

**M Y A N M A R**

**GOLD**

*For whosoever will save his life shall lose it: and  
whosoever will lose his life for my sake shall find it.*

- Matthew 16:25

**M . A . R O B I N E T T E**



## *Dedication*

**T**his book is dedicated to my good brother Naing Thang, who I am honored to know and call my friend. God was kind enough to introduce me to a true hero of the Christian faith and allow me to introduce him to the world. Having him as an example and inspiration for the people of my church, my children, and myself is a treasure I cherish.

This work is also dedicated to the countless unnamed giants of our faith whose stories will be told to us only in heaven and seem so small and unimportant in the eyes of men. To those who offered themselves as living sacrifices and whose lives come up continually as a sweet-smelling savor to God, I dedicate Myanmar Gold.

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My mother, who has already passed from this world to the next, said she always knew I would one day be a writer of books. She, no doubt, would have been grinning from ear to ear with gratification as I handed her a copy of Myanmar Gold. She and my dad spent most of their lives telling their children they could do anything they set their minds to do. It’s not a bad way to raise your kids.

Thank you all!





## CHAPTER I

---

# *Over the Dark Seas*

I'll never forget how I felt when I saw his smiling face for the first time.

I remember standing at the top of a long flight of stairs, looking down into an old, dark airport terminal that echoed like a concrete basement. My body rebelled as I tried to adjust while I worked my way through the eager crowd that disembarked with me from the bubble-top Korean-Air 747 toward the customs counter.

My heart raced in restless fear, and my lungs labored in this humidity-soaked world pungent with unfamiliar smells I wasn't sure I should breathe in.

It felt like I was in a time-travel experiment gone wrong. I was in the right place alright, the place I had set out for, but I almost wanted to turn around and go back home. The atmosphere was oppressive.

The general feel of this crumbling World-War-II-era airport was an appropriate introduction to the former British colony I would meet outside.

Yangon International Airport still bore the code RGN, calling back to the city's better-known name of Rangoon. Rangoon is now called Yangon. This, by far the largest of the country's cities, is

crammed with more than five million people. It sits on the southern coast of the country called Myanmar, still known as Burma to many people around the world. Like New Orleans at the confluence of the mighty Mississippi River and the Gulf of Mexico, Yangon sprawls around the mouth of Myanmar's largest river, the Irrawaddy, as it flows into the Indian Ocean.

These people, like the name of their country and the seat of their commerce, are still in flux as they look for their place in the modern world.

Standing in the slow-moving line, I looked into the strange faces on the other side of a silent wall of glass as though staring into the murky waters of a strange sea. I was hoping, literally praying, to recognize someone. That's when I saw Pastor Naing Thang (pronounced Nāng Tong).

His expression was so much more than a welcoming smile; it was a hungry embrace like you might imagine on the face of someone just rescued from years of solitude on a desert island or in a forgotten prison.

God knows I needed the welcome. Getting to Myanmar had been much more difficult than I had imagined. Although it had only taken twenty-six hours of flying, I felt months away from my home in Ohio. Loneliness and trepidation already began to hover over me in my first few minutes on the ground.

The depth of what I could not understand in what I saw in Pastor Naing's eyes that day has kept me returning to Myanmar and turning daily in my heart to her beautiful people.

I'm not sure what he thought of me, his rotund, bearded visitor from the other side of the world, but I was sure looking him over. Before I could get too self-conscious about how strange I must have looked to him, another, more powerful feeling washed over me. As I turned to see the heavily-armed military policemen standing between me and my host, an instant lump formed in my throat, and I really wondered if I would make it past them without being

arrested. I thought, “Wouldn’t it be a shame to get this close and not even make it into the country.”

There’s a little backstory here.

Honestly, by the time I touched down in Yangon, I think my imagination had me worked into a practical state of panic.

Being left alone with my thoughts, hour upon hour on this overseas odyssey, was almost too much for someone like me.

Like James Thurber’s fictional character Walter Mitty, my imagination runs like few others I know. And that’s just what mine did, even while I was still on the runway back in the United States making my first connection in Atlanta.

From taxiing down the tarmac, to taking off, to lifting above the cumulus clouds, and eventually crossing over the frozen Great Lakes, I kept imagining what would happen if we crashed and I survived. Pressing my face against the cold glass, one moment I was struggling not to freeze or starve to death in the arctic, the next moment I was trying to tread the black waters of the Pacific at night. As we jolted a few times in the turbulence, I was sure I felt the dull bump of a great white shark on my leg.

Trying not to think of what was really worrying me at the end of my flight, I indulged a little too much in my own made-up sagas.

Apparently, I had watched a few too many survival movies.

My final connection on my round-the-world trek kind of woke me from my fitful dreaming and brought me through the crisp bright lights of the ultramodern Incheon Airport just outside of Seoul, South Korea. As we made our way to Myanmar, we flew over dozens of Chinese cities teeming with light and life.

But as we got closer to Myanmar, it grew darker and darker.

As the pilot banked the airplane and made his final descent circling the ancient Asian city, it was dark and close to midnight.

As we circled, Yangon was gloomy and glowed orange from the fire and smoke of the thousands of cook fires lining every street.

Straining as I looked down into the smoldering city, I was convinced I was swirling down into flames and darkness that would consume me.

The YouTube videos I had watched to prepare me for what to expect in Myanmar were feeding the ever-growing flames of fear breaking out upon my mind.

Myanmar had become a scary place inside my head, and I was finally there, floating over the fires of uncertainty.

My work as a journalist in the early 1990s, and what I had learned then, traveling to uncertain places, had pressed me to learn all I could before I took this investigatory trip.

Back then, one of my assignments even took me behind the recently opened Iron Curtain of a collapsing Soviet Union. I went to Minsk, Belarus, to cover the spread of Christianity where it had been formerly shut out by the communists.

I had grown up during the Cold War under the constant threat of nuclear war. When I landed on an exploding blanket of snow in Minsk and we skied to a stop in the powder, I knew I was getting ready to walk the streets of what had been our nation's worst enemy. I knew how serious this was.

Before that trip I had had plenty of lead time for research and had known what to expect; but my first trip to Myanmar was practically spur of the moment, and there was little reliable information out there to help me get my footing on what would be waiting for me.

Truth is, I knew virtually nothing about it and didn't even know where or what Myanmar was the first time I heard the name. I wasn't even sure it was a country.

My quick, pre-trip research was flat-out frightening. Burma was familiar to me from my study of World War II and from the incredible 1957 movie *The Bridge On The River Kwai*. It had also been brought up several times by the character Higgins in the television

show *Magnum, P.I.*, and was even the butt of countless jokes in the sitcom *Seinfeld*.

The real Myanmar was no laughing matter. Still called Burma by the United States and many other countries, Myanmar has been led by a brutal military-junta for many years. Reports said their numerous warlords had oppressed their people with a North-Koreanesque fervor for decades. They are not ruled by a single dictator, like North Korea; but the country is cut up into many diverse regions, each ruled by extraordinarily wealthy, powerful, and often cruel generals. Year after year, this nation of despots has topped the list of the most dangerous places in the world to be a Christian.

Sandwiched between Thailand and India, and bordered by China to the north and the Indian Ocean to the south, Myanmar's more than fifty million people have been virtually cut off from the rest of the world for many years.

Still littered with the dilapidated ruins of colonial British occupation in the late 1800s and the aftermath of World War II in the 1940s, the people have lived in a desperate state of fear and poverty most could not imagine. Thousands of them have risked their lives and unknown numbers have died trying to escape, looking for freedom or a way to provide for their families.

You may not have heard about them, because these sweet, humble, hard-working people stay in close-knit communities, but there are tens of thousands of them in cities around the United States. Ask any one of them and they'll tell you they came here seeking opportunity at great peril, and found it. They love the United States and the American people, who have been constantly reaching out with love to them during their long periods of darkness for more than two hundred years.

The pictures and videos I was able to find on the internet were surprisingly difficult to come by. There were a few videos uploaded to YouTube that I really wished I hadn't watched before I went.

Dozens of grainy, shaky, sometimes sideways video clips taken from hidden cameras were smuggled out of the country. Believe it or not, at this time, cameras were banned in Myanmar. People caught filming or even talking to those filming were in imminent danger of arrest.

On these videos I could see the real turmoil in their otherwise friendly faces as they looked from left to right to see who might be watching.

I found more than one disturbing video that showed people trying to start public protests in Yangon, only to be met with startlingly quick and deadly violence from the authorities.

The speed at which this came was incredible and terrifying.

It was startling and painful to watch how it often took no more than seconds after the protesters raised their signs for them to be swarmed by agents coming out of nowhere. Invariably, the protester would be attacked and beaten to the ground, having his sign ripped from his hands. Moments later, he could be seen being hauled away by the police. Many of these people were never seen or heard from again, reported the narrators of these videos.

In a city of millions, somehow there were thousands at work for the government, walking the streets ready to spring into action. This was terrifying.

When I went to Belarus to cover the brand-new missionary work there, I remember being followed by the infamous Soviet secret police, the KGB. I was searched and intimidated by them at gunpoint more than once. Looking down the barrel of a machine gun while the soldiers held their fingers on their triggers was no picnic. It was scary; but there was some idea that because I was a journalist and my trip was public, nothing too serious could happen to me. After all, I was an American!

What was going on in Myanmar felt like third-world KGB. I didn't get the idea that respect for America was going to work here among the authorities like it had in Minsk. This was a whole lot

further from home in more ways than one. This time I was the missionary who might get locked up or worse, not just the reporter trying to get the story.

For me, Myanmar would be like going into an inner-city alley in the middle of the night. I might disappear into the filthy darkness, and no one would even know where to start a search. On this trip, I was all alone.

I was told by those I knew who had been there before me that the people of Myanmar were harmless and gentle, but “beware of the military police.”

They told me to stay as far away from them as I could and avoid contact with them at all costs. They were dangerous, corrupt, and merciless, they said. I needed little convincing. Numerous times throughout my life I had imagined what it might be like to get lost in Mexico and imprisoned in a dank cell by crooked Federales, but that seemed more like a joke to me than this did. This was the real deal. Being alone didn't help my growing anxieties.

During my journey to Myanmar, I needed to buoy my spirits and ease my building fear as I globe-trotted around the world. I sat with my face pressed against the cool glass in my window seat. A clean blanket of snow had fallen across the Midwest the day before I flew north over the Great Lakes, Canada, and even the North Pole.

My mind wandered over the years of my life that had brought me to this point.

High above the clouds I found peace thinking of my nearness to heaven and especially to the God of Heaven. He was going before me, He was with me now, and I was in His good hands. It was going to be alright.





## CHAPTER 2

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# *Strange Preparations*

**A**s a boy, I walked and talked with God from my earliest memories. Some of my fondest reflections of childhood were the times I laid in the deep grass with my white American Husky, Prince, looking up at the clouds and singing songs of praise to my Creator. On most of those days I strained my heart and even my eyes looking up into those ever-changing clouds hoping to see His face, even though I knew I wouldn't really see Him there. I looked for God everywhere and eventually learned to see Him in everything.

Our church, which we were die-hard members of, to say the least, was constantly working to “win new converts.” My mom and dad were always meeting new people and having them over to talk about the things of God from the Bible. Our church was always reaching out to the lost and sharing the Good News.

As a part of this, when I was eight years old, an extraordinary thing happened in our lives that continues to have a profound effect on me.

Our church was “in revival,” as we used to say. New people were coming and getting baptized every week. I remember we had a large whiteboard on the platform of our church with the names of many we were trying to “pray into the church.”

One by one they were coming, and their names were being crossed off. This was a very exciting time for all of us that I'll never forget. Our little church building on Gates Street in the south end of Columbus, Ohio, was jam-packed each week and filled with energy and promise. It seemed the building would burst each week as we crammed everyone in for another boisterous Pentecostal preaching, dancing, and shouting session.

It was easy to see; we needed a bigger building. So we started a building fund. Soon our efforts took our bank account somewhere near \$100,000, as I recall. That was a lot of money back in those days, but apparently not enough to buy a piece of land and build a church building we could all fit in.

Our wonderful pastor, Paul H. Cook, inspired by a burden from God, came before the church with a faith challenge. He said we should take the money we had in the building fund and give it to people working to build churches "on the mission field."

We would trust God to provide what our church needed. It was a bold move. And we did it.

What happened next was nothing short of a miracle, and what amplified the effect even more was that a whole church witnessed it together.

Out of the blue, it seemed, a very wealthy man approached our pastor with an incredible offer.

He was a Christian who had been very successful in business but had lost most of his wealth. The man said he prayed and asked God to help him get it back. If He did, the man told God, he would give a large part of it back to God.

This man told Pastor Cook he wanted to donate a 57-acre tract of land to our church. This was prime real estate in Groveport, Ohio, a quiet suburb of Ohio's capital city of Columbus. Way at the back corner of this beautiful grass-covered piece of land, at the end of a long winding driveway, was a spacious and luxurious house. Set on the edge of an attractive wood, the incredibly spacious

ranch-style house had a huge heated indoor pool and its very own Coke machine.

Next to the house was a handy pole barn equipped with a tractor and mowing equipment to care for the property. In front of the barn was a small fish pond. Right in the middle of the property, next to where the church would be built, was—get this—a helicopter landing pad.

All this was offered to our church, no strings attached. You can imagine what this did for this already excited band of brothers and sisters. Needless to say, we never did have trouble raising money for missions after that.

If the land, the house, the barn, the pond, and the helicopter landing pad weren't enough, this wealthy man helped us build a beautiful new church right in the center of that land.

God had opened up the windows of heaven and done for us what we were trusting He would do. This would make taking steps of faith, for the rest of my life, a whole lot easier than it would be for most. That's a real gift that keeps on giving. It seems to keep bearing fruit in my life every day.

To me, this whole story of the great treasure I discovered in Myanmar is yet another one of these blessed fruits.

Well, as you can imagine, everyone got involved building our new church.

Even though I was little at the time, I remember helping my uncle Rush lay the tile on the floor going down the center of the foyer leading to the sanctuary. I brought Uncle Rush buckets of clean water as he mudded and grouted that floor. For all I know, I only helped him once for a little while; or perhaps I was there the whole time. No matter; the memory has stayed with me for a lifetime.

I grew up worshiping God in that place of miracles. And as the saying goes, "When the doors were open, we were there."

Every Sunday morning, every Sunday night, and every Wednesday night, my whole family came for church services. Every time we

came, we walked over those same tiles. Every time we did, I looked down and remembered God's provision. Doing that made it impossible for me to forget.

Those tiles are still there today in Groveport as a testimony of God's faithfulness. In fact, over the past forty years, I keep going back to see them so I don't forget. The church building has changed quite a bit over the years, but those tiles are still there.

I recently took my thirteen-year-old son, Gideon, to see them and retold him the story. I wanted to write it down so others would remember it too.

Gideon is number six of my eight children: five boys and three girls. Four of them have traveled to Myanmar with me so far, but I pray all of them will be able to be part of this story for many years to come.

My prayer is that Myanmar, and the work we do there together, will touch them like those tiles touched me. It will make the invisible hand of God impossible not to see.

Since then, I have had numerous such experiences of trusting God and have seen time and again, firsthand, that God is still in the prayer-answering business. Nothing could be truer than this: we have not because we ask not.<sup>1</sup>

This whole experience of getting the land and the church touched all of us, but it touched our pastor so deeply he left our church years later to supervise mission work in Asia. That's all I knew then. I didn't even really know what that meant exactly when I was a boy; but I knew he was far, far away in the mysterious Orient bringing the Light to the darkness. What I only learned recently, that he too traveled to Burma, keeps me looking up at the clouds and into every horizon for a glimpse of my wonderful Maker, wondering what new thing I will learn that will show me His face again.

So here we were in our new building, on the land we had been given. Our miracle millionaire man kept the miracle going beyond the gift of the land and property.

<sup>1</sup> James 4:2

Not only did he give us fifty-seven acres and help us build our church, but he also encouraged us by helping us put on a few somewhat bizarre Sunday School contests.

One that was almost as hard to forget as getting the land and the church went like this.

Our generous benefactor, who I don't remember ever attending our church, offered, through our pastor, a free horse to anyone who brought at least ten people to Sunday school.

Imagine that!

To those who didn't want a horse, he offered a free mini-vacation to his mansion in Key West, Florida. That was amazing enough for most of us. Knowing how to put on a proper contest, he offered a grand prize to make it even better. The person who managed to bring more "verifiable first-time visitors" than anyone else would not only get their choice of a horse or a trip to Florida, they'd also win something even more spectacular.

The grand prize was a ride in a jet helicopter.

No joke.

Whoever brought the most visitors would come to the church one day, and a helicopter would land on the landing pad next to it, then take off with the winner of the contest strapped inside. I know this all sounds made-up, but fortunately there are plenty of witnesses.

You'll never guess who won that helicopter ride. 😊

I wanted to win so much I brought every relative I could corner and every friend from school who dared talk to me during that time.

On the final Sunday of the contest, I even brought two entire football teams, mine and my brother's, and two squads of cheerleaders. To make sure they all came to church, my parents invited them to stay at my house the night before. I have no idea where they all slept or how we got them all to the church, but we did.

What I remember most about that night is that little people, like me, were everywhere all over my house.

I remember my bedroom was wall-to-wall boys. On the bunk beds, in the closets, and covering the floors. Kids were so thick you couldn't take a trip to the bathroom without stepping on a sleeper. Most of all I remember my friend Louis Hollis, our smallest teammate and the only African American on our football team. The next morning, after giggling in the dark all night, we woke to a sight that would make a great Facebook post today. Hollis had found himself the perfect spot in this sea of kids. I'll never forget it. He was small enough to curl up in a laundry basket in my closet. He looked like a fuzzy little black kitten covered in contentment. Today, I often remember that day when my adopted son, Valiant, curls up and falls asleep while I'm reading to my family.

I doubt you're waiting with suspense to find out who won the Sunday School contest; but just in case you are, yes, it was me.

My harrowing ride with a one-legged Vietnam War veteran pilot who flew me from Groveport around the skyline of Columbus, complete with a maneuver that included us going upside down for a second or two, was well worth the work to win.

Almost every person in our church was able to bring at least ten people during this contest. Most people didn't have anywhere to put a horse, so most of the church took the trip to Florida.

It wasn't a "Price Is Right" luxury trip; but from the perspective of a little kid, it was epic.

Piles of us got on school buses and traveled to his home in Key West for what was, for many of us, the trip of a lifetime.

The more I remember this whole event, the more unbelievable it sounds to me, and I lived it; so it's hard to imagine what you might be thinking right about now.

I'm having so much fun remembering it that I have to tell you one more thing about it.

The Key West mansion had a yacht. It wasn't gigantic, or super luxurious, from what I remember; but it was a serious boat complete with a large fishing chair on the back that you could strap yourself into to keep from getting pulled into the ocean if you hooked a big one.

Group by group, whoever wanted to go, we went shark fishing in the famed Bermuda triangle. My older brother hooked a giant fish our captain called a "king shark." It jumped out of the water and swam under the boat before it snapped his line.

I wasn't much bigger than the mackerel I caught when it was my turn to strap in out there on the choppy Atlantic. It wasn't really that big, but I remember saying if it were any bigger, it would have pulled me in.

This trip also pulled me in a little deeper to mission work as I saw the distant coastline of Cuba and thought of all the people there under communism, oppression, and spiritual darkness. I wondered if I could one day cross the sea and share with them all that God had given me.

I remember how, even when I was very young, God continued to deal with me as our family continued in our own work as "fishers of men."

My dad and mom were always meeting new people and inviting them over to talk about God and the Scriptures. I have no idea how many of these people my dad taught through a large flip chart that walked through the Bible, but lots of them ended up becoming part of our church.

This was the way of life they taught me, and watching God change the lives of strangers and turn them into friends is something I have never stopped doing. It's contagious. You should try it if you haven't.

When I was just starting high school in the early 1980s, refugees everyone called "boat people" made their way from Southeast Asia to my part of the world in the farmland just south of Columbus.

I was blessed to befriend a large group of young people from Vietnam, Cambodia, Thailand, and Laos who risked their lives for the land of opportunity.

They were kind, humble, and resilient, and they were my first friends from the other side of the world.

Several of these beautiful young people became converts, and some of them still work in serving Christian ministries more than thirty years later. I loved them then and learned a lot from them. They were mistreated by many in my country school, who called them “chinks” and pushed them around. But my family invited them to our house and took them to church and even baptized several of them.

This was my first contact with indigenous Asian people. Even then, I loved learning phrases in their tonal languages and loved how they banded together to help one another. Their hard work in school and after school made me admire them.

By the time I crossed the Pacific for the first time, those days were ancient history for me, and they seemed lost in a disconnected past from another life. They were woven into the fabric of who I was, for a work I could never have imagined.