

Ma THIDA

An essay and a story

A Brief Biography

1966

I was born.

England defeated West Germany 4-2 in London to win the World Cup of soccer.

*American poet Adrienne Rich publishes her fourth collection of poetry, *Necessities of life*, written almost entirely in free verse.*

Indira Gandhi became head of the Congress Party and the first female prime minister of India.

General Subarto took power after bloody coup and civil war, and then Indonesian forests became open for foreign concessionaries resulting widespread deforestation.

1967,68,69,70

My body, mind and heart were nurtured by my dad and mom.

My body was developed.

My mind was raised.

My heart was cultivated.

Latin American author Gabriel Garcia Marquez completed his epic novel 'One Hundred Years of Solitude'.

South African surgeon Christiaan Barnard carries out the first human heart transplant.

American women organized marches to protest the Vietnam War.

Apollo 11's American astronaut Neil A. Armstrong became the first human being to step onto the moon's surface.

Golda Meir became the first woman prime minister of Israel.

British and American medical researchers develop the CAT scan, which integrates thousands of X-ray images into a detailed picture.

1971,72,73,74,75,76,77,78,79,80,81,82,83

My various birthdays were passing.

My hair's birthday.

My eyes' birthday.

My ears' birthday.

My mouth's birthday.

My throat's birthday.

My right hand's birthday.

My left hand's birthday.

My body's birthday.

My legs' birthday.

My mind's birthday.
My heart's birthday.

Women in Jordan got the right to vote.
The world's population surpassed four billion.
In Berlin, the World Congress for International Women's Year opens with almost 2000 delegates from 141 countries.
Labour minister Tina Anselmi became the first woman in the Italian Cabinet.
Margaret Thatcher became the first woman prime minister of Great Britain.
The first birth of a human child conceived through in vitro fertilization, a technique pioneered by British doctors Patrick Steptoe and RG Edwards.
The World Health Organization declared that smallpox had been eradicated three years after the last known case.
The internet was invented.

1984

Ma Thida (sanchaung)¹ was born.
In Bhopal, India, a Union Carbide chemical plant explosion killed 3300 people and injured thousands seriously.
American researcher Robert Gallo and French researcher Luc Montagnier announced independent discoveries of the virus later named HIV.
Desmond Tutu, later Archbishop of Cape Town and head of the Anglican Church in South Africa, was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for his leadership in the national struggle against apartheid.

1985, 86, 87

My right hand, tongue and heart were reborn on pages of paper.
My right hand prominently developed, tongue consistently fluent, heart steadily warm.
My brain, right hand and tongue re-grew up at the hospital.
My brain prominently developed, right hand consistently active, tongue steadily warm.
The Nigerian playwright and novelist Wole Soyinka wins the Nobel Prize for Literature.
An accident in one of the atomic reactors at Chernobyl in the Soviet Ukraine led to the worst disaster in civilian nuclear power.

1988-89

I was born by myself.
My right hand, tongue, brain and heart no longer developing and active, becoming burnt.
However a new "me" was reborn from the organs remaining from original "me".
The deforestation rate in Brazil's Amazon region peaks and attracts increased international concern.
Benazir Bhutto became the prime minister of Pakistan.

¹ My pen name

1990

Dr Ma Thida was born by myself.

But I was slowly turning frail.

My right hand was no longer developed, my tongue no longer fluent, my heart became boiled.

My brain was no longer developed, my right hand no longer active, my tongue became burnt.

Some parts of “me” were dead.

I got the opportunity to attend the funeral of my body parts.

I didn't offer a bunch of red roses.

I didn't light the honey candle.

I didn't show my portrait picture.

But I was silent as I was at other funerals.

The world population surpassed five billions. (That means that in other parts of the world, there might be other births and other developments.)

In Saudi Arabia, women drove cars in Riyadh to protest laws preventing them from operating motor vehicles.

Violeta Barrios de Chamorro is elected president of Nicaragua.

1991,92

Some of my body parts went on dying.

I was still attending those funerals.

Didn't offer a bunch of red roses.

Didn't light the honey candle.

Didn't show my portrait picture.

I tried to hide my shame-filled mind behind my crossed hands, as I usually did at other funerals.

There were Hindu-Muslim riots in India, Pakistan and Bangladesh.

Erwin Neher and Bert Sakmann, two German cell physiologists won Noble Prize in medicine.

Someone won prizes.

Someone offered prayers.

Someone's wishes didn't come true.

1993

I temporarily died.

My hair's funeral.

The freely flying and never pony-tailed hair was tied with a black hair band.

My eyes' funeral.

Usually far- and wide-seeing eyes were limited to see the distance just over the eyelashes.

My ears' funeral.

My ears, preferring knowledge and information over earrings, were corkscrewed by the constantly ringing tune of “How are you all?”.

My mouth's funeral.

My mouth, preferring worthy and right words over sweet and pleasant ones, went mute in a tradition of grinding teeth and biting lips.

My throat's funeral.

My throat, ready to vomit as it doesn't want to swallow, was swallowed by a tradition of absorbing the vomitus.

My right hand's funeral.

My right hand, always trying to reflect physically the mind and the heart, went tired from massaging my forehead and neck.

My left hand's funeral.

My left hand, which had tried to support the old and help the young, was captured by days spent resting still on my knees.

My body's funeral.

My body, chest opening up, heading up, was pressed down, forced to lie flat for days and nights.

My legs' funeral.

My legs, which had tried to walk until the horizon, grew tired by running in a closed circle.

My mind,

My heart,

Never die.

Never die.

I never ever attend the funeral of my mind and heart.

Tony Morrison became the first African-American woman to win the Nobel Prize for literature.

Tansu Ciller became first woman prime minister of Turkey.

Kim Campbell became the first woman prime minister of Canada.

After 40 years' dilemma, the world greatest dam, The Three Gorges, was built on the Yangtze river in China.

1995

My birthday was celebrated without me but with many people whom I have never known.

I slowly died and gradually reincarnated.

I attended the funeral of me.

My birthday was celebrated without me.

The United Nations' fourth world conference on women met in Beijing, China.

965,000 people attended the Claude Monet exhibit at the Art Institute of Chicago.

82% of Poland's forests were damaged by acid rain.

1996, 97, 98

I was adopted again by the World.

I was still attending the funeral of me.

They were celebrating the adoption ceremony without me.

Protease inhibitors provided a new treatment for AIDS which dramatically improves rates of survival.

East Timorese Roman Catholic bishop Carlos Felipe Ximenes Belo received the Nobel Peace Prize in 1996 for his nonviolent efforts to draw international attention to East Timor and promote independence from Indonesia.

In Afghanistan the ruling Taliban government places strict restriction on women, forbidding them to work outside home and receive an education.

1999

I reincarnated but still was attending some funerals.

There might be a knot when you tie two pieces of rope.

My hair, eyes, ears, throat, body and legs were reincarnated.

I was still attending the funerals of some of my body parts.

The AIDS epidemic worsens in Africa as reports indicate that some 9400 people on the continent are infected with the fatal virus everyday.

Mireya Moscoso became the first woman president of Panama, and in December oversaw the US handover of the Panama Canal.

Elizabeth Dole resigned her position as president of the Red Cross to explore a run for the Republican nomination for US president.

1999, 2000, 2001

The days of Dr. Ma Thida being reconstructed, piece by piece.

My hair, eyes, ears, throat, left hand, body and legs were reincarnated.

The eyes stretched their legs, the tongue visited around, the throat refused swallow if it felt like vomiting, the left hand supported elders, helped youths and joined talented people, the body laid as trench, the legs ran in three-sixty degree direction.

But I was attending the funeral of me.

Didn't yet offer a bunch of red roses.

Didn't yet light the honey candle.

Didn't yet show my portrait picture.

Y2K got the world worrying.

The Akashi Kaikyo Bridge, linking the Japanese island of Awaji to the city of Kobe on the main island of Honshu, opened to traffic. The bridge, 3911-m (12,831-ft) long, is the longest suspension bridge in the world.

The Al-Qaeda international terrorist network founded by Osama bin Laden attacked the World Trade Centre in New York. 3047 people were killed. 3152 children became orphans. Most of the deceased people's bodies weren't found. Several nationals and citizens including police, fire-workers and medical personnel who were rescuing the victims were killed.

There were serial funerals.

There was a big funeral, carpeted with flowers: black and white roses in bunches, bouquets, baskets.

There was a big funeral, flame-lit by honey candles.

There was a big funeral, walled with portraits and pictures.

Tears, sobbing, grief, weak fingers, frail body and pathetic legs were the shapes of the sorrowful funeral.

A national flag on the coffin, great sympathy and violent support from the authorities, interviews with victims' family members, papers and pages of missing notes and poems. All of those expressions made those left behind accept this funeral in a more even spirit.

*They didn't need to attend their funerals.
Their funerals were attended by several world citizens including someone whom they never know.
Their funerals were attended by more crowd than their birthdays were.
Actually most of them were not heroes. They were only ordinaries.
Most of them died without knowing anything. World citizens buried their bodies as they were the
dead evidence of result of terror and violence.
Their funeral was world famous.
They lost their lives.
From now every year their death would warn the world about the value of peace.
Tongue and hands must still stay alive instead of their bodies which died.
They didn't really die.*

2002

Ma Thida-Sanchaung, my pen name, was nearly totally reborn.
My hair, eyes, ears, throat, left hand, body and legs were reincarnated.
The eyes stretched their legs, the tongue visited around, the throat refused swallow if
it felt like vomiting, the left hand supported elders, helped youths and joined talented people,
the body laid as trench, the legs ran in three-sixty degree direction.
But I was attending the funeral of me.
My right hand and tongue were not yet reincarnated.
Didn't yet offer a bunch of red roses.
Didn't yet light the honey candle.
Didn't yet show my portrait picture.

*Bin Laden was not arrested.
Terrorism didn't stop.
The World is still getting warmer.*

September 2002

*

Every day everyone's waiting for "*one day*".

.....
1997

Yu was waiting for "*one day*".

It had been nearly a decade. Since Zaw left home in 1990 Yu had been waiting. She was waiting to be with him again - at least to meet him without an iron mesh or bar and concrete block between. She believed one day she would meet him concretely in the open air, not untouchably at the murky, muggy, interview room in Insein prison.

Zaw had been sentenced to 20 years' imprisonment in 1990, and another 12 years' imprisonment in 1996 for his steadfast commitment in democracy. Yu agreed that what Zaw had done for his people was right. She never missed an opportunity to meet him fortnightly at Insein prison. Only fifteen minutes every two week was nowhere near enough for them to talk through all the issues - their three children, their parents, the financial and social affairs of their own family and friends. So Yu always felt dissatisfied after meeting him. She was forever waiting for *one day* when she could meet and talk him for never-ending hours and hours.

Yu realized Zaw wouldn't be released early before finishing his full prison term. So she only hoped she could meet him one time without any hurdles in between: no warden, no iron bars, no concrete blocks. She wanted to grip Zaw's warm and welcoming hands, grasp Zaw's broad and trusty shoulders, and to glimpse every bit of Zaw's puny, and increasingly flabby body to spot the traces of torture. That was her ever-lasting and never-fulfilling wish.

Yu was waiting for *that one day* when she could be in touch with Zaw.

.....
Zaw too was waiting for "*one day*".

It seemed like more than a hundred years ago, since he'd been detained in Mandalay and sent to the infamous Insein prison after a month at interrogation center. A hundred years spent waiting to meet Yu. Twenty four hours normally lasts for twenty four hours, but for him, twenty-four equated ninety six. One earsplitting strike of the main jail gong every fifteen minutes, throughout twenty-four hours, expanded the length of his dreadful day.

In solitary confinement Zaw imagined himself in Yu's womb. The womb was lit with a forty-watt bulb and with the warmth of things Yu had sent - two blankets, two towels, food and clothes. Starlight fell over every city, every country and all people. But a brick wall blocked his only window, which was reinforced by a double layer of wood stakes and iron bars. Barbed wire garlanded the wall like a giant's crown. Zaw had two pots - one for drinking water and one for washing water - and two bowls, a small one to use as a plate at mealtimes and as a cup at bath-time and a big one to use as a toilet.

Zaw wanted to grip Yu's gentle yet supporting hands, to grasp her slim and loyal arms, and to glimpse her frail and increasingly flabby body, to examine her for signs of sickness. Zaw already knew Yu's spiritual health was above average. But he wondered about her lonely struggle for their family. Zaw wanted to show his adoration to Yu concretely. That was his ever-enduring and never-fulfilling wish.

Zaw was waiting for *one day* when he could be in touch with Yu.

.....
 One day in late 1997 there was an announcement about the changes of the title and of some of the members of the State Law and Order Restoration Council, or SLORC. Regime change brought the State Peace and Development Council, or SPDC, and a reshuffle of almost all but the powerful three men. This provoked a lot of wishful thinking. Perhaps a general amnesty for all political prisoners, or a general reduction of prison terms for both criminals and political prisoners.

Together Yu and Zaw separately thought the long awaited “*one day*” might be coming soon.

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 One day soon after the SPDC took power, Yu heard that instead of a general amnesty, the political prisoners would be transferred from Insein to other distant prisons. Yu was ever the optimist. Zaw might be transferred to Mandalay prison and she would no longer have travel nearly 400 miles every two weeks to meet him. She waited to hear about his transfer information from the network of families of political prisoners.

Zaw had also heard about the potential transfer of political prisoners to prisons in Upper Burma. He wished he could be transferred to Mandalay prison. He tried to send a message about the transfer to Yu, and waited to hear whether he would be transferred closer to Yu.

.....
 “Zaw and other political prisoners will arrive at Mandalay station tomorrow morning on their way to the far north of Burma.” The smuggled information reached Yu late one evening. “Be positive” she reassured herself. Though she would have to travel to meet Zaw in another prison, she could still dream of the chance to meet Zaw concretely in the open air. She was sure Zaw would look for her at the station the next morning. She was still hoping that “*one day*” might have come.

Yu couldn't wait for next morning to arrive. That night was the longest night in her entire life. She didn't sleep a wink, but her sheets were wrinkled. She left the light on so she would see the clock easily. She was waiting for tomorrow.

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 “Yu might be waiting for me at Mandalay station tomorrow if she got the news.” Zaw definitely knew what Yu would do. Though he wasn't sure about his potential destination, he knew the train would stop at Mandalay station for a while and they might be transferred to another coach to continue the journey. So he could meet Yu at the station. Zaw was still hoping for his “*one day*” dream.

The night, packed together with 75 people on the rickety wooden floor of a decrepit coach, was like nothing he had experienced before in his entire life. The train drifted exhaustedly forward into deep darkness of the night. The coach was also dark and no one could see either the surroundings or each other. Zaw's plump thigh was flat under his friend's heavy chest, and a student's skinny ankle was just under Zaw's unbending head. The smell of urine made all of them shut their mouth. Zaw was waiting for dawn. He was waiting for tomorrow.

.....
 Yu choose Platform 3 to wait on since a local train never entered the two main platforms. She had brought a packet of biscuits, fruits and bottles of juice. She tried to relax on the bench, but with a beating heart.

“Zaw! I'll be forever with you wherever you are. People all over the world will also be with you all, all the political activists who've made their sacrifices. Don't worry about me

and our family. I will take care of them well. Just try to stay healthy. Be strong.” A stream of words and phrases blocked her throat. She did not talk to her other friends or family members of other political prisoners. An Express train arrived at Platform 1 and waves of commuters flooded the whole station within minutes. Yu sighed and gazed beyond the scene. That is not Zaw's train, she was sure.

Yu was still waiting.

Soon after sunrise Zaw chose the left side of the coach to see Platform 3 where Yu would wait for him, as they knew the station was arranged. Zaw was thirsty because they used all three water pots in the coach, both for drinking and for washing. He hoped Yu had brought some food and drink, although he wouldn't mind if she had brought nothing, providing he could meet her.

“Yu! I'll be always with you wherever I am. We all also proudly recognize the other kind of sacrifice you and the rest of the families have already made. Don't worry about me. I am still going strong. Just take care of yourself and our children. Be strong.” Zaw practiced his words in a whisper. He sat silent between the others, gazing out at golden sunshine and green fields which he hadn't seen for nearly a decade. He listened attentively to the entry siren of the train.

Zaw was still waiting.

The long-awaited train had just arrived. Yu forgot all her companions and the family members of other political prisoners. Her eyes scanned the hundred windows of the 12 to 13 coaches - ordinary class and upper class. She passed over white, yellow, black, familiar, strange, smiling, ignoring, anxious and other expressive faces. Where was Zaw? Her eyes welled up with tears.

There was a coach like a mail carriage. Iron mesh and bars covered the only two windows. These windows were also occupied by a bunch of different heads. There was not enough light inside the coach for someone outside looking in to see clearly. Where was Zaw? Yu blinked to clear tears to clearly see her Zaw.

Her throat was filled with her pounding heart. Her call echoed in her chest. Yu wished Zaw could see and call her since she couldn't produce a sound from her mouth. She was still missing Zaw. And she was still waiting for a call from Zaw.

The train had just arrived at Platform 3. Zaw and his friends were suddenly confronted by crowds of their family members. Their unadapted eyes couldn't spot even the most familiar faces in the open air. Their noses were pressed flat against the iron mesh and their heads were crushed against each other at the two windows on the platform side. Zaw's head was stick among the others. He squinted to see more clearly. But waving hands and shaking heads stopped him from identifying whose faces and hands were whose. Where was Yu?

Zaw eventually found Yu standing still to his far right. She was seemed to be unable to bear this scene and briefly losing consciousness. Zaw thought he should give her some time for regain her balance. Zaw could still wait for a few seconds.

Yu came round again. She her hands over her eyes and looked for Zaw's face.

There he was. His broad shoulders - now hunched up to get more space at the window. His ever-smiling face though it was stained with a mysterious mood.

Yu smiled sweetly at him when she knew he was staring at her. "Zaw! I'm here." But that was only a soundless echo in her chest.

"Keep out of here! Just stay still on the platform! If not, we'll drag out. They will come down on to the track and go to another coach over there. Don't get closer than you already are!"

The familiar noise from an experienced warden cut across their echoes. Yu was held back by her friends nearby. The warder's hand slapped the air in front of Yu.

Yu realized she would have to wait again.

.....

Zaw's hands were trapped under other's waists. "Please . . ." He tried to raise his hands. He couldn't.

He tried to smile brilliantly behind the iron mesh. He felt pain, but did not know how, or why, perhaps because they were all trying to stand in front of the window. "Yu! I'm here." But his call disappeared under the other sparkling shrill voices.

"Get out of here! Just stand one behind another. And then you queue on the track in front of the coach over there. Don't say anything!"

The familiar commands of an experienced warden cut across their echoes. All of them tried to line up one after the other. The grating sound of the iron shackles connected to their waists sounded like a horn to get them to keep silent.

Zaw prepared again to wait for more minutes.

.....

Frail living toys in filthy white prison uniforms crept one after another on to the track in the open air. Zaw was indistinguishable among them. Each carried a bulky bag on his back, a bed roll in one hand, a food carrier in the other and a pair of iron chains on both feet. They all tried to wave, show thumbs up, say something. But they were carrying too much stuff and the guarding wardens herded them, warned them off. That was how Zaw looked in the open air.

Yu was suddenly struck paralyzed, blind, deaf and dumb.

Zaw was gradually worn-out, bandy-legged, bent-headed, and hump-backed.

"Where are they sending you?"

A bright and conscious voice woke up the whole platform. Other questions echoed. Everyone became anxious to get this information. Zaw and friends didn't even know where they were going, they were walking senselessly, pausing for a while until the warders warned them with a blast of whistle.

"Myitkyina" a warden answered curtly.

Myitkyina is the capital of Kachin state, 250 miles from Mandalay. The road from Mandalay is terrible and the railway is also unreliable, sometimes taking 72 hours by train. Planes only fly twice a week and cost the skies for ordinary people.

Yu measured the distance between her and Zaw. It might be about 30 feet. A little closer. If they would let her, she could help Zaw by carrying his bag and carrier, she could grasp Zaw's hands, and hug him - no matter what the others thought. But for now, Yu just gripped firmly the plastic bag of food and drink for Zaw.

Zaw was still confused as to whether he should stand back from the line, drop every thing on the track, and open both his arms to greet Yu who would definitely run to his chest in seconds, no matter what the wardens would do to him later for that.

"Hey...look. That's a lot of prisoners. Perhaps drug addicts or murderers. Let's keep away from this platform."

A thoughtless remark pierced Yu's eardrums. "No, my husband is a medical doctor and a member of parliament. They all are political prisoners and they sacrificed their freedom and dignity for the benefit of all Myanmar citizens, including you," she said in her head and heart. But she couldn't say those words out loud. Yu was almost paralyzed, blind and dumb.

Zaw suddenly stopped. He had switched his hands to carry things more easily. He concentrated on both Yu and the carrying. Zaw thought Yu seemed perplexed to see these embarrassing scenes.

Yu eventually realized what she should do.

"Here! I would like to give this - food and drink - for my husband Zaw."

"Oh, wait a minute. Yes, Ok, I'll give your parcel to him."

He quickly took the parcel from Yu and asked "Who's your husband?"

"Over there with the yellow bag on his back. Look, he just stopped and looked at us now. Do you see him?"

"Uh, oh yes, I see."

"Please tell him I miss him and to take care" Before Yu finished her sentence the warden left.

Zaw thought Yu had asked the guard for something and was pointing to him. So he stopped for a while, pretending to fix the iron foot chain to move easier.

"Here you are. That's from your wife. She misses you she said."

"Please tell her about our destination is Myitkyina."

"She already knows."

The warden left to arrange the seating plan on their new coach. Zaw noticed they were close to the new coach. He might lose his last chance to see Yu concretely in the open air. He wanted to do something for Yu. He dropped everything he was carrying on to the track and started to wave both hands simultaneously. The rest of his friends followed his example. "Silence! Shut up! Just keep walking, pick your things back up." But they didn't care, or even hear.

Yu determined to wave both her hands too. Was this all she could do? She was now meeting him in the open air. She had hoped she might do something for Zaw apart from giving him food and drink.

In the mean time Zaw picked his things up again and offered a goodbye smile with strong self-confident eyes to Yu. Then he crawled up into another coach like into a lair. Yu's eyes full of longing were glued to his back. She looked for a guard nearby.

"Please help me. And tell him I will come and see him at Myitkyina prison soon."

"You won't be allowed to meet him at Myitkyina prison until the end of this month, I think. But don't worry. He has enough food and other things. As you can see, their bags are bulky."

"Until end of this month?" Yu repeated, doubting.

"Yes. Why not? It's usual for transferred prisoners to be kept without any interview with anyone for at least two weeks. You must wait a while," the warden just explained, normally.

Of course, it had become normal to hear that word, "**waiting**" since Zaw was arrested.

2004

Yu is still waiting in Mandalay.

Zaw is still waiting in Myitkyina.

Every day everyone is still waiting in prison, and at home.
