

The Chiapas Lacandon forest

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Nan-Kim, a love story

The Lacandon, scattered and yet united, hidden and ever present, mysterious and inaccessible, live in an awe-inspiring forest, a universal heritage and natural wonder, a jewel to be protected for the world's future.

No one knows how they appear and disappear in the darkness beneath the crowns of ceiba, cedar and many other varieties of giant trees. Where do they come from, where do they hide?

They are sometimes to be seen in the river, standing upright to row their dugout canoes, then they vanish like a mirage.

Suddenly, in a corner of a Mayan city or temple, on top of a pyramid or behind a stele, they spy on visitors, only to vanish into the forest's vapors and tangled underbrush. As if, by their presence, warning intruders at their sacred sites that they, the Lacandons, are the true owners. No one can follow them; the forest is said to swallow them up.

To have many descendants and preserve their race, the Lacandons are polygamous. Nan-Kim, a Lacandon prince, must have been about seventy years old. Well-known in the forest for his potent fertility, it was said that his children numbered a hundred. Any Lacandon woman was proud to bear a son of his. He was a strong man, taller

than most, and his face looked exactly like one of the Mayan masks at Palenque. Long, black hair fell straight down over his shoulders and back. In Lacandon fashion, he wore a white cotton tunic tied on one shoulder that fell in elegant folds to his ankles. A quiver of arrows hung from his other shoulder.

The first rural clinic that was built in the forest was situated in a little village many hours, over narrow paths, from Ocozingo. A young doctor by the name of María Elena was assigned to it.

Obviously, Nan-Kim offered to honor her by taking her to wife. She was so terrified, she wanted to return as fast as possible to Tuxtla and her family. She no longer wanted to be a doctor, or anything, just to be with her parents.

The medical supervisor explained to the prince that she could not accept, that customs were different. Being very persuasive, he convinced María Elena to stay on and work there. She remained several years and became like a mother, like a queen to the Lacandons. She cared for them, and loved them with all her heart.

One rainy night she arrived by jeep at the regional hospital, in San Cristobal Las Casas, the royal city of the Chiapas highlands. She brought

Nan-Kim in unconscious and very sick. They were accompanied by two of the prince's children, a middle-aged man, and a beautiful young girl, like a vestal virgin from a Mayan temple.

Nan-kim was in serious condition with a cerebral hemorrhage. María Elena, deeply moved, sat by his bed and tenderly stroked his hand. She told him things in his language, which she had by then learned. The two Lacandons stood at each side of the hospital room doorway.

He recovered rapidly; after three days he was conscious, eating and talking. His sexuality had also awakened, and when the nurses came close, he stretched out his hand to caress them.

He made quite a show when he left the hospital. Photos were taken of him standing proudly, with his princely air, at the top of the stairs, flanked by two of his people. He raised his head, arranged his locks down the front of his tunic, and posed.

He returned to the forest and the next year had another hemorrhage, and died.

María Elena asked for a transfer and left the Lacandon tribe forever.

We never knew if she had fallen in love with Nan-Kim. It remained a mystery. A mystery like the Lacandons, like their imposing forest. 