

To Love Forever

By
Bob Burnett

I buried my beloved wife somewhere in the Cambodian jungle on 14 May 1970, buried by the explosion of a fragmentation grenade in the VC tunnel. I left her with a crude stake hammered into her chest.

I fell in love with Karen Ann McPhinney in the sixth grade. I pulled her hair and called her names, pushed her around on the playground. She ignored me. In the eighth grade, I asked her to dance and she left me standing red-faced when she turned away giggling.

My life changed at a New Year's party, middle of our senior year in high school. Dope smoke thick enough for a contact high. Loud music and strobes. Peace symbols and bell-bottoms and tie-dye. Karen was with Tommy Lee Bryant. I was with some blonde with stringy hair whose name eludes me. Dreamy float to the midnight hour.

Karen stepped in front of me, placed her hands on my chest, moved them to my shoulders, my neck. She locked her fingers my long hair, yanked my head down, pressed her mouth against my ear, and whispered words I had waited years to hear. Then Karen Ann McPhinney crushed her mouth on mine and changed the shapes and textures of my world forever.

After high school, we chanted slogans and demonstrated and held peace marches and made love on the grass under the stars and floated through the days on Purple Haze and doobies and sweet red wine. But even at Berkeley they expected students to show up for the occasional exam in order to stay in college and keep the draft deferment. I didn't know I'd flunked out until I got my draft notice. The draft board was unimpressed that I'd burned my draft card.

We loaded what little we owned in my VW bus, but the Colombian grass missed the turn to Canada and we were in a wedding chapel in Vegas.

I took my overdue draft notice to the Marine recruiter and he said it was no problem. Sign right here and raise your right hand.

They cut my hair, taught me to march, taught me to kill, and shipped me out to where I could put my new skills to use, killing little brown men with hands and feet and teeth and knives and other weapons of a less intimate nature.

I spent the last of my liberty with Karen at a cheap motel in San Diego, and she kissed me goodbye with tears in her eyes.

That was the last time I saw her alive.

Three weeks later and halfway around the world from my love, I was hustled out of the replacement depot before I had time to unpack my seabag, and choppered to the latest hot spot.

I was assigned to a rifle squad, replacement for a grunt who went home in a body bag. I have some memory of preparing for a patrol. We must have gone out. How else could I have become a prisoner? I remember nothing of the patrol or of my capture.

My cage was made of bamboo shafts the size of my wrist, spaced a hand-width apart, bound with tough vines, supported by posts three feet off the ground. High enough for village children to get underneath and poke at my nakedness with sharp sticks dipped in my own excrement from the ground below my cage.

Most memories of my captivity are muddled, but I remember the children, their delight in tormenting me with sticks, the amusement they shared catching insects to mash into my daily bowl of rice. I remember the interrogations, sharp questions from short men in black pajamas, followed by beatings, always followed by beatings.

Memories of that time still trouble my sleep.

Hunger passed, as did the discomfort of being cramped in a cage too small for standing or stretching out, but thirst was a constant. Sweltering heat intensified the stench of my festering, insect-infested wounds. Fever clouded my eyes and my thoughts. I remember wondering if I was dying or if somebody had put strychnine in my Purple Haze and given me the mother of all bad trips.

The night Karen melted through the bamboo bars and began kissing my wounds, I believed she was just another part of the acid trip. She murmured soft soothing words which were not words at all until they rose in tone and intensity, fueled by her rage, and became, *"Oh the dirty rotten sombitches oh what have they done to my baby oh look what they did to my sweet love . . ."* and on and on while she cradled my head against her breast and stroked my face.

I had almost nodded off when she leaned me back against the bars and whisked away. Her keening wail rose to an excruciating pitch as she whipped through the village, rousing men and women and children to terror and death. A hooch burst into flame and lighted the grisly scene. I watched languidly as this apparition flitted through the village slashing and ripping and killing.

I remember smiling when the head of one particularly vicious small boy rolled toward my cage.

Bodies and parts of bodies littered the ground when she returned to me. With one stroke of her delicate right arm, she shattered the sturdy bamboo bars of my cage. Karen scooped me up and cradled me in her arms, a mother carrying a toddler. My head tipped down and I slept.

I awoke to blackness so complete I wondered if I'd gone blind. I was stretched out on my back on some soft material. I raised my right hand to my face, touched my beard, twiddled my fingers in front of my eyes. I felt the breeze from the movement, but could see nothing.

I sat bolt upright in the darkness. I ran my hands over my chest and thighs and neck and feet. No soreness, no sores, no scabs, not even any of the caked filth that had encrusted my body for an unremembered length of time. I was clean, even my hair and beard. An unfamiliar but pleasant fragrance with a hint of flowers and soap replaced the pungent odors of my long-unwashed body.

I sat for a minute or an hour, with no way to measure the time. It finally occurred to me that I felt . . . fine. I felt clean and well and whole and rested.

I was on a pad of woven material piled six or eight inches deep on a dirt floor. I discovered a smooth cylinder on the floor next to my bed, felt the length of it and discovered a string at one end. A candle. More exploration yielded a small rectangular object with rough sides. A matchbox.

I fumbled a wooden match from the box and scratched it to light. After momentary blindness from the light, my eyes began to adjust and I lighted the candle.

The room was about a dozen feet long and half that wide. Dirt floor and walls of logs rising to a low ceiling of timbers. A mineshaft? A tunnel? My curiosity about my surroundings ended when I discovered a GI canteen of water and a basket of fruit.

Both the canteen and the basket were empty before I saw the note. I recognized her neat script before I started to read. So it hadn't been a dream or a bad trip. Karen was here. How? I read her note.

My Love --

You are in a VC tunnel. If you want to go outside, be careful. I booby-trapped the entrance with a Claymore mine. The trip wire is about a foot below the trap door and you need to unhook the wire from the mine before you raise the door. I didn't find you just to have you blow your ass off!!!! Ha, ha.

I wanted to be with you when you woke up, but I can only be there at night and if you're reading this you must have woke up in daytime. Daytime does strange things to me even in a dark tunnel, so I had to be somewhere else. We'll talk tonight.

I like your new beard. Very distinguished looking. I bet you didn't know you have gray streaks in it. Your hair, too. I can't even imagine what you went through.

Enjoy the fruit and water. I didn't leave much 'cause I figured you'd puke it up and make a mess. We'll get you some real food tonight. Get well and strong. I have plans for you!!!!

Bob, my love, I'm just glad you're alive. Nothing else really matters to me. I have loved you ever since I can remember and will love you forever. For better or for worse. See you tonight.

Love ya,

K

So it had not been an acid trip. Karen really was here. What was going on? We'll talk tonight, she'd promised.

I was restless, waiting for dark and having no idea how long that might be, so I took my candle and matches and crawled down the low-roofed passageway to the entrance. I found the Claymore, unhooked the trip wire, and cautiously pushed up against the wooden trap door.

I emerged between huge gnarled tree roots. The underbrush and trees were so dense, I could see only a few meters in any direction.

I took a few prudent steps on tender feet to peek around the Banyan tree, then retreated to one of the roots where I sat and removed a thorn from the sole of my right foot. Sweat oozed and dribbled in the oppressive heat, absent the salt-sting of sweat in

open wounds. The dozens of festering injuries had healed. Only pink scars evinced their locations.

It was late afternoon. Under the canopy of trees the sun was an unseen fading brightness as the shadows deepened. Listening to the emerging night-sounds, I waited patiently for my love to come to me.

"Bob?" Her voice came from somewhere to my right, but I could not see her.

"Karen?" I stood.

"Yes. I didn't want to startle you." I felt her at my side, turned and reached out for her in the dark. She melted into my arms and we stood locked together in our nakedness. I stroked her back, pressed her head against my chest. She was cold, so cold against my sweaty body. We kissed then, the long and deep and hungry kiss of lovers long separated.

At some point I became aware that she was not breathing. And I felt no heartbeat under my hands. Karen must have sensed some change in me, for she pulled away.

"Well, shit. I was tryin' to figure out how to tell you, but I guess you figured it out for yourself." Her voice was soft, nearby, anguished.

"I haven't figured anything out, except that you're here."

"Yeah, well, I'm here, but I ain't the girl I used to be."

"What are you talkin' about? Come here." I held out my hand in the darkness, reaching toward the sound of her voice. I heard her inhale, start to speak, then the air whooshed out wordlessly. I felt her fingers touch mine. She grasped my hand and pulled it up, pressing my fingers against her throat.

"Check it out for yourself."

I felt her throat move as she inhaled and exhaled to speak, but that was the only breath she took. Her throat was utterly and completely still. No breathing. No pulse.

"What the . . ."

She pulled away. "No," she said softly, almost to herself. "No, I don't suppose you could figure it out." Louder now. "So I'll have to say the words. I'm dead, Bob. Deader'n a friggin' doornail. D. E. A. D. As in no longer among the living." Softly again. "And I can't even cry about it."

"Karen . . ."

"I should've just left you where some GIs could find you, let it all be a mystery to you, let you think you'd been dreamin' or hallucinatin' or somethin', but no, hell no, I gotta come see you just to touch you one more time. Oh God, Bob, I love you and now I've screwed everything all up and I'm dead-"

"Karen!" She stopped in mid-sentence. "I don't understand any of this, and I don't care," I said.

I held out my arms in the darkness, then felt the chill of her fingers on my hands, my arms, my chest, my face. Then she was back in my embrace again. I felt whole and complete and happy, just holding her.

"You're cold," I said, not thinking of the implications.

"Yeah, well. That's the nature of us dead folks. Only time I get warm is after I've eaten. And that ain't somethin' you want to see. Trust me on that."

"I didn't mean-"

"I know. I know," she murmured into my chest. "Takes some gettin' used to, don't it? Not used to it myself, yet. Only been dead a couple of months. Seems like longer."

"How? What . . ."

"Long story short. Judy Quinlin. Remember her?"

"The weird broad with dirty black hair and strange eyes?"

"Yeah. Her. Think back. Ever see her in the daytime?"

"Well . . . I don't know. Never paid much attention to her."

"Me neither."

"She killed you?"

"Let's go for a walk. Let me sort this out, how to explain it to you."

"A walk?" I laughed. "I can't see a damned thing."

"See how I've changed? I can see just fine. I guess I'd already forgotten that I couldn't see in the dark when I was alive."

"Lighten up, lady."

"Baby, I'm havin' a real hard time with this. Be patient with me."

"I'm sorry. I just . . ."

"Yeah, I know. Let's go inside the tunnel where you can light your candle."

Karen pulled away and I heard the tunnel trap door open. I felt my way to the opening, dropped inside, found my candle and matches.

From somewhere above me she said, "Think you can crawl to your bed in the dark? I'd rather not have a light right now."

"Yeah, I think so." I crawled along in the darkness, clutching my precious candle and matches, feeling my way. Behind me I heard the soft closing of the trap door.

When I reached the pad of blankets I turned to sit on them, waiting for Karen. I sensed her presence, perhaps from the temperature change, perhaps from some stray wind current, before she spoke.

"Get your mind right for some changes in me before you light your candle."

Changes? I carefully removed a match and struck it on the matchbox. After the temporary blindness passed, I lighted the candle.

Karen was squatting at my feet, just out of reach, completely naked. She seemed pale and her dark hair was mussed, but then her hair was normally mussed and tangled under her headband. She wore nothing at all. No headband, not even any sandals. Her dark hair seemed to float around her head, and her brown eyes appeared red in the candlelight. She seemed the same other than that.

"What changes? You are absolutely beautiful."

"Changes like this . . ." She smiled and slowly, ever so slowly, two upper teeth began to extend and lengthen and . . . I awoke on my bed with Karen stroking my face and making soothing sounds.

"What the . . .? I must have passed out."

"Nah. I did that to you. I have this thing, see, what the others call an aura. I can turn it up so it's real strong or turn it off if I want. Thing is, it makes humans sleepy. I just gave you a big shot of it so you wouldn't freak out."

"The others?"

"Judy and others like her. Like me, now."

I sat up. "Karen, you telling me you're a va . . ."

"Not the V-word. Let's not use the V-word, baby. But, yes. Most of the stories are pure Hollywood bullshit, but in concept . . . well, we refer to living humans as homo sapid, not homo sapiens. Play on words. Means they have an agreeable taste."

"Jesus!"

"Baby, I don't think even Jesus can help me now."

I pulled her down on the pad, kissed her cheeks, her nose, her forehead, her lips. She opened her mouth to me and our tongues danced and darted.

"How did you do this?" I said, raising my left hand, indicating the pink marks which had once been festering wounds.

"Part of the deal. The spit that heals. So we won't leave fang marks around to show where we had supper."

"Show me your fangs again."

"I don't think you're ready for that."

"Try me. If I freak out you can knock me out again."

She smiled. Slowly, ever so slowly her mouth changed shape and fangs an inch long emerged. Her lips were stretched into a grimace, but it was not of evil. Her eyes danced.

I gently kissed each fang in turn. "Lady, you're an orthodontist's wet dream!"

She laughed and pushed me off of her, mumbling indistinctly as her fangs withdrew. "Not fair. I can't talk with my mouth all screwed up like that."

She pushed me down on the pad and we horsed around and wrestled, and the wrestling changed into a wanting with only one possible outcome.

At some point during our lovemaking her fangs slipped into my neck. Her rhythmic sucking was in tempo with the cadence of our hips. Her body warmed noticeably.

Later, while I rested sweat-drenched and breathless and Karen nestled beside me with her head on my chest, she said, "I'm sorry."

"Sorry? Sorry for what?"

"For having a snack at your banquet table."

"It's okay. Matter of fact, I thought it was exciting."

"You're weird, buster."

"Like that's a new piece of information?"

"Nope."

We rested quietly, not talking or moving except for her fingers playing idly with my chest hair. I was almost asleep when I felt her sit up.

"Que pasa, kiddo?"

"Is there anything you need, Bob? I mean besides more food and water. I know you need that."

"Boots. Or shoes or sandals or something to put on my feet. They're tender as a baby's butt. Maybe another candle. But it can wait."

"I have to go out. I have to go out right now."

"Why?"

She was silent for so long I thought she was ignoring the question. When she spoke her voice was filled with bitterness and pain.

"You might as well know all about it. Bob, I have to go find something – *somebody* – to eat."

I felt her move away from me in the darkness. When she spoke again, it was from several feet away.

"Let me tell you about this new tenderness I've got." Her voice was almost a hiss, forced between clinched teeth. "So we're layin' there together like we always do after we make it, feelin' sweet and cuddly and I got my ear to your chest listenin' to the pound of your heart slowin' down after a humpin' marathon and you know what I'm thinkin' about? You know the *only fuckin' thing* I can think about? I'm thinkin' about rippin' your throat out and takin' a bath in your sweet hot blood. How's that for after-play romance?"

And then she was gone. There was no sound, but I knew she was gone. I fumbled around, found the matches, lit the candle. I was alone in the tunnel. I sat and watched the candle burn down to a stub. She did not return. Finally, I slept.

When I awoke I felt Karen's cold body beside me. She did not move or respond when I spoke her name and touched her. I found the matches and lit my stub of a candle.

Karen rested on her back, eyes closed, utterly still. Dead. Dark brown splatters adorned the backs of her hands. Something dark crusted her short fingernails and smeared her fingers. The same dark stain formed a crude X in the center of her chest slightly to the left of her breastbone. I had to turn away. I could not look at her.

I felt off-center, groggy, a hangover morning without the booze and dope of the night before.

Her note rested on a well-worn pair of sandals with a new candle stuffed in each one. Next to that was a tree limb a couple of feet long sharpened on one end and cut off square on the other end. Next to that was a rock the size of a grapefruit.

Bob, my love –

You probably feel like shit. Sorry about that. I didn't want to talk to you any more so I turned up my aura and knocked you out. I kept you out for almost a month when I first got you here, but that was different.

About what I am . . . After they said you'd been killed my world fell apart. I just didn't care any more. Got heavy into the dope. I was so pissed at you for not splitting for Canada, and at the bastard politicians for getting us into this crazy war. But I was really crazy mad at the ones who had killed my beloved. I guess I ranted and raved a lot. Even beat up an Asian gal on campus. They told me later she was Chinese.

Anyhow, when Judy Quinlin told me she could fix it so I could kill the ones who did it to you, I guess I was ready for almost anything. At least I thought I was. The reality of it was more than I bargained for.

Judy and I and a couple of others like us came here. They love wars. Easy pickings. Me, I just wanted to get even. And I did.

When I got here your spirit spoke to me. I don't know how. I guess we're linked somehow. I was in Da Nang. It only took me a couple of days to find you. I hope you don't remember any of that. I freaked out. When I saw what they had done to you, I just flat lost it.

Anyhow, all the time I was healing your body, I kept this hope alive that somehow, some way, we could make it. Baby, it was only a dream. I am what I am and I'll be this way forever. Unless you set me free.

*Bob, my love, I hate what I am. **I hate it I hate it I hate it.** All I want to do is be really dead, to be done with it, done with the terrible hungers that drive me and the things I have to do to satisfy them. To think of existing like this forever and forever and forever - I can't take it. I know that what I'm asking – begging - you to do will maybe be the hardest thing you've ever done. But if you love me, if you truly love me, you'll do this for me.*

I guess you've seen the wood stake I cut for you. And the rock -- I couldn't find a big hammer. Honey, I don't even know if it will work. Maybe there's truth in the Hollywood stories about a wood stake through the heart. Maybe not. I guess we'll find out the first night after you do it.

Do it right now, baby, right now before you have too much time to think about it. Do it for me. Do it for us.

And what I want you to do then is, please sit with me for one night. Just hold my hand and sit with me in case it doesn't work right and I wake up scared or messed up or something.

If it works, if I stay dead like I pray I will, I want you to go back home and make some kind of a decent life for yourself. Find some sweet lady and treat her like you always treated me, like she's the best ever.

And once in a while when you're nestled like spoons in a bed that smells of your lovemaking, think kind thoughts of me, the little hippie chick who will always be yours.

*Love Forever,
Karen*

My candle was guttering out. I lighted a new one from the old one, set it in place with a few drips of hot wax on the little board I used as a candle holder, then one page at a time I burned her note. I held each page until it burned my fingers. I watched the flames and felt my tears run down into my beard.

I picked up the stake with my left hand, the rock with my right, turned and without any hesitation hammered the stake into her chest on X marks the spot.

I suppose the movies need the drama of eyes flaring open, of fangs gnashing, of evil hissing, of bodies dissolving into piles of dust and that sort of thing. The reality was that nothing at all happened other than the popping of ribs breaking as the stake passed through her chest. She responded no more than a side of beef responds to the butcher's cleaver.

I lay down beside my love, cradled her head on my arm, and there I stayed while the old candle burned out and the new candle burned down to nothingness and went out. I waited and I waited and I waited and Karen changed not at all.

At some point I slept, then awoke still holding her coldness and she still had not changed. I gently extracted myself and without striking a light, crawled to the tunnel entrance. We had forgotten to hook up the trip wire on the booby trap, which was a good thing since I didn't think about it until I was standing in the darkness.

It was dark. Karen was truly dead. I went back and lay with her, leaving the Claymore mine unarmed and the trap door open.

They must have seen the open trap door. I heard whispers at the entrance and roused myself from my grief. Down the length of the entry passageway I saw faint sunlight from the open trap door, and shadows cast by movement at the entrance.

Whispers. Moving shadows. Then clearly, "Shit! A Claymore!" and the shadows disappeared.

I sat up, leaned to lightly kiss Karen's cold lips, put on the sandals she had brought, and prepared to be rescued.

More whispers, more shadows at the entrance.

"You stupid bastards," I said. "If I'd set the trip wire you'd be tellin' your story to Jesus."

The shadows evaporated like smoke.

I crawled to the end of the passageway and squatted below the opening.

"I'm an American," I said, raising my empty hands into the open air. "I'm comin' out. You shoot me, it'll really piss me off."

I crawled into the open and stood, hands raised above my head, palms forward. It occurred to me then that all I had on was a pair of sandals. I had been without clothing for so long being naked seemed normal.

At first I thought I had imagined it, that I was all alone in the jungle with my insanity. Then I saw part of a face and the muzzle of an M-16. Then another and another. In their grease paint and camouflage netting, the Recon patrol blended with the dense underbrush.

They had questions. Where I'd been. How I'd escaped from Charlie. I made up a story which seemed to satisfy them.

"Gimmie a grenade," I said.

"Why?"

"Just gimmie a fuckin' grenade."

Wordlessly, one Marine handed me a fragmentation grenade. I pulled the pin. "Fire in the hole," I said as I leaned into the entrance, released the lever, and tossed the grenade down the tunnel. As I rolled away from the trap door Marines hit the dirt and rolled for cover. The explosion was a muffled *whump*. Dust and debris filled the air. The roof caved in, burying my love.

Three chopper rides later, I was on a hospital ship somewhere off Da Nang. They clucked over me and pampered me and poked and prodded and weighed and measured and shook their heads. I'd lost fifty pounds, but was healthy as a horse. The spit that heals, Karen had called it. Strong stuff. Almost four decades later and I've never had even a head cold.

Thirty-eight years of sameness and emptiness and loneliness. Thirty-eight years of "what if" and doubt and regret. Thirty-eight years of wondering if maybe, somehow, we could have made it work.

This morning I awoke in tangled, sweat-drenched sheets. In my dream Karen had come to me, bringing vivid primary colors of love into my monochrome existence. Between kisses she explained that the wood stake had dissolved in the perpetual dampness of the rain forest, that the old myths were only partly true, that she was free from the bondage of the stake.

It was only a dream. I only imagined the fecund scent of her body in my bedroom, imagined the fading pink marks on my throat when I looked in the mirror to shave. It must have been a dream.

But tonight, tonight . . . I'll leave a note by my bedside.

Awaken me, my darling. Awaken me to be with you forever, to love forever.