

Thawda Aye Lei

**Innocence or not**  
(Short Story)

(1)

I am heavy-hearted these days, especially whenever I meet his eyes. I want to forget those eyes, to avoid them as much as possible. His looks make me shiver. These days, he is the center of all my spiritual musings. When someone asks me how powerful he is or what kind of power he has over me, since he's able to take control of my mind, I can't give a satisfactory answer.

This "he" is the poorest of all. To be more precise, he is a dog — a stray, a throwaway, always bullied by stronger groups of dogs, always shouted at and driven out by everyone. Those who know me well would laugh if I said I was obsessed with a stray dog. I've never before become attached to a pet, liking tidiness and fastidiousness as I do. But this is an exception. Because of him, I broke all of my strictly-enforced rules and restrictions.

It was a long, long time ago. When I was an adolescent, I developed those restrictions on my own. As I recall, it was dusk, a summer evening. It happened suddenly at dinnertime, after I had returned home from school exhausted. At that moment, I glanced out a window near the dining table. There I saw a cat in a nightmarish situation. Jumping from a brick wall to the roof of our neighbor's house, she was delivering a kitten, which dropped down from her belly. I had not been paying attention to her wailing earlier, not realizing she was suffering the pains of labor. I just didn't notice her.

It was perfect timing: as soon as she landed on the roof, her baby entered the world. Since the house next door was a single-story building, the scene of that cat in labor could be seen clearly as if it were shown on a big screen. Naturally she knew how to cut the umbilical cord on her own, and she had that little red fetus which could not be recognized as a kitten as her dinner. That scene has haunted me ever since. In that moment, I even vomited up the meal I had been eating. It was shocking for me to face a violent and disgusting act suddenly and unexpectedly. Later, after reading books and conversing with my doctor friends and having gotten to know more about rabies and other infectious diseases animals carried, nobody needed to remind me of the fact that animals were to be avoided at all costs.

Those experiences connect me to that stray dog. Is he becoming a part of my life? Am I becoming a part of his? All I can say for sure is that I cannot love him.

(2)

Examined closely, his life seems to be an interesting story. He is a terrier, a breed popular among most dog lovers. When he appeared on our street, his golden days had already passed. His coat had lost its color, and he was skinny and missing patches of hair. He was just a little stray dog trying to survive. Nobody wanted to love him or hold him. When he would pick a fight with the bigger dogs over a scrap of food, he always had to apologize while they growled and lunged at him.

On that day, before he came into my heart, I guess he had just fought with a pack of dogs. The whole quarter was full of growls and snarls. The next day when I went downstairs to go to work, I noticed him hiding out under the staircase. His left hind leg was raised and I could see some blood on his thigh that had not yet dried. Startled, he looked at me as I hurried down the stairs, already late for work. That was the first time we made eye contact. In that moment he seemed to be afraid of everything, begging me with his eyes, and trying very hard to withstand the pain of his wounds. I told myself that he shouldn't

have fought with the larger dogs and that his suffering was inevitable, but he defended himself with his moans. I was very late for work, so I couldn't care for him, and I met his eyes with a quick look only.

Nevertheless, this affected me. When I returned home in the evening, I saw him lying still at the bottom of the stairway. I was disgusted to see him wet with blood, dusty and dirty. When I saw the stray lying still, I felt pity for him and wondered whether or not he was beyond saving.

At the same time, I blamed every family in this apartment building. "Nobody cares about this dying dog? Not one person cares about casting him away like garbage?" After a short while, I guess someone from one of the flats pumped up water. The sudden noise of the motor running startled the little dog, and he lifted his head at the sound. I realized that he had been sleeping. He looked at me. His wound didn't seem to be any better. Being unable to move, I wondered how he would find food to eat. He must have been starving. I couldn't endure his pathetic look. Being faint-hearted, I ran upstairs.

He must have found himself here because he wanted a safe place. The area to the left of the stairway where the water pumps were housed was always locked. That area was safe for him because big dogs could not fit between the iron bars guarding the pumps, only a little dog like him could slip through. How long would he be staying there? Would I be seeing him every day? This thought made me weary with anxiety.

(3)

The second day, a Saturday, I walk downstairs. Every time I go down I see him. He looks a lot thinner than he did yesterday. His hair is falling out, so that big patches of skin are visible on parts of his body. When he sees me, he can't bark at all, he can't even make a sound. I'm not sure if he feels more comfortable around me, or if he feels like it is no use, or if he is simply too weak to make a sound. One thing is for sure: he's watching my every move. Whenever I look back, sensing his eyes on me, he always meets my gaze. Although I can't imagine what he thinks of me, I hate him. I just want that little wounded dog to disappear. Instead of having sympathy for him, I feel exceptional disgust.

When I have to go down the stairs on the third day, I try not to look at the left side of stairway. I fail. I glance at his small frame with curiosity, wondering, "Am I meeting a dead dog face to face?" I see him breathing slowly, napping. He used to be very thin, but now he looks totally emaciated. His hind leg bones in particular are jutting out. I feel uneasy.

I am frustrated with myself. I blame myself, thinking "Why did I become an unkind woman?" What is right and what is selfish are always at odds. Despite hating animals, I teared up when I was in high school and I read about the little dog called "Arr Mate" in a book of Burmese prose written by Thaitpan Maung Wah. I imagined how I would be kind to that little dog. When he comes over to greet me I cannot stand it. I try to avoid him, wrinkling my nose.

Am I being fair? Are my behaviors selfish? Do I deserve forgiveness? In order to soothe myself, I look for different excuses, pretending not to know the truth and avoiding the matter altogether. I thought of buying food for him.

I let go of the idea of trying to help him as much as possible, thinking, "No, the time when the red silk cotton flowers bloom is getting closer.<sup>1</sup> Without knowing if he was bitten by a rabid dog or not, should I even get near him? What if he licks my face and I get infected?" Then, I think of bringing over a vet I know. Would they be willing to spend time and effort for a stray dog like him, being used to caring for

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<sup>1</sup> In Myanmar there is a traditional belief that if a dog has encountered rabies, it will become infected by the time the red silk flowers bloom in the summer.

the dogs of the wealthy? It would be impossible for me to go to a veterinary clinic without having to touch him. I'd failed before I'd even begun.

Yes, it's true. My avoidance is unforgivable. I know it well. Especially for me, a social worker, it's totally disgusting that my morals and my actions are opposite. The sun sets but the fire of my ego is still burning. It's difficult for me to breathe and I think, "Why am I so stubborn, why do I ignore the truth?" It is the fourth day. I am becoming more afraid of his looks. I feel very small when I'm in front of him. I'm reluctant to go home. If possible, I want to avoid that stairway. Though I don't want to see him, our meetings are sporadic since there is another stairway I can take to get up to my floor. I ask myself whether I'm sure I still hate him. The answer is vague.

(4)

"For you, *sayama*. Here is *thanatkhar*"<sup>2</sup> a present from the villagers."

The villagers from the tropical region project passed me a gift from an official. The innocent, honest nature of the villagers should be appreciated. Like the villagers from upper Myanmar, those who were from the villages in the *Ayeyawaddy* region also sent me dried prawns and fish whenever the delivery driver was available.

"I am doing social work!" I told them. "If I accept these, I might be misunderstood. My organization warned us not to accept these. And since I live alone, I don't need so many. So, please don't give them to me." But they insisted. "There are not too many, *sayama*. If you don't accept this little amount that we can afford, we will feel sad. If they are not useful for you, you can give them to others as presents," they said, and insisted I take them until I accepted. If I reimbursed them, they wouldn't accept the money. Hence, whenever I went to their villages, I always brought old books and journals for them to read, as well as stationary, and snacks and drinks for the children. Our community is safe, being full of love and kindness.

Even my colleagues envy the villagers' generosity with me. Although I am the one who easily loathed things, who was favored in the family and thus was spoiled, I always treated the villagers well when I met them. I treated the AIDS patients warmly; I always ate with them, and I became absorbed in conversations with leprosy patients, too. When the supporters of the project, unintentionally perhaps, discriminated against racial or religious groups, I spoke out within the organization without caring what others would think. Now, this sort woman has broken all of the social rules and courtesies for a dog. She is ignoring her humanity. The self and the absolute truth are at war in my heart. While thinking and thinking, I begin to suffocate, with no one to save me.

I know that humanity does not only mean treating other human beings according to *lawka parla*<sup>3</sup> principles, but it also means treating those who are in difficult circumstances well, loving them and being kind to them. But I cannot repress my ego. In fact, my insecurity is more than simply the fear of a dog. It is more complicated, although it seems simple.

On that evening, on the way home, I am restless with emotion. To tell the truth, I do not want him to be dead yet. At the same time, I do not want to see him again. If I spent just one night battling my selfishness and building up my courage, could I be in time to save his life?

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<sup>2</sup> Traditional Burmese make-up

<sup>3</sup> The deterrent principles of shame and fear which guard the world from falling into chaos

When I glance at him before heading up the stairs, he is lying down on his side. He's not studying me with his eyes as he usually does. While lying down, he gazes at the road through the iron bars of the door, like he's already given up. I gather my strength and sigh in frustration. However, I cannot sigh. It's easy to cry and difficult to sob, but upset as I am in this moment I cannot merely cry, and find myself sobbing with ease.

(5)

This morning when I see him, he does not look well at all. He seems to be on his last legs. He doesn't even look thirsty as he feebly licks the water leaking out of a water pipe. He drinks very slowly, gathering all of his strength to lap up the water.

That scene has been lingering in my mind all day. I see his face in a meeting, I see his image in a computer screen, and I even see his eyes while writing reports. Later, I am going crazy. The story is too tragic, isn't it? I have to do something. What else can I do? "Is he still alive?" I know that he cannot possibly live any longer. When I imagine his appearance bit by bit, I pity him. This time, I don't have to force myself. "I should pity him. Just pity him. I have to pity him!" Have to, in order to be a good human being.

In the meantime, I explode for an unrelated reason. I resent an unfair matter which encroaches upon a woman's dignity and pride.

Unexpectedly, I heard about an infuriating story at my office. One of my colleagues gossiped with me about one of our senior persons'. "The girl is innocent and her whole family is honest. As their house is opposite ours, we know that girl very well. Being too innocent seems to be something wrong nowadays! How can they accept a normal, naïve girl who holds a local degree as their daughter-in-law? They don't agree that she belongs with their son." Those words incite my pride.

"If they don't like her, they had better put out the fire before it begins to smoke." The senior person paid the girl and broke up the newly-married couple, believing that she didn't deserve his son. They should sympathize with the girl since they have their own daughter. Does it make her unworthy, that she didn't graduate from a foreign university, or that her family is not as rich as theirs? This man from the office always says that he's working toward gender equality and would never discriminate based on class. When it comes to his own blood, however, he is a different person." While saying this, I am shaking with anger. These are the actions of one of the directors of my office, who exercised the power of a father over his son. This is not acceptable to me. I would like to accuse him of discriminating, of violating human rights. I want to publicly denounce that what he says in public and what he actually does are totally different. All of a sudden, I remember the dog. A human being always thinks of his or herself only. I am quickly finding excuses to distract myself from the truth.

"Anyway, I'd better sympathize a bit."

(6)

Tonight, I must venture out. I am not able to steel myself any more. I prepare to go back home early. I always eat lunch and dinner out, so I decide to buy a half of a grilled chicken, not fish. Fish bones can get stuck in the throat. Since it's a payday, other colleagues persuade me to eat out with them and I say yes, despite having bought the chicken. When we get back home, it's fairly dark, and although the power is cut in the quarter since the full moon is out, everything, living or non-living can be seen perfectly clearly. The details, on the other hand, are still blurry.

When I get closer to our flat, my heart beats faster. I hope that he's not dead. I want him to feel my last good will and sympathy for him. I don't want him to win. In my defense, I also truly want to make peace with him. If not, like *Banyar Nwet*<sup>4</sup>, I would die each time I saw the scar on my forehead.

Tip-toeing, I approach the stairway. The noise of the door opening breaks the silence. Lying down just next to the door, he doesn't move at all.

I am shocked. I think it's too late. Fearful, I move toward him. He's absolutely silent. I want to cry, and I get choked up. In that short while, I don't notice what I've done. When I feel the warmth on my palm, I realize that I've placed my hand on his body.

Rising and falling, his body moves slightly. It doesn't look like his breathing is labored, just like he's breathing slowly. Or maybe he has no strength left to breathe. I dare not breathe either. Despite his musty smell, I don't know how much time has passed. When my subconscious mind starts working I take out the grilled chicken I bought earlier and put it near him. I open the water bottle and glance at him, afraid that he will get up and bite me at any moment. When I see him moving abruptly, I feel happy. I think he smells the grilled chicken.

But no, he doesn't. In that very moment, in one fifth of a second, he becomes still. He didn't smell the food; he was struggling for his final breath.

I thought I would cry, but I find myself choking instead. I hear the clanging sound of the stroke of midnight and the sound of dogs barking and I feel as though they are mocking me. How can I cleanse myself? When I think of myself in nice clothes facing this dead dog on my way to attend a public talk on women's rights tomorrow, I am frightened.

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### Winter Nights I Still Remember (Essay)

The title of the entertainment troupe *Pantra*<sup>5</sup> *Nay Win Maung* could be clearly seen in gold lettering, shining in the glare of the spotlights. The program today was first popular Burmese songs and a concert, then a short skit entitled "If You Want Your Inheritance, You Have to be Clever" and an adaptation of Min Theinkha's short story "*Ma Min Phyu Hma Hma Pyaw*," or, "Tell The Truth, Ma Min Phyu." Later, there would be a traditional Burmese dance duet, followed by the classical play *Waithadaya*<sup>6</sup>.

The announcer was shouting his heart out at the front of the venue. "Dear revered friends, tonight the *Pantra Nay Win Maung* troupe will be performing their utmost. They will try even if their hearts burst

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<sup>4</sup> The name of a hero in the legend. He defeated his enemy in an unfair way, but got a wound on his forehead. Though he was defeated, he felt uncomfortable whenever he saw that scar on his forehead. That scar always reminded him of his unfairness.

<sup>5</sup> "Pantra" means "drama and music" in Burmese. In Mandalay, there is a Pantra school. The ones who are graduated from that school usually take "pantra" as a prefix in front of their name.

<sup>6</sup> One of the Jataka stories

with the endeavour. I might be so bold as to announce that we have story plots and dance sequences that have never before been performed, specially created for this new season. So Pantra Nay Win Maung and his troupe cordially invite all of our fans to visit our shows and never regret that you had missed them.”

The musical entertainment was being held in the Let Cheik Tan neighborhood of Mandalay. The Let Cheik Tan quarter is south of the Ta Ye Tan quarter, and is renowned for its artists. Many people who depend on the performing arts live here. One can point one's finger here and there at random and will inevitably point at a house belonging to one artist or another. *Pantra Nay Win Maung* has only an office here, but he can be counted as one of the natives of the quarters. No matter whether he has new repertoires or not, the lovers of Burmese performances will flock to the entertainment grounds. The most enthusiastic are the people who live here, from the Let Cheik Tan, Khon Hlee Win, and Nawarat quarters. They are competitors so to speak. What a pity if *our* boy loses, because his fans are not supporting him, the native boy!

The famous Myanmar conductor Shwe Daung Myaing is my cousin's grandfather. He has a big family, so they had already reserved two places inside the hall. The stage curved like the letter "U". It looked so grand. At both sides, in the back and even in the middle there were small raised platforms. Hanging above these raised platforms were numbers, "1", "2", "3", etc. Grandma told me that those were reserved seats. I nagged my grandmother about buying seats up there, but of course the prices vary with the seat locations. There was even a special place called Pan Kauk Sin. This is situated near the center stage where the spectators can pick up the flower garlands thrown by the male lead. The lowest price for one mat there was five-hundred kyats in 1994. The mat is so small that it can barely seat a person, let alone allow one to stretch one's legs.

When I was told "Save your money if you want to see the performance", my heart dropped. My mother had once told me that we can only spend one-thousand kyats a week for our family of six. I get just three kyats a day as pocket money, so it seemed like an impossible dream for me to save that amount of money.

It was fortunate that Shwe Daung Myaing's family are such fans that we got the chance to go and see this performance. Grandma had requested that they share their seats with us for this one night. Just imagine the number of people sharing the two mats barely able to accommodate two people - three from our family including Grandma, plus six from their side - a total of nine persons. We would have extras such as water bottles, snacks, and blankets with us, too.

Grandma Yee, Pwa Pwa Yee, is very organized. The wife of Shwe Daung Myaing, she had carefully packed these bread-like crackers and coffee for the intermission, then fermented green tea leaves to enjoy while watching the short skit, and some bittersweet preserved fruit to drive away the sleepiness when watching the dance duets. The two teenage daughters of *Pwa Pwa Yee* had even brought along some perfume to spray on the lead male dancer, and wreaths to place around his neck. They had also brought some make-up creams and lipsticks with which to adorn themselves, despite the fact that it would be too dark to see.

My elder sister and I were clutching the bundles of blankets that Mom had packed for us. Grandma complimented us on the similar warm sweaters we were wearing, saying that we both looked like dolls. The sweaters were reserved for special occasions such as these, and underneath them we wore two additional layers of warm clothing. We planned to watch the performance the whole evening, so we had

to be prepared for the cold Mandalay winter night. The night was very chilly, with gusts of frigid air that made our fingertips numb. We were overjoyed, shouting every time we exhaled condensation. We were so excited to be off to see the performance. Grandma scolded us half in jest, saying "Never could control these mischievous kids." But we could not explore the festival grounds as the cold, once described by one famous writer Achote Tan Saya Pe as "the chill that defies all description," drove us inside the hall. Ha... Ha... inside was a pandemonium.

Like us, most families had bought only one small mat for the whole group. Altercations erupted: "Why don't you buy enough mats to accommodate all of you? It's an all-night performance, who would want to be cramped and uncomfortable?" The other side would not take that lying down. They replied: "Why make a fuss! It's just for one night. Have you forgotten that we have lived harmoniously before, sharing pinches of salt or a jug of oil between us?"

Everywhere people were quarreling, teasing each other and generally having fun. Almost every group was in a heated dispute, demarcating their boundaries. Some had encroached right left and center, real colonialists! There were also hawkers stepping around the seated audience trying to sell their snacks. "Hello! We have cheroots, betel, potato chips, fish crackers, bitter preserved fruits, sunflower seeds... What do you prefer? Just say the word!" The worst were the hawkers selling "powder to expel bad air" - native medicinal powder to make one pass gas! What if somebody in the crowd used this powder, forcing the rest of the audience to inhale this foul air?

I was sweating under my layers of warm clothes despite the cold December night, and could only pray for the program to begin soon. The whole venue was noisy. The announcer repeated his invitation to buy tickets to the show stridently to the festival goers, and every ten minutes the loudspeaker from the Security Committee shed would also blare, warning that drunkenness and debauchery would not be tolerated inside the grounds. The quarreling inside the hall would temporarily cease if there was an announcement about lost children or jewelry being found. Then the quarreling would resume. Nobody even listened to the music from the orchestra, each engrossed in their own petty affairs.

"Good evening to all our fans from far and near! We wish you good health and peace and tranquility. Now our troupe *Pantra Nay Win Maung* is ready to entertain our esteemed fans, and so without further ado lets us now enjoy the show!" the announcer said over the loudspeakers as the curtains slowly began to rise. The performance began with the customary "Obeisance Dance" by a group of young girls in the costumes of spirit mediums.

Some of the dance troupes that performed for free and for only two nights would perform this dance with the title "Dance of The Spirit Mediums" on the first night, but on the second night they would call it the "Dance Of The Court Maidens" and perform it later in the showcase. As soon as the Obeisance Dance began all the quarrels would die down as the fans became mesmerized by the dancing. This was Grandma's time. She liked Burmese dance performances very much. Even when speaking she would quote from the famous male dancers of her time, saying "My life is but a bitter gourd between the bushes of thorns, " or, "When will my worries be over, when will my worries be over!"

My elder sister is her firstborn grandchild, and so she is her favorite. Her granddaughter's friend was her friend and the enemy of her granddaughter was her enemy also. Whenever there was a quarrel at school she would side with her favorite granddaughter, no matter who was right. She would retort "Ha ha! I would like to reply with a line from Shweman Tin Maung's play," or " Do you know what Sein Aung

Min would say...?" or "Unlike Aung Than Kyi by *not* including extraneous matter...." Instead of getting angry, her opponents were amused by her antics. Now, judge for yourselves.

As the curtains rose, she began her critique. She said we must judge the standard of the troupe by the expertise of the girls in the Dance of the Maidens, by their movements and technique, the so called twelve basic and important movements: the movement of the belly, the movement of the back, the movement of the breasts, the movement of the hips, the movement of the legs, even the movement of the *secret places*. When I inquire about what she meant by "secret places" I was hit across the forehead for being too inquisitive. Regarding my question about whether I would be able to see all of these movements in the dancers she replied that I would with experience. However, by the time I could appreciate the traditional Burmese dance performances, such epic pieces as *Bon Shay Zat*, *Myae Wine Zat*, *Yoe Pyat Nin Zat*, *Hle Zat* and *Lu*<sup>7</sup> bioscope were things of the past, all lost to the flashing disco lights.

When a performer came out singing one of the famous songs of the late vocalist *Twantay Thein Tan*, the spectators were mesmerized as if the late vocalist had come back to life. Then other popular songs by famous vocalists like "The Only Place Where Peace Reigns is Where My Lover Is", and "Do You Remember Me Too" were performed on the stage to the delight of the spectators. Suddenly the stage was rocked by another singer who dashed onto it with cries of *phensedyl, phensedyl!*, and the spectators enjoyed that too. That woke the napping girls, and they prepared their garlands for their favorite male dancer.

Pwa Pwa Yee quietly scolded her granddaughters, "Hey! Try to be demure, don't be shameless!" but when they retorted "Ah.. .Pwa Pwa, you would have done the same when you were young!" she subsided into silence, perhaps afraid her rowdy past would be revealed. Other vocalists included a male singer who "wanted to keep your heart in a refrigerator like an apple" and another who screeched "Who kidnapped Mae Thida<sup>8</sup>?" Still another female vocalist with hot pants came up on the stage to perform for the the male audience "Okay take this, take this.." while twisting and turning her body like a worm sprinkled with salt crystals. The performance was anything but boring.

I felt pity for my grandma whose experience of traditional Burmese performance did not include modern rock music. She was speechless, at a loss when she tried to judge the contemporary Burmese traditional entertainment. She could only utter "What nonsense, as if they had nothing else to compare it with!" when another singer asked the audience "Is love like a fire?" I just took it as the troupe fulfilling their promise to offer the audience their full repertoire of musical talent. After the first part of the show, and after a short skit was over and the duet dance had begun, most of the audience left and we wrapped ourselves in our warm blankets.

The chilly night air lashed the people still in the audience with a vengeance. The cold penetrated into our bones, but we dared to enjoy the songs and the dances of the male dancer and his female companions as they danced and cavorted and sang songs of love, despite our eyelids threatening to shut for the night. Outside even the vendors' stalls had closed down and all was quiet. Only our beloved grandma was still busy tallying up points on the male dancer's movement. Occasionally she would turn to us to make some remarks, but we were way past even mumbling replies to her. The male lead was performing his best for his fans. When the actress Madi Devi in the story sobbed when her children went

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<sup>7</sup> Different types of Burmese *zat pwe* in the previous decades. *Zat Ppwe* means "all-night performance."

<sup>8</sup> Mae Thida (Sita) is the name of a female character in Ramayana story.

missing, Grandma was engrossed in the performance, saying “Why does this poor thing have to suffer so much!” with tears in her eyes, forgetting all of her criticism of the troupe's artistic talents.

She hid her tears, feeling embarrassed to be seen crying in the middle of the performance. Pretending as usual, she projected her anger and frustration onto us: “You two useless girls slept through the whole scene! I will never take you to watch the *pwe* again.” But the *pwe* continued on despite its audience, some of whom were sleeping, and others, crying.

-- End --

Translated from the Burmese by Harry Hphone Thant  
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