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Burma

In the spring of 2008, a few months before I returned to Burma for the first time since leaving as a child, I bought an old guidebook at the Strand bookstore in New York. It was a red hardback with a fraying dustcover and a speckled binding, shoved to the side on a forgotten shelf in the travel section. The title, “A Handbook for Travellers in India, Pakistan, Burma and Ceylon,” was set in the kind of stiff, upright font you would find below portraits in the dining hall of an Oxford college.

I felt the book had a history. Stamped at the bottom of the title page were the words “John Murray, Albemarle Street, London. 1962”. Yet something about the book seemed older. In the preface, I saw that it had originally been written in 1859 by a Captain E. B. Eastwick, MP, a man I later saw described as a ‘diplomat, Member of Parliament and British Orientalist’. The manuscript had been updated nineteen times since then, mostly by Englishmen out in the colonies in the service of Empire, men such as the chief engineer of the Indian State Railways and the Keeper of Records to the Government of India. These were men, I imagined, who wore pith helmets to go shooting and sweltered in the infernal heat, who drank a stengah of whisky every afternoon at the British Club and died of humidity and loneliness.
My parents had told me stories of their own parties at the British Club in Burma in the 1970s. They had moved there from Indonesia in 1974, about a year after getting married, so that my father could take up his first posting for the United Nations. They were newlyweds in their mid-twenties: my father a young, skinny Englishman in black-rimmed glasses and a batik shirt; my mother a Beatles-loving Indonesian girl in miniskirts and a swingy coat. For the first few months they stayed at the Inya Lake hotel, a low building set in gardens down the road from the Rangoon Sailing Club. From their window they could see the lights of General Ne Win’s house twinkling across the water.

There were few other foreigners. The British, of the colonial type, were gone, replaced by a new, less stiff-lipped breed. These were the days of the ‘Burmese Way to Socialism’: in his quest for progress, General Ne Win had cut most foreign economic ties. The foreigners who came were diplomats, ruby-hunters and geologists, the kind of people who had reasons to live in a place closed off from the world. On weekends they gathered at the British Club. It was housed in a small, red-roofed villa at one corner of the British diplomatic compound, and served drinks and a tiffin lunch on Sundays. My parents told stories of high jinx and scandal there. At one costume party, a man turned up dressed as General Ne Win, wearing a dark green uniform with the general’s epaulettes. The police later stopped him driving home, a drunk, giggling white man weaving wildly across the streets at midnight, appearing to impersonate their head of state.
Soon after my parents arrived, my brother was born. I have a picture of him on the steps of the Indonesian embassy wrapped in swaddling clothes, being held by the ambassador’s wife. My mother is standing to her side in a housedress, her belly still visible beneath the cloth. I have seen her belly, traced the strange, wave-like marks left by four children. In the photo, my father is standing apart. He is staring at the camera with his hands hidden, conscious of being caught on film.

I followed two years later. I have another photo taken at the Indonesian embassy. This one is in the gardens, at once more intimate and open. I am lying spiky-haired in a baby lounger while my brother runs towards the camera. My father must be behind it. To my side, his camera has caught my mother jumping in mid air, her hair blown back and her arms in a windmill blur. She is laughing. Burma, she has since told me, is where she and my father were happiest.

Something about the book drew me in. *India, Pakistan, Burma, Ceylon*. The title made me think of my father’s first plane journey from England to Indonesia in 1969, a few years before he met my mother. He had joined Voluntary Service Overseas and was on his way to work in a village in Sumatra. He had left Europe only once before. Plane travel was different then, slower. He did not have the muffled comfort of his plane journeys now, no second growth Bordeaux or Star Alliance Gold. He had no airline lounge, no Molton Brown, no orchid folded in the napkin. He had only the comfort of the exile: the knowledge, deep in the blank pages of his passport, that he would never again go home.
The plane was run by the British Overseas Airways Corporation, BOAC. “What does BOAC stand for? Better On A Camel,” the joke went. It had to stop several times to refuel. London. Zurich. Tel Aviv. Tehran. Bombay. Singapore. Jakarta. I wonder if my father thought it strange, when he looked out the window at Iran’s bleak landscapes, to be heading to the chaos of the rainforest. In Bombay, he got out on the tarmac, and for the first time was hit by a blind slap of heat, the kind you still feel when it’s gone.

I had been planning for some time to return to Burma, and thought I could take the book with me. I wondered if it would arouse suspicion. “Sri Lanka is not Ceylon, and we are not in Burma,” the customs guards would say. “We are in Myanmar.” But they might find the book funny too. I would show them the section recommending that gentlemen bring gabardine suits and a dinner jacket on their travels, or the reminder to huntsmen that “high velocity rifles should never be used in thickly-populated areas”. Perhaps I could show them the advice under ‘Travelling Servants’:

“Friends ‘up country’ may engage a servant and send him to the port of arrival. ‘Up-country’ servants are often cheaper and more trustworthy, but their knowledge of English is not generally very good, and they may be unhappy if far from home. Ladies may travel with an accredited manservant without hesitation, and will find him far more useful than an ayah in all respects. The services of an ayah are more difficult to secure, and naturally are more expensive.”
I wouldn’t tell them I wanted to find my ayah in Burma. She was a nice Indian lady, my mother had told me, a woman called Lily. Lily lived with us in our little bungalow on a small street off Prome Road. She was Christian, a minority among the Buddhists. It was Lily who rocked me to sleep at night, Lily who held me when I was a mewling ball of flesh and hair. I have only a single picture of her, taken by the pool of the Inya Lake hotel. In the background, my mother’s friend is sitting cross-legged on a sun lounger. Lily is sitting on the ground next to her, wearing a dark flowered sari wrapped up around her shoulder. She is fat and has a nose ring. I don’t remember her at all.

The airport guards would ask me the purpose of my visit: was it tourism, business, visiting friends? I wouldn’t know what to tell them. I didn’t know why I wanted to return. I told myself it was to rediscover the past, but I actually hadn’t thought about it much. My mother had told me stories of our life in Burma, but I could not picture any of it. She described the bungalow we lived in, a house with two bedrooms and a single air conditioner. She told me that my father drove to work every morning in a green Ford Escort, and that at our farewell party we gathered at our Burmese neighbor’s house to sing Auld Lang Syne around the piano. The retired colonel a few doors down brought a bottle of Johnnie Walker, she said.

I remembered none of this. I pictured the piano, the black market whisky, and my father in his green Ford Escort driving to work. But the images were synthetic. When I tried to remember Rangoon I could picture only our house,
and even that was made up. In that image was a green car under a mango tree. I could not imagine the city outside.

The book contained a series of fold out maps. They were printed on heavy paper, stuck like natural dividers through the book. The streets were represented by black and white lines, and were set against a watery blue. There were city maps and country maps: guides to Bombay’s choked alleyways but also to the open peaks of mountains, Sikkim, Kashmir and the Northwest Frontier. Some cities had mosques, others temples. Delhi had Humayun’s tomb, Rangoon the Shwedagon pagoda, Bombay the Mahalakshmi temple. If you looked closely at the cities, though, you could see the threads of the British. Most had a telegraph office, a high court, and a racecourse for British gentlemen. Two had a hospital called Dufferin.

I opened up the Rangoon map. It was the first time I had seen one. I saw in it a city bound by water, lines of neat streets looking fragile against the vast blue of the Irrawaddy River. The center of Rangoon was laid out in a grid. Near the river I saw Fraser Street, Merchant Street and Dalhousie. Up near the convent was one of few Burmese names on the map: Bogyoke Street, the Street of the General. It is several blocks away from the Secretariat, the large redbrick Victorian building where, after independence, General Aung San was killed. People don’t speak much of that now.

The map provided an anchor for me. I had a visual structure in which to place my parents’ memories. I wondered what the markers would be on my own
map. I could put a flag on the Mingaladon aerodrome to the north to mark the place my parents stepped off their plane from Jakarta that day in 1974, still full of faith and hope. I could find our house, draw our little bungalow with a green car outside. Perhaps I would just circle the city, identify the place where my parents’ love for each other was simplest.

I should have known then that maps don’t help. We all have our own maps of the past. They are fragmented, and if you try to step in them they give way. My parents’ is composed of love and regret. I don’t know yet what mine is made of.

Andrea Woodhouse was born to an English father and an Indonesian mother. She grew up in Burma, Pakistan, Zimbabwe, Indonesia, Jordan and the United States. She lives in New York. She would like to thank Joyce Johnson and all her classmates.