
Opening Extract from...

The Art of Hearing Heartbeats

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Part One

Chapter 1

THE OLD MAN'S eyes struck me first. They rested deep in their sockets, and he seemed unable to take them off me. Granted, everyone in the teahouse was staring at me more or less unabashedly, but he was the most brazen. As if I were some exotic creature he'd never seen before.

Trying to ignore him, I glanced around the teahouse, a mere wooden shack with a few tables and chairs standing right on the dry, dusty earth. Against the far wall a glass display case exhibited pastries and rice cakes on which dozens of flies had settled. Next to it, on a gas burner, water for the tea was boiling in a sooty kettle. In one corner, orange-colored sodas were stacked in wooden crates. I had never been in such a wretched hovel. It was scorching hot. The sweat ran down my temples and my neck. My jeans clung to my skin. I was sitting, getting my bearings, when all at once the old man stood up and approached me.

"A thousand pardons, young lady, for addressing you so directly," he said, sitting down at my table. "It is most impolite, I know, especially since we are unacquainted, or at least since you do not know me, not even in passing. My name is U Ba, and I have already heard a great deal about you, though I admit that this fact in no way excuses my forward behavior. I expect you find it awkward to be addressed by a strange man in a teahouse in a strange city in a strange land. I am exceedingly sensitive to your situation, but I wish—or should I be more frank and say I need—to ask you a question. I have waited so long for this opportunity that I cannot sit there watching you in silence now that you are here.

"I have waited four years, to be precise, and I have spent many an afternoon pacing back and forth out there on the dusty main street where the bus drops off the few tourists who stray into our city. Occasionally, on the rare days when a plane was arriving from the capital and when I could manage it, I would go to our little airport to keep futile watch for you.

"It took you long enough.

"Not that I wish to reproach you. Please, do not misunderstand me. But I am an old man and have no idea how many years remain for me. The people of our country age quickly and die young. The end of my life must be drawing near, and I have a story yet to tell, a story meant for you.

"You smile. You think I have lost my mind, that I am a bit mad, or at least rather eccentric? You have every right.

But please, please, do not turn away from me. Do not let my outward appearance mislead you.

"I see in your eyes that I am testing your patience. Please, indulge me. There is no one waiting for you, am I right? You have come alone, as I expected you would. Spare me just a few minutes of your time. Sit here with me just another little while, Julia.

"You are astonished? Your lovely brown eyes grow larger still, and for the first time you are really looking at me. You must be shaken. You must be asking yourself how on earth I know your name when we have never met before, and this is your first visit to our country. You wonder whether I have seen a label somewhere, on your jacket or on your little knapsack. The answer is no. I know your name even as I know the day and hour of your birth. I know all about little Jule who loved nothing better than to listen to her father tell her a story. I could even tell you her favorite one here and now: 'The Tale of the Prince, the Princess, and the Crocodile.'

"Julia Win. Born August 28, 1968, in New York City. American mother. Burmese father. Your family name is a part of my story, has been a part of my life since I was born. In the past four years I have not passed a single day without thinking of you. I will explain everything in due course, but let me first ask you my question: Do you believe in love?

"You laugh. How beautiful you are. I am serious. Do you believe in love, Julia?

"Of course I am not referring to those outbursts of passion that drive us to do and say things we will later regret, that delude us into thinking we cannot live without a certain person, that set us quivering with anxiety at the mere possibility we might ever lose that person—a feeling that impoverishes rather than enriches us because we long to possess what we cannot, to hold on to what we cannot.

"No. I speak of a love that brings sight to the blind. Of a love stronger than fear. I speak of a love that breathes meaning into life, that defies the natural laws of deterioration, that causes us to flourish, that knows no bounds. I speak of the triumph of the human spirit over selfishness and death.

"You shake your head. You do not believe in any such thing. You do not know what I am talking about. I am not surprised. Just wait. You will understand what I mean once I tell you the story I have borne in my heart for you these past four years. I require only a bit of your patience. The hour is late, and you are surely weary from your long journey. If you like, we could meet again tomorrow at the same time, at this table, in this teahouse. This is where I met your father, by the way, and, as a matter of fact, he sat right there on your stool and took up his tale while I sat exactly where I am now, astonished—I will admit—disbelieving, even confused. I had never before heard anyone tell a story like that. Can words sprout wings? Can they glide like butterflies through the air? Can they captivate us, carry us off into another world? Can they open the last secret chambers

of our souls? I do not know whether words alone can accomplish these things, but, Julia, your father had a voice on that day such as a person hears maybe only once in a lifetime.

"Though his voice was low, there was not a person in this teahouse who was not moved to tears by the mere sound of it. His sentences soon took the shape of a story, and out of that story a life emerged, revealing its power and its magic. The things I heard that day left me as firm a believer as your father.

"'I am not a religious man, and love, U Ba, is the only force I truly believe in.' Those were your father's words."

U Ba stood up. He brought his open palms together in front of his chest, bowed ever so slightly, and left the teahouse in a few quick, light steps.

I watched until he disappeared into the bustle of the street.

No, I wanted to call after him. Do I believe in love? What a question. As if love were a religion you might believe in or not. No, I wanted to tell the old man, there isn't any force more powerful than fear. There is no triumph over death. No.

I sat hunched and slouching on my low stool, feeling that I could still hear his voice. It was tranquil and melodious, not unlike my father's.

Sit here with me just another little while, Julia, Julia, Julia . . .

Do you believe in love, in love . . .
Your father's words, your father's . . .

My head ached; I was exhausted. As if I'd woken from a relentless and sleepless nightmare. Flies were buzzing all around me, landing on my hair, my forehead, and my hands. I didn't have the strength to drive them off. In front of me sat three dry pastries. The table was covered with sticky brown sugar.

I tried to sip my tea. It was cold, and my hand was shaking. Why had I listened to that stranger for so long? I could have asked him to stop. I could have left. But something had held me back. Just when I was about to turn away, he had said: Julia, Julia Win. I could never have imagined that the sound of my full name would unsettle me so. How did he know it? Did he in fact know my father? When had he seen him last? Could he know whether my father was still alive, where he might be hiding?

Chapter 2

THE WAITER DIDN'T want my money.

"U Ba's friends are our guests," he said, bowing.

Still, I took a kyat bill out of my pants pocket. It was worn and filthy. Repulsed, I stuck it under the plate. The waiter cleared the table but ignored the money. I pointed to it. He smiled.

Was it too little? Too dirty? I set a larger, cleaner bill on the table. He bowed, smiled again, and left it, too, untouched.

Outside it was even hotter. The heat paralyzed me. I stood in front of the teahouse unable to take a single step. The sun burned on my skin, and the dazzling light stung my eyes. I put on my baseball cap and pulled it low over my face.

The street was full of people, yet all was oddly quiet. There were hardly any motorized vehicles to speak of. People were walking or riding bicycles. Parked at one intersection were three horse-drawn carriages and an oxcart. The few cars on the road were old Japanese pickups, dented and rusty, crammed with woven baskets and sacks to which young men clung for dear life.

The street was lined with low, single-story wooden shops with corrugated tin roofs, where vendors offered everything from rice, peanuts, flour, and shampoo to Coca-Cola and beer. There was no order—at least none I could discern.

Every second shop seemed to be a teahouse with patrons out front crouching on tiny wooden stools. Around their heads they wore red and green towels. In place of pants, the men wore what looked like wraparound skirts.

In front of me a couple of women had smeared yellow paste on their cheeks, brows, and noses and were smoking long dark-green cigarillos. They were all slender without seeming gaunt and moved with the same elegance and lightness I had always admired in my father.

And the way they stared at me, looking me square in the face and in the eye and smiling. I couldn't make heads or tails of those smiles. How threatening a little laugh can seem.

Others greeted me with a nod. What, did they know me? Had all of them, like U Ba, been expecting my arrival? I

tried not to look at them. I walked down the main street as quickly as possible, my eyes fixed on some imaginary point in the distance.

I was homesick for New York, for the din and the traffic. For the unapproachable faces of pedestrians who took no interest in one another. I wanted to be back where I knew how to move and how to behave.

The road forked after about a hundred yards. I had forgotten where my hotel was. All I could see were the oversized bougainvilleas, taller even than the shacks they hid. The parched fields, the dusty sidewalks, the potholes deep enough to swallow basketballs. Wherever I turned everything looked strange and sinister.

"Miss Win, Miss Win," someone called.

Hardly daring to turn around, I glanced back over my shoulder. There stood a young man who reminded me of the bellhop at the hotel. Or of the skycap at the airport in Rangoon, or of the cabdriver. Or perhaps the waiter at the teahouse.

"Are you looking for something, Miss Win? Can I help you?"

"No, thank you," I started, not wishing to depend on this stranger. "Yes . . . my hotel," I said, desiring above all some place to hide, if only within the hotel room I had checked into that morning.

"Up the hill, here, to the right. Not five minutes away," he explained.

"Thank you."

"I hope you enjoy your time in our city. Welcome to Kalaw," he said, and stood, smiling, as I turned back around.

In the hotel I walked silently and quickly past the smiling desk clerk, climbed the massive wooden staircase to the second floor, and sank down onto my bed.

The trip from New York to Rangoon had taken more than seventy-two hours. Then I had spent a whole night and half of the next day in a ramshackle bus crammed with people who stank, people wearing nothing but grimy skirts, threadbare T-shirts, and shabby plastic sandals. With chickens and squealing piglets. A twenty-hour journey on roads that bore little resemblance to streets. Dried-up river beds, if you ask me. All just to get from the capital to this remote little mountain village.

I must have slept. The sun disappeared; night fell. A semi-darkness filled the room. My suitcase lay unopened on the other bed. I looked around, my eyes wandering back and forth as if I needed to remind myself where I was. An old wooden fan hung from the ceiling high above me. The room was big, and the Spartan furnishings gave it a monastic air. Beside the door a plain cupboard, by the window a table and chair, between the beds a little nightstand. The whitewashed walls were unadorned, without pictures or

mirrors. The old wooden floorboards were worn smooth. The sole luxury was a tiny Korean refrigerator. It didn't work. Cool evening air wafted through the open windows.

In the twilight, at a few hours' remove, my encounter with the old man seemed even more absurd and mysterious than it had by the full light of day. The memory of it was blurred and indistinct. Spectral images drifted through my mind, images I could not interpret, images that made no sense. I tried to remember. He wore a white shirt yellowed with age, a green longyi, and rubber flip-flops. He had white, thick, closely cropped hair. His face was creased with wrinkles. I couldn't tell how old he was. Sixty, maybe seventy. On his lips yet another smile whose import I could not divine. Was it sneering, derisive? Compassionate? What did he want from me?

Money. What else. He hadn't asked for any, but those remarks about his teeth and shirt were clear enough. I knew what he was getting at. He could have learned my name from the hotel. He was probably in cahoots with the front desk. A con man who wanted to whet my curiosity, to make an impression before offering me his services as a fortune-teller. No, no—an astrologer. I wasn't buying it. He was wasting his time.

Had he said anything to suggest he had actually known my father? My father supposedly said to him: "I'm not a religious man, and love, U Ba, love is the only force I truly believe in." My father would never even have thought such a thing, let alone have spoken it out loud. Least of all to a

stranger. Or was I kidding myself? Wasn't it more likely a ridiculous presumption on my part to imagine I understood my father's thoughts or feelings? How well had I really known him? Would the father I thought I knew have disappeared, just like that, without leaving even a note? Would he have abandoned his wife, his son, and his daughter without explanation, without ever sending word?

His trail evaporates in Bangkok, the police say. He might have been robbed and murdered in Thailand.

Or was he the victim of an accident on the Gulf of Siam? Was he hoping to enjoy two weeks of peace and quiet, for a change? Maybe he went to the coast and drowned there while swimming. That's our family's version, the official one at least.

The homicide squad suspected him of leading a double life. They refused to accept my mother's assertion that she knew nothing about his first twenty years. They considered the very notion so preposterous that at first they suspected her of having played some part in his disappearance, either as his accomplice or as the perpetrator. Only when it became clear that there were no high-stakes life-insurance policies involved, that no one would profit financially from his purported death, did they shake off every shadow of suspicion. There very well could have been some side of my father lurking behind the mystery of those first, long-lost twenty years, a side that we, his family, had never seen.