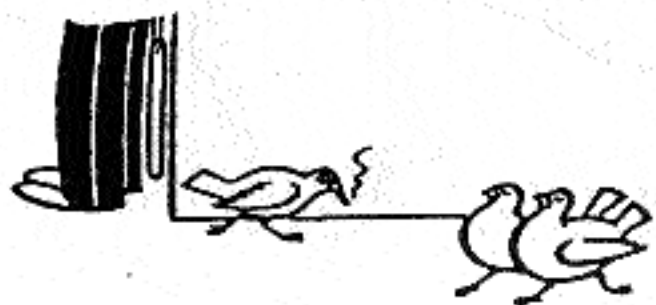


## UNSOLVED MYSTERIES SOME PIGEON!



Up until the time Mingala West, a Burmese restaurant at 325 Amsterdam Avenue, near Seventy-fifth Street, closed, a year and a half ago, a pigeon would walk up to the place almost every evening, right before sunset. It came to the door, sometimes gently tapping its beak on the glass, sometimes waiting patiently on the sidewalk. In most respects, the pigeon was unremarkable. But, because it so often lingered outside, the staff at the restaurant, most of them exiles from Burma, began letting it in. Without hesitating, the pigeon would head for a stairwell at the back and descend, one stair at a time, until it reached a landing, where it would rest its head against the wall and close its eyes. Its expression was so pained that patrons passing on the way to the rest rooms often thought that it was dying. Sometimes they said something. "No, it's O.K.," the waiters would respond; they were used to it. In the morning, the pigeon waited by the door, ready to go back outside.

The Burmese, of course, are predominantly Buddhists, and Buddhists believe in reincarnation. To the Mingala West staff, a pigeon that asked, in its own way, to spend the night in the restaurant was without a doubt the reincarnation of someone who had some connection to the premises. Hence they had no choice but to let it in. "It's like a sign," Kyaw Tha Hla, one of the restaurant's owners, said a while back. "It acts almost human. It's another living being. What can you do? You just let it go to sleep."

New York storefronts, as it happens, are constantly undergoing reincarnations of their own. And it was Kyaw Tha Hla who recalled that 325 Amsterdam Avenue, in a previous life, had housed a sushi restaurant called Nishi. The place was opened in the early eighties by a Japanese man and his American partner, who occasionally arranged meetings there for psychics. Nishi offered fusion food, mixing Japanese and Western influences—such as the Hot Fuji, which

was essentially a hot-fudge sundae. For a time, the restaurant prospered. But in 1989 the American died, and the business began to falter. The surviving partner closed Nishi in 1990. Enter the Burmese.

Mingala West opened on January 27, 1991, a date deemed auspicious by a Burmese astrologer. In order to be ready in time for the opening, the new owners rushed renovations and neglected to hold a *pay-ate*, a traditional Buddhist ceremony, in which a monk performs a blessing to cast out lingering spirits. According to Kyaw Tha Hla, that may have left open a door through which the karmic force of life—including, perhaps, the spirit of the deceased Nishi owner, in the body of a pigeon—could pass. If so, he was fortunate to have found Buddhists at the door. "I'm glad it was us who took over, because maybe another person would just shoo him away," Kyaw Tha Hla said.

Mingala West never made much money; its owners kept it going for nine years largely to provide a meeting place for Burmese dissidents and exiles in New York. But when the lease ran out, in 1999, and the landlord doubled the rent, Mingala West quietly closed. The space remained vacant for eighteen months. Mingala West regulars and Kyaw Tha Hla himself occasionally passed the bare storefront and wondered about the pigeon, but no one ever saw it.

Now a new tenant has moved into 325 Amsterdam Avenue: Gotham Gardens, a flower shop run by two men, Kevin Esteban and Dan Dahl. Like the previous tenants, they like animals and believe in the spirit world. Esteban's terrier, Maggie, accompanies him to work each day. When they moved in, Dahl found some old oil paintings the Burmese had left behind under the stairwell, and decided not to throw them out, because, he said, "it would be really bad karma."

On the flower shop's opening day, in late December, something unusual happened. "I had the door open, and a pigeon was walking around out front and wanted to come in," Esteban recalled recently. The pigeon loitered there for a while. But, deterred by Maggie's presence, it wouldn't cross the threshold. It hasn't been seen since.

—Sheridan Prasso