

# THE WOMAN IN THE JUNGLE

(An excerpt from *A Dream of Heaven*)

By Michael FitzGordon

Through the bamboo bars of his cage he could see a beautiful woman in the jungle. She was beckoning to him with graceful hands. She was lovely in her white silk Vietnamese ao dai. He thought he knew her name, a French name, but it escaped him. She was pleading with him to come to her. He felt confused, as though he were regaining consciousness, as though he were underwater and viewing the world wavering and wobbling through the surface of the water. He could only see the light above the surface in a small circle, as if he were looking into the world above through a tunnel of light. He thought it was the index of refraction that did that, but he did not think he was underwater. Maybe he was looking into the next world, but his vision was limited and distorted by some kind of index of refraction. He shook his head; it hurt. His mind was not right. He was not even sure what year it was. 1970? He was suffocating in the fetid humidity of this cage in the jungle. There was a lovely woman in the jungle. It was as if she were the love of his life. Somehow he had to get to her. Somehow he had to get out of this bamboo cage to get to her. They could escape together. But this thought was interrupted when he saw her transform into a leopard and flow silently into the jungle. He felt a great surge of confusion and fear. The fear woke him

with a start, his heart pounding and his hands gripping the bamboo bars of his cage. He had fallen asleep that way, his forehead resting on the bamboo above his hands. He looked into the jungle where he had dreamed she was, and he thought he saw her again. He could not be certain whether he was dreaming or not. Or perhaps she was a ghost calling him to join her on the other side, in death.

"The woman," he whispered, pointing into the jungle for the benefit of the Vietnamese man in the cage with him.

The man was suppressing moans of pain, and did not care much about what the American was seeing. The man shook his head.

"No," the man said. "Don't look. If you let yourself look too long at the woman in the jungle, you will die," he said. "She will take you. Don't look."

The green, clammy jungle pressed in around the clearing. The air was hot and humid, and felt like wet cotton in his lungs. He heard strange animal calls in the jungle. The clearing was small, with the trees and vines entwining together into a dome above. The light that filtered through the canopy was as green as if through stained glass, or through the surface of water thick with algae. The air itself seemed as green and viscous as slime in pools of stagnant water. It felt as though just breathing the air

would infect you, make you turn green too if you stayed here long enough. Like leaves and other things that used to be alive, rotting on the floor of the jungle, you would die and become a part of the rich dirt. The air was fertile with the odor of rotting life. The life in things was constantly being transferred, in dying, from one living thing to another. The jungle was full of the slow and sometimes sudden roar and rush of dying and living. Fear stuck in Jack's throat like a clot.

The Vietnamese man in the cage with him moaned again. He was dreaming something bad. As sick, weary, and hopeless as Jack was, he nonetheless was aware of the bizarre irony of the man's nightmare. What dream could be worse than what they were living? They were locked in a bamboo cage, starving, diseased, and at night listening to feral hogs in the jungle eating the remains of dead prisoners. He tried to remember who the Vietnamese man was. There was something familiar about him. He was Nguyen somebody. Nguyen Ai Quoc? The man moaned again, more loudly. Alarmed, Jack looked across the clearing to see if the Viet Cong guerillas had heard. Four of them were squatting on the ground as they played cards and smoked cigarettes. They looked up when they heard the man moaning.

Jack nudged the man to wake him and stop him from moaning, but it was too late. The soldiers spoke among each other, and then rose and walked toward the cage. The soldiers were smoking, talking, and laughing as they approached. They were going to have some fun. They unlocked the padlock on the cage and dragged the Vietnamese man out, leaving Jack behind. Jack was sick with dread at what was about to happen. He could not clear his mind. He could not remember who the Vietnamese man was, but he was somebody Jack cared about a great deal. Was he a brother, or a friend? Jack was trying desperately to remember. It seemed odd that he would think

the Vietnamese man was a brother. He had to remember the name. Nguyen Cao Van?

There was a lone and bare tree trunk in the middle of the clearing. All the branches had been cut away to leave only a Y-shaped fork about twelve feet above the ground. The soldiers tied the end of a rope around the man's wrists and threw the other end through the fork in the tree trunk. Then one of them pulled on the rope until the prisoner was hanging by his wrists with his toes barely touching the ground. The Vietnamese man moaned in pain. The soldiers laughed.

One soldier, the political officer, produced a bayonet. He picked up a palm leaf and walked over to Jack in the cage. He showed Jack how easily the blade cut the leaf. Yes, it was as sharp as a razor. The man shaved his cheek with the blade for Jack's benefit.

In perfect English the political officer said, "Ho Chi Minh wrote that the peasant is 'crucified on the bayonet of capitalist civilization and on the cross of prostituted Christianity.'"

Jack's heart was pounding with fear at the insanity and horror. He knew what was going to happen now. The soldier walked back to the man on the tree. The soldier brandished the blade. He was milking every moment for as much drama, terror, and pleasure as he could. He was torturing Jack at the same time he was torturing the man on the tree. Jack knew what the soldiers were going to do, and the man on the tree knew too. The soldiers were going to skin him alive. The soldier bent over to make the first incision in the man's side. The man on the tree prayed. He shouted for God to help him to suffer well and to die quickly. Jack could not bear what he was seeing. He was going to black out or go blind. He wanted to scream, but his fear was so great that the scream caught in his throat. He saw the blade cutting the skin and the blood starting to come out. A strangled scream started to escape from Jack.

"Jack, stop it! Stop it! Wake up!"

Victoria was shouting at him from the bedroom door. She was ready to run because once years earlier when he was waking up from a bad dream, he had thought she was an enemy soldier and had tried to choke her. So she stood and watched from the doorway. He came out of sleep gasping for air, his heart pounding. He was drenched in cold sweat. He sat up abruptly, wild-eyed, and swung his feet to the floor like he was going to run, but he sat there panting and trying to slow his heart. He was back in the year 2000, but he still had that underwater feeling. Victoria

had gone from the room. She probably went to get some cognac. He was still sitting there trying to understand the dream when she returned with two snifters of cognac. She handed him one and sat on the couch facing the fireplace. She turned on the fireplace with the remote control. Flames

licked up around the faux logs. She swirled the cognac in her glass. He heard the air conditioner kick on, dueling with the fireplace.

"Don't sit there behind me," she said.

He got off the bed and joined her on the couch.

"You used to have bad dreams like this maybe once a month," she said. "But it's getting to be almost every night now."

He didn't answer.

"I'm not getting my sleep," she said, "with you thrashing around."

"For a moment I thought you cared," he said.

"Why is a wealthy psychologist like you having bad dreams?"

"Middle class," he corrected her. "Psychologists are seldom wealthy. It's generally not a

lucrative career choice."

"Middle-class psychologist married to a wealthy socialite, then."

"Okay, you want me to quit being a psychologist and live on your money."

"You do anyway. Your salary doesn't pay for my hors d'oeuvres."

"Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?"

"You love it when I'm mean to you."

"It makes me forget my dreams. Thank you so much."

"Maybe I can get you to quit your no-class job and do something lucrative."

"It has much class. The Tijerina Center is a charitable foundation for the treatment of traumatized combat veterans."

"And Smith funds you because he saw Tijerina die trying to save another soldier," Victoria said. She had heard it a million times.

"Do you have any idea what it's like to see a person die that way?"

"That's right, no greater love," Victoria said sarcastically, her cynicism absolute and final. She could not stand people who wrapped themselves in the flag.

"And Smith can't even get into the San Antonio Country Club, right?" Jack said, imitating the next thing she usually said in this conversation.

"Right!" she said.

"Maybe he doesn't want to be in the country club," he said.

"I'm sure he affects that," she said. "How boring! Déclassé."

Jack did not answer. He had heard it a million times. They were swimming in mutual contempt, but he seemed unable to stop it.

"But, Jack, such a no-class charity, talking to those veterans who didn't have the means or

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the brains to avoid combat!"

"Guys like me."

"I told you not to go. And now here you are, years later, having nightmares."

He knew where she was going with this.

"I don't have enough symptoms to be diagnosed with PTSD," he said.

"And denial is a river in Egypt."

"I'm functional. I'm getting through the day okay."

"And why do I find you scary?"

"Have I ever hit you, hit the wall, threatened to hit you, cursed at you, or even yelled at you? Haven't I been most patient and avoidant of conflict with you?"

"What about the time you almost choked me?"

"One time. I was asleep, having a nightmare, and when you tried to wake me up I thought you were an enemy soldier. I am deeply sorry. I told you how to avoid that in the future, and it has never happened again. And what about the time you got drunk and pointed a gun at me? You never apologized for that! Shouldn't I be in fear that you are going to shoot me someday, probably some night when I am asleep? And you won't ever apologize because you want me to have that fear."

She remained silent and smirked, as he knew she would. She thought it was cute. She thought it was okay and clever and empowering for a woman to abuse a man, and she thought that no one would ever even see it as abuse, precisely because she was a woman.

"So I shouldn't be scary to you at all," he said.

"Yes, you're definitely scary," she said.

"When I got drunk and pointed that gun at you, there was an instant when I saw something in your eyes that sobered me up in a New York minute. I remember thinking I was the one with the gun, and you were the one who should be terrified, not me."

His heart skipped a beat as he recalled that

moment.

"I don't want to talk about this anymore," he said, and stood and went into the bath. She followed him. He went into the shower and turned it on. She sat at the vanity and watched her face in the mirror as she spoke.

"Are you trying to wash off this dirty conversation, your dirty dream, or your dirty status as a Vietnam veteran?"

"You really should," he said over the sound of the water, "go to graduate school in psychology."

"I've already forgotten more psychology than they taught you at the university."

"Your arrogance is a defense against the deep-seated insecurity that accompanies unearned wealth."

"Oh, I earned it, buddy. I most certainly did. Being married to that man. Talk about nightmares. Would you like another cognac?"

"It doesn't take us long to polish off a cognac."

"You're making me feel insecure."

"Yes, please, darling, on the rocks this time."

After the shower he went and sat by the fire again. She returned with their brandy. She watched him sip his brandy and stare into the fire. At fifty-three he was in better physical condition than most men of twenty-five. His brown eyes were somehow intense yet kind when he was looking at her, but most often she felt he was looking past or through her. His curly brown hair had a little gray at the temples. She wondered how he could be so handsome, such a physical trophy as a husband, and yet she did not feel much love for him anymore. He had been so kind as a young man before he had gone to war. There had been nothing scary in him. He had been kind, but reserved. Now he was scary, and reserve had turned into a distance so great that she sometimes thought she were looking at him through the wrong end of a telescope. There was hardly any sense in divorcing him. He had no money.

"Which dream was it this time?" she asked.

"Prisoner of war torture," he said.

"So what did you do in Vietnam to give you such bad dreams?"

"Nothing. I've told you before. My brother Jeremy died, I guess. I don't remember much about it. Other than Jeremy's death, I was fortunate enough to have a fairly uneventful year as an advisor in Go Dai district between Saigon and the Parrot's Beak. That was thirty years ago. It was so boring I can hardly remember it."

"If you tell me you'll have to kill me."

"No, no, no, it was nothing; it was boring!"

"You don't remember much about how Jeremy died," she said.

Jack felt a surge of anxiety, and his heart skipped some beats, but he squelched his anxiety.

"I guess you have a point," Jack said.

There were a few moments of silence until he realized she was looking at his big toe with the missing toenail. He pulled his foot back out of her sight.

"Your toe is ugly," she said.

"I think I dropped an ammo can on it in Vietnam."

"I know," she said.

"Now," he said, "you're going to ask me again why I'm having such bad dreams. I'll tell you it's because of listening to all the horrific stories of my combat veteran clients. You'll tell me that my nightmares are a sign from Mother Nature or God that I should quit this job as a counselor to traumatized veterans. I should forget psychology. I should forget veterans. I should forget pain and suffering. I should golf, shoot skeet, and join the polo club, the ski club, and the board of the Art Institute."

"Don't forget the butcher metaphor," she said.

"Okay, I won't. You're like civilians who enjoy eating meat, but who think butchers, who kill, clean, and chop up animals, are crude people who need to become more refined. Yet they're the ones who deliver the goods."

"So let's see if I have the metaphor straight. You mean to say that I think veterans are crude and low-class, yet they're the ones who paid for my freedom and prosperity with their lives."

"You forgot the part," he said, "about combat veterans being the ones who chop people up with bullets, knives, and axes."

"And deliver the goods."

He didn't answer. He was lost in the flames, realizing his spirit had never returned from the war.

She knew he had slipped away from her again. She interrupted his reverie.

"Darling, would you be so kind as to sleep in the guest room? Your dreams are interfering with mine."

"Maybe this is another bad dream I'm having right now," he said. "Maybe I dream about the war because I'd be happier being back there again."

"Thank God we don't have children," she said. She returned to the bed and turned off the flames with the remote, leaving him sitting in the darkness listening to the soft rush of the air conditioning still battling the heat from the fireplace. On the one hand, he agreed that it was good that they did not have children in their sick marriage, but on the other hand, her remark was of course sadistic, because she knew how much it hurt him that they did not have children. After a moment he got up and went down the hall to the guest room.

When he fell asleep, he was in the bamboo cage again. The woman in the jungle was beckoning to him. His heart was aching for her.

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