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Nyi Pu Lay

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COUNTRY BOY

Translated from Burmese by Anna Allott and Khin Thant Han

The boy had never slept under anything but thatch, and he was startled by the drumming of rain on the corrugated iron roof. At this point, just when he'd been overwhelmed by a sense of helplessness, the din on the roof was the last straw. Eyes downcast, the boy shivered as he shuffled along behind the blackbooted prison warder. The closer they came to the building, the louder the rain sounded on the iron roofing; it was pelting down, as though it were trying to spite him in particular, and it showed no sign of relenting. The boy trembled in apprehension as he followed Blackboots into the prison building.

What was around him? Cells with iron bars? The boy shot a timid glance ahead and immediately lowered his eyes. The occupants of the cells were examining him as though he were a creature of unknown provenance. One man was restlessly pacing his cell, while another was singing at the top of his voice. What with the drumming of the rain and the bellowing of that voice, the boy felt utterly wretched and scarcely able to breathe.

"Heh, warder! That nice little bit of stuff—why don't you put him in here with me?"

Blackboots ignored the invitation and walked on. Personally, he would have preferred to put the boy in the block that held the "politicals" —the section 5(j) prisoners. He knew that this would have been better for the kid, but he also knew that the authorities were leery of letting newcomers into the "political" block in case they picked up dangerous ideas. It had been decreed that the boy would be put into this block, and

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Blackboots couldn't go against his orders. The best he could do for the boy, he'd decided, was to put him in a cell where he would get some decent food to eat.

The boy was shaking with fear now as well as from the cold. Somewhere in the middle of the building Blackboots stopped in front of a cell, took a bunch of keys out of his trouser pocket, and thrust a key into a large black padlock. One turn . . . two turns . . . three, four. The key wouldn't turn. The prisoner inside the cell was impatient to see the door open—but it would have to stick just at this moment. In the adjoining cells, the inmates were eyeing the boy, looking him up and down.

Blackboots rattled the key, bashed it, and tried again to give it a turn. But it was no use—the damned thing was stuck fast. One more try, he thought, and if it doesn't work this time I'll put the boy in that other cell over there. But then, quite suddenly, with a grating noise, the lock opened. Just the kid's luck.

The un-oiled hinge squealed as the iron grille swung open. The boy had never known such misery: his fingers and toes went cold while his whole body seemed to be getting hotter. As for the man in the cell, he looked as though he had been handed a pot of honey. When Blackboots told the boy to get in the cell, his eyes filled with tears. Silently, calling out to his father, he dragged his feet up the four small steps into the cell. Once he was inside, Blackboots closed the iron grille and then once again there was that menacing noise, the painful screech of the gate, followed by the sound of the key, turning once and then again, double-checking. Being alive in hell, the boy thought, must be something like this.

Voices called out from nearby cells.

"Hey. You with the merchandise!"

"Look over here, mate!"

"You're really in luck, pal, what with this cold rain!" the boy heard one voice say.

In luck! What luck? Why was this man in luck? The boy couldn't puzzle it out. Now there were other ominous sounds of jubilation from the neighboring cells.

The inmate he'd been put in with was about six feet tall, solidly built, quite light-skinned and, he guessed, just over thirty. The top half of his body was naked, revealing a panoply of tattooed muscles. Covering his chest and back were two tigers, done in green and bluish ink. The tiger on

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his chest was crouching ready to spring, while the one on his back had already leapt upon its prey. The tigers' eyes were bright red.

With a welcoming grin on his face, Tiger Man held out his hand in greeting. "What's your name, kid?" he said.

Fresh from the country, the boy had no idea that you greeted people by shaking hands. Tiger Man persisted, taking hold of the boy's hand and shaking it. He seemed to be in no hurry to let go.

The boy looked up, wide-eyed. "Maung," he said softly.

More questions followed. "Where are you from? What's your crime, kid?"

Tiger Man nodded as he listened to the boy's answers. Then, from deep inside his bedding roll, he took out a vest and a cotton *longyi* and told the boy to change out of his wet clothes.

"For a grown-up, he's not unkind," the young lad thought, as he changed his clothing. Meanwhile, Tiger Man was busy relaying information to those in the the other cells. "Says he's from Hawa district. Got three years for chopping down trees."

Outside, the rain had begun to ease off. Even before he put the clothes on, the boy could see that the vest was far too big for him, while the *longyi* was so wide that it would wrap around him with a huge flap to spare. It made him uncomfortable to put them on, not just because they were too big, but also because he had never worn clothes of such good material. But once they were on, he felt warm and dry, and then he began to worry about his father, wondering which block he was in and which cell, and whether he could possibly be as warm and dry as he was and whether he was having one of his asthma attacks.

At wash-time, from the cell at the far end, there came a man with a tattoo of a winged star with a dagger plunged into it. He called out a greeting as he passed.

"Hey, kid, don't be so down. You'll be done with this place in the blink of an eye. In the time we've got to do, just the meat-eating days add up to more than three years! By the way, mate, what national news has the boy heard?"

It was only then that Tiger Man realized that, in his excitement over the boy, he'd forgotten to ask. But it didn't matter anyway, for the boy didn't even know what "national" meant.

On the way to wash, the other inmates stopped to chat with the

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new arrival. The boy stared in fascination at the tattoos on their bodies, while Blackboots looked on, shaking his head. Like Star-dagger, they all asked for news. Star-dagger had already told them there wasn't any, but they asked anyway, either hoping for some information or just wanting to hear what the kid had to say. The boy didn't know this, but these were the inmates who were in for long stretches, and a government amnesty was their only hope of ever getting back home to their wives.

One man wore a tattoo with two crossed arrows buried in a heart that was dripping blood. A rather plump man bore the words "Isali Miss" —there had been a cassette recording of a song called "Isali" and a painter called Ko Wathon had done a picture of a woman for the cover, and this is what they called her. One inmate had a tattoo with "Fu Manchu" spelled out underneath—the boy had no idea who that was and to him the tattoo looked utterly repulsive. A pale, somewhat slender, man had "Loving Mother, Wicked Son" on one forearm, and "Remorse is not my philosophy" on the other. He reminded the boy of Ko Myaing, the fisherman in his village. There was another inmate whom they called In-thugyi because he had all sorts of magic squares and mantras on him, one with the four Burmese words "sa, da, ba, wa," another with "Buddha, Dhamma, Sangha." A dark-skinned fellow with a flattened nose had a tattoo that read "Even a nun will be shown no mercy if she smiles at me." He pinched the poor lad's cheek through the iron bars, leaving him embarrassed and hot all over.

When it was their turn to wash, the boy crept out behind Tiger Man, holding his rain-sodden clothes under his arm. They passed some men who were singing raucously, some who were doing their exercises, and others who were having a smoke, lighting one cheroot stub from another. Some smiled and greeted the boy like an old friend, but he didn't smile back; Tiger Man had told him not to. But even though he was pretending not to notice, he did catch sight of a man who was tattooed with a snake, a shark, and a crudely revealing figure of a woman.

Tiger Man carefully scrubbed the boy's clothes for him, with Sunlight washing soap. Then he handed the boy some sweet-smelling white soap, of a kind he'd never seen before, and ordered him to rub himself from head to toe, scrubbing hard in all the folds and crevices of his body. The water was so cold that the boy came out in goose pimples, but just as he was about to stop, Tiger Man grabbed the soap himself and

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lathered the boy all over, scrubbing him clean. When he was done with scrubbing, Tiger Man rinsed the boy down and told him to rub the dirt off his own back. Blackboots watched all this uneasily, wishing he could ask his boss to move the kid to the block with the political prisoners— he could see that, in prison terms, Tiger Man was "hand-rearing" the child. When the food came round at supper time, the two were brought a large bucket of rice with a plastic bag and a small container of curry hidden under the rice. "Good rich curry," said Tiger Man, "sent by my boys in the kitchen, for me."

The pair were settling down to eat when Blackboots arrived, grinning broadly, holding a tin plate that was piled high with plain, boiled rice. Tiger Man put a handful of curry on the plate, and the warder went on his way, his eyes alight.

Although the food was good, the boy found it hard to get it down. His appetite disappeared when he thought of his father. Poor Ahpay, what was he having for supper? He imagined him eating the watery prison soup with its sprinkling of green leaves and rice, and nothing but a bit of poor-quality *ngapi* for seasoning.

As for Tiger Man, he was relishing his food. He picked out the best morsels of meat for the boy and even asked him what kind of curry he would like for his next meal. After all, he had his own men among the prison staff and since they were well supplied with food, he could live like a lord. The boy said nothing; he was surprised that life in prison was turning out to be so different from what he'd expected. He heard Tiger Man telling the warders who had brought the food around to cook enough for two tomorrow. Then, once again, he heard Tiger Man boasting about the arrival of a boy in his cell, just as if some valuable treasure had come his way.

The boy had worked out that Tiger Man was not a nobody in this prison. But he was still surprised when he saw him lighting a cheroot with a lighter—surprised, not because of the lighter (he'd seen one of those before) but because he'd heard that cheroots were very scarce in prison, very valuable. Cheroots were like money when you were inside, people said: if you had cheroots, you could get hold of almost anything. But he'd heard also that getting a light was very difficult, even if you had a cheroot and your mouth was dry and you were dying for a smoke—yet here was his cellmate with a one-flick lighter and what seemed to be an unlimited supply of cheroots.

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After they had finished eating, Blackboots appeared in front of their cell again. Tiger Man handed him a couple of cheroots, picking them out of a plastic bag that had a picture of Rambo on it. The warder took them, but there was a change in his expression now. Gruffly, he said: "Mind you teach this new young kid the prison drill. If he hasn't got it right by morning, he'll be in for it from the chief warder. Might even be unlucky enough to get a beating. Get that, kid?"

At these words the boy, already inclined to take fright at the sight of anyone in trousers, turned pale with fear.

"Don't worry, brother," Tiger Man said. Blackboots went off, and Tiger Man turned to the boy. "No need to worry," he said. "You won't get a beating. I've got a good friend out there."

Blackboots appeared yet again outside the cell because In-thugyi and Isali Miss had sent him to ask for cheroots. Tiger Man handed some over and then, puffing on his own cheroot, settled down to daydream, his eyes following the smoke as it spiraled into the air. It was getting late, and the light had begun to fade. From his bulky bedding roll Tiger Man pulled out cotton blankets and sheets for the boy and showed him how to make his bed. Then he put the boy to work on his own bed, lingering over the task, getting him to hold down his soft, warm sheets and tucking the blankets in until everything was neat and snug. In Tiger Man's ample bedroll there were crisply ironed shirts and *longyi*s as well as woolen rugs, patterned cotton blankets, and bedclothes of many colors, including some army-issue sheets. After laying out the beds and tidying away the clothes, the boy was hot and sweaty, despite the chill from the never-ending rain. Tiger Man was sitting cross-legged on his bed, puffing contentedly at his cheroot, but the boy could find nowhere to rest his gaze: it kept returning to the sullenly sooty ceiling.

After a while Tiger Man began to talk about his life: about the pretty girls who had chased him and how he'd dealt with them; about his techniques for managing certain sorts of girls and married women and how he'd succeeded in eluding their snares by restraining his desires over the months and years—all this he recounted with great relish. And there was more: about how fine his parents' houses and cars were, about how good he was at boxing, about how he'd won prizes for karate and taekwondo, about how he'd fairly swum in whisky and beer, about what a good shot he'd been in the army and how he'd risked his life crossing from

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Kawthaung aboard a motorboat. As for why he'd landed in prison, he said that in trying to be public-spirited one time, he'd gone too far. Some drunks were threatening to wreak havoc at a local pagoda festival and he'd got into a fight and hit one of them: the fellow had dropped dead on the spot. Then he went on about all the money he'd had to pay out during the prosecution, and about how beautiful his wife was.

While Tiger Man was recounting this tale, Star-dagger was smiling at the self-pitying voice in the opposite cell: "That great tomcat is at it again, telling his tales to the kid."

The sky cleared that night but the boy still found it hard to sleep. When he dozed off, it was only in fits and starts, for he could not stop thinking about his father and his mother and grandmother, and about the crop in the fields. He seemed to wake at each stroke of the iron bar, which sounded every fifteen minutes all through the night. As for Tiger Man, he was snoring loudly in a deep and contented sleep.

When morning came, the boy's eyes were smarting painfully. Tiger Man was sitting on the shit bucket in a corner of the cell, and from this squatting position he called out to the boy, telling him how to go about washing his face. The boy thought about his father yet again when they ate some biscuits the like of which he'd never tasted before; they were foreign, judging from the packet, but how they had got here he had no idea.

All of a sudden, Tiger Man shouted something to Star-dagger and Fu Manchu, in the adjoining cell. The boy heard him clearly, but the words made no sense to him. How could they have? Right from the start the inmates had been talking to each other in prison slang so that he wouldn't be able to understand what they were saying. But even though he couldn't get the meaning, the boy understood that Tiger Man had announced something important. In the next cell, Star-dagger and Fu Manchu were shouting with laughter and banging on the walls to pass the message on, by code, to their neighbors, Isali Miss and In-thugyi.

Although the rain had stopped, the sky was still dark and it was piercingly cold. The rough, homespun *longyi* the boy's sister had woven for him was not yet dry. Suddenly Tiger Man thrust into the boy's hand an iron spike about as thick as a little finger and about a foot long. The boy took it, but his eyes widened in fear. Smiling gently and speaking in a soft, cajoling voice, Tiger Man told the boy that he wanted him to sharpen the spike. And mind, he added, it was very important that the sharpening be

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done silently. He performed several strokes himself, in demonstration.

The boy got to work, but no matter how hard he tried he couldn't keep the spike from making a noise when it was rubbed against the cement floor. With his eyes wide open and ears pricked, Tiger Man positioned himself by the iron bars of the cell door, to keep watch. After a while the boy began to wonder exactly how sharp the spike had to be—he couldn't tell since he had no idea what it was for. He was a hard worker and could plough and till as well as any grown man, but now it seemed as though his hands weren't strong enough to make the spike as sharp as Tiger Man wanted it.

The boy's work was interrupted by a warning shout from a cell at the end of the passage. "Hey, pal! If you've got a spare cheroot, send one along with the boss, will you?"

Tiger Man, taken aback, hastily grabbed the spike from the boy and hid it under his bedding roll. When Blackboots arrived, he was ready with a cheroot. "Please give this cheroot to cell No. 2 for me," he said. "And what about you? Here, take this while you're about it." Then he handed Blackboots an extra cheroot for himself, to make sure that he wouldn't be back too soon. The boy looked on, puzzled; he had no idea what was going on.

Blackboots turned around, and his footsteps receded down the corridor. Tiger Man listened intently to the sound until it had faded away, and then he asked Fu Manchu something in slang. From the next cell the answer came back in the same incomprehensible argot.

Taking the spike out from under the bedcovers, Tiger Man gave it four or five more strokes. He positioned himself with his back to the cell door, so as to hide the spike more easily if the need arose. The spike was shining, already so well honed from the boy's efforts that Tiger Man couldn't make it any sharper. It wasn't as pointed as a pencil fresh from the sharpener, but it was just as sharp as a *kalaung*, the tool used for extracting samples of rice. When Tiger Man tested the point with his palm, the jab made him flinch and the hairs stood up on the back of his hand. His expression changed and his lips curled into a smile.

Once again he called out in slang to the nearby cells. He followed this by shouting out the names of the inmates in the cells that Blackboots had to pass on his way down the corridor. Then, handing the spike back to the boy, he ordered him to carry on sharpening it while he kept watch.

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Reluctantly the boy went back to work, listening in amazement as Tiger Man boasted about his hold over the head jailer and his connections with the director of the prison.

Presently Tiger Man took the spike and rubbed it against his hand. It glinted as though it were nickel-plated. The boy glanced at Tiger Man's face, and he did not like at all the red flush that had come upon it. Suddenly Tiger Man grabbed hold of the boy's hand and leaned over to nuzzle his cheek. Holding the sharpened spike in one hand, he whispered something into the boy's ear.

The boy recoiled in terror, crying out in protest: "Oh Lord! Lord Buddha! But I'm a man! A man!" Tiger Man silenced him by clamping a hand over his mouth, and the boy broke into a cold sweat, his heart beating wildly.

Nearby Fu Manchu and Star-dagger were straining their ears, trying to picture what was going on in the cell next door. The voices were only faintly audible, the words indistinct, and what they mostly heard was Tiger Man's deep, throaty voice.

The boy had clenched his fists, determined not to give in, no matter what. At just this critical moment Blackboots reappeared and Isali Miss called out a warning, in their secret inmates' code: "Hey, mate! Let me have some MSG taste powder if you've got any."

Tiger Man was now not only flushed in the face but over his upper torso as well. Hurriedly concealing the spike under his bedding, he gave the boy a glare, hissing at him to keep his mouth shut. As he turned away to reach for his private stash, the boy caught sight of the tip of the sharpened spike, sticking out from the bedding. Big Tiger was looking in the other direction, reaching into the gap between the wall and his bedroll, his back just inches from the boy. The boy gripped the spike and pulled it quickly from its hiding place. He touched the point, and a shiver ran through him. Suddenly he lunged, and as easily as a pen slips into its cover, the spike's tip slid under Big Tiger's armpit, piercing the man's skin and slipping between his ribs. Big Tiger's great round eyes bulged in terrified astonishment, but not a sound came from his lips.

In the cells nearby, Fu Manchu, Star-dagger, Isali Miss and Inthugyi were still straining their ears, trying to catch the slightest sound, still trying to imagine the scene in Tiger Man's cell.

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Nyi Pu Lay

***Nyi Pu Lay** is the pen name of U Nyein Gyan, born in 1952, the youngest of five children of Ludu U Hla and Ludu Daw Amar, two famous left-wing writers and intellectuals from Mandalay. He began writing in 1985, after his father's death. He rapidly became popular for his satirical short stories, two collections of which have been published (in March, 1989, and September, 1990). On December 25, 1990, he was arrested and charged with being in contact with illegal organizations. More likely, perhaps, his arrest was because of his family's political pedigree and his satirical writings. He was released in Feburary, 1989. This story, which has not been passed for publication in Burma, was written soon after his release and sent personally to Anna Allott, the translator. He is now writing regularly, but only what is passed by the censors is being published in Burma.*

***Anna Allott** is a senior research associate in Burmese studies at the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London. She is a frequent visitor to Burma, and has been a Ph.D. supervisor to Daw Aung San Suu Kyi.*

***Khin Thant Han** advised the translator on obscure words and idioms. She was born in the 1940s and was a teacher of English in Mandalay until 1988. She now lives in Manchester, England, with her husband, Gerry Abbott.*

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