Hello and welcome to VT Untapped, a podcast from the Vermont Folklife Center that explores the state through the voices of its own residents. I’m Mary Wesley.

I can hardly believe it’s time for our THIRD annual “Meet Cute” episode. Our Valentine’s tradition here at VT Untapped is to share little love stories about how people first met their significant other, the kind of story known in the movie biz as the “meet cute.” But this time--like most things this year--it’s a little different...

We’re coming up on one year of living through the Covid-19 pandemic, and as a part of our Listening in Place project, we’ve been focused on hearing from Vermonters about their experiences of this tumultuous time, in their own voices.

We know that Vermonters have continued to cultivate new romantic connections during this time but, to be honest, we paused a bit around asking people to tell us their touching stories of new flowering love in the midst of the pandemic. Would anyone really want to put a spotlight on a newly forged connection by sitting down for an interview with us?

So instead, our 2021 Meet Cute focuses on two themes that have consistently emerged through Listening in Place: resilience and human connections. Less of a “meet cute,” this year’s February episode of VT Untapped explores Covid as a catalyst for strengthening an existing relationship—a story about love across distance and across borders.

Everest Witman and Marjolène Forest, known to her friends as “Marjo,” first met late one night in 2014 at a gas station in Burlington, Vermont. They were both in search of food after attending a contra dance - he was in the band, she was on the dance floor. Their first conversation focused on the relative virtues of various cheese-flavored snacks.

Everest and Marjo’s connection quickly moved beyond cheesy chips, and fueled by their mutual love of traditional dance and music they began a long-distance relationship, Everest lived in Brattleboro, VT, Marjo in Montreal, so crossing the Vermont/Quebec border became a regular affair.

And that, dear listeners, is pretty much all the “meet cute” you’re going to get this year!

Five years later after finishing his degree at the University of Vermont, Everest moved to Montréal so they could live together and a year after that, at the beginning of 2020, they hopped on a plane to cross another border together - into Australia. Taking advantage of the “working holiday visa” available to both US and Canadian citizens they planned a year-long stay to experience life down under.

As you can imagine, these plans were interrupted by the pandemic. In mid-March as Covid cases started cropping up across the globe Everest and Marjo began receiving daily barrages of text messages from their mothers urging them to return home. The question was, could they go home together?
Everest Witman: Originally we had wanted to come back to North America at the same time but the border, borders everywhere were closing, which meant that Marjo being a Canadian citizen and me being an American citizen, I had to go back to the US and she had to go back to Canada. We couldn't go back to a country together, anywhere.

So they bought separate plane tickets. They had sublet their place in Montreal for their year abroad so each returned to their family homes, Everest was headed for Brattleboro, VT, Marjo for Shefford, Quebec.

Marjolène Forest: It was kind of a no-brainer because we had to do it, um, but then it was also very hard not knowing how long that would be like. At first we thought that we were like, OK, well, we'll do this. And then in about a month, we'll be able to see each other because then covid is going to get better and will just be able to see each other. Um, but I guess that, um...That's also when Everest proposed, I guess?

Proposed? When I interviewed them about this story, Everest and Marjo were so caught up in reliving the confusion and stress of navigating their unplanned departure from Australia that they almost forgot to mention this one, bright moment from their last few days there together.

Everest Witman: Yeah, so we didn't we didn't we didn't know how long it would be before we'd see each other again, which was very difficult. But also I had already been planning to propose to Marjo at some point during our travels in Australia. So I was at that point of knowing that I was going to propose at some point I was looking for the right moment. And so I decided to propose before we would be separated, uh, just because I thought that that would, that would somehow make the separation easier for us. Honestly, it wasn't it wasn't anything that fancy, it just kind of slipped out when we were talking one night.

Marjolène Forest: I mean I was like, “Are you joking? Are you serious?? And then he said, “Yeah, I’m serious!” And then I was just like, “Yes.” I mean we had been talking about getting married for a while. Like, the conversation had been there where, we knew it would happen at some point, so it was not like it was a big surprise that, oh, wait, do I really want to get married or something? That subject had been, um, cleared out, like a while ago Yeah, there was no ring.

Everest Witman: Yeah there was no ring...

Marjolène Forest: There is still no ring yet.

Everest Witman: Nothing, nothing fancy like that, except it meant a lot to us to, to actually be engaged.

cello transition

Everest Witman: I don't, I actually don't remember the moment that we said goodbye, I remember it being, like, very painful to fall asleep the night before and know that we would be separating and then I would be all by myself the day after. For another 24 hours. And then fly back by myself after that. If I somehow if I managed to get on my flight and all went well. So after we came back to North America, I was in Brattleboro and Marjo was in Shefford, Quebec at her mom's. I was at my mom's. And so we spent, probably I think, three months separated in those respective places. We got back home.
We isolated from our family members and, uh, dealt with the jet lag and spent a lot of time doing the thing everyone else did when covid started, like tons of tons of video chatting with friends.

**Marjolène Forest:** So many.

**Everest Witman:** So we were we were both going to bed at like 4:00 a.m. in the morning, uh, video chatting each other and our friends before that every single night. So we did that each for two weeks.

**Marjolène Forest:** I guess that the beginning of our isolation was also talking a lot about, um, getting ready for our wedding, even though we were only planning to get, well well to get married a year and a half after we got back.

**Everest Witman:** Yeah, so our idea was that we were engaged and then we would get married as soon as Covid was no longer a problem and we were reunited. So one of the big, like, saving graces of that period was the excitement of kind of planning for our future wedding. So we, like, set the date really far out. We still haven't hit the date that we've we had set and started like compiling a guest list, doing graphic design for invitations and things, uh, thinking about logistics, like doing all that wedding planning stuff just because we had all this free time. And it was very exciting. And we also spent a lot of time calling our friends and telling them that we were engaged. So, we did a lot of that.

So we waited for a very long time and watched the news closely about the border situation. The idea was that I was going to go back up to Canada as soon as I possibly could. The border closure had been set for like a month out and they kept on renewing it. And so that was the situation. And it was all a matter of speculation, when are they going to open the border finally when it finally gets under control because of lockdowns or whatever. So we each spent three months apart, which was long, already much longer than we would have liked to spend apart. And I mean, I personally was battered by a sense of hopelessness because it wasn't sure how long it was going to be still. Like it could be another six months possibly. And that was very difficult.

**Marjolène Forest:** So on June 8, the government well, the two governments sort of, um, took an arrangement together that, um...

**Everest Witman:** Well, the Canadian government just decided to make an exception for spouses of Canadian citizens and perhaps permanent residents, I don’t know. So spouses in the sense that people who are married or people who are de facto, I think “common law partners” is that is the correct term in English for that. In French, you would just say "conjointé". Uh...

**Marjolène Forest:** Correct. Yes, they were able to cross the border and to go visit their people and so we thought that it would work for Everest to cross the border. We still had been dating for, like then it was like five years and five years and a half, so we were like, OK, we're going to try this.
Everest Witman: So that was in May. So it had been exactly a year that since we had moved in together, except that we had been separated for the past three months at that point. But it looked on paper like we could we could present the case that we were a common law couple and then it would work for me to cross the border. And we actually called the border and talked about our situation to the border guard there. And they said that it wouldn't be a problem for me to come. I just had to provide certain documentation, which I gathered up very dutifully. I had a huge pile of evidence, like to document our relationship and document our cohabitation and spousal relationship and all that sort of stuff.

With his tome of documents in hand Everest and his mom decided to make the almost three hour drive from Brattleboro up to the Quebec border.

And so I got my mom to drive me up to the border a few days from then. Like on a Tuesday we drove up. And when we were 20 minutes from the border in Vermont, her car started overheating. And so we had to pull off the side of the road, wait for it to cool down, drive again, to get to the next exit, pull off the side of the road, for like 30 minutes each time. Then eventually we decided that it was just not possible for us to make it to the border, even though we were like, I don't know, four exits away. So we left the car on the side of the road. We had it towed to a garage. And we had one of my mom's friends who was in the area pick us up and drive us to the border. Do you remember what the name of the border crossing is? Is it St. Albans?

Marjolène Forest: It's Stanstead.

Everest Witman: So this is at the Derby Line-Stanstead crossing, which is a one lane border. We wanted to go to a small one because we thought it would be better. And so I had to walk down like a long bridge and down a hill and then walk up to the window in the car lane with all my stuff and stop to talk to the border agents, there.

Marjolène Forest: So I was parked in the place where they normally search your car when you're about to just cross the border, and so that's where I was parked. And then, um, so I could see from my mirror behind me, Everest just next to the cabin, um, where there were like a bunch of guys behind him. So obviously, like people were just finishing up work. I think it was around like 5:00 pm or something like that. People were trying to just get back home as soon as possible. And then there's Everest, who's stopping everyone, um, from being asked so many questions.

And so I just waited in the car and I was just looking in the mirror and I could see Everest just there. Like, I could see that they were going back and forward to going inside and coming outside to him and asking him a bunch of questions until I was like, OK, well, he's just coming. And so I looked and then it was not Everest at my door. It was the border officer. And so I just put my mask on and then I rolled my window and I was like, "Hi." And then she's like, "Yeah, so, your fiancee was denied entry and, but you're allowed to get like five minutes to talk to him if you want. I'm just going to be there. I'll look at the woods or something like I'm not going to listen to whatever you're telling each other, but that's all I can do." And so I just walked out of the car and then I saw Everest and um, I guess we were both crying.

Everest Witman: Yeah, so basically at that point, both of us were crying so much that we couldn't really have a conversation. So we didn't really take advantage of our five
minutes. So then I, I told the border agent that, that we were done talking and then I took my passport back and then I walked back to, to my mom, who had been waiting for me. And then I had to walk through the US border again because technically I'd left the country. So I had a form in my hand that said I've been denied entry into Canada. And so I entered the US on foot again. And then, uh, I was just like, you know, crushed with the, like, most intense feeling of like defeat and hopelessness that I think I've experienced ever in in memory. And so our car was totally wrecked and we had to go stay with my mom's friend in northern Vermont that night and find a way to get back, back home.

Marjolène Forest: Then I went back home. I just couldn't eat anything, I was just hiding in my room and then people started messaging us. I mean, we didn't tell a lot of people that he was denied entry because it was just hard to face the whole thing. But then a few people started sending us, um, articles, like journal articles saying that, American citizen cannot come to Canada either by car or by flight, but Canadian citizens are allowed to fly to the US.

Everest Witman: Leading up to this, uh, we, we had, also thought about the possibility of like, OK, maybe there's a way for us to get married without both being in the same country. So we had thought about going to the library at the Derby Line in Stanstead. There's a there's a library there, which is both in Canada and the US. And our thought was if we go to the library, we could get married there without both physically being in the same country or do something like getting married in international waters or something like that. So we had these crazy plans and then we realized that Canadian citizens could still fly to the US because for some reason, the US didn't, never closed their air border to Canadians. And so we found out that Marjo could fly to the US.

Marjolène Forest: So I called the député... the federal deputy from my county to validate this information because I wanted to make sure that, well, I wanted to explain our situation and see if there was something that the government could do for our stories. And so I said, well, I read this in the news. Is that true? Do you think that I could just fly to the US, get married, and then just come back by foot and then us being, us being married would mean that we would be part of the exception of people that can actually cross the border. She wasn't sure if that was going to work, but she was like, well, if you end up doing it, just let me know and then I can share this information with other couples that are in the same situation as you.

Everest Witman: So we bought Marjo a plane ticket as soon as we figured out our plan, had her fly down, just trying to, like, get through all the, like, hoops of getting married as fast as possible so we could cross the border just before they changed anything. So you flew down and then we made some appointments. Went to the town clerk's office, got the documentation...

Marjolène Forest: The day before we got married, I was like, Everest, we should go to the store and I'm going to try to find a, uh, a pretty dress. And so I found one at a pretty cool store in Brattleboro. I was very happy. I still, I actually love this dress. Um, yeah. So I had this dress and then Everest dressed up a little bit.

Everest Witman: Yeah, and so we got dressed up. We took some some photos with just like a cell phone on a tripod with a little like remote as like wedding photos in, in my driveway on my mom's property. And then we, then we...then that day we drove up to Lise's house and she married us. Just on her land, just just just the three of us. And then
we were, we went, we took our, like, signed marriage certificate to the, to the clerk's office. And they gave us a marriage certificate the day after and the day after that, we drove back up to the border again.

**Marjolène Forest:** And then when we got to the border, we got the same officer that denied entry the week before to Everest.

**Everest Witman:** Yeah, so there were two, so I had seen two border offers. Two border agents: a woman and a man who had denied me entry. And the man was there and he recognized us.

**Marjolène Forest:** And he said, “You again!?”

**Everest Witman:** He was just incredulous that Marjo had somehow gotten into the US.

**Marjolène Forest:** He was like, “How did you get there?” And I said, “Well, I flew.” He's like, “Oh, they got you in?” “Yeah.”

**Marjolène Forest:** Yeah, so that was so I was kind of funny and then, um, so he. He took our information and he was like, “oh, yeah, well, so show me your documents, like how why are you trying to cross the border?” And I was like, “Well, I flew to the US, we got married, and now here's our certificate.” And then he said, “Can I see the certificate?” And he had it in his hand. He was just blown away.

**Everest Witman:** He was definitely dumbfounded and not like able to process the information on the document in front of him. It was really, really funny. And I once again had all my all my possessions. And Marjo had all the stuff that she'd flown with, and we were like in the car lane with cars behind us blocking the only only lane at that border. So we went inside.

**Marjolène Forest:** Yeah. So they were asking us the same questions. “Where are you going to stay? Where is your quarantine?” And so we had a letter from my mom saying that we were going to quarantine there and that she was able to give us supplies while we were being there so that we wouldn't have to go to the store or anything and that we wouldn't have any visitors and everything. So it's really a thing that you were saying under [Aside in French: serment?]?

**Everest Witman:** Under oath.

**Marjolène Forest:** Oat?

**Everest Witman:** Oath.

**Marjolène Forest:** Oate?
**Everest Witman:** Oath. It's OK. I can say it.

**Marjolène Forest:** Ok. OK, so...

**Everest Witman:** We're going to run it through Google Translate.

**Marjolène Forest:** So you're saying this things to, we say in French "serment," that you're going to follow the rules and that you're not going to have any visitors and everything, and that if you're not following those rules, then you might get arrested and do prison for about three years or something. So it's very like, all of that part was very stressful. But then it was yet also very funny because when they got our information and they had to call in to make sure that it was OK for them to let us through. And so he was like, yeah. So we've got this couple. They just got married yesterday conveniently. And then they're like, yeah, we don't see anything wrong about their, their, their documents. So if you say yes, then we're just going to let them go. And so they said yes.

**Everest Witman:** Mhm. Yeah. They had to check in with the higher-ups. We did our homework very, very well and had documents for every like question they asked us.

**Marjolène Forest:** And then right before we left the border, um, the border officer that had denied entry to Everest the first time, um, he asked me to go outside with him to set out to write all of our information for the quarantine check. They were calling us like about three times during those 14 days, also sending two emails to make sure that we respect, um, the rules about quarantine. And he was like, so it's worked like, it worked it out for you guys to be able to have Everest cross the border and I was like, yeah, thank you. And then so he was really acknowledging that the whole situation was not great for him either. But...

**Everest Witman:** I think that they were very happy to be able to let us through. And when they denied me entry to Canada, I don't think that they were happy to have to do that. I mean, they were doing their jobs very well and very considerately, and they have to have to follow the rules and if that means not letting a person in, that's what they have to do. So I don't have any, any hard feelings towards those officers for for not letting me in there doing their jobs very, very well. Uh, more angry about the rules which had me blocked from coming in that first time.

Everest and Marjo got married on June 24, 2020 and were both able to cross the border the next day. There are still uncertainties in their future plans, but at least now they are able to confront them together.

**Everest Witman:** So the wedding is still on the calendar, but we're definitely now more looking at the possibility of rescheduling it to the year after.

**Marjolène Forest:** Because being both Canadian and American, we want to be able to have everyone at our wedding. We already had the wedding with just the two of us and the minister, and that's enough. And like we had a wedding with masks. The next one is
just going to be people partying together and just having fun. Um, so if we have to push it another year, then we'll just do it like, a week after we were done with quarantine, after we had gotten back to Canada, I did write back to my deputy saying that, um, well, I had flown to the US and then we got married. And then the day after we got our certificate and everything. And then I, um, we both crossed back by foot to Canada. And so I told her and then a few weeks after that, she she...She wrote back to me in email. So I received an email from her saying that she, um, had been using our situation to advise other couples that were in the same situation.

*cello transition*

**Everest Witman:** I still...I still like, oh remember, like I forget that we used to be separated for a very long time and then and then I'm grateful that we've managed to, to be together and now we've been in the same place for a solid seven months straight. So that's really great.

A really big thank you to Everest and Marjolène for sharing their story with us. We did this interview over Zoom but since Everest often records himself as a musician he was able to set up some good microphones to record their end of the conversation so thanks to Everst as well for the production help! They recorded the interview *together* from their apartment in Montreal. The subletter moved out at the end of December so they are now, truly back home. To see some pictures from their life together and find out where you can hear Everest's music check out our show notes at www.vtfolklife.org/untapped

The Vermont Folklife Center’s *Listening in Place* project is an ongoing effort to maintain and cultivate community, listen to others, and document our extraordinary daily lives together during the pandemic and beyond. We are doing this by continuing to do our own, staff-directed fieldwork, and we are supporting individuals and communities in their own documentary projects.

If you’d like to learn more about making your own recordings or interviews and adding them to the growing *Listening in Place* collection in the VFC archive please find us at www.vtfolklife.org/listening.

If you liked listening to this show please tell others to look us up and subscribe. You can find VT Untapped on Apple podcasts, Google Play, Stitcher, Spotify and TuneIn Radio.

This episode of VT Untapped has been made possible in part by the National Endowment for the Humanities: Democracy demands wisdom. It was produced by me, Mary Wesley. Our executive producer, who also happens to be the VFC archivist, is Andy Kolovos. The cello music in this show was recorded by Dave Haughey.

*Upbeat cello plays and fades out.*

Thanks for listening.