In this particular state forestry enterprise on an island off the northeastern coast of Vietnam where nearly 90 percent of the workers are single women, there is not one person who is unaware of the legend of Tan Dac.

It goes like this. Tan Dac was a courageous general under the command of Tan Thuat.* The general was famous for his lightning-like attacks against the French colonialists. When Tan Thuat’s insurrection was finally defeated, Tan Dac led the tattered remnants of his guerilla group to Cat Bac Island. They established a base camp near the passage to the northeastern coast, and from there destroyed many of the enemy’s ships. The guerillas were young, healthy, and strong, and hatred for the French invaders boiled in their hearts and strengthened their determination to seek revenge for Tan Thuat. They slipped through the jungles and over the mountains, set ambushes and booby traps on the slopes, and lured ships into the mouth of the river. They suffered hunger and cold with patience and

*Nguyen Thien Thuat led an insurrection against the French in the north of Vietnam, 1885–1889.
they were more than willing to sacrifice themselves for their cause. Tan Dac was pleased with his men, and they regarded him as a father and almost as a god.

Then one day near the village of Viet Hoa, Tan Dac came upon an old woman and her daughter. The old woman was on her knees gnawing and tearing at the grass and trying to push her daughter’s face into the earth. Seeing her supplicant’s posture, Tan Dac asked her to come closer and tell him what was wrong. He was surprised and then enraged to discover that the woman’s daughter had been raped by three of his guerillas. In front of the two women and the whole band, the three disgraced men were beheaded. Their unlucky heads rolled on the ground, leaving three lines of blood, like red snakes. Tan Dac wanted to be sure his guerillas understood that they had only one right: to defeat the enemy. All personal desires, all other needs and hungers, had to be eliminated.

The remaining guerillas obeyed their leader without hesitation or reservation. They continued to suffer hunger and cold, and tried desperately to stifle the normal sexual desires of young men. And in reality, in the jungle and mountains of this island, it was rare to encounter anyone who could stir such desire.

It wasn’t long after the beheadings when the guerillas came across an old man on his way to pick bamboo shoots. He was carrying a large, bulging jute-fabric bag, which he offered to Tan Dac’s men. Ca Dinh, one of Tan Dac’s lieutenants, opened the bag and looked inside. His face grew pale. He let the bag drop to the ground, then roared, “Betrayed! Betrayed!”
“What do you mean?” Tan Dac peered inside the bag, shocked at his friend’s reaction.

“My dear sir.” Ca Dinh trembled with anger as he leaned over to whisper into Tan Dac’s ear. “My dear sir, don’t you see what’s in this bag?”

Without looking again, Tan Dac said, “All I saw were two jackfruits and a bamboo shoot.”

“Exactly. Two jackfruits and a bamboo shoot. They signify the male organ, sir.”

It is said that the roar that burst from Tan Dac’s throat then echoed among the trees and shook their branches. He ordered his men to chase down the old man. They caught him by Red Fish Lake. Without a word, Tan Dac drew his sword and struck through the old man’s neck as easily as if he were slashing at the wind. The old man’s head flew in one direction, and his poor body fell down near the edge of the lake, dyeing the foam at the water’s fringe a deep red. The two jackfruits and the bamboo shoot were thrown down on the bank next to the body. Boiling with anger and humiliation, pushed by their own stifled, thwarted desires, the men rushed upon the fruit and the bamboo and chopped and tore into them, smashing them, slicing open the jackfruit and tearing out its seeds, which were strewn all over the lakeshore like coins. In their hearts, the guerillas could only hold their hatred and their need for revenge. As Tan Dac had told them, all other hopes, sentiments, and desires had to be killed.

The unfortunate old man’s children and grandchildren soon heard the terrible news. They took up their spears and their
guns and cut their way through the jungle to chase the guerillas. Ironically, destiny led the two groups to come face to face by Red Fish Lake. Again, there was bloody fighting between two unequal forces. Again bodies were slashed and mutilated. By the end of the battle, only two of the old man’s grandchildren were left alive. One escaped, but the other was captured and led to Tan Dac. He smiled at the young man and said, “Don’t you understand that we’re fulfilling our duty to the country by doing our best to kill the French?”

“Yes, I know.”

“Aren’t you ashamed of losing your country to the French? Join us, and you can wash away your shame.”

“It wasn’t the French who destroyed my family,” the young man said stubbornly. He looked straight ahead, his gaze unblinking. “Who will avenge them?”

He shared the same fate as his grandfather. His body too was thrown into Red Fish Lake. Soon the brackish water of that lake was said to be cursed with blood. When the weather turned cold, schools of red fish swarmed up and covered the surface of the water like a red sail. In the eyes of the locals, this was the innocent blood of the unjustly killed, blood which couldn’t be separated from the water, no matter how many seasons it froze or melted.

The surviving grandson sought vengeance for his family by becoming a scout for the French. Day after day, month after month, he led the blue-eyed, big-nosed foreigners through the jungle, in their hunt for Tan Dac and his guerillas. Eventually, the last surviving members of the band were found hiding in a cave. They were trapped, but steadfastly refused to surren-
After several months, believing that finally all of the guerrillas must be dead, the French sealed the entrance of the cave and withdrew.

From that day, no one heard any more about Tan Dac and his guerillas.

But around Red Fish Lake, a large number of jackfruit trees appeared—a forest of jackfruit trees. The fruits ripened and became food for the birds and fell and were scattered. In the season of jackfruit, whoever dared climb up the mountain through the jungle to gather fruit would become drunk from their thick, suffocating smell. And not far from the jackfruit trees had sprung up a thick forest of bamboo. The bamboo shoots grew everywhere, their life force a strength nothing could stop.

Some ninety years later, when the state forestry enterprise was established, Production Brigade Five, which was responsible for planting elshtoria pantrine trees and processing the huong nhu extract from them,* was settled in Viet Hoa. There were thirty-eight women in Brigade Five, ranging in age from twenty-one to forty-four. Many of them had been in the Volunteer Youth Corps, working on the Ho Chi Minh Trails, but when peace came, there were too few men, and no place in the cities and villages they had left so long ago, for these leftovers from the war, many of them now past the age of

*A type of peppermint oil used to relieve pain.
marriage. Of the group, only Tham was lucky enough to find a husband. Cuong was one of the original inhabitants left in the village, and he worked now as a storage keeper for the forestry collective. None of the women dared to make their way through the jungle and climb up to Red Fish Lake, with its notorious jackfruit trees and groves of bamboo. But the jackfruit trees kept bearing their fruit and the bamboo shoots grew thick and wild and without restraint, like a secret everyone knew and whispered about. Though they had never been there, the image of that forest of jackfruit trees, those bamboo shoots standing upright in their groves, appeared many times to the isolated women, often more clearly and concretely than any images of men they would try to conjure for themselves.

Then unexpected good fortune struck one other woman in Brigade Five. Nha was only twenty-one years old, one of the team’s youngest members. She’d been on her way to pick up some equipment at the headquarters of the collective, when she suddenly came upon a regiment of soldiers building a road across the island. She was spotted at the same time by Khanh, a regiment scout, and it was this way that the two young people met. Soon after, one Sunday morning, all of Brigade Five was thrown into an uproar over the news that a young man was coming to visit them.

From Khanh’s unit to the state forestry enterprise headquarters was a half-hour walk, and from headquarters it took another three hours through the jungle to Viet Hoa. The women were touched and thrilled by Khanh’s dedication to Nha. When he arrived, they surrounded him, shooting so many questions at him that he could hardly answer. When he sat down to eat,
a frenzy of chopsticks danced around him, piling the food in his rice bowl into a Himalayan peak. Khanh tasted the exquisite suffering of one who is loved by everyone. And when Nha visited his regiment, she met the same fate.

Once the love between these two became known, the board of directors of the state forestry enterprise decided to have a talk with the regimental commander. They confronted frankly the question of how to encourage more bonds between the women in the collective and the soldiers. Such a “love project,” they reasoned, would lead to marriages, which meant that many soldiers would volunteer to stay and work on the island after their conscription. Finally, they agreed on a course of action. The regiment would often send several companies to cut timber and bamboo for the forestry collective. In addition, the commander would encourage his soldiers to spend their Sundays off visiting the state forestry enterprise.

The results of the “love project,” however, were limited. Most of the soldiers were quite young, only in their late teens or early twenties, like Khanh. But the women veterans in the collective were older, and the soldiers would have to address them as “big sister” or “auntie,” according to tradition. That method of greeting inevitably built up a wall between the two groups that no one was daring enough to break through.

One Sunday morning, Nha woke up early, combed her hair, and carefully put on her makeup. Dissatisfied with her own things, she borrowed a red silk blouse from her friend Hien, and a necklace made of tiny seashells from Luyen. All of her co-workers gathered around her, helping her dress and make up her face, reassuring her of her beauty, and when she finally
left, she was cheerful and pleased with herself. That was how
the other women would remember her. None of them knew
then that she had departed forever. By the next day at noon,
she still hadn’t returned. Everyone began to worry, but all the
women could think of different reasons why Nha might be
late. Then another day passed and they began to get angry and
nervous. When she hadn’t returned by the next Sunday, the
women were frantic. They received word from the regiment
that Khanh had waited all that last Sunday in vain. Had she
gotten lost in the jungle? An emergency alert was issued. The
regiment scouts and the women from the state forestry enter-
prise scoured the whole western section of the island. One
day, another, three days passed. Nothing. The search went on
in force for another two weeks, and for another month after
that smaller groups continued to look for Nha. Although there
were no predators in that primitive jungle, the trees and un-
derbrush were so tangled and thick that some places had never
been imprinted with the press of human steps. The jungle had
swallowed any trace of the missing girl.

For some time after Nha’s disappearance, no one, not even
the bravest young women, dared to trek across the jungle from
Viet Hoa to the collective’s headquarters.

Time passed and fear faded. One afternoon, Hien gathered
her courage and walked alone to the regiment base camp, to
see her boyfriend. An hour later, crossing the road that led to
Red Fish Lake, she felt a breeze blowing through the jungle
canopy above her head and felt suddenly dizzy.

She sat down for a while to come back to herself, and then
bravely continued her journey. Soon, however, she felt a strange
sensation, as if someone were trying to lead her the wrong way. The field of wild grass that she knew marked the beginning of the trail had disappeared. Panicking, Hien retraced her footsteps and realized she had just missed the trail. A chill seized her. Just a second more, and she would have repeated Nha’s bad luck. Like Nha, she came from the lowlands and was not skilled at navigating the jungle. Nevertheless, she had found the right way again and was determined to continue. Suddenly a flock of birds swarmed up around her, and from their chaotic tumble she heard a low, sorrowful call: “Nha, oh Nha, Nha!”

Terrified, Hien rushed back in the direction of Viet Hoa. As she did, she prayed: “Oh, Nha, you were wise when you were alive, and you have become sacred in your death. Please don’t cause me any harm. Please bless me. We had no quarrels between us or hatred for each other. The day you left, you were wearing my red silk blouse . . .” Hien ran, the wind whistling by her ears, the trees swaying back and forth drunkenly. And the ghostly voices of the birds chased after her, crying clearly now: “Doom! Oh doom, doom!”

After that, no other woman walked alone through the jungle. Nha’s disappearance and Hien’s frightful experience hung like a gray shroud over the whole collective. Whenever they had to go to headquarters to work or to attend a meeting or even to see a film, the women only ventured out in groups. Their fear reinforced the feeling that the jungle had closed around them,
surrounding them, keeping away any chance at love or happiness. At night they woke from uneasy sleep with the choked feeling of being hemmed in, cut off from the rest of humanity. They would hear the ghostly, agonized sounds of the birds crying from the jungle and a chill would pass through them.

The state forestry enterprise had been founded in 1976, a year after the American War. In 1982, a festive mood had swept the entire area when it was learned that the Cat Bac region was going to be designated as a national park. Once that occurred, the collective was placed under the management of the Board of National Parks. During the inaugural celebrations that marked the event, the women of Brigade Five had dressed in their best clothing and gone off gaily to headquarters so they could participate in the celebrations. On the last evening, they watched a film, then lit their torches and started back to Viet Hoa. But as they were making their way through the jungle, they were again struck suddenly by their solitude. They hugged each other and sobbed. With the establishment of the national park, their island was now officially a “forbidden place.”* A forbidden jungle. How coldly that phrase echoed in their blood. From this day on, it would be illegal for anyone to hunt or take timber from the Cat Bac jungle. While this decree was good for the environment, it served only to isolate them even more. Forbidden jungle! But now they would be separated and forbidden themselves. Even before, this place had already

*Once designated as a national park, a region is protected from further development and population increase, hence a “forbidden place.”
felt cold and lonely; now this seemingly innocuous change made them feel imprisoned, like nuns in a sealed monastery.

The situation lasted another year, until the day Luyen brought back news which cheered everyone up. One morning, along with Cuong the storage keeper, Luyen went to headquarters to get more farming tools and work clothes, as well as some crabs or fish they would use to supplement their poor meals. They flagged down a truck going to Cat Bac town. While she was there, Luyen stopped off to visit a friend at the export company and received some news that she eagerly relayed to the other women when she got back. “There’s a new guy at Yellow Cow Bay. Someone from the city. I hear he’s really good-looking.”

“Did he take Phuc’s place at the turtle rearing farm?”

“Right,” Luyen said, then added thoughtfully, “But isn’t it more correct to call it a turtle seeding camp?” She meant turtle breeding. The other women laughed. One said:

“Phuc is so afraid of his wife he doesn’t even dare to put his own seed into her, let alone into the turtles!”

“Stop it—don’t talk such nonsense. Listen, here’s the best part.” Luyen lowered her voice. “They say the new guy left the city because of a broken heart. But I hear he can draw so well his pictures look as if he’d taken a photo of someone,” she added.

“He must be very talented,” another woman murmured dreamily.

“Is there a way we can get over to Yellow Cow so we can ask him to draw for us?” a younger woman said, naively revealing her intentions. All the women burst into laughter, then
hugged each other, still laughing, trying to hide their shame as if the young man had appeared in their midst. Yet even though they felt ashamed, each of them burned to meet the new man.

It seemed an impossible task. Yellow Cow was a small islet that lay in the bay to the east of Cat Bac Island. It would take only twenty minutes to get there by boat, but the eastern shore of Cat Bac consisted of a sheer cliff that was nearly impassable. The only way to get to Yellow Cow was to walk or hitchhike to the headquarters of the collective, then go by car to Cat Bac town and then continue by boat to Yellow Cow. None of the women had ever made that complicated journey.

Now the temptation and the frustration were agonizing. It took barely twenty minutes for them to get to the edge of that eastern cliff and look down at the cow-shaped islet with its grassed hills that turned yellow in the autumn. They knew that on that islet was a valley, and in it was an experimental turtle breeding camp, and at that camp now was a man; young, handsome, artistic, and new. They would go, some of the women, to the edge of that cliff and they would stand and stare and dream of the fulfillment of their hidden desire. Sometimes they had to fight back their tears. Even if they could climb down to the beach below, there was no boat for them to row across Yellow Cow Bay. He was so close, within reach of their gaze, but they could never meet him.

The more the women of Brigade Five were being stirred like an ant nest before the monsoon by the arrival of this man, the
more Mrs. Cay, Cuong’s mother, let out her anger on Tham, her daughter-in-law.

“Fruitless tree! Childless woman! You’re ruining the future of my family,” she shrieked directly into Tham’s ear. “This state forestry enterprise is overrun with unmarried women, all of them dying for a husband. My son could have as many wives as he wants. What a pity he had to end up with a good-for-nothing slut like you!”

She had harangued Tham with this cruel barrage for over a year. Tham feigned indifference, acted as though she had heard nothing. But the more she tried not to hear, the more clearly her mother-in-law’s bitter diatribe rang in her ears. The words scratched at her brain and pierced her heart like thorns. Being single and childless was sad and humiliating; it was true. But being married without having children was even more so. It seemed as though happiness had eluded everyone in Brigade Five.