



A Train

**Without a Driver
is not a Train**



DOH HLAY





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A Train Without is Driver is not a Train

‘U Set Gaung, I want about 480 grams of the rice noodles. Medium sized.’

All the regular customers who know him and the other vendors who sell near him do not call him by his real name. Instead, they say ‘U Set Gaung’, the head of the machine, the train driver.

When he hears them call him this, he smiles and cries out:

‘Large, medium and small rice noodles are all available here. Thin noodles? Flat noodles? Regular noodles? Name what you want and you will get it.’

Behind his voice, the clunking of a passing train can just be heard. Oh, he hasn’t been back on train for more than six months now. At this very moment he should be in his uniform, sitting at the head of a brand-new locomotive. Wouldn’t there be passengers too? Some would be returning home after months away for work. Another passenger might be going away from home for the first time to start a new job. There would always be someone trying to get away from someone else. Or someone travelling to meet the one they love. No matter who or for what reason, it used to be his responsibility to ensure everyone reached where they wanted to be.

But then, on February 1st, all those lives broke into different directions. Ticket vendor Ko Min Lwin now sells swords in Sagaing,

Conductor San Oo has opened a betel-nut stall. Carriage attendant Ko Hla guards a factory at night.

Those twin brothers who lived on the platform might live there still if they haven’t been forced away. But no train comes to them now.

So, what about the head of the machine who now sells noodles?

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‘Until our elected, civilian government is reinstated, I will not drive a train again.’

From birth to school to university and finally to marriage, the children of the railway live their lives in housing provided by the State to their parents who operate the stations and drive the trains and fix the tracks. Once they are old enough, they too then leave their children every morning or night to start their shift at the same station which is just across the tracks. A commune has formed. Close-knit and bonded by working with each other, watching out for each other.

Or at least they did until U Set Gaung left his train - the commune following him to the front of the station - and announced that no more trains would run.

With no more trains, there was no need for U Set Gaung or Ko Min Lwin or San Oo or Ko Hla or anyone else. The housing compounds were forcibly cleared. The commune dismantled. The railway family splintered as each searched for somewhere else to sleep.

For U Set Gaung, he took to his eldest daughter’s house. Rather than following in her father’s footsteps, he now

followed hers.

In the morning, he's the one who gets up the earliest heading for the market with a woven basket prepared by his daughter the night before. If there are pre-orders for his daughter's noodles, he can make a quick delivery on the way back. When he returns, his grandson will ask him why he doesn't show him how to drive a train if he is a train driver. U Set Gaung's heart sinks. His grandson had never even ridden on a train he had commanded. He and his wife had planned for all their grandchildren to ride the rails with him during the coming holiday season now they were old enough to remember doing so. His wife wanted to go to Bagan; his younger daughter wanted Myitkyina in the north; his younger son Pyin Oo Lwin, and ... well, his elder daughter didn't care where he went so long as he took his grandson with him.

'When are you going to drive the train again, Grandpa?'

Not long, grandson. See, there is my uniform. I'll put it on soon and then we can go on a trip. Where would you like to go, my grandson?'

The boy scratches his head and thinks and then revealed his wish.

'I told Pho Ther next door that my grandpa drives the train. I don't care where we go as long as my grandpa drives the train.'

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On that first day, when state employees across the country went on strike, U Set Gaung originally stopped the train he drove from Myitkyina before it reached its destination. But after some reflection, he realized that the train is not just owned by the State but also by the people, and the people had the right to complete their journey once started. And so he carried on until Mandalay before performing one final check over the machine. Only then did he leave. There is a mutual understanding between all heads of machines: the train drivers, ship captains, and plane pilots. Each machine is like a relative and to abandon it is akin to leaving behind a loved one.

Each day that passed he thought of his locomotive and he never felt good. "Dad, here is your wages for this month."

His daughter came into the room and slid some folded notes into the front-pocket of his shirt. His daughter is very careful. She knows that her father donates some small money to his junior colleagues. At the beginning of the civil disobedient movement, they did receive support from the public, small gifts and gestures here and there, but when the economy crashed there was nothing left for anyone to give and the donations dried up. Although U Set Gaung can survive because of his daughter, his colleagues younger than him, those without children to lean on, have become desperate. So, she always make's sure her father has something to pass on to them at the end of every month.

This month though, San Oo's wife is giving birth, so he will need to send some more money to him.

"Daughter, can you give me some extra this month as I want to give some to San Oo?" His daughter never argues.

"Can I give it to you another day, dad? I need some for the shop. It will only be 3 or 4 days."

She always keeps her promise. U Set Gaung knows. Plus, San Oo's wife is not due for a while yet so a few extra days won't matter. Until this revolution is over, this is how we all will survive. Trusting each other.

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'Grandpa Set Gaung.'

As soon as his grandson wakes up, he shouts for his grandpa. While U Set Gaung is preparing for tomorrow morning's noodle orders, his grandson appears next to him and says,

'Where are your uniforms, grandpa?'

In a slight daze, the child searches for the hat on his grandfather's head. Then, he looks at the hat stand and continues to murmur,

'Grandpa Set Gaung is not wearing his hat.'

The grandson seems to be still half asleep after his daytime nap. 'Why is that, my grandson?'

Only then, his grandson starts to laugh and admits that he was still dreaming. 'What did you dream?'

His grandson squinted and tried to remember what he was dreaming about. 'Grandpa Set Gaung was driving his train and wearing his uniform, but....' His grandson was on the edge of crying,

'... We were not there. It was just you.'

His grandson was sad because Grandpa Set Gaung did not take him with him on the dream-train. U Set Gaung is not surprised. Every night in his dreams he is driving his train, why shouldn't the child do the same.

'Really, my grandson? Only, in my dream, you are with me.' The child's eyes clear as he hears those words.

'Oh really, grandpa? What was I doing? Where were we going?' U Set Gaung places his palm on his grandson's head and says,

'You were pestering your grandma to buy you every type of food you saw on the way. Your grandma was buying you all that food with the money she had hid from me.'

His clever grandson listens and asks,

'Ok. But you were driving the train. How did you see us eating food if you were driving the train?'

U Set Gaung could not help but laugh at the question.

'Hey you, it was a dream so of course I can see. What you wanted were ice lollipops, palm roots, plums and so many other things. I even took a bite out of one of your plums to see what it tasted like.'

While listening, the grandson licks his lips, 'Did it taste good, grandpa?'

U Set Gaung has important orders to finish for tomorrow and this child is full of questions.

Dreams can begin with the last thinking you were thinking about but often never end in the way you want. Sometimes, U Set Gaung could be driving his train, but there are no passengers behind him. Other times, the tracks just end in the middle of nowhere for no reason. One time he drove the train across water. There are many endings, but they all eventually finish the same; with his wife waking him up at 4 o'clock in the morning.

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At that time in the morning most people are still dreaming but for food vendors like U Set Gaung, it is just the beginning of their day. U Set Gaung was not unfamiliar with working at this hour. When he was still head of the machine, four was the time when the Mandalay bound train arrived from Yangon. Then, the station would be crammed with vendors, trishaw drivers and taxi-men all arguing over the passengers disembarking from the train. For a train driver like him, like he used to be, that morning would be the end of a journey and the time to return to his

family. Now it's the start of his day and he has a different journey to make. He is making the first of his deliveries, the rear of his motorcycle weighed down with saddle bags full of his daughter's rice noodles. There are not many people on the streets at this hour and the rain is making it hard for him too see what is ahead of him. His head feels hot.

His motorbike slides down the road.

He opens his eyes, but he can't see anything.

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He is at the head of his machine. He is wearing his uniform. In one hand he is grasping money. He is on the way to San Oo's house. His wife is on the train with him. And his grandson. And Carriage attendant Ko Hla. And the baskets of noodles he delivers daily is on the floor next to

him. Although the train is moving, he does not hear any noise from his wheels. He looks down and he just sees clouds.

How curious!

His train is flying.

Yuya 5.10.2021

This story was inspired by the life and death of Win Ko Oo, a train driver and one of the first Civil Disobedience Movement protest leaders in Mandalay, whose unsolved murder is widely held to have been committed by agents of the illegal regime in response to his high-profile and courageous denouncement of the military coup and the men who orchestrated it.

