

## The Story of Watermelon Island

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A long, long time ago, kings still felt a bond with the common people. Instead of shutting themselves away in their castles, surrounded by fences and guards, they spent time with their subjects and showed true affection for them. Back then, the ruler of Vietnam came from the rich line of kings known as the Hung Dynasty. This particular king had such devotion to his people that he adopted a son from a very poor peasant family. This son, Mai An Tiem, was a very intelligent and talented boy and he quickly became the favorite of the king, who lavished attention on him and gave him many gifts. When Mai An Tiem grew up, the country's mandarins often came to him for advice, and appealed for his help whenever they asked for favors from the king. Some of the king's natural children became jealous.

When Mai An Tiem turned twenty, the king arranged for the young man to marry the third eldest princess, who was called Co Ba, or Miss Three. The couple moved into one of the king's most beautiful castles. Glistening treasures filled the rooms. Dozens of servants sat ready to cater to their every whim. Despite the richness of this life, Mai An Tiem never forgot his peasant roots. Every day, he ate simple, healthy meals of rice and vegetables, and only occasionally indulged in meat or fish. His clothes were solidly built but unadorned. He spent his mornings overseeing the maintenance of the castle and his afternoons working alone in his garden.

Few people knew about this garden, but it was a magical place. Mai An Tiem tilled the moist black earth with such loving attention that tomatoes hung in enormous clusters on the vines. Forests of sunflowers grew as tall as trees. The carrots tasted so sweet that you could eat them for dessert.

One day, Mai An Tiem and Co Ba had a party. Orchids and roses filled the castle with such color and fragrance that visitors imagined an army of gardeners had produced them. The fruits and vegetables were so delicious that rumours flew about a cargo ship filled with imported goods from exotic lands. Everyone competed to praise the wealth of the couple. Mai An Tiem only smiled and said, "Wealth doesn't matter. Only labor will bring true happiness."

Among the guests was Hau, one of the king's natural sons, a clever but lazy young prince who had been jealous of Mai An Tiem for a very long time. Hau's great dream was to make his adopted brother look bad in the eyes of the king. As soon as Mai An Tiem had spoken, Hau recognized his opportunity. He excused himself from the party, rushed to the king's palace, and demanded an immediate audience with his father. "Mai An Tiem has spoken against you, my Royal Father," he declared. He repeated Mai An Tiem's exact words, then added, as embellishment, "And he said many other nasty things about our family."

Roaring in anger at the thought of such insolence, the king immediately sent a platoon of soldiers to Mai An Tiem's castle. The soldiers told the guests to go home, confiscated the beautiful treasures, and ordered the servants back to the palace. Within a very short time, Mai An Tiem and Co Ba stood in an empty castle. Only Co Ba's personal servant, Mo, and Mai An Tiem's personal servant, Man, remained, begging the soldiers to let them stay with the young couple. Because the king had given no order specifically banning servants, the soldiers relented.

As harsh as the punishment of having the castle stripped of its wealth may have been, it still didn't satisfy the king. He decided to banish the young couple as well, ordering his soldiers to take them to a deserted island in the Eastern Sea and leave them there with nothing but some clothes, a knife, and enough food to last them for a month. The king wanted to teach Mai An Tiem a lesson. He expected his son to beg for

forgiveness, in which case the soldiers would return to rescue the castaways at the end of a month.

The young man did not adhere to his father's expectations, however. From the moment his possessions were confiscated until the minute he set foot on the island, he not only never begged for forgiveness, but he also didn't utter a single word. As the soldiers prepared to sail away from the island, they asked if Mai An Tiem or Co Ba had any message for the king.

With tears in her eyes, Co Ba nodded. "Please give our father our deepest wishes for a long and healthy life," she said.

Mai An Tiem picked up his wife's hand and squeezed it. Then he looked at the soldiers and said, "We thank our royal father for everything he has given us in the past and we're sorry that he's angry with us now." He paused for a moment, then, in a quiet but firm voice, he said, "I still believe what I said about wealth. Two working hands can bring warmth and a full belly."

The soldiers returned to the palace. When they passed on the words of Co Ba, the king was so moved that he wondered if he had punished the young couple too severely. But when he heard what Mai An Tiem had said, his face grew hard. "If they want to scoff at my wealth, then leave them there," he said, adding, "From now on, we will behave as if those two never existed." From that day, he forbade the members of the court to ever mention the names of Mai An Tiem or Co Ba again.

Mai An Tiem, Co Ba and the two servants now found themselves in a place that seemed very inhospitable indeed. They saw no houses, no boats, and not a single sign of human life. The waves lapped against a sandy beach, above which stretched a barren strip of land nearly bare of vegetation. Beyond that strip of land lay dense forest. In the distance, a range of hills climbed toward the sky. Co Ba, who, unlike Mai An Tiem and the two servants, had spent her entire life living in castles and palaces, now worried that

they would starve to death in this place. Mai An Tiem tried to calm his wife. "Don't worry, darling," he said, stroking her head. "If we work hard, we'll survive."

Their first goal lay in finding shelter for the night. Setting forth from the beach, they began to explore, clearing a path through the forest toward the center of the island. The foliage grew denser and they saw strange animals and trees full of fruits they had never seen before. After several hours, they came upon a shallow stream running from the direction of the hills. Although the water was rushing over rocks and fallen branches, it was so clear that one could see every pebble at the bottom of the stream. They stepped onto rocks that jutted out of the water and watched tiny multicolored fish hiding in the crevices of the rocks. On the other side of the stream lay the entrance to a cave.

"Let's use the cave as a shelter," Mai An Tiem proposed. "It will protect us from the sun and rain, and animals won't bother us there." The four lifted up their few belongings and picked their way across the stream.

Branches and dead leaves covered the floor of the cave, but it was also spacious and airy. Tired and hungry, they cleared a small area, then lit a fire and cooked some of the food that they had brought along with them. Darkness fell, and the women lay down to rest while Mai An Tiem and Man took turns guarding the entrance to the cave. Despite the unfamiliarity of their surroundings, the night passed serenely, with nothing to scare them and only the sounds of the wind in the trees and the hooting of owls.

The next morning, Mai An Tiem and Man set off to explore the island. Not far from the cave, they found a large stand of bamboo. They immediately took out the knife and began to make traps for hunting and nets for fishing. While the men were away, Co Ba and Mo finished clearing out the cave. They collected mounds of dry leaves and used them to make soft cushions on which to sleep. In one corner of the cave, they set up a circle of large rocks as a spot for a fireplace, then they lit the fire, and began to cook. By the time the men came back at sunset, a hearty meal lay ready for them.

Many days passed. Life became more stable. Every morning, Mai An Tiem and Man went out to hunt for food. Co Ba and Mo wandered along the stream gathering fruits and nuts. At first, they worried that the strange fruits of the island might poison them, but when they saw rabbits or monkeys eating a fruit they decided it was edible. In that way, they introduced themselves to many delicious fruits they had never even seen before.

In the evenings, the four sat around the fireplace, cooking and talking about what they had experienced that day. The men preserved any meat they had found and carved tools out of bones. The women used threads of their tattered clothing to sew new garments out of animal skins. Co Ba's smooth hands had by now become calloused with work. Mai An Tiem's white skin grew dark from the wind and sun. But their muscles were firm and their bodies were healthier than ever.

In this way, spring, summer, fall, and winter came one after another, then passed. A year went by. Then two. Then five. Mai An Tiem and his wife now considered their two servants closer to them than blood relations. The four were so used to life on the island that they rarely thought of the mainland any more. Co Ba gave birth to a handsome boy. Man and Mo married and afterwards had a baby girl. As the two families grew, they became even happier.

One day, after they'd been on the island for seven years, Mai An Tiem walked to the ocean to check his nets for fish. As he stepped out of the woods onto the barren strip of ground near the beach, he disturbed a flock of birds, causing them to fly away. Mai An Tiem noticed that the sandy ground where the birds had rested was scattered with shiny black seeds. He didn't know what kind of seeds they were, but he buried them anyway, hoping they would grow into something that he and his family could use.

Life was very busy for Mai An Tiem and he completely forgot about the seeds. It wasn't until many months later, during one of the hottest days of the year, that he noticed a patch of strange plants growing in that spot. The plants grew close to the ground, and their thick vines stretched across the sandy dirt. Mai An Tiem squatted to look.

Underneath the leaves, he saw an enormous fruit lying on the ground. Smooth and green with spots of white, it looked like a melon but was larger than any melon he had ever seen. He cut it in half and discovered a deep red pulp dotted with shiny black seeds. As soon as he opened the fruit, many birds dropped down from the trees and tried to eat it. Suddenly, Mai An Tiem recalled the day he had buried the seeds. If birds could eat this fruit, he reasoned, so could he. He dug his fingers into the pulp, scooped out a small piece, and tasted it. The fruit was sweet, fragrant, and full of juice. As he chewed and swallowed, he felt his mouth and throat and stomach grow cool. The heat of the day seemed less oppressive. Mai An Tiem was so impressed that he cut a medium-sized fruit off the vine, hauled it onto his shoulder, and hurried home. When they tasted the melons, Co Ba and Man and Mo immediately loved it. But none of the grown-ups were as happy as the children, who ate the sweet fruit until its juice ran in streams down their chins.

They named the fruit, which we know as watermelon in English, "Red Melon," in honor of its bright red hue. That afternoon, Mai An Tiem and Man gathered the seeds of the fruit to use to plant another crop. Soon enough, they were able to collect a second harvest. Now, Mai An Tiem had an idea. Taking a dozen or so of the finest melons, he carved his name and the location of the island into their rinds. Then he set them adrift on the ocean and waited.

The island was deserted, but it was not very far from a busy shipping lane. Before long, several merchant ships pulled the melons from the sea. The sailors also loved the delicious fruit, and, following the instructions on the rinds, they came to the island, hoping to find more of it. When they met Mai An Tiem's family, they proposed to buy the fruit. Mai An Tiem refused to take any money in trade, however. He lived on a deserted island. What good was money to him? In exchange for his melons, he asked for knives, fabric, salt, tea, and other goods that they had not been able to make for themselves on the island. The sailors readily agreed and word of the fruit quickly spread among them.

Many ships began to arrive and, by trading their melons, Mai An Tiem and his family acquired many of the goods that they had once had in their castle.

As news of the melons spread, people from the mainland came to the island to ask if they could take up residence and help with the planting and harvesting. The island's population began to grow and the island became famous for its special red melons.

It was only a matter of time, of course, before a servant presented the king with a piece of the bright red fruit. It tasted so good that the king wondered about its origin. When he heard the story about the far-away island, he thought of Mai An Tiem and Co Ba right away. So many years had passed that his anger had diminished. Now the king recognized the severity of his punishment. He ordered his soldiers to go to the island and bring his son and daughter home. When the couple arrived with their little boy, the king almost didn't recognize them. Mai An Tiem had grown into a powerful man. The once-delicate Co Ba was now a strong and healthy woman. The king felt happiness and regret at the same time, happiness at seeing his family again, and regret at what he had done to them. Now he recognized the truth in what Mai An Tiem had long ago said. Wealth really didn't matter. All the wealth in the kingdom could not have bought such strong bodies or healthy minds. No riches could purchase the happiness that shone in these young people's faces. At that moment, the king knew that Mai An Tiem had the wisdom necessary to be a great leader and so he named him heir to the throne.

Under Mai An Tiem's reign, the kingdom was peaceful and prosperous. The shipping industry became busier than ever.

Man and Mo stayed on the island and turned melon farming into a hugely successful enterprise. Traders came from near and far to buy the fruit.

Today, watermelon remains one of the favorite fruits of Vietnam. In summer, people eat it to cool themselves down. In winter, during the days of Tet, they set it on their altars as an offering to the ancestors. Some people believe that the color of a Tet

watermelon's juice tells the fortune of the coming year. If the liquid runs clear, it's a bad omen, but if it's a deep, dark red, you can count on good luck.