









off." She revealed that in her isolation she had difficulty breathing and would lie awake listening to the thump-thump of her heart, wondering if it would fail. There were times when she did not get enough to eat and her weight fell to 90 pounds.

"Weren't you terrified?" I asked.

"When I was small," she said, "it was in this house that I conquered my fear of the dark. I just wandered around in the darkness and by the end, I knew all the demons weren't there." During the first years of her house arrest soldiers were ordered to lie with their ears to the ground so as to detect her 'tunnelling' to the house next door. They failed to grasp that she had no intention of escaping, or seeking exile. Outside, her name became a byword; and people would pass her house just to be reassured by the sound of her playing her piano. When it stopped there were rumours that she was dead. "That was when the string broke," she said. "I was pumping too hard. I have a hot temper, so I took it out on the piano!" "Will Burma be free in the foreseeable future?" "Yes!" she replied unhesitatingly.

"That's not just a dream?" "No, I calculate it from the will of the people and the current of world opinion . . . I knew I'd be free . . . some day." The next day I joined the crowd outside her gate waiting for her to speak. The people were different from any I had seen; they were smiling, talking freely with each other, as if waiting for a gig to start. There were betel nut sellers and cheroot sellers and a man with a block of ice ingeniously balanced in a red sock, selling cups of cold water. With the grace and courtesy that is never deferential and is so much part of the Burmese character, people made way for the foreign Gulliver, offering a cushion for me to sit on.

When Aung San Suu Kyi appeared she was flanked by two other figures of principle and courage: General Tin Oo and U Kyi Maung, a former colonel, the vice-chairmen of the NLD, both of whom have spent years in prison. The clapping and whooping lasted minutes. She now looked grey and drawn. Yet she had people in stitches as she carefully mocked the dictatorship, using irony and parable (so I was told; she spoke only in Burmese). As they laughed I counted the spooks in sunglasses, filming, photographing, watching. Their arbitrary power was like a presence. Recently a young man tried to ease the crush by moving the barrier and was bundled away and given a two-year sentence.

At the end of her speech people asked questions. She leaned over the spikes in the fence and listened intently, replying expressively. An old monk pushed through and asked her if she would join him in prayer; and she did. Most did not linger. A man told me he never went straight home after a meeting. "If they follow you," he said, "things start to happen. The power goes off; the kids are sent home crying from school." When I asked him if 1988 could happen again, this time successfully, he said: "Imagine a zebra crossing. The traffic never seems to stop for the pedestrians. One or two dart across. The majority wait impatiently at the kerb, then they surge across, until the traffic has lost all its power. Well, we are all back at the kerb now, waiting impatiently." At that, he looked over my shoulder and walked quickly away.

Desmond Tutu - like Aung San Suu Kyi, a Nobel Peace Prize winner - said recently, "International pressure can change the situation in Burma. Tough sanctions, not constructive engagement, finally brought about a new South Africa. This is the only language that tyrants understand." What is hopeful is that there is the promise of sanctions in a remarkable disinvestment campaign already well underway in America. Based on the boycott of apartheid South Africa, selective purchasing laws have been enacted by a growing number of US cities, including San Francisco. These make illegal municipal contracts with companies that trade with or invest in Burma. Last week New York State was considering similar legislation; and one of the biggest investors in Burma, Pepsi Cola, with its headquarters in upstate New York, has withdrawn.

A Massachusetts Representative, Byron Rushing, who has written a selective purchasing law for his own state, told me: "In the case of South Africa, we were able to put pressure on a whole range of companies, like General Motors, Coca-Cola, Pepsi Cola, and most eventually withdrew. And that really added to the pressure on the white government. That was a victory. As for Burma, it's not going to happen overnight, but we have started. The civilised world should follow."

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