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Shu's Story
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She wears silver bangles in her ears and more around her wrist. She wears a hand-dyed indigo ensemble and leg warmers tied tightly with ribbon she stitched. Her name is Shu, she's ten years old, she's Hmong, and together we go walking.

Jerry and I meet her one evening as the sun droops over terraced hills, and twilight dims the cobbled streets of Sapa. It's a small burg in northern Vietnam, high on a skinny precipitous hill near the Chinese border. She finds us poking through the local market. She insists on friendship.

Shu makes music as she goes, carrying a portable cassette player in a black leather satchel. She pushes the buttons, and a friend sings in Hmong. She pushes them again, and a voice sings in Vietnamese. "That me," she says. She takes my hand, leads us through the darkening street and asks, "Tomorrow you leave?"

No.

"OK, tomorrow you go walking?"

Maybe.

"OK, tomorrow I find you." Then: "Here's a present for you."

She dangles a black ribbon embroidered with red and yellow flowers, green stems and leaves. Shu made it herself. She wraps it around my right wrist, ties it snugly, and tells Jerry he'll get one the next day. Then she swings my arm. She will find us, yes she will.

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And she does. The next morning, Shu pounces from the foggy market as we walk through town to an overlook above a cloudy abyss that leads to Cat Cat, a Hmong village in the opposite direction of her own.

"Hello. You remember me?"

Of course.

"Your name Karen?"

Yes.

She grabs my hand again and asks our plans. Where do we want to go?

Cat Cat, we say.

Shu will show us the way. And so we go walking, together, as she planned.

We follow the pebbly road and talk about Shu's business. She sells her mother's embroidered jackets, with little silver bell buttons. She sells the earrings, bracelets, and necklaces that her father carves and fashions. She stays in Sapa, two hours by foot from her village, Lao

Chai. In town, she sleeps in a Vietnamese house with other Hmong girls who do the same. She walks home often, gives her parents the money she makes, then returns to Sapa to sell more trinkets. Shu has never seen the nearest city, twenty miles away. She's never been to Hanoi, never traveled beyond her walks. Her feet—brown, stained, cold in plastic sandals—they're her life.

And her life, at ten, mirrors the lives of many. It portends a life to come. They, the ethnic hilltribe women of Sapa, rap on restaurant windows and grab at foreign arms, hoping to sell their clothes and precious metals for a pittance to wide-eyed travelers who come here just to photograph them in their togs among their chiseled mountains. The girls start much younger than Shu. They continue well into wrinkled, grandmotherly life. Many ethnicities share the fertile nooks and crannies near Sapa, but the Hmong and Dao tribes govern the tourist trade.

But Shu—Shu is different. While others aim to conquer the traveler's wallet, whispering, "*OK, OK, you buy from me,*" Shu works instead upon the heart. She bewitches with irresistible charm. She meets many foreign friends, takes them by the hand, and learns their native tongues. She opens her sack, retrieves a tiny purse, unwraps plastic from a parcel inside, and unravels paper around a stack of passport photos. There's Erik, John, Nancy, Margaret, and many more. From England, Holland, Norway, Australia. She pins the Canadian flag to her lapel. She dons a plastic flower in her headdress and carries a stuffed toy mouse, a gift "from Japan," she says. Shu sells, that's her job, the thing she knows, at ten years old.

No school today?

"Maybe I don't go to school and the teacher is very angry with me."

The teacher is in Lao Chai. English, tourists, money—they're all in Sapa.

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After our walk, we offer Shu a full-fledged lunch inside the Four Seasons restaurant—a small local shop, not of the luxury chain—as Hmong and Dao women cluster around the doors outside. The proprietor grunts, preparing to evict our friend. We say it's OK, and the owner asks us again for assurance. She's our guide today, we tell the man. He chuckles.

Shu can't read the menu, English or Vietnamese, so we do the picking. We order green tea and fried rice with chicken. She gobbles intently, then clutches her belly and says she's full. Then she eats a spring roll.

It's time for business. Shu keeps her father's tiny carved hoop earrings pinned inside her jacket. Bigger items, such as shirts and necklaces, she stashes at "the Vietnamese house" on the edge of town. She leads us there, to a small structure of wood and earth smack against a hillside. Freshly dyed indigo dries out front. When the clouds part, the house snatches 180-degree views and a stellar look at Fansipan, Vietnam's highest mountain.

Shu takes us into the bedroom where five, six, then seven women assemble. They say hello in chorus and dangle their wares before us. "You buy, you buy, OK?"

Shu riffles through a rice sack beneath a wooden bed and grabs a bundle, then leads us outside onto the stoop. She shows us two jackets with embroidered lapels and appliquéd squares with crosses and lines and triangles, all dyed deep, rich, and royal shades of blue. We look, touch, snuggle, admire while Shu takes a needle and thread to stitch a fraying seam. Women crowd around. They snicker at the handiwork, snorting that we should buy from them instead.

But we buy from Shu. We bargain a bit because it is protocol, and I feel criminal for taking so much and imparting so little. I am embarrassed how little we pay for two jackets and a

bracelet. But she beams and thanks us profusely. Then she grabs my hand again, when the deal is done, and trots with us up the winding street.

"Me go with you."

We walk a bit. She hugs me, straddling my torso and clenching me in a warm embrace. "Thank you, thank you," Shu says.

We part with plans to meet the next morning. Shu will take us home to Mom and Dad.

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The next day, we go by foot, the way Shu does, down a bumpy road that slices across the mountainside. White rock looms above and a pit of air below, filling a valley wide and green. She holds my hand, then drops it to skip ahead at her own pace. Then she runs back to reunite with the two of us.

She points to buffalo and pigs and rice terraces. "You have?" she asks about our country. We answer sometimes yes, sometimes no, sometimes yes but different. Like the pigs. We watch black, hairy, snorting boars skirting narrow paths. We have pigs, I say, but pink and not so hairy. We have ducks just the same. We have streams tumbling down hillsides, wiping boulders clean. We do not have rice growing in geometry, row upon row upon square upon square, with water falling from one terrace to the next.

Shu doesn't know flat land. Hanoi? I tell her it's flat, like the road. No hills. She can't imagine it. "You no have?" she asks, sweeping her arms through the air, pointing to the postcard around us.

Well, not exactly.

I ask whether she knows airplanes in the sky, and she motions like a propeller. I tell her that's how we go from our country to hers.

"Maybe you have many, but me only one." In her ten years, Shu has seen just one airplane, a small one. It could never hold her whole village and more.

We buy cookies and three trunks of sugarcane at a shop where we turn from road to trail and begin our descent to the valley. The shop owner is Vietnamese. I ask Shu, when she buys food at the market, does she pay the same price as the Vietnamese? In reply, she asks what we pay for bread. There are foreign prices, Hmong prices, Vietnamese prices—in that descending order. "I pay more," she says. More than the Vietnamese. "I don't know why."

The subject recurs whenever we go walking. In her home—the Vietnamese. Later, over a snack—the Vietnamese. "I don't like Vietnamese," she says. And then she edits her words. "Sometimes friends."

But only sometimes.

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Shu leads us down, down through red earth that her neighbors plow and trample and chip away to carve new terraces, preparing for the next reap. She leads us up again, past children sloshing in the river, through a school whose blackboards show lessons in Vietnamese. This, she says, is the school she doesn't attend, the place where the teacher is angry with her for her absences.

Her home is farther uphill, through muddy trails and dried-up terraces. Twelve children scamper and chortle as we approach. Their noses drip, just like Shu's. Their skin is leathery, their

hair snarly, their clothing ragged, their eyes runny. They devour the little goodies we bring.

Shu's home is like others nearby: dirt floor, wood frame, grass-and-shingle roof. Hemp balls are stuck in the walls, and corn dangles from the ceiling. A blackened wok sits over a smoldering fire, and water trickles into a trough. There is one bedroom, beside the kitchen fire, with one bed and one big blanket. Light beams through cracks in the wall. Shu's aunt sits in the doorway with soft light illuminating an intricate pattern as she embroiders.

Shu's mother, Cu, chops pork fat with a cleaver. She goes outside to pick fresh greens with tiny yellow flowers, then returns to the kitchen and chops the vegetables on a thick wooden block. Shu stirs the fat in a pan while Cu adds the greens. Steam fills the room. Cu sets a small wooden table near the door. She ladles vegetable broth over cold rice, then fills our bowls with greens. All of us eat together while father Ga naps in the other room after taking a few swigs of his pipe.

After food, it's time for business. Shu's aunt displays her finished embroidery, a purse. There are silver necklaces, shorts, shirts, bags, rings, and bracelets—all for sale.

How much?

"You say," Shu replies.

She rarely names a price. We buy earrings and a blue-burgundy embroidered swatch for a tiny price that pleases Shu's family immensely. They give us a needlework square and batik shorts as gifts. Shu hands her mother the money we gave her the day before.

Tell your mother she does beautiful embroidery, I say.

"She knows, she knows, I tell already."

Tell your father he does beautiful jewelry.

"He knows, he knows. Yesterday, you buy bracelet." Our business is done, so Shu grabs my hand. "OK, we go to Sapa now."

And that's that. They all wish us well, and Cu tells us to return when we "have baby."

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We head back up from the hot valley, and sweat drips from Shu's brow. She unravels her leg warmers, then ties the hemp strips around her waist like a belt. We stop for Coke at a roadside shop. A European man we met the day before lumbers up the trail. Shu says she remembers him.

"I suppose you do," he says. He remembers Jerry and me. We saw him on the path between Cat Cat and another village called Sin Chai.

"Yesterday, you go Cat Cat," Shu says. "Me know you."

But the man doesn't recognize her. They all look the same to him, the Hmong girls wearing blue. There are so many, dressed alike, with dark brown skin and dark brown hair and dark brown eyes. But Shu remembers him well, and she knows enough to say so in English, Vietnamese, and Hmong.

"Cheeky," he says. "They're learning very quickly."

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She finds us again the next afternoon. The flap-flap of plastic sandals on asphalt ends in a robust hug. She's here, minus the fake flower on her hat, minus the hat itself, hair in pigtail braids. She has tiny, wispy bangs. She's the only Hmong girl we see without a traditional hat.

Shu is Shu, and she does her own thing.

I donate photos to her collection, pictures of Jerry and me in Hue, the Imperial City. We tell her that's in Vietnam. "Oh, very good," she says and she gives us the thumbs-up.

She follows us as we move toward dinner. There is no electricity when we enter the Mimoza restaurant. Fluorescence and karaoke give way to candlelight. We sit near the window, and Shu tells Jerry to switch sides with her. She scrunches in the corner, wriggles in her chair. She can't sit still.

You have a problem?

"Yes. Police."

She's not supposed to be in the restaurant, and she doesn't want to be seen. Shall we move?

"Yes."

We move three tables away and our bodies conceal her. The electricity flickers on, and an old man in a beret smiles at Shu as he sits near the kitchen door, listening to a tape player croon the *Godfather* theme.

We order rice, tea, tomato soup, barbecue pork kabob, tofu, and fried vegetables. Shu inhales—four helpings, five helpings. She's ravenous.

Does Lao Chai have lights? I ask during another flicker.

"No, Lao Chai not have."

Did you eat today?

"No."

This the first time? No food yet?

"No food today."

Why not?

No answer.

No money?

She nods.

If you have no money, you don't eat?

She nods.

What do you eat at home?

"In Lao Chai, we have this and this," she points to the rice and the lettuce beneath the pork—but not the meat itself.

Same as we had in your house?

"Yes. Same same, what you had."

Rice, greens, pork fat. Every day?

"Yes."

You eat every day?

"Every day."

We clear the plates and she nibbles on peanuts, then settles into the large white plastic chair in a food coma. She smiles, twists her hair, loosens her leg wraps.

Does your Japanese friend take you to dinner?

"No."

Your Canadian friend?

"No."

Hmong women call to her through the window, and she goes briefly to check the matter. We ask if she has a problem.

She nods yes. “Later…later with Dao and Hmong.”

The Dao women enter as we finish. They drink tea and ask Shu something we can’t understand. We can’t begin to understand the complications of friendship between her, a ten-year-old Hmong girl in Vietnam, and us, two Western tourists who do more than buy trinkets. We part and say good-night. We have seen the looks, the stares, at foreigners sharing time and food and love with her, a Hmong girl. She has “problem,” as she says. But she is hungry.

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Life shuffles along, Jerry and I board a plane, many months pass, and a letter arrives. “Hello Karen, How are you today?” It’s written in neat, careful penmanship. “Today where are you going? Today I went for a walk with my friends. Will you come back to Sapa to visit? I miss you, do you miss me? Do you remember when you came to my village. I remember. I have the photo that you gave me. Thank you. You bought 2 jackets from me, I will remember you. Never forget me, I’ll never forget you…I have a present for you.”

Enclosed are two bright, braided bracelets.

Her name is Shu, she’s older now. She’s Hmong, and she hugs my heart. And every day, in my mind, together we go walking.

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