

Forever and Ever and Ever

### **Forever and Ever and Ever**

In the West the cliché, *love at first sight* is often held up to ridicule. In that part of the world where strangers will marry and raise a family, they also chuckle at the idea of a parental arraigned marriage. As I live in this and at times amazing hemisphere thoughts of a childhood in a land so far away cross my mind.

Do you believe in love at first sight? For those that are preparing to giggle at someone my age questioning the validity of this belief, I will express that I do. And, I have proof.

Let this tale be written from the mind and of a child that has since earned a Masters.

I was a Bru, the mountain people of Western Vietnam. A people called *Moi* by the Vietnamese, a word in their language-meaning savage. The French christened us *Montagnards* or the mountain people. Our newest ally at the time of my childhood, the Green Hats from America we named *Warrior Monks from the West*. They called us *friends*.

At the age of ten my body almost surrendered to a fever that would blaze its path through my slender form. In delirium my words concerned the appearance of my father's family from Laos in our hut. This brought a stern face mother to pick me up and press this boiling lump that is my frame close to her breasts. My father's family lay dead executed by the allies that support our enemies from the North. My rambling phrases sent the woman scampering from our home and to the path that

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led to an enormous green tent. The canvas temple of the Green Hats is a place where medical miracles occur daily.

As I lay in a loincloth my feverish shivering would multiply as the leader of these men at times known as *Warrior Monks from the West* entered the tent. A monstrous hand held my slight quaking shoulder. The face with the color of a black sky hung over me. Red streaks around dark brown eyes seized my attention. This focus from absolute fear did not last long. He yelled with the power of a trumpeting elephant for someone with the name, Michael. The flap of the temple blew open and there stood an angel. The sun's rays framed this young man as my eyelids squinted at the miraculous sight. Even today, I see little spears of light streaking from his body just as described by the women in long black robes that wear large wooden crosses around their neck. Walking to the side of his father. I say that, due to the respect shown from this vision from heaven. Looking up the fever increased but in a way indescribable. Blue eyes under a floppy green hat cut through my vision. All I could see is this fair, soft face with a slight red tone. The tone the very white Green Hats will develop from our sun. Removing the hat blond hair rested on small ears. I recall the pure whiteness of such a sight. I do remember a few very light strips mixed with the yellow.

I gave no attention to his father as the bull of a man turned my body till I found myself face down. All that took my concern bent his body over the table I lay upon.

"Ok, kiddo." The leader spoke with a grin on his round face. "It's for you Michael, old boy." A large chuckle shot from the revered one's lips.

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As the point of a needle pierced my bare bottom I felt the boy's love slice through my thumping heart. In the family hut before this visit, I found it difficult to breathe. Now I felt something different. Though prior to meeting the leader's son the fever would grow so strong that my mouth would fight to suck in air. Though the sight of him did cause a loss of breath, in a way that did not affect me so.

My elation at meeting the son of the Green Hat leader would double as his father handed my mother a green shirt. It is the one that the Green Hats wear under their uniform with the stripes of a tiger.

To explain, this is a custom of my people. I knew that I became his betroth with my mother's acceptance of the gift. My life would change forever. You see I am to become the wife of a Green Hat. Our love will last *forever and ever and ever*.

In the days that follow, my existence would circle around a future with a Warrior Monk from the West. I later found the reason for that designation.

As the Green Hats grew in number in our village, Bru leaders wanted to strengthen the bond between these men and our people. They offered their daughters in exchange for that bond. A Green Hat that possessed a wife and family in their home country did not stop the offers. These refusals began to border on an insult. Many of the Bru did not understand the peculiar marital ways of the Americans. Bru men are allowed to have more than one wife, as long as no two wives live in the same village. Wiser heads prevailed and at least in our hamlet, the consensus being that these Green Hats must be Warrior Monks. Thus, they need to be celibate. As explained by my mother, "you must take a pure soul into battle."

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True or not, the rumor kept our friendship with these miracle men strong.

I knew that when Michael's vow of chastity is fulfilled, we would be married.

Then we will be in love *forever and ever and ever*.

As time pass, the betrothal became the main topic of our village. Immaterial of my task, talk of a future life with Mikey always would be leaving my lips. Though my mother grew tired of hearing about the blue-eyed children with golden hair that would be her grandchildren, the people of the village shared my joy. Walking from my hut to another brought smiles and titters as I pass the women. I would not let their words that so moved my heart bring a smile to my face. That would not be acceptable for a future bride. A Bru's life is hard, and maybe for the women even harder. It did become difficult to not share in their elation of the future marriage.

"There is the little one that will marry the Green Hat with yellow hair." One woman said as she washed her child in the waters of the *Xepon*. Another added, "oh yes. I hear the soldier's parents will be here for the marriage." A burst of laughter followed.

The other woman with matted hair and breasts that jumped up and down replied. "Do you believe this child? She keeps saying they will be in love *forever and ever and ever*."

Answering the rude statement, a silent woman sitting with a sleeping child beside her spoke. "She's a young girl. So what if that is what she tells people? The Cong walk our perimeter every night looking for a weakness. Let us all have fantasies to take away the truth of our lives." Putting wide fingers through long

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damp straight black hair she lifted a hand as if to wave the discourteous speaker away.

After a few seconds there came a burst of cheerful laughter from behind me. All around knew of our love.

Our love is true. It will last *forever and ever and ever*.

One day, I visited a part of the village near the tents of the Green Hats. There stood Michael. As soon as the other men, Green Hats and Bru saw me strolling with my mother they let out hoots and loud chuckles as one man went into a tent. He appeared laughing with my Michael beside him.

These sounds must be a sign of delight in their culture. The men of our village that spoke the little English they knew and then pointed at me for my future husband to see.

One Bru man that understood the Green Hat language said, "Green Hat, yellow hair," aiming the words at Michael. "Your future wife is here." The sentence brought the usual large smile to any that spoke those words.

My Michael's light skin grew dark with a touch of red. He shook a head of blond hair and spoke to the older Monks.

"Enough! Enough already. Can't you guys grow up and bust someone else's chops?" He took a breath and sent a wave and smile toward me before entering the tent to his rear.

This kind of behavior from the men and my Michael is something from their land. And I must respect this tradition and remain unmoved.

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I enjoyed this time as a future bride. When his father rested from performing miracles for our people, I would sit with him on a log outside the green temple.

“Ok, now repeat...repeat...” His large eyes at times hypnotized my girlish vision. The man stood tall with broad shoulders and a voice that would frighten a hungry tiger. If I were not to be in his family I would fear for my life.

The gentle tone kept repeating the words. He wanted me to know the way Green Hat wives welcome their men from battle. This is due to my Michael on a mission in Laos. He and others would punish those that meant to harm us.

“Ok, little one.” Again his words flew to my ears with a warm breath floating over my skin.

“My Michael, my husband. We get married soon?” His face gave birth to a smile after speaking them. “Now you baby. You try.”

“My Mack cal...hub stand...ee got mare...ee...sun?”

“Beautiful baby. Great. Now, the guys return sometime before nightfall. You make sure you tell him that in front of the other Green Hats.” My future father-in-law halted and began to raise thick eyebrows. “Damn,” a word he let out in a snort. “You don’t understand nothing I say. Ok,” a grin took control of his face.. “I’ll make sure everybody hears this. The kid will shit his pants.”

The man bit a lower lip as if something bad had occurred.

“Oh, well...sweetie, I’m glad you didn’t understand my Alabama cussin’ now.”

I rushed home for my mother told of a surprise waiting for me.

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Bru women adorn themselves with elaborate dress after bathing and applying color to their lips and eyes. This is tradition for a wife to perform on the arrival of her man from the hunt or battle.

A tradition that I must respect.

My mother did so giggle as she applied what the Green Hats call *something stick* to my lips. I couldn't remember or pronounce the actual name, but it did not matter. I am truly going to be the wife of a Green Hat *forever and ever and ever*.

A red *yem* surrounded the area where my breasts will be. She cinched the waistband of the purple sarong. Loincloths are for children, not someone with my stature in the village. Mother then wrapped my long black straight hair up in cloth that held many different colors. This feat took some doing, as the length of my hair ended a bit above my bottom.

A young teenager entered our hut and fixed earrings in the holes made for me at birth. The girl, a future wife herself used a stick with a black point to draw under my lower eyelids.

To end this ensemble, my mother slipped anklets of beads strung in such a way as to bring about a slight jiggling as I walk.

"My future husband will be home soon. We will be married and be together *forever and ever and ever*."

My joy is indescribable. Even when I overheard my mother talking to the helpful young woman in a way that proved she thought herself too young for grandchildren.

"Well, I guess it's ok. We all get a kick out of this fantasy of my daughter."

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The teenager followed. "It will be good practice for when she is older."

The two giggled and gave off slight chuckles.

This did not bother me. I have accepted her reasoning. Though a few questions kept popping up in my thoughts.

*Could it be that this is all a game? Is it possible, Michael has no intention in marrying me? Are they sharing my joy or pretending to? Even my future father-in-law?*

The time for our men to return had come. The man that speaks to the radio gives our hamlet the word.

I stood in full dress. I could see them coming in sight.

As we women, for I was one of them stretched our vision to see the column, a hush lay upon us as a blanket. As the returning men drew closer some women began to gasp.

A few of the soldiers and Bru were on stretchers. Many of the others limped through the red dust that floats from the dirt on a dry day.

Turning to my left, I saw my future father-in-law running toward our group. His gait is aimed at me.

This father to all, Bru and Green Hat, slowed his pace as he inhaled a deep breath. Those that spoke of him often use words that are reserved for heroes and conquerors. A figure with arms as big as the head of a water buffalo and a chest broad enough to blot out the sun. This man of honor and strength showed an expression not seen before by me. His difficult walk continued. As he entered my vision, I saw what looked a tear running down one cheek.

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He spoke to me in English, a language I did not understand. The scent of his words brought a bitter taste upon my tongue. For I knew what he was telling me.

“My future husband would not be coming home...*forever and ever and ever.*”