Lus Cog Tseg (The Promise): Retold by Touhoua Yang

During Madman’s war, there lived a handsome young man named Zong who had fallen madly in love with a young woman name Yer. Zong and Yer lived in villages approximately 8 kilometers, or 5 miles, apart separated by a jungle. Zong made the long journey by foot to visit her every afternoon. Each evening, the two lovers would sit on a bench and talk and talk until nightfall, often times building a fire to stay warm before Zong would make the long journey back. On one dark evening, Zong’s and his family heard a knock on their door. They went to open the door.

“Hello, we are in need of more men and require that you eldest son help us fight this war. If you want to continue to be a member of this community and consider yourself Hmong, you will help!” exclaimed the strange soldier who appeared at their door. He then sat down and had a short conversation with Zong, his father, and his mother.

“Alright, I am not afraid,” said Zong as he stood up to face his father and the soldier. “I will go and protect our people and keep our family pride strong!” The soldier left promptly and Zong’s parents told him they were very proud of him and that it took a lot of courage to fight in the war.

The truth was Zong was not afraid of going to war and fighting for his people but there was something he was very afraid of; he could not stand the thought of being away from his love, Yer. The next morning, he made the trek to Yer’s village and spent the entire day with Yer trying to make the most of his time left with her. As the sun began to set, Zong told Yer that he would have to leave to go and fight in the war and did not know when he would come back.

“Promise me,” cried Yer, “Promise me that no matter what happens, you will come back to me and love me forever. No matter what happens to me or to you, promise we will be together forever.” With tears in his eyes, Zong promised that he would come back and be with Yer and love her forever. With a short embrace and tears rolling down both of their cheeks, they said their good-byes and Zong’s walk home seemed longer and more lonesome than ever.

Zong was away for two months before coming home. While Zong was away, a group of tigers had come and terrorized Yer’s village leaving the village all but deserted. During this attack, Yer had been killed by a tiger and Zong’s parents knew how devastated he would be so they chose not to tell him the truth. As soon as Zong arrived home, he took a quick shower and told his parents that he was off to visit Yer.

“Tub,” his father said while pausing and looking over at his wife because he was unsure of what to say before he finally blurted out, “Yer has gone off and married someone else.”

“Lies father, nothing but lies. Yer would never go off and get married,” shrieked Zong. “She promised to wait for me and me for her!”

“Tub, I am not lying now will you just stay home with your mother and I tonight and we can talk more about this over dinner? I beg of you Tub…”

Zong did not wait for his father to finish and he ran out as fast as he could. While running through the forest in the darkness of the night, Zong kept telling himself it was not true, it COULD NOT be true. They loved each other and would love each other forever. With his mind and heart racing, he reached Yer’s village in just over 40 minutes and upon seeing the village, Zong just could not comprehend it.

The village looked deserted and unkempt; many houses were tattered and torn and he did not hear the sound of people anywhere. He walked until he arrived at Yer’s house. He knocked on Yer’s wall. There was no reply. He knocked and whispered telling Yer he had come back for her. Sure enough, the door opened and Yer walked out. They went and sat on the bench where they usually sat each evening to talk. Zong wanted to embrace Yer but she said she was shy and to wait until she felt more comfortable. There was something strange about Yer and Zong could not quite figure it out. He just could not put his finger on it. That particular evening, there was a new moon and unlike most nights, not a single star was in sight. In the darkness, all Zong could see was Yer’s silhouette and could not make out her facial features.

As the two sat and talked about the past two months, Zong had learned that the village looked deserted because everyone was guarding their rice patties after hearing that there was a tiger had attacked and killed a man while he was tending to his patty. Therefore most of the villagers were camping out by the patties in hopes of killing the tiger. The truth was Zong did not care about the rest of the village for he was with the love of his life but there was something strange in the air. The more they talked, the more the air seemed to be filled with a rotten but an unfamiliar stench. Zong decided to build a fire.

“I want to be able to see your face, Yer. It has been far too long that I can barely remember what you look like and I want to see that beautiful face tonight.” said Zong as he began to build the fire. Sparks flew and just before there was a flame, Yer blew it out. Zong told her not to do that because he really wanted to see her and the night air was chilly. Yer finally agreed.

As Zong started to work on the fire again, he kept trying to figure out what that smell was. It smelled like someone had left a dead animal to rot nearby. With the fire built, Zong smiled and looked at Yer’s face and to his horror he realized why she did not want a fire built and also why his father tried to keep him at home. Her face was gruesomely disfigured and it was YER’S face that was rotting and dripping with pus. Each drip of pus caused the fire to singe and make a loud popping hiss. Fear overcame Zong as he realized now that Yer was no longer the girl he loved; she was dead and something had taken over her body and spirit.

“Why are you so quiet, my dear?” asked Yer.

“I’m just basking in the warmth of the fire and thinking about our conversation.” lied Zong. He knew he had to do something quick. “I have to use the restroom and I will be right back.” Zong said.

“Lies,” hissed Yer. “You are lying, are you trying to get away from me? Do you not remember your promise?”

“No, my love, I really have to go. If I did not want to be with you, would I have come all this way? It will be really quick, I promise.” Sensing something was not right, Zong added, “Here, you can hold onto my siv, or sash, while I go to the bathroom, okay?

“You better not be playing games with me, Zong! This is not the night to play games.” quipped Yer in a stern loud voice. Zong untied his siv and gave one end to Yer before tying the other end around his waist again. Zong walked quickly to the edge of the village where the trees were and disappeared.

A few minutes passed before Yer became inpatient. Wondering where he was, she gave a tug on the sash and there was still resistance so she knew he was still there. Another minute or two passed by before she tugged on the sash and once again, there was resistance. Ten minutes had passed by and Yer’s patience had grown thin. She pulled on the sash and the resistance was still there so she decided to follow the sash to find Zong as she believed he was up to no good. Hand over hand, she followed the sash until she came to the end of it. Zong was nowhere in sight; he had tied the sash to a tree and had taken off for home.

In a rage of fury, Yer ran after Zong screaming like a banshee yelling, “You think you can get away from me? You think you can make empty promises and everything will be alright? You are mine and I will get you!”

Even though Zong was about a mile and a half ahead, he could hear her cries ring out through the darkness of the forest. Fearing for his life, Zong ran as fast as he could. Every minute or so, Zong would turn back to look for Yer. Her screams grew closer and closer and fear grew in Zong’s heart. He had about one mile to go before he was out of the jungle and two miles before making it home. He looked and saw that Yer was no more than a hundred paces behind him. Fearing for his life, Zong climbed up a large tree and sat at the treetop. Yer walked around the tree yelling and screaming saying he was hers and there was nowhere he could go. This went on until the first ray of morning.

Zong looked at the horizon and upon seeing the sunrise, he knew he would be safe. Yer’s screams had died down and soon enough, Yer ran back into the jungle but not before saying, “Zong, you are mine. No matter where you go, no matter what you do, I will find you and you will keep your promise!”

Zong finally climbed down the tree and ran home. As soon as he arrived, his parents hugged him and were thankful he was alive. He told them all about what happened and they, in turn, told him the truth about what happened to Yer and her village. That day, Zong started to become sick and her parents fetched the village Shaman to perform a soul-calling ceremony. They believed that Zong had lost his soul the previous night when Yer chased him. At the end of the ceremony, the shaman told Zong that he would be alright and his soul would come back as long as he stayed inside his house for 30 days.

Zong started to feel better and by the end of the first week, he felt 100% but his parents made him stay inside the house obeying what the shaman had said. After the second week, Zong had gotten over the fright and was getting restless. He itched to go outside and talk with his friends but again, his parents felt he should stay home and he did. The end of the third week came and went and Zong just couldn’t take it anymore. He had been home for 22 days, seen his parents come and go, heard the play and laughter of everyone else in the village and he wanted to go out. Once more, his parents were able to convince him to stay. It was day 29 and his parents had gone to tend to the rice patty; Zong felt he was home long enough and another day wouldn’t matter, would it? Zong got up, changed his clothes and was ready to go out and be with everyone again. He opened the front door and as soon as he did, Yer was right there standing in front of him and before he could turn back and close the door, she grabbed him and took him with her.