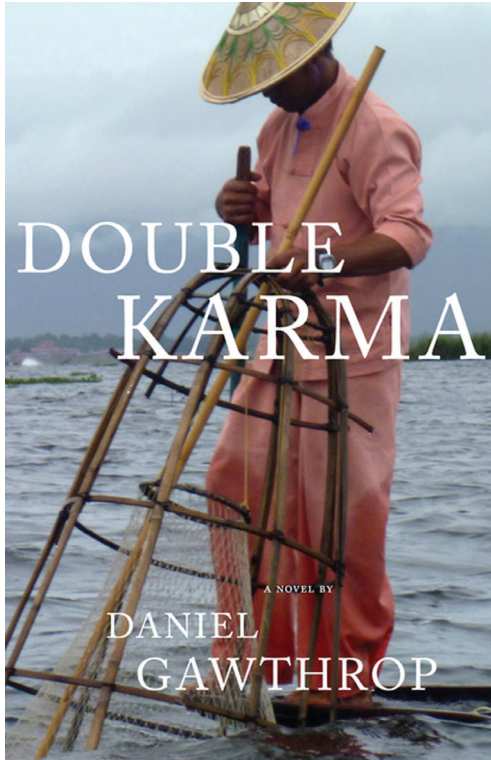


Excerpt from *Double Karma*
by Daniel Gawthrop



Published by Cormorant Books

Publication Date: April 2023

368 pages

\$24.95

1

Rangoon, Burma
March 1989

My first day in another man's identity began with a flash: the blinding glare of a ceiling light the moment I opened my eyes. I tried to speak but couldn't, and if I could, my voice would have been muffled by the bandages wrapped around my head. I tried to turn over, but my whole body throbbed with pain. My head was clouded — I felt like I'd been brought back from the dead — and I hadn't a clue what could have brought me to this state. What had happened? I recalled only the heat of flames, loud voices I didn't recognize, and being picked up and dragged away. Where was I now? Lying on a bed somewhere, in a room with a window.

Within moments of my regaining consciousness, the room filled with people. A man in a white coat asked in Burmese if I knew my name. When I could not speak it, he spoke a name I didn't recognize. Other white coats who came in called me the same name and "sir" or "captain." They asked about people I did not know, places I hadn't been, things I could not recall. I responded with a blank stare until one of them shook his head, saying, "Ah, poor Aung Win. The bump on your head has damaged your memory. Don't worry, it will all come back." For the next few hours, people came in with food, Buddhist pendants, garlands of jasmine, and giant chunks of jade, which they presented with great ceremony. These visitors were uniformed soldiers of the Tatmadaw, the national army. When I noticed that the white coats addressed each other by rank, it dawned on me: I'm in a military hospital. When I speak my

first words, they'd better not be in English.

On the morning of my second day of consciousness, a nurse told me a special visitor was on his way. Minutes later, the clapping of army boots down the corridor signalled his arrival. The door opened. A Tatmadaw private stepped in, followed by a second man wearing tinted aviator glasses and an officer's cap. I recognized him at once: Khin Nyunt, chief of Military Intelligence and Secretary-1 of the State Law and Order Restoration Council. The SLORC. Burma's military dictatorship. A brutal regime that had stomped on the pro-democracy uprising the previous summer, squashing it like a bug. The junta I had fought in the Karen State jungle, when last conscious, beside student and ethnic rebels. An army whose soldiers I had shot at and killed using Thai-funded weapons.

My mouth dried up. I lost my breath for a moment. For I knew what no one else in that room did: I was not a Burmese national but an American citizen of Burmese heritage. A Western meddler. A foreign menace. Now here I was, facing one of the regime's most dreaded figures. Since the crackdown in September, countless students and dissidents had been arrested and jailed before being tortured, executed, or disappeared under Khin Nyunt's ruthless, beady-eyed watch. But the private, who didn't have a clue what I was hiding, proudly introduced me to this monster as Captain Aung Win, a national hero. That's when I remembered my own name and understood what was happening: I am Min Lin. They think I'm Aung Win. The other guy.

The private nudged me, reminding me to salute the First Secretary. It took some effort to respond. I painfully and slowly lifted my right arm — still attached to an IV drip — in Khin Nyunt's direction. The senior SLORC officer answered my salute with his own before scolding the private: surely, I needed more time to recover,

he said, before my instincts could be a hundred per cent. Then he gestured to the door, inviting in a group of reporters and photographers I didn't recognize. All were state journalists, some appointed after the coup. Flooding into the room, they surrounded my bed. Khin Nyunt stood next to me and placed an arm around my pillow. Then, he turned to the journalists. The flashbulbs started popping as he began to speak.

“Captain Aung Win's bravery on the field of battle,” he said, pointing at me, “has been well-established from the moment he joined the Tatmadaw as a young cadet.” He went on to describe me as a true patriot and proud Bamar soldier who, in the most recent battle at Maw Pokay, had done the dangerous reconnaissance work necessary for my battalion to overtake the enemy's headquarters and capture a key strategic base of the KNLA. I had risked my own life to save the lives of fellow soldiers, said Khin Nyunt. For this I had suffered a serious head injury.

Khin Nyunt turned to the private, who handed him what looked like a cigar box. The SLORC officer opened it and pulled out a circular bronze medal, its centre bearing an engraving of the Burmese *chintse*, the lion symbol, inside a star. The medal was attached to a large red ribbon with a green stripe in the centre.

Khin Nyunt continued addressing the journalists. The government had asked enough of Aung Win on the battlefield, he said, so today I was being presented with the nation's highest honour for gallantry, the Thiha Thura Medal. As of this moment, I was also being retired from active duty. Khin Nyunt then reached for my hand and shook it, congratulating me as more flashbulbs popped off.

I thanked him, stammering in Burmese that I did not expect such an honour. He did a double take at the sound of my voice. For an instant — not long enough for anyone else in the room to notice

— his eyes narrowed as if sizing me up. Then, with the fake smile returning to his face, he carefully draped the medal around my neck, took my right hand and shook it. More flashbulbs went off. A staff reporter for *The Working People's Daily*, addressing the senior SLORC officer as if I weren't in the room, asked what I would be doing once released from the hospital. Khin Nyunt squeezed my shoulder as he replied. Aung Win would not have to worry about his future, he assured the reporter, looking at me again, a special assignment had been arranged for me to serve my country in a non-combat role.

An older reporter interjected, noting that Aung Win was only promoted to captain a few months ago, a rare distinction for a soldier so young. Surely, I should be returning to the field as soon as I recover, no? Khin Nyunt paused a moment to glare at the reporter. "For a man of Aung Win's talents," he said, "there are many ways to serve the Union beyond the battlefield, and he has earned the right to explore them." Then, citing my need for rest, he ended the press conference and wished me a speedy recovery. I would receive my instructions soon enough, he said, pausing a moment before looking me in the eye and telling me not to worry — everything would be fine. I would be fine. Then he left.

I hadn't been asked to speak and, apart from that polite thank you for the medal, hadn't said a word. Now I'd been left alone with my thoughts. My first thought was that I must be going insane. How could my doppelgänger have appeared on a battlefield in Burma, from completely out of nowhere? I didn't have a twin brother. Why did we look so alike? And how could our brief encounter have happened without a single witness before my look-alike vanished?

There hadn't been enough time to find out, and all those soldiers who'd spent most of their waking hours with this Aung Win — men who knew his every detail — had mistaken me for their beloved comrade. This mistake had also made it past the country's senior intelligence officer who, inexplicably, had shown up to preside over Aung Win's medal presentation. Why not the soldier's battalion leader or some other lower-ranking Tatmadaw officer? The orderly visiting my room shrugged at my surprise. "Secretary Number One must crave the publicity," he said.

Later, an Army private visiting from his Rangoon barracks told me that the rescue operation to take Aung Win out of Maw Pokay had taken twenty minutes. From the moment I was mistaken for him, I assumed, the urgency to save the captain's life must have precluded a proper search for ID. After finding me unconscious, two soldiers put me on a stretcher and prepared my evacuation while the rest of the battalion chased the rebels into the jungle. I was then airlifted by helicopter to the Tatmadaw base at Hpa-an before being transferred by plane to Rangoon. It seems I had fooled everyone without the inconvenience of being awake. But, even with the real soldier now unable to speak for himself, how long would it take for the error to be exposed?

The next day, an excited nurse came in carrying a fresh copy of *The Working People's Daily*. Handing it to me with a big smile, she pointed at my image on the front page. The lead story carried a large photo of a heavily bandaged Aung Win — me — sitting up in my hospital bed, Khin Nyunt shaking my hand after giving me Aung Win's Thiha Thura Medal. The accompanying article, "Maw Pokay hero awarded for gallantry," appeared from my reading of Burmese to include the verbatim text of Khin Nyunt's speech, along with the part about giving the young captain a non-combat role in a yet-to-be-determined office. Scanning the rest

of page one, I spotted a headline in English just below the fold: “US photographer missing, feared dead in Burma.” An Associated Press wire story from yesterday, it had been photocopied from an English newspaper and reproduced for the state journal, complete with grainy photo of the blown-up KNLA headquarters at Maw Pokay:

BANGKOK, March 28 — A US photographer has been reported missing and is feared dead in Burma’s Karen State after being caught in a fierce battle between Burmese Army forces and the Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA), sources close to the situation say.

Min Lin, 27, landed in Burma last year. A Hollywood-based lensman known more for his work in entertainment and fashion than in conflict zones, Lin was said to have been covering the student pro-democracy movement for a long-term project when he joined insurgents in the Karen State jungle following the military coup on September 18.

When reached by Associated Press, a spokesman for the All Burma Students’ Democratic Front (ABSDF) confirmed that Lin had been at the scene of an intense battle between government soldiers and KNLA rebels that concluded yesterday with the rebels’ defeat. Anti-government forces fighting the military junta include members of the ABSDF, a student guerrilla organization.

“Min Lin was with us in a part of Karen State formerly held by rebel forces,” said an ABSDF representative, speaking on condition of anonymity. “The Army overwhelmed us, and Min

did not make it out of the area. The Tatmadaw [Army] did not take many prisoners, so we fear he is dead.”

The nurse, still going on about the other story, gushed about me being a hero.

The fact that *The Working People's Daily* had run a photo of the wrecked rebel HQ, instead of a headshot of me, to accompany the AP story about my death was a relief: photos of the same man in both stories would have meant serious trouble. As it happened, there wasn't a single image of me circulating on the newswires back then. I was like most photojournalists, preferring to remain behind the lens. The truth was further concealed by the fact I wasn't fully recognizable from the photo in the other story, which showed a highly sedated hospital patient with his head wrapped in bandages. But surely the SLORC would come across my passport and put two-and-two together, wouldn't they? Perhaps not. I had been using a fake passport with a different name for all but my first week in Burma, the previous year, and had destroyed both passports before going to Maw Pokay. Besides which, a foreign news report of Min Lin's likely death had rendered me a person no longer of interest to the Burmese state. Thanks to those convenient facts, my identity as Aung Win was not in doubt — at least, not among the higher-ups in the SLORC. The Tatmadaw rank and file were another matter.

Over the next week, as I regained my strength, more soldier comrades of Aung Win dropped by the hospital to pay their respects. Most were not satisfied that a simple bump on the head could have produced the degree of amnesia from which I claimed to be suffering, nor explain the accent that was suddenly so different from Aung Win's. All were disappointed that I could not remember them. One who claimed to be Aung Win's best friend was

especially troubled by my obtuseness. For ten minutes he interrogated me about where I had been at certain times, the names of my unit mates, and details about my hometown. I shrugged helplessly.

He frowned, saying I was not Aung Win, before spitting on the floor and walking out.

Later, I learned that this aggrieved soldier filed a complaint with his superior officer and demanded an investigation into Aung Win's disappearance. Instead of taking the complaint seriously, his Tatmadaw commander transferred him to a new job in Mon State, from which he would never be heard again. Perhaps the military brass thought that Aung Win's best friend was nuts. More likely, his search for the truth was seen as unhelpful to the SLORC's promotion of patriotic narratives, which call for popular captains to lead their units with uncommon valor as they conquer a final stronghold of rebel forces while under heavy fire. Due to such compulsory storylines and a few serendipitous factors — the Tatmadaw's failure to identify the actual Aung Win's remains at the scene, the rushed medevac of me, his look-alike, and the fact no family members had spoken up on the dead man's behalf — it became conventional wisdom that I, the person carried off the battlefield in Maw Pokay on March 27, 1989, was, in fact, Aung Win.