



# *Giving Alms*

KHIN CHAN MYAE MAUNG



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## Author's Note

In 2013, when I left Myanmar to study abroad, I knew very little about home. Shamefully, I must admit, I knew little more than a well-read tourist about my homeland. I knew of wet markets and street vendors, which I only frequented because of my mother. I knew of stories my father used to tell me of a Yangon untouched by the sullied hands of modernity. Before the streets were crowded with cars and the houses replaced by condos. I had been to Bagan, Mandalay and Bago, and seen the sights. Honestly, a little part of me wanted to seek refuge in the arms of a less complicated country. But it was not till I was far away, almost halfway around the world to be exact, that I found myself clinging to my memories of home.

During many of my days spent abroad, my mind was preoccupied with coming home. This was not a literal homecoming, but a emotional and spiritual one. This was because I became rather obsessed with the stories of my grandmother and great-grandmother. Women, who had fought hard for their place in a society that proved itself to be less than kind. Listening to their stories over the phone, brought a kind of comfort that can only be described as a shared understanding of hardship. I carried the stories of my

family's matriarchs as I fended for myself in a foreign land. This sharing of intergenerational stories made me aware of the narrative that I had disregarded.

My personal journey as a writer became to uncover and make visible the innate humanity that is often lost in the milieu of time and modernity. Narrative and representation is a matter very close to my heart, especially stories which are not tainted by rose-colored lenses. It must also be mentioned that most works about Myanmar available in the international market are often stories surrounding the military regime. There is much to be said about the culture, diversity and the complexity of a people other than just our military history. Many may patronize Myanmar, cast us to be the destitute character, typecast to be a political prisoner of its own dark history. As a young Burmese writer, I acknowledge history but reject the notion that it should define a whole people's narrative.

I write these stories for my grandmother, great-grandmother and for all those women before them, and those who have yet to come. In a way, I have come home to them, holding their true stories in my heart, and crafting those I share with you now with the humility and empathy that they have passed down. I hope you enjoy this anthology as much as I have writing it.

Khin Chan Myae Maung

# Stillborn

Ko Thike was not shaken by our son's death the way he was with our daughter's. Our first child was stillborn, gray and wet—a girl. She came with her fingers clenched in a fist, face veiled with thin blood vessels that clung to her skin. It was no one's fault. The doctor was held up at the checkpoint for far too long. And curfew made it impossible for him to reach our house before morning. But it was not his fault, nor was it the fault of the British soldiers or the resistance that made them suspicious of night travelers.

I took it upon myself to blame insignificant destinies—the doctor's faulty bicycle chain. The sweet anise tea that kept the guards alert through the night. The number of chilies I ate during the pregnancy. All these insignificances colluded against us, but they came by no direct fault of ours.

“Karma has failed us,” my husband whispered into our dark bedroom. With his hand over his mouth, he stopped himself from wailing. What an incredibly loud noise sorrow makes when muffled, a noise that distils the air in your lungs to heavy stones. I doubted that the Universe could be malicious, only terribly indecisive in its expanse, but I did not correct him. For years we waited on happiness; whatever

it was, we held our breath waiting. Then Arkar came, and a deep exhale rushed through the house as his cries flooded the doors and windows.

My baby had long curling lashes like his father. They caught tears like dew balanced on the fringes of a spider's web. Round eyes—big ones, dark like tamarind pits ripe in melting fruit. The soft veins of his eyelids would twitch in his sleep as his lips parted slightly. The first few days of motherhood, they say a woman feels a thousand worlds passing through her at once. Each one a past life where she's held the same face to her bosom and time collapses into one crushing moment of recognition.

*Oh, how I've known you for so many lifetimes, and here we are again.*

Arkar was beaten to death outside the south gate of Rangoon University. He choked on his own blood, body stripped naked and tied to a post—he was made an example of. Somehow, I expected it. Our son, the homosexual, would be beaten to death on the curbside and stripped of his dignity. So when the telegram came from the Rangoon police addressed to us, there were little words to be said between Ko Thike and I.

What could we say to each other that we did not already know? That we were not expecting it? That he should have listened to us and married that girl we arranged? Or that we should have gone after him when he left. Ko Thike forbade it. For five years it was as though both our children had died at birth. One stillborn, the other treated as though he had been. Now we stared out the train car window, waiting for it to depart, gone to claim a body that was stranger to us.

It was a humid night, clouds blanketing the naked sky and wrapping its fingers around the moon. The land broke



into paddies separated by mango groves and the scent of crushed grass lingering in the night air. Ko Thike sat by the window, his posture was slump and the buttons of his collar undone as the shirt clung to his chest. I reached over to him and squeezed his hand tightly.

“Ko Thike,” I dared only to whisper, “we should arrange the funeral.”

He turned to me, the man I loved so much, as death licked its lips in the reflection of his thick glasses. They were fogged by the warmth of his face, grease smudged on the corner of his spectacles.

“For what, Sein?”

“He was our son,” my voice quivered, “that doesn’t change.”

“So you want to bring this corpse into our home?”

“It was his home.”

“He left us.”

“But Ko Thike,” I said, squeezing his hand, “he was our boy.”

The words stung him as he lifted his glasses and rubbed his forehead with the back of his hand.

“I should have beaten it out of him when he was a boy, then this could have all been avoided.” His breath shuddered, “Maybe this is better.”

The back of my hand flew against his cheek in one swift move. Silence sewed my lips together as tears engulfed my vision. I escaped the small booth to the back of the car and shut the compartment door.

For years I had agreed with Ko Thike and denounced my son. I resisted the urge to turn around whenever I felt his presence near—whenever the scent of coconut oil and spiced cologne passed, that feeling came rushing. A longing that came from far beyond my reach that I learned to deny as if I

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