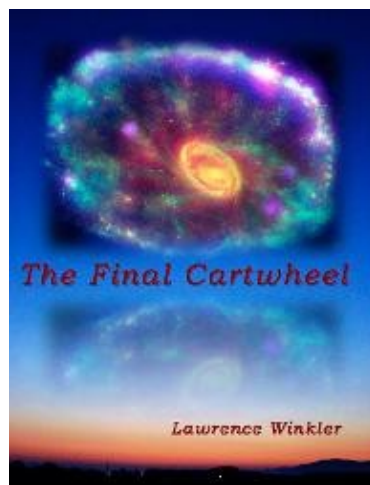


The Final Cartwheel

By : drwink

The Final Cartwheel is the story of a young doctor's return home, after a five-year hitchhiking odyssey around the world. Through East Asia, Indonesia, and around the Antipodes, the circle becomes unbroken.



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The Final Cartwheel

End of Strife

Laura Bowman: "Isn't that illegal?"

U Aung Ko: "In Burma, everything is illegal."

Beyond Rangoon, 1995

I landed in Burma when it was still Burma. I landed in Rangoon when it was still Rangoon. I landed in a military dictatorship, in humidity, decay, and cigar smoke.

It could have been Havana, if my revolutionary reincarnation had gone through more crucifixion. The Cuban marriage of Catholicism and Communism was about the extinction of the self, through submission to collective control; the Burmese union of Buddhism and Socialism was about the extinction of the self, through the individual attainment of enlightenment, through an impossible contradiction.

The ratio of corruption to competence was encouraging. The smiling faces of the inept immigration officials cleared the middle path for me out of the terminal, where a hopalong Indian babu loaded me into his taxi for the drive to the YMCA.

We drove by the 300-foot spotlight towering temple spire of the Schwedagon, a seven ton golden hypodermic tipped with 5,448 diamonds and 2,317 rubies, injecting karma into the night sky. The Schwedagon was twenty-five hundred years old, the oldest pagoda in the world. During his visit in 1889, the golden dome had made an indelible impression on Rudyard Kipling.

"This is Burma," He said. "And it will be quite unlike any land you know about."

Legend has it that the eight strands of Gautama's hair the Shwedagon contained, were brought from India to Burma by two merchant brothers. When King Okkalapa opened the golden casket in which they were transported, *there was an incredible tumult among men and spirits ... rays emitted by the Hairs penetrated up to the heavens above and down to hell ... the blind beheld objects ... the deaf heard sounds ... the dumb spoke distinctly ... the earth quaked ... the winds of the ocean blew ... Mount Meru shook ... lightning flashed ... gems rained down until they were knee deep ... and all trees of the Himalayas, though not in season, bore*

The Final Cartwheel

blossoms and fruit.

My own reception at the YMCA was somewhat more subdued. The Fat Man provided the only sleeping space remaining, on the stage floor beside the piano. I drank Vimto and played Beethoven, until the fatigue worked its way down my arms and into my fingers.

My last ounce of energy extinguished the floodlights. A squadron of mosquitoes and a wounded grandfather clock chimed two hours off my life. *Big-bong Bing-chunk... Big-bong Bing-chunk.*

I was still semiconscious in the Gold Kazoo, when a large pair of mirrored sunglasses shook my shoulders. I looked up into a green Burmese jungle hat, and a smiling black moustache on a tanned mustard face. He was just like they said he'd be.

â MingaLAbâ He said. â Iâ m Roy.â

â Iâ ll bet you are.â I said. â Where you been?â

â MandaLAY.â He said. â You got the duty free?â I handed him a bottle of Vat 69 whiskey and a carton of 555 cigarettes. In Bangladesh, they had told me it would pay for my entire week upriver and incountry. Roy looked it over, and tapped me twice again on the shoulder.

â Ready to go?â He asked.

â I just got here.â I said. It was four in the morning.

â You only have a week.â He said. â Burma big country.â I rolled up the Gold Kazoo painfully, wondering why I had just paid six kyat to play a piano.

Rangoon was a British bastardization of Yongon, which in the local dialect literally meant â to run out of enemies,â or the â End of Strife.â My strife was just about to begin, in its dark humid low altitude decomposition. Because electricity was intermittent, there was no reliable power to run elevators. Other than the Schwedagon, no buildings were constructed higher than the set of stairs you could climb in the heat.

I stowed Serendipity in favour of a smaller bag that Roy provided. Room in the truck would be at a premium. He suggested I buy a ticket from â Tourist Bummer.â *Tourist Burma.*

â Why?â I asked

â To show them you go somewhere.â He said.

â But I am going somewhere.â I said. He told me our trip was â special,â and a train ticket would cover our tracks. He prodded the Fat Man to accompany me to Tourist Bummer. I bought passage to Mandalay, for a dollar.

The Final Cartwheel

The Final Cartwheel

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