

The Rangoon Reader - Episode 2



By Robert Heckerl

In which I describe my proclivity for verbalizing perpetual befuddlement in the most inappropriate manner and why my pants fell down in front of the Rangoon Teahouse last night.

I take it seriously. I do. I wear a mask. It's a black cloth affair which attracts great deals of cat hair thus compromising my breathing apparatus from the get-go. But it's all about appearances and the black mask, bristling as it is with cat hair, is the sign to everyone else that I don't want to get them sick nor do I wish to inhale molecules of spat betel nut or whatever else is bobbing around in this hot, moist (oh, it is most moist) tropical atmosphere.

I walked out to the road to hail a cab. This never takes much effort. The cabs are always just sitting there, waiting, their drivers draped in various states of ennui across their steering wheels, with limbs often hanging part way out into the road itself. They snap to when they see me emerge from the mold-flecked gateway of the Golden City Condominiums, not because I'm good looking or that I've even combed my hair for the day but just because Golden City residents are perceived to be flush with cash and therefore generous with the fare. I'm not flush with anything, really, unless it's a momentary case of prickly heat, but I do what I can in these times to give a decent fare. One driver, several weeks ago, even had his half-naked (lower half unfortunately) three year old son rough-housing around in the front passenger seat. Never mind the seatbelt, this was clearly a father who'd had to take his child to work that day. Times are hard.

My cab wound its way through the streets, shot through, as they are, with jungle. That's the thing with a city like Yangon. You CANNOT keep the jungle out of the city, and I'm glad they don't even try. There are no paved-over 'open spaces' between modern new buildings here. It is jungle. It's like someone took a big vat of jungle and just poured it into the city where it spreads low and wide, into every nook and cranny. I mean, it is not difficult to picture a tiger roaming

between the new KIA auto center and the KBZ Life Insurance buildings. It was probably only fifty years ago that tigers were still taking washerwomen on the banks of creeks just outside the city. In fact, even today, tragically, people bathing or washing in the infinite watery lairs of the Irrawaddy Delta just to the west vanish with a gurgle due to the protected saltwater crocs that roam the estuary, far inland from the sea. A few times a year, snakes that can cause great harm - most notably death - are wrangled out of trees and bushes and pantries and toilet reservoirs. Banded kraits, cobras, pythons in the double digits.....these creatures like water, so they like the south and don't mind the city because there's still jungle everywhere. Fortunately there are 'dry country' snakes that are not to be found down here but further up towards Mandalay - primarily the Russell's Viper and the spitting cobra. I can think of nothing more lurid than stepping out for a cup of tea and having a snake spit into your eyes, disabling you, sending you crashing to the ground and rolling around like they taught you to do in the old fire drills. Then what? I think the spitter just leaves then, satisfied it has countered your threat. That doesn't mean you're not going to lay there and die. As the spitter slinks away, that poison is slinking into your bloodstream and it's going to try to take you out, make an example out of you. But again, that snake is found up in the dry central highlands.

So I was really out looking for samosas. In normal times, there'd be heaps of them on every corner, great mounds of just-fried samosas. The times being as they are, however, I had to walk for well over an hour, peering down every little side alley for a sight of those sumptuous golden triangles. The samosa makers just aren't out right now. They probably don't want to be arrested, or simply taken to the side and beaten with rubber truncheons, for violating this sort of quasi-lockdown state we are all living in. Despite my growing hunger, I managed to keep my eyes open for photos. Downtown is where all the old Colonial action is. There are some truly imposing British colonial structures still standing. Some have been renovated and are now occupied by people selling life insurance policies. I like the ones that haven't been renovated yet. I always imagine they are haunted. Why wouldn't they be? The old colonial architecture fascinates me. Some buildings have little plaques on them with dates of 1855, 1905, 1878. So you stand there and look at these things and can imagine all the pencil-pushing of the British Empire that went on in these high-ceilinged megaliths. You can also imagine the shenanigans, of all sorts, that a bunch of Brits, far from home, would have foisted upon the imaginary banners of esprit de corps, decency, and dignity. I bet there were all sorts of sordid things happening all over the place.

Snapping myself out of such imaginings, I continued to walk.....where are these goddamn samosas? And that's another thing. I have developed the most curious habit of talking to myself out loud. This trait is a remnant of my months upon months of isolation. I hope it stops someday. It has no place in civilized society, especially the things I say. A friend sent me a meme the other day which stated '*I Whisper "What the Fuck??" to Myself at Least 20 Times a Day.*' Most of us do. However, this sentiment combined with my inability to stop giving voice to the spinning tops careening around in my skull lead me to say this out loud, and probably 60 or 70 times a day. This may be said to my cats, depending on what they've done to disturb the peace, or it may be said when peering down back-alley number nine and seeing no samosas. It may be said as a question or a statement. 'What the fuck??' 'What the fuck!!' It's a very solid

little phrase and suitable for most any occasion. I do admit, though, that I need to learn to stop actually saying it when I am out on the town. I will, however, continue to say it to the cats because I've got one who is a floor-shitter, one who likes to pull plants out of their soil and cast them about the apartment, one who hounds me incessantly to be walked on his leash, and one who I can only make contact with using a two-foot-long back scratcher.

I was about to die and it was getting dark. Google maps showed me that I was now quite near the famous Rangoon Tea House. I'd always assumed this place was a venerable institution going back to the time of Sir Stamford Raffles or something, but it turns out the place opened in 2014. Despite THAT disappointment, they were selling samosas-to-go. I also ordered a black tea, which the establishment is famous for. Honestly the best tea I have ever had. So good that I bought a big tub of the loose black stuff for three dollars so I can enjoy it at home. Of course it won't be anywhere near as good as that made right there at the RTH, and I can already see myself taking a first sip at home and then inquiring of the Universe, 'What the fuck??', but it's fun to try to recreate special things. I also bought a ceramic mug stamped with the Rangoon Tea House logo on it. It will remind me of this particular moment in time, and that's what buying little things in strange new cities is all about.



Oh yes...I almost forgot. I have lost enough weight here that the khaki shorts I had no issues with just six weeks ago, after being bedazzled by the heat and humidity of the day, simply would not stay up as darkness fell across the old city. Exiting the Rangoon Tea House, with my hands full, my shorts just suddenly lost any and all ability to stay on my body. They just gave up. Fortunately a taxi, with its driver slung across the hood of his car smoking a cheroot, was right there and took me back to the invented magnificence of the Golden City Condominiums in which I reside, for now.