

Burma

Sent: Tuesday February 11, 2003

Subject: Burmese Nights



George Orwell wrote *Burmese Days*, but I figure it's the nights that are more interesting. funny thing is that he also wrote *1984*, which we know is about totalitarianism in the extreme. next funny thing is that the country that now best fits his macabre *1984* world is myanmar (aka Burma) in 2003. so lets call this missive *Burmese Nights--2003* edition. don't worry folks, I won't get too political here: it's just that I really would be missing the point in my description of burma (a name that is somehow more romantic to me than myanmar) if I didn't preface my comments by saying that the government of burma is from start to finish a bunch of pillaging assholes. now that having been said we can get on with things. you see the people of burma remain a very friendly bunch who are overjoyed to say hello and get a hello back from you. more often than not they have no interest in money, just a bit of communication from an alien from another planet.

indeed we are, I have heard rumblings that my email was infiltrated by an unknown general tim from the secret police, who made some remarks. point is that the people of burma have no access to internet (nor do visiting tourists). thus, they are cut off from most, if not all, access to information about the outside world. similarly, they have no concept of how the world sees them. so when a strange looking wanderer happens through their village, they see him as more real than the space invaders that just might make their way onto the one tv set that blesses the village (if there happens to be power to juice the electrodes), the government gives some substance, but no content, there are a few refrigerators for sale in the capital. and disc players and the odd tv set. but there's nothing to play on them. tv shows are all edited (except for some strange reason cnn and bbc news--maybe that in itself is a comment on content) and all music can be burmese only. thus, for example, I was walking in the booney of boonies watching oxen plow a field, just as they had done for centuries, when I heard a haunting melody sung by a girl in burmese. it took me awhile, but I finally recognized the tune as elton john's *candle in the wind*. perhaps it's better that a whole culture is cut off from the crass consumerism that is thailand and the rest of the west. but its still sad to watch the people struggle with nothing while their self-appointed government ships loads of teak, jade, girls, opium and other big-money

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products to its neighbours.

I jotted down the following one night:

they have but a smatter of progress here--just a jot, a tad, a trifle of things luxurious--a light spit, not a rain, of water to wash in--not a plop, but a whiff of food to eat--just a scratch of work to do--and nothing but watching each other to entertain the long, long days.

but even so, there's a great deal of laughter in the streets, in the teas shops, in their hearts. and the Buddhist temples are active with meditation, with spirit. so somehow the whoa in whoville have still allowed christmas to come in spite of their grinchy government.

there's nothing easy about living in Burma. clean is relative, I've watched many a person bathing in the irrawaddy river, a once-beautiful and big waterway that was the source of life, just as the ganges in India and the mekong for much of south asia. but the irrawaddy is a bit of a stinky mess right now, just so you don't think I'm some kind of perv, I must say that the buddhist people of burma are modest: when they bathe in public they wear their J.onyyis..-long cloths that in other countries are called sarongs. thus, I watched in awe as people tried to get clean in murky water, in water that carries all sorts of things, including bodies, just glancing through my notes here I've got a few more bits, and others that may make another day. now back in bangkook, the crazy capital of capitals, there is the luxury of everything--there is nothing you can't get in bangkook, including shot. the recent police dudes vs. drug dealer stats are as follows: from february 1 to 10 police claim that 144 "drug dealers" have been shot here. the prime minister declared war on dealers a short time ago (apparently not to be outdone by george w.). so what has resulted has been a turf war that (I suspect) involves as many police as dealers, for example, many of the deaths are attributed (by police) as either: self defence by police, or dealers shooting other dealers before the other dealer can rat him out. all highly suspicious and not investigated. I thought I'd throw this in just to say that nothing here is normal in any context that we aliens might expect.



Bumper Stickers
destined...
for failure

speaking of alien, here's a few excerpts from a menu that a found in pye, a small city on the irawaddy, they had hired a translator, but I suspect, like all thing , they got what they paid for

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(not much) : half-fried eggs; stuffed bean cards; crab ran roll (but didn't run fast enough?); fighting ball sauté (??); fried chicken couple (until death do us part?); fried chicken in paper; fried chicken with corns (don't eat the feet); fried prawn Euton (eat and then sleep?) ; fried sandwich fish; and crispy tried fish tall. how do you order from menu like this? I just pointed and prayed, survival in these places takes many forms.

well that just about wraps it up for now. just remember that if you're going to Burma take flea powder and lice shampoo. no, not for yourself; the powder for the forlorn dogs and the shampoo for the folks.

one last thought (there's always one last thought): the long line of tomorrow sped to yesterday. the loss of life is always, except not today. so here we are in the present, wondering what to say, while the rest of life drives past us in out-of-date chevrolets.

Sent: Sat, 15 Feb 2003 03:42:11 -0500 (EST)

Subject: Hard Beds and Communal Combs



before the memory of myanmar becomes nothing more than badly scratched notes, I'm throwing another one of these at you. apparently burma rates as one of the poorest in the world. it certainly looks like it. but that also means you see people inventing ways to cope. thus, things like combs and cigarette lighters hang in public places for all to use, rather than share the combs, I opted for a short haircut. cost of a haircut in burma? 25 cents. now some of you might say that at that price I got ripped off.

part of travelling is learning how to be a good prisoner, that is, the lessons of patience and also of calmness in the face of complete bureaucratic idiocy. my note from a now forgotten movie reads "have you ever been in a place where all hope is gone and all that is left is patience?" even more than patience, you learn to find comfort in jail-sized rooms and sleep on a board covered with a sheet and called a bed.

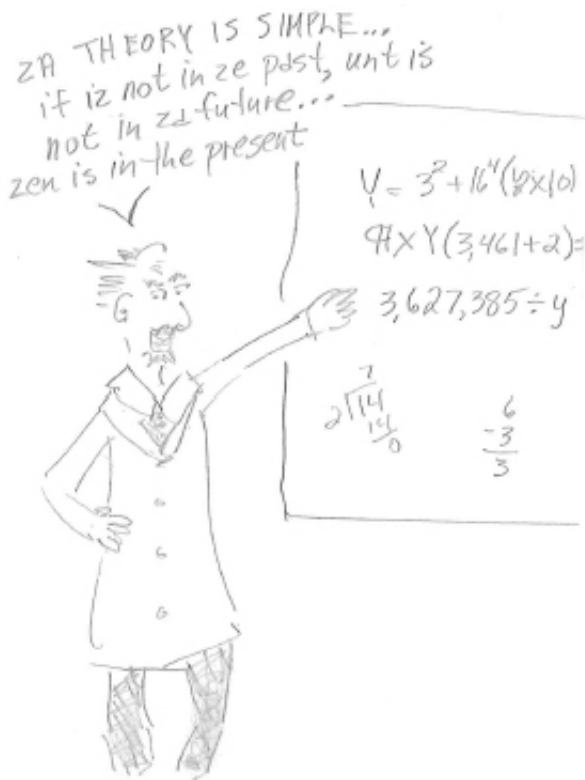
harry chapin (the storytelling singer) has something important to say about sleep. and in my view it relates to travel in the sense that when you're on the road you are pursuing your path, and even when it gets all mucked up, you still can feel that you're on your journey, taking your steps, in your direction. harry's grandfather was a painter and said this: "harry, there's two kinds of tired--there's good tired and there's bad tired. ironically enough, bad tired can be a day that you won. but you won other people's battles, you lived other people's days, other people's dreams. and when it was all over there was very little you in there. and when you hit the hay at night, somehow you toss and turn, you don't settle easy. good tired, ironically enough, can be a day that you lost, but you don't even have to tell yourself, because you know that you fought your battles, you chased your dreams, you lived your days. and when you hit the hay at night you settle easy, you sleep the sleep of the just and you can say 'take me away.' I am good tired."

that's what harry's grandfather said. then harry went on to say "now there's a process in your and my lives in the insecurity that we have about a prior life or an afterlife. I hope there is a god. and if he does exist, he's got a weird sense of humour. but if there's a process that will allow us to live our days, that will allow us that degree of equanimity towards the end, looking at that black implacable wall of death, to allow us that degree of peace, that degree of non-fear, I want in." harry hasn't been with us for awhile, but I hope he found his place. besides how to sleep on a hard bed, the people of burma taught me how to befriend dirt and how to really fill a truck and bus. all forms of public transport are double-plus full, and the people just cope with a smile. it is a country where horse-drawn carts and carriages are still used as the primary form of transport in the rural regions. although romantic, the horse carriage is not a quick way through town. thus, I learned to slow down my expectations. ox carts have their own paths beside the main roads: have you ever noticed the look of determination that oxen express? they seem to say "this is my job and I do it well." I also learned that you can get take-out beer in burma. only trouble is they put it in a plastic bag. I watched several guys order a pitcher, only to see the pitcher poured into a plastic bag. I am still curious as to how they drink it. do a bunch of guys sit close together each with a straw? some things of burma must remain mysteries.

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that leads me to tell you about bagan. one of the great wonders of asia. it is a large plain covered with more than 2,000 pagodas. at sunset you can climb up one of the larger ones to see the whole plain alive with birds, bats, palm trees and seemingly endless pagodas. most are brick and look like a big square house with an ice cream cone stuck upside down on top. at sunset they all turn orange.

on one of the days I was there I stopped my bike just off the road and stared in awe at that scene. after a few moments my focus on the pagodas switched to my feet, which I realized were very itchy, looking down I saw that I had planted both feet firmly on an ant superhighway and they had decided that my legs made an interesting detour. far out of town and with no water, I started pounding my feet on the ground, after doing this for a bit I looked up to see that two burmese guys had slowed their bicycles to watch. as they continued down the road, I imagine their conversation went like this: "that was weird," "ya, but I've seen it before. it's the tourists, they do some sort of dance to the sunset."

burma is where india meets the orient, this makes for a puzzling mix of buddhism and islam. it also makes for one of the great dangers of travelling in india: flying betels. flying insects are not usually too bad. flying betel is. like the folks of India, the folks of Burma like to chew betel nut. and chewing means spitting (a lot). thus, be forewarned that walking close to a packed bus, a packed tea shop, or pretty much anywhere where people are involves the risk of catching a flying betel. the good news about burma is that people smile a lot. the bad news is that many of those smiles have a ghastly iron-oxide red glow to them. I never did get used to that look, perhaps it just takes more time. I think the toughest job in Burma must be that of a dental hygienist, I wonder if they finish off by saying; "for your fluoride rinse do you want mint, bubble gum or betel nut?"

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I also learned a new driving technique. honk your horn at every available opportunity, and even when there's no reason at all, while the vehicles of burma are downright shaky, the horns work real good. you honk to warn people that you're vehicle is approaching, and you honk as you pass them as if to say hello, then you honk once you're by as if to say glad if missed you, maybe next time. more than once I got a head-splitting ear full as I walked the streets of rangoon and mandalay. the reason was probably just that the truck driver (trucks have the loudest horns) was bored and wanted to see a tourist jump (and swear), so much more happened that will have to wait for other days: there were mice playing tag in my so-called "upper class" train car; there was an almost-disappeared city from 1500 year ago that took me two hours to walk across; and there were the endless burmese renditions of western songs, such as rod stewart's gasoline alley, creedence clearwater revival and yes even shania twain. in bagan I jotted the following:

walking around touristville,
I stopped to look around.
there were guys wearing bozo shorts,
and girls in cheap sarongs.
one dude took a million shots
of an old lady in a chair,
while two little girls right next door picked lice from each other's hair.
a big-ass tourist bus rumbled through the road honking wildly at everyone--
just missed the guy eating frog
(or was that beast a toad?)
amongst all that commotion
from the throng of gawking fools
a prayer of buddhist monks went past
a classic burmese tea shop
with its free tea and tiny stools.
where I sat watching this show
of two cultures just colliding:
the one an arrogant tourist class
just in it for itself,
the other a kinder simpler folk
less in the present than in the past.

so I guess I'll let the rest of the burmese memories fade to a dark and distant glow. I've got a last few days in bangkook, then it's off to the north and possibly into laos. as one fellow quipped about bangkook: "this town has ruined much better men than us." and with that I once again say farewell (because to say farebadly would be downright unfriendly), your humbled servant, john

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Sent: Date : Fri,0:33:05 -0500 (EST)

Subject: Getting Near a Border

Roll over? - shit... I
thought you said roll one



(and these guys are known for...
their sense of hearing).

besides using a gerund in the title, I'm sending you something different this Lima. what you are about to receive (should you decide to accept it) is a prospective piece, as opposed to a retrospective one. what I mean is you're getting what might happen, rather than what did.

I have found a clean and well-lighted place. those of you who are hemingway fans might recognize that reference to one of his short stories where several blokes congregate to a late-night bistro to sit out the night. for various reasons they need the calm, the peace and the light (as opposed to the mayhem and the darkness--which is right outside the door of this place in downtown chafing rai, northern thailand), I simply need a computer that works and some light to see my notes. but a break from reality is also good, hart noes. the good thing about plans is watching them change. that is what I plan on doing. first of all I will go to a place called sop ruak, I didn't know where it is either. turns out it has an alias (as all good criminals do) and that alias is "the golden triangle." famous for opium export the place is now a tourist trap where folks gather to get their photo taken under yet another stupid sign that says the obvious. apparently this one says "you are here," or "here's a tourist pretending to be an explorer--please note the foolish hat," or something like that. don't forget, I haven't been there yet, I plan on hanging out for awhile and getting in on a few pictures, since I don't have a camera, I have some fun sneaking into other people's shots: "that's a great photo george, but who is that man in the green shirt?" please note that I am not the man in the yellow hat.

so why go? you see there's something mystical about the place too. thailand, burma and laos all stare at each other across the two rivers that forge the triangle of three countries. and even better. it may be the start of a down-river trip on the mekong. from touristville, the mekong cuts the border of thailand and laos for a bit, then it curves eastward into laos--I plan on being on a slow boat heading that way. eventually the mekong goes through an ancient capital called luang prabang (which probably translates from the laotian to mean "thank god this trip is over"). in any

event I plan on getting off there, I mean getting off the boat.



I have had two travel reports that have lead me to choose this path. one says that the roads of laos are brutal. the other is that the so-called speed boats on the mekong are equally brutal: maniac drivers who are not always sure where the sand bars are.

yet there is something more important about travelling by water. actually there's many things. one of them is time. another is that you see a slice of life that is not roads, gas stations.... which leads to a quote from a book I am reading. I recommend this book: "a fortune-teller told me" by tiziano terzani. although italian, he is a writer for der spiegel, covering asian issues. he was warned by a fortune-teller not to travel by plane in 1993. to his credit he didn't and had an amazing voyage through asia--most importantly its spiritual side. he says this:

"as soon as you decide to do without planes you realize how they impose their limited way of looking at things on you. oh, they diminish distances, which is handy enough, but they end up diminishing everything including you're understanding of the world."

that also relates to the way that all of the buzz and whistle of our luxuries smooth and airbrush the world for us. so our friend terzani says this:

"if you pretend to be blind for awhile you find that the other senses grow sharper avoiding planes has a similar effect: the train journey with its ample time and cramped space re-animates an atrophied curiosity about details."

with all the smash and bang our world creates we rarely take a moment to look someone in the

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eyes and exchange a smile. such are the details of life that we are missing.

"okay... okay, okay, okay" (to quote joe pesci in lethal weapon) just one more quote, since it relates to travel by water:

"ships approach countries by slowly and politely entering the mouths of their rivers; and distant ports become long-awaited goals, each with its own face, each with its own smell."

to that last point I can attest: at least about the smell part. I plan on keeping my nose peeled.

so anyways, that's why I'm passing through touristville. I figure it'll be an amusing start to some sort of voyage.

in laos there's also a plain of jars. that's right. a valley that has a whole bunch of jars that weigh around 600 to 1,000 kg. this is not to be mistaken with the jar of plains (which is not an interesting tourist site). the jars in the plain (not the plains in the jar), according to one guide book (remember I haven't been there): "appear to have been fashioned from solid stone, but there is disagreement on this point." so what's to disagree about? either they are or they aren't, I figure. and no one can agree about why they were "fashioned": perhaps sarcophagi, wine fermenters or rice storage. sounds like the x files should have done an episode out there. they could have had a rice wine party with ghosts.



so these are the plans. I plan on solving the jar/plain fiasco once and for all and writing a book about it, strange thing is that it didn't get bombed into oblivion like the rest of laos. that country gets two nods from the world community: luang prabang is a world heritage sight; and Laos (so far) goes down in history as the most bombed country in the history of war. and they weren't even in it. that's what you get, I guess, for helping your neighbours by letting them run a little trail through your country. apparently (not forgetting that all of this is heresay) there's lots of UXO. I didn't know what that means either. it means unexploded ordnance, unlike their

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cambodian neighbours to the south who have a big problem with landmines, the laotians have lot of bombs that never went off. however, they seem to have developed a new form of architecture by using shell casings to build houses and other stuff. such is human ingenuity. while in phnom penh I had never seen so many one-legged guys. I have no plans about what the people of laos might be. that is why I am going there, however, I expect to see great spirit in the face of adversity.

by "adversity" I mean "nothing." and by "great spirit" I mean "the ability to smile." in other words, some people have the capacity to smile even though they have nothing. these are good people. I plan on meeting a few in laos. I will tell you what I can of them later.

as a bigger john than me said, "life is what happens while you're making other plans."

thanks for tuning in. john (the non-beatle)