bad is going to happen to him. People seem to be saying ‘OK, he’s alive, now it’s time to strike. No more waiting,’ Ko Win paused to steady his breathing. “You should see him. He looks terrible. All he wants to do is come back to his sidecar stand. I’m afraid there won’t be anything left when he gets there.” He didn’t mention any of Ye Htut’s specific plans. It wasn’t necessary, he had her attention. “We’ve got to do something.”

“I don’t know what to do and even if I did, no one really listens to me,” from Thin Thin.





Ten seconds passed.

“What can we do?” hers less a question of what could be done, more a statement to break the silence. “The shops are closed, both of us are staying away from the CrossRoads, not causing trouble.”

“We should open the shops. Tomorrow,” Ko Win almost shouted the “Tomorrow”, catching himself off guard with the force of his proclamation. His determination was unlocked for the first time. “We can’t let what started as a problem about a hair style turn into a disaster.”

“Opening the shops would be like lighting a fuse,” her tone doubtful, but she felt the force in his voice and saw the fire in his eyes.

“The fuse is already lit. The locked doors just hide the sparks and build up the pressure. Open the shops and let the poison out. Don’t tell our families or anyone else ahead of time. After we open, tell everyone to back off.” He surprised himself again, this time with the clarity and simplicity of the plan. “You and I are the ones running the shops. You and I are closer to the ages of the ones throwing the rocks and lighting the fires. We can’t let Ko Thant be the victim again. We have to try to solve the problem. No more talking, it’s time to act.”

She sat motionless, startled by Ko Win, trying to think.

“Can I at least speak with Nabeelah?” she was surprised again, this time that she was seeking his counsel. He did not have to respond.

She knew the answer was no.

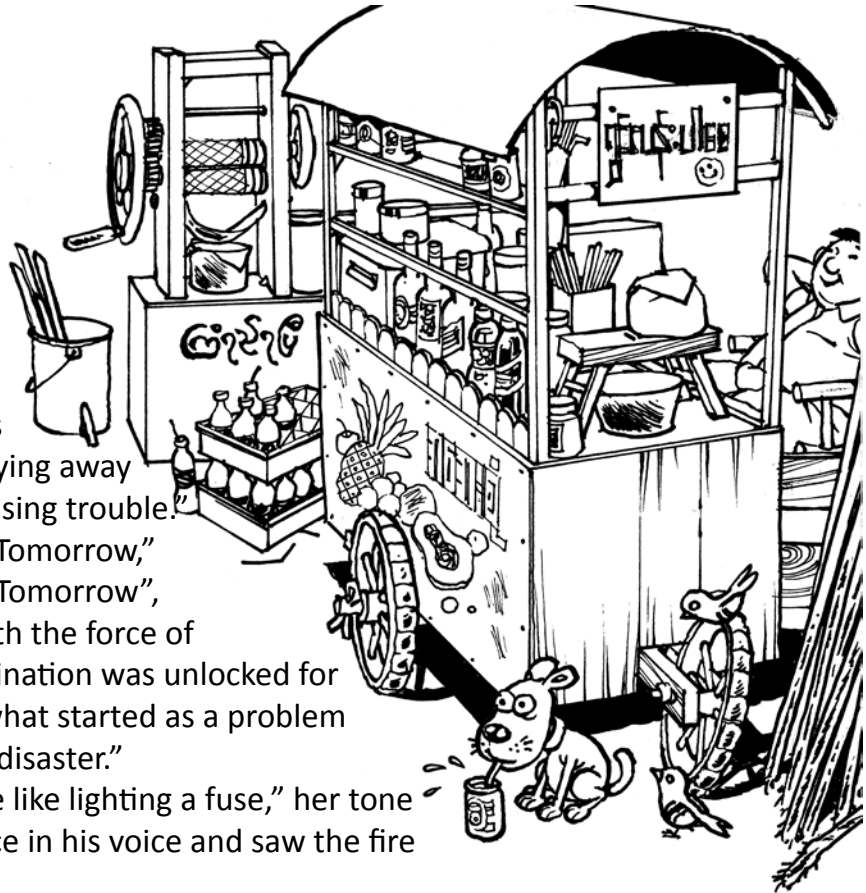
“Tomorrow morning, 7am, I will be open for business,” he said.

“Your front door is locked,” she said.

He ignored her statement, thinking it best not to say that he would break the lock, instead responding with “This will only work if you are also open.”

He stood up. “Now let’s get out of here before somebody sees us.”

He followed her back across the bridge, into uncharted territory for both of them.



**26 KO WIN AND YE HTUT**

“We need to meet, someplace where we can talk in private,” Ko Win said to Ye Htut early that afternoon by telephone.

Ye Htut assumed Ko Win wanted to get his specific thoughts about last night’s CrossRoads retribution plan. He said they could meet in U Maung and Thiri’s living room later this afternoon, while they were at work and his boys were still at school.

Ko Win disliked Ye Htut from the beginning. As his life fell apart, Ye Htut tried to drag the whole family down with him; mostly his wife, but really everybody. Not just the money he spent which he did not earn, but the temper, the drinking and the hateful attitudes. But all paled by comparison to what Ko Win had learned three days ago.

“I’m going to open SMILE tomorrow morning. *The Cloud* is opening too. The idea is to bring things slowly back to where we were a month ago...so that Ko Thant can come to work. If the Maungs and the Nazims are not at war, everyone and everything will be better.”

“You’re kidding?” Ye Htut laughed derisively.

“I’m not kidding.”

“Not at war you say? Not at war? This is a war. Who are you to speak against the pride of our people, our religion, our nation,” Ye Htut reddened as he spat out the words. “You should never have stooped to working under the thumb of a girl...a MUSLIM girl. She is an agent of her people, trying to infiltrate what is ours. Nobody is going to listen to you, or follow you and that girl.”

“They will listen when I tell them about you,” Ko Win said. Ye Htut paused, confused.

“What are you talking about?” Ye Htut said dismissively.

“About what you have been doing to your wife.”

“What?” Ye Htut stiffened.

“You know, the stomach, the back, the legs. Blows everywhere except where people could see them.”

“You’re crazy,” Ye Htut hissed.

“No you’re crazy... crazy with hate and fear and violence. And you are the agent, trying to infiltrate my family and friends and our community.” Ko Win’s voice was slow, clear and measured.

He was surprised at the calm that came over him. Ko Win had held the secret inside until now. Being around the house all the time in the last two weeks, he saw much more of Ye Htut and Sanda’s nine year old twin boys. Shy and reserved, they rarely laughed. Ko Win tried to draw them out. One day last week, they were playing and one boy accidentally hit Ko Win in the face with the back of his hand. A solid blow. The boy paused for a second, wide eyed, and then burst into tears.

“What’s wrong? I’m OK. You didn’t mean to do it.”

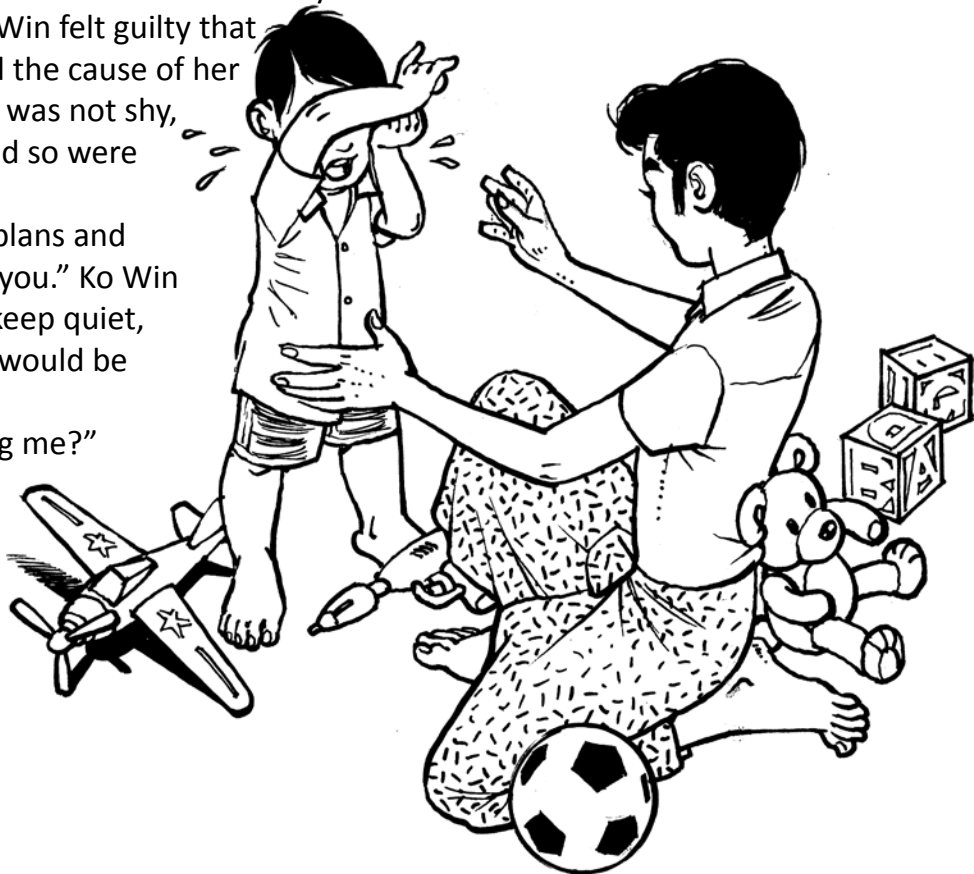
The tears turned into sobs. “Why does daddy hit mommy all the time? He means to do it.”

Ko Win held the boy to his chest. That’s why Sanda looks down whenever Ye Htut is speaking. Ko Win felt guilty that he hadn’t recognized the cause of her fearful behavior. She was not shy, she was petrified, and so were the twins.

“You stay out of my plans and I’ll keep quiet about you.” Ko Win knew he would not keep quiet, but the punishment would be slightly delayed.

“Are you blackmailing me?”

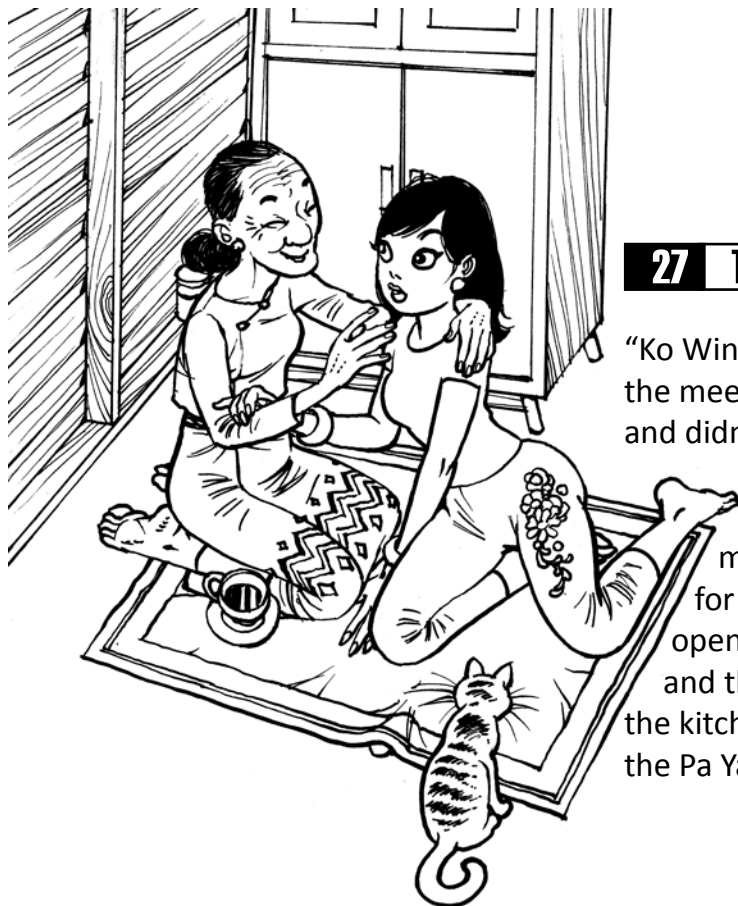
Ye Htut still defiant, but less confident. The eyes were black, but along with the hate, they gave off the unmistakable adrenaline of fear.



“Yes,” said Ko Win, slowly and distinctly.

“If you cause trouble in any way, with the shops, with the sidecar stand, with any of us, especially with your own family, I’ll go to the police. They have been watching you for years, just waiting for an opportunity.”

Ko Win’s threat could unleash an even more violent reaction from Ye Htut. He was fearful, not for himself, but for Sanda and the boys. Too late now.



## 27 THIN THIN AND NEBEELAH

“Ko Win called me last night before the meeting. That’s why I couldn’t look at you and didn’t talk with you afterwards.

I promised not to say anything.”

Thin Thin’s allegiance to Nabeelah made her disobey Ko Win’s request for secrecy about tomorrow morning’s opening. Nabeelah prepared cups of tea and they moved to the living room from the kitchen, where the telltale bitter odor of the Pa Ya Say had returned since

the closing of *The Cloud*.

“We met this morning. Ko Win wants to open his shop tomorrow...and wants me to open mine also... I mean yours. He’s really worried that with Ko Thant out of the hospital, something bad is going to happen. And soon.”

Nabeelah took a slow sip of tea. Her expression said Not ‘keep going.’

“Ko Win thinks he and I are the center of the storm. We need to do something ourselves. If we are there in person, open for business, side by side, it might calm things down.”

Nabeelah’s look again said ‘continue.’

“I think he’s right,” said Thin Thin. “He’s not going to say anything to his aunt and uncle until after he opens. But I can’t do this without talking to you first. It is your land, your buildings, your business and your family.”

Nabeelah felt a rush of memory. Her older brother was about Thin Thin’s age when he fought for freedom alongside Aung San and other Buddhists and Muslims in the Independence Movement. She was only 12 years old at the time, but the fear and excitement and admiration she felt way back then was still fresh. The same emotions she now felt for Thin Thin. She wanted to cry, but now was not the time. She took a sip of tea, surprised that her hand held steady.

“I’m proud of you, and I agree with you and Ko Win. I don’t care about what might happen to the stores, the business and me. But I care about your safety, and the family’s safety. I would like to open the store tomorrow morning myself. But you are right. The positive reactions, if they come, will be from people your age, but only if the first actions come from you and Ko Win. I’m the past, you’re the present. And the future.” She reached over and gripped Thin Thin’s hand. “You will need someone nearby to help if trouble starts. Ko Thant can’t help this time. It’s time to help him,” she paused. “We can’t tell the men tonight. They will stop us...I mean stop you. I’ll deal with them after you open in the morning.”

## 28 SHOPS OPEN AGAIN

The CrossRoads was very quiet at 7am Monday morning when Ko Win and Thin Thin opened their shops. The first to notice, on their 7:30am arrival, were Thiri and U Maung. Neither was happy, but they took no immediate action. The two sidecar drivers showed up at 8am and they were very happy.

A close observer would have noticed that the SALON opened at 10am, an hour later than normal. Sanda was home getting the boys ready for school. It was one of the few tasks normally done by Ye Htut, but last night the snake had slithered back to his parent's barren plot.

At the same time, Nabeelah told everyone in her compound what was happening and asked, more ordered, them to stay away from the CrossRoads. The men were angry, but did nothing. As the day wore on, there was curiosity down on the benches by the lake about Ye Htut's absence.

The young Buddhist and Muslim boys, the Parade Day sharks in the water, were not circling the CrossRoads. They were somehow tuned into the vibrations of requested calm coming from Ko Win, Thin Thin and, indirectly, Ko Thant. With the visiting monks gone, reason seemed to be restored at Ywa Oo Kyaung.

All was quiet on Tuesday. Word came from the sidecar drivers that Ko Thant would come to the CrossRoads for a short time next Monday. He would do a little maintenance on his sidecar. Sanda reopened the SALON at the usual 9am hour. Thiri would get the boys ready for school. Ye Htut was nowhere to be seen.



Monsong and the CrossRoads were blessed with the beginning of High Season. More people moved up and down Thazin Road than in recent memory. The shop owners were busy. The tourists were happy to explore the town.



On Thursday, three young women tourists stopped at *The Cloud*. Two wanted facials and the third, seeing Thin Thin's short hair and stylish curls, asked for a shampoo, haircut and style.

"I can do a Pa Ya Say shampoo, but if you want a haircut or styling, you should go across the street to SALON."



## 29 WELCOME BACK

The following Monday morning, Ko Win, Thin Thin and Nabeelah, the hosts, set up the table for ten near the sidecar stand at SMILE. If they felt the irony for the similar arrangement that took place the morning of Kahtein Parade, it went unspoken. At each place a cup and saucer and a plate with two small sweets, a Muslim almond cake and a Buddhist mango cookie.

The guests arrived at 10:30am. Ko Thant was escorted to the head of the table by the sidecar drivers, as if he were the mayor. He still looked frail, but stronger for the 10 days rest at home. Thiri, U Maung and Sanda crossed the street, tentative but smiling at the sight of Ko Thant. Nabeelah sat next to Ko Thant. Thin Thin and Ko Win circled the table, he holding the tray while she poured tea for everyone.

Not surprisingly, the conversation was tentative and reserved. Everyone told Ko Thant to take his time before coming back to work.

“You will be my first  
“That is if you don’t make  
She smiled. “OK,” he said.  
it gave me back my health

customer.” He smiled at Nabeelah.  
me take any more of your medicine.”  
“I admit it wasn’t poisonous, I think  
and maybe even my sanity.”



The Buddhists took polite bites of their native mango cookies, but they were more interested in the super sweet almond cake. Guilty pleasures. After about 15 minutes, U Maung put down his cup in a dignified manner, looking at Thin Thin and Nabeelah and Ko Win.

“Thank you for this gathering,” he said and he now looked at Thiri and Sanda. “We should be getting back to work. There seem to be customers around.” He paused. “I think we may start staying open until 8pm.”

As the party began to break up, Ko Win noticed that Ko Thant was staring intently at something in the middle distance. It reminded him of the day just a short month ago when the frog tried unsuccessfully to cross Thazin Road. Ko Win looked where Ko Thant was looking, and Thin Thin did the same. First to the road... nothing to see...then beyond to the buildings and specifically SALON. Something. But what? Thin Thin blinked and looked again to make sure she was not mistaken. Ko Thant and Ko Win did more or less the same double take. They all recognized it at the same time...the sticker on the wall of SALON had been removed.

Two seats down from Thin Thin, Sanda sat quietly. She maintained her usual shy expression, but upraised eyes told that she was clearly aware and involved with what was happening. Thin Thin fought back tears as she looked first at Ko Thant, then at Nabeelah, next at Sanda and finally at Ko Win, who was looking back at her. ■

