

I AM A LUCKY GIRL

Vanessa and I were walking through the Scott Market in Yangon on a hot summer morning, where the temperature was climbing to an estimated 40o Celsius. It had taken us a while to get there. For several days we had promised ourselves a visit to the renowned shopping haven, but had usually opted for the hotel pool or an afternoon rest. But at last we had made it.

While the market was clearly changing, with the appearance of some new air conditioned restaurants and a few contemporary stores, there were still plenty of traditional stalls jammed together in clusters separated by fascinating narrow, darkened alley-ways, down which one could easily become lost behind the hanging clothes, the cluttered displays and the multitude of wares of every description stacked high in baskets or bundles on either side.

We weren't intending to buy much – maybe some souvenirs for folks at home but little else. That, however, was not what the smiling shopkeepers thought. To them we were potential sources of income – two Westerners with cameras and mobile phones, with rings on their fingers and, no doubt, bulging wallets in their pocket. That we had not come to shop could not be possible. But it was a very hot day, a spirit of lethargy hung like warm mist in the humid air and few of the merchants made much effort to earn a sale.

Except for one. A girl about twelve years old, in a long dress with a scarf over her head and a shoulder bag at her side, spotted us and immediately offered us a packet of post cards which she deftly unfolded with one hand, waving them before us in a long strip so we could see them clearly.

She was eager for a sale but her pretty dusky face looked dispirited and discouraged. It had obviously been a tough morning. 'Two thousand?' she pleaded, with a rising inflection in her voice. 'Two thousand?' she asked again, holding the cards high.

I tried to wave her away. 'I'm sorry,' I said kindly. 'We don't want any postcards.'

'Two thousand?' she repeated plaintively, showing us the cards again as if we had never seen them before. 'Two thousand?'

I shook my head and tried to walk on. She ducked around in front of us. 'One thousand?' she asked hopefully. 'One thousand?'

Vanessa and I turned into a side alley. She followed us. When we stopped to look at something, she produced the cards again. 'One thousand?'

I turned away and gently eased her aside.

But she would not give up. She followed us down the crowded alley and up the next. She went around corners with us and stopped where we stopped. And constantly her small, girlish voice asked plaintively, 'One thousand?'

I explained firmly, ‘Look, we don’t want any post cards. I’m sorry, but we really don’t need them.’

She turned away crestfallen and walked slowly back, her shoulders sagging. She kicked at something on the ground and wandered on. There were few tourists in the place and the possibilities of further sales were slim.

We picked our way up and down a couple more alleys. It was a small adventure – like stepping back in time to an ancient world where trading was a personal affair, a lingering interaction to be savoured and experienced, not transacted in haste. The small, dark booths on either side of us were crammed with wares, sometimes piled up in short leaning towers, sometimes spread out, sometimes carefully displayed, sometimes just stacked in jumbled heaps of miscellaneous goods and sometimes hidden in gloomy inner recesses, almost out of sight.

We stopped to look up at some Burmese garments hanging from a rail above a stall. We stooped down to admire some nice handicrafts, spread out on a sheet of cloth almost beneath our feet, obviously the result of hours of painstaking work. We brushed against other customers as they cruised knowingly up and down the alleys, spotting genuine bargains and ignoring eye-catching but valueless junk.

Eventually, hot and tired, we headed for the exit. The young lady was waiting for us. ‘One thousand?’ she asked, thrusting the cards in front of me. I told her yet again that I did not want the cards and turned aside.

But as we walked off, I said to Vanessa, ‘I guess we could have bought those cards. It wouldn’t hurt us. It’s only a dollar. And she has worked pretty hard to get it.’

So I turned back and held out a 1000 kyat note. ‘You are very persistent,’ I said. ‘You deserve it.’

‘I am a lucky girl,’ she replied and broke into a flashing smile of triumph. Her teeth needed dental care but I suppose her family couldn’t afford it. I took the cards but as I walked away I thought, ‘I don’t even need these.’ So I called out to her, held them out and said, ‘Here, sell these to someone else.’

She grabbed them with glee and ran off with a laugh, her shoulder bag bouncing at her side. She had made a 100% profit on the deal and she was pretty happy.

Vanessa and I watched her delight with pleasure. She reminded us of the widow in the Bible whose persistence Jesus commended. But later I realized how little we had actually done. I could at least have paid her the original asking price. The girl was lucky but had I been more generous, she could have been luckier still.

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