17. Ghost Train to Mandalay

My first reaction to Rangoon, now a sad and skeletal city renamed Yangon, was disbelief. The unreality of arriving in a distant modernized city cannot compare with the unreality of seeing one that has hardly changed at all. If a place, after decades, is the same, or worse than before, it is almost shaming to behold. Like a prayer you regret has been answered, it exists as a mirror image of yourself, the traveller, who has to admit: I'm the same too, but aged – wearier, frailer, fractured, abused, weaker, shabbier, spookier. There was a human pathos in a city that had faded in the years I'd been away, something more elderly, almost senile. So, adrift in the futility of being in a foreign city, woozy in the stifling heat, I fitted right in. After a day or so I took a horrid pleasure in being here, back in time, in the place I had remembered and had once mocked with youthful satire, a ghost town that made me feel old and ghostly.

The crumbling and neglected city seemed surreal, because the place was isolated under the Myanmar military dictatorship, and helpless and tyrannized. Soldiers were everywhere, even in the sepulchral back streets. It looked pessimistic, unlucky and badly governed. It had no bounce. It was a city without visible ambition: no challenge, no defiance. Being young here wasn't an advantage, nor was strength any use; brains just made you unhappy and a target for the secret police. Students and journalists were hated and abused. So were democrats: win an election here and the army put you in jail. But a reign of terror is seldom terror in the true sense; it is anxious boredom and suspense, and a kind of hopeless resignation bordering on despair, like a household dominated by the pathology of drunken or nagging parents.

The Burmese I met talked frankly about their fears and the political intimidation. They had the sullen defiance of people who were constantly bullied.

'They rule with the gun. They can come to your home at any time,

knock on your door, and take you.' This from a taxi driver, a man of thirty or so, speaking in a whisper.

'Why would they want to take you?'

'For no reason!'

And another man, a trader in a market, said to me in the same kind of cautious whisper, 'A prison sentence here is a life sentence. Many of my friends have been taken away. I know I'll never see them again.'

The generals had been in power in the 1970s, when I'd been here last. They were still in power, propped up by their control of the drug trade and enabled, bankrolled, by the Chinese government, their biggest trading partner, in exotic substances such as heroin and more mundane items like watermelons. The United States and many other countries refused to do business with Myanmar for ethical reasons. It was a pariah state that had defied the democratic process by invalidating the 1990 general election and imprisoning the winner of it, Aung San Suu Kyi. Since then she has been threatened, attacked, imprisoned, persecuted, widowed and continually put under house arrest. I arrived in Myanmar at a time when her sentence of house arrest was extended for another year, her street barricaded with roadblocks and sentries. Not even the hungriest taxi driver would dare to take me to her street, nor even speed me past it.

But so familiar was Yangon in its sameness and its smells that I easily found my way around. To get my bearings I walked to the main railway station, inquired about a ticket to Mandalay, and then strolled along the streets towards the river, marvelling at the crumbling buildings, the old cracked shop-houses, the hawkers squatting in the shade of the arcades selling oranges and mangoes, the battered cars, the stinking monsoon drains – nothing new. The pagodas were brighter, the stupas freshly gilded, the walls newly whitewashed. Frustrated by the military repression, people seemed to take refuge in Buddhism, which preached patience and compassion. Apart from the newly painted pagodas, the city was ruinous, which was unique in the reinvented Southeast Asia. Myanmar was exceptional in its decrepitude and low morale, its inefficiency almost total.

The imperial city still remained, Victorian in its long colonnades and narrow passageways. I marvelled at the existence of the broad and massive buildings with their tall windows and balconies and porches, all of them preserved by being ignored. Any of Rangoon's well-known colonials would have found the place familiar. Had Rudyard Kipling, George