

2,337 Paces Barry Murphy

I stopped after my 2337th pace of the day and felt it again. That knowledge that if I had spent those paces going towards the boarder, I would be free now. This is what pains me every day. Knowing that I am only 2337 paces to freedom, to survival, that pains me. The boarder separates Myanmar, with Laos. I know because I have been there before, about 5 or 6 times now. They sent me with some other prisoners to carry sacks of Yaba to men with motorbikes there when the national military launched raids on the roads and river ways. I know where to go and I can't take the torture anymore. So I've decided it has to end one way or another. Tomorrow night I'm going to run

The boarder has no walls, no barbed wire, no checkpoints with soldiers. If you cross the line, all you have to do is head due south for a few days. Then, once you're past the reach of the Shan State Liberation Forces (SSLF) and the traffickers they pay to capture and return escapees, then you're free. The problem isn't the boarder itself. It's what's before the boarder that terrifies us into staying. A mile long minefield.

My name is Ky San Cho, and I'm a prisoner in an internment camp called Wan Ngai run by the SSLF. I have been here for 18, 19, 20 months, I can't remember anymore. When every day is the same and the heat, and the exhaustion flow over you, it's difficult to keep track of things. This camp has one purpose and one purpose only. To produce Yaba, a drug that combines methamphetamine and caffeine. The SSLF makes us produce this to sell abroad and the money goes to finance their war of independence, or so the guards and looped messages from the speakers

tell us. It's all bullshit. Everyone knows but is afraid to speak about it. The money goes to Ba Lan Huat, known as 'The Puma'. He is a gangster in a general's uniform. I hope someday to come back and find him. I will kill him for all he's done to my family and the other innocent civilians in Shan state. First though, I need to survive and the only way to do that is to escape.

If you look on the map, Myanmar is a country. But it's not, it a series of independent militaries trying to break free as independent nations. Several ethnic and religious groups make up the different territories. The national military use unrest as an excuse to impose themselves undemocratically as the government and to persecute dissidents. The conflict has been waging for the past 60 years with several factions being previously being supported by communist China and the USSR on one side and the west on the other. These days, with no one fearing the expansion of communism or capitalism, the militaries have been taken over by gangsters who use the drug production to finance their regimes. Politics is a smokescreen for making money.

This is how I came to be here. A week after my 16th birthday, I was woken up in the night by a squad of soldiers who dragged me and my family out into the black. I remember my father screaming and begging on his knees things I couldn't hear. He was pleading for his life, his family, probably saying whatever he could to mitigate the violence he knew was coming. He failed. I seen them cut him with a machete. I'd only seen a machete used once before at the market, but that had been done with a dead pig. The butcher downed his cleaver onto a leg of ham. There was no blood. The ham was dead and indifferent. My father didn't have that luxury. We were denounced as traitors and collaborators, which is what they say every time they raid a village to kidnap people.

I was separated from my mother and little brother. I pray every night that they have survived and are waiting for me south of the border. It's the only thought that keeps me going.

Camp life is hell. Hell is something I only learned from that Spanish priest. He came to the village talking about Jesus and life after death and how people, when they die, do not actually die, but start living forever in other worlds. It's different to the Buddhist teachings we knew. No reincarnation in their beliefs. He said if people are good they go to paradise and get everything they want. If they're bad, however, they go to a place of fire and misery. I didn't believe him, no one did. But now, I pray it's true. I pray that these animals who have killed my father and friends go there. This camp has almost made me a Christian.

Conditions here are worse than the slums in Wan Hai village. The floors of our bamboo and clay brick hovels are dirt. We sleep on some straw, but it's always wet from sweat and condensation. The guards sometimes piss on the floors. Sometimes, in the night when they're drunk or high on Yaba, they come in and piss on us, and call us names and threaten to do things to us. All we can do is pretend to be asleep.

The room is always full of mice and rats. Sometimes giant red centipedes from the jungle make it in. One of them stung an old woman named Gewa last year. We woke up to her screaming and rolling around. We tried to calm her down but the shock was too much for her. She started shaking. That's when the guards came in and took her. They told her they were sending her away to a medic. We never saw her again. Not long after, when I was clearing shrubs to plant peas, I found

a burn site with bones and teeth protruding. I screamed and screamed. A guard dragged me back to another field. He told me it was just a monkey they shot. Monkeys don't have amalgam fillings.

They wake us every morning before dawn. Everyone is herded with shouts and insults to their designated duties. Some men bring in the barrels and sacks containing the components for the Yaba. Others work in the sheds mixing the ingredients in giant vats. The heat is sweltering and all they have to protect themselves from the fumes is dust masks and handkerchiefs. It doesn't work as the chemicals get into their skins and drive them crazy. Once man after having been awake for almost 2 weeks plunged his head into the boiler. All the skin of his face peeled off. He didn't scream, only babbled in confusion and ran around blind, like a beheaded chicken. A guard brought him away to see the medic.

I work on the fields, growing and harvesting peas, rice, and potatoes. Some days when production quotas are behind, they put me on the pill presses stamping out Yaba pills from the finished powder. I hate this job worst of all. Not only is it sole destroying in its monotony but it makes my arms cramp after a few hours. The weight of the cast iron lever is too much for me. The weight of knowing that I'm making poison which will kill people is heavier.

In Wan Ngai, I'm scared and conflicted every day. In one way, survival and freedom is so close to me, but in another, it seems as far away as the moon. 2337 paces to the boarder is all I need to be free. Over there, people are normal. They don't do what people here do. If I can get there, I know I'll be like them. I can be a businesswoman who earns lots of money. I will get married, have children, and be happy. I might will save money and travel to Paris and New York.

Most importantly, I will find my mother and little brother. Wherever they are I will find them and we will be together again. It's only 2337 paces away. I think I can do it in 15 minutes. Well, maybe 20. At worst, half an hour. Whatever it takes, I can do it. I should have done it a long time before but I was scared of the minefield. I was scared of being caught. I was afraid of what they would do to me. They make examples of people who try to escape. They burn them, slowly, while they're still alive. I seen a man, a month ago being tied across the barrel of a cement mixer that they lit a campfire under. He screamed all night. I couldn't sleep until he stopped. I hoped they cut him free. But they didn't. I seen him next morning, what was left of him. His belly crackled up like pork and his innards hung down the side. They never buried him, just left him for the mice and maggots to devour.

I know that if I'm going to run, I need a diversion. I've buried a flask of lithium powder beside the clearing which we use for a toilet. I overheard the guards warning a man working in the mixing lab to never put more than two ladles of it in a time. He said it will explode. I've seen it happen once before as well. Half the galvanised roof of the lab was blown away. All I need to get through one more night. I have to try to sleep. Just one more night in the piss soaked, overcrowded sauna room of a bunkhouse. Tomorrow evening, I live or die

The sun is setting and my chance is now. The last shift has just left the lab while the meth is cooling. I perform the customary hand up, and bow to attention.

“I need to use the toilet comrade commander” I say clearly, with no eye-contact.

“Proceed”, the routine reply I was hoping for.

Now I'm scared. I hope I'm stopped or questioned by anyone else. I can hear the rush of blood behind my ears. I get to toilet clearing. Just to be sure I don't raise suspicion, I squat and wait over the buried canister of lithium. Now, I start digging. It's deeper down than I remember, but I find it and pocket it quickly. Moving on the lab, I cloak my face and pour.

2 minutes is all it took to explode. I started running, counting paces. I'm at 2,000 now and going fast, but it feels like slow motion. Bullets fire behind me, but I'm so close. I'm almost free. The momentum is driving me now. Everything a blur. It almost feels like there's a spring in my step.