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escape from tibet
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by Michael Cheikin

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Synopsis

ESCAPE FROM TIBET is a five character piece based on the true story of buddhist monks' escape from persecution in Tibet through the Himalayas, and the American reporter who accompanied them.

Production Information

Actors: Three women, age 30's - 40's.
Two men, age 30's and 40's.

Set: one set, a bare stage, with a large backdrop of the Himalayas. The mountains are opaque while the sky is translucent to allow a silhouette of the mountains, and characters, when the drop is backlit.

down right is a chair and crib.

Playing Time: Approximately 15 minutes

Props: two home-made back packs made of sticks and burlap
one modern back-pack made of titanium and nylon
water bottle
crib
chair

escape from tibet

Time

Fall, 1996.

Place

The action takes place in a Phili apartment (STAGE RIGHT) and on a path through the Himalayas in Tibet (STAGE LEFT).

Dramatis Personae (in order of appearance)

JEFFREY, male, 30'S a newspaper reporter, beard and glasses.

BUNNY, female, 20's, JEFF's wife. A princess.

SUNG, female, 40's, a Tibetan nun. Sickly, desperate.

MING, female, 30's, another Tibetan nun. Energetic, maternal.

YANG, male, 40's, a Tibetan monk. Leader of the expedition. Strong, honest.

Author's Note

The mountain trail event is a true story based on an interview I heard with reporter Jeffrey Fleishman on Fresh Air (WNPR, Terry Gross), before he won the Pulitzer Prize. He also wrote about it in the Phili Inquirer. I found his verbal description of this incident of leaving the nun behind extremely compelling.

(TO THE ACTORS: The pacing of JEFF AND BUNNY is conventional. The Himalayan scenes should be a bit slow, poetic and surreal, as they are in JEFF's mind. These scenes should not be thought of as strictly chronological, but more flowing.) [lines in square brackets are optional]

1 (STAGE RIGHT IS JEFF'S BEDROOM, STAGE LEFT IS A MOUNTAIN
2 TRAIL IN THE HIMALAYAS. EACH
3 AREA HAS FLOODS AS WELL AS A
4 SPOT. THERE IS A CENTER STAGE
5 SPOT THAT ACTS AS A
6 TRANSITIONAL AREA.)
7

8 (FROM THE DARKNESS, WE HEAR:)
9

10 JEFF:
11 Bunny!

12
13 BUNNY:
14 Coming!

15
16 (SPOT RISES UP STAGE CENTER, ON JEFF STANDING, IN A TUX,
17 HIS OVERCOAT ON. HE IS
18 BAREFOOT.
19

20 (IN THE BACKGROUND WE SEE A FAINT SILHOUETTE OF THE
21 HIMALAYAS.)
22

23 JEFF:
24 Let's go. I'm setting the alarm. (HE PUSHES SOME
25 BUTTONS.)
26

27 (FLOODS RISE ON STAGE RIGHT, BUNNY, IN A VERY ELEGANT
28 EVENING GOWN, IS LEANING INTO
29 A CRIB.)
30

31 BUNNY:
32 I'm just checking the baby.
33

34 JEFF:
35 You already did.
36

37 (HE UNSETE THE ALARM, WALKS STAGE RIGHT, INTO THE
38 BEDROOM. CENTER SPOT DIMS.)
39

40 JEFF:
41 Wendy'll take good care of her.
42

43 BUNNY:
44 Come and give her a kiss.
45

46 JEFF:
47 Already did.
48

49
50 (BUNNY STANDS, LOOKS AT JEFF, SEES THAT HE'S BAREFOOT.)
51

52 BUNNY:
53 Jeff!
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JEFF:
What?

BUNNY:
Aren't you missing something?
.....

(QUICK SPOT UP AND DOWN CENTER STAGE ON YANG, A BUDDHIST
MONK AND LEADER OF THE
EXPEDITION THROUGH THE
HIMALAYAS. HE IS THIN,
DRESSED IN COTTON, WITH A
WALKING STICK, WEARING A HAND-
MADE BACKPACK.)

YANG:
You not with us. You not know us. If caught with us--
you will be killed--with us!
.....

BUNNY:
What about shoes?

JEFF:
(LOOKS DOWN) Oops.

BUNNY:
Or else you should paint your toe nails.
(HE GOES INTO "CLOSET", TAKES OUT SOME HIKING BOOTS)

JEFF:
Here, I'll put these on.

(HE STARTS TO PUT HIS BOOTS ON)

BUNNY:
Jeff, those are boots.

JEFF:
So?

BUNNY:
They'll be taking pictures. You're getting a Pulitzer
Prize, for God's sake.
.....

(SPOT UP AND DOWN ON YANG, CENTER STAGE:)

YANG:
(PROUDLY, NOT BITTER) Our shoes are made from paper.

111 JEFF:
112 (ASTOUNDED) But, but, how do you get through the snow?
113

114 YANG:
115 Our heat comes--from--the inside.
116

117

118
119 JEFF:
120 (LOUDLY) I'm wearing these boots, and that's it!
121

122 BUNNY:
123 You're gonna wake the baby!
124

125 JEFF:
126 Then leave me alone!
127

128

129
130 (FLOODS RISE STAGE LEFT ON YANG. YANG IS NOW WITH MING
131 AND SUNG, TWO BUDDHIST NUNS,
132 WITH VERY SHORT HAIR. SUNG,
133 40'S, MING, 30'S. THEY ARE
134 WEARING THIN, WORN CLOTHES AND
135 SHOES, AND HAND-MADE
136 BACKPACKS.)
137

138 (JEFF CROSSES TO CENTER STAGE, RIGHT LIGHTS FADE TO
139 BLACK, CENTER SPOT RISES.)
140

141 YANG:
142 You walk with Ming and Sung. If questioned, you don't
143 know them. I stay with others. Only use camera when I
144 say.
145

146 JEFF:
147 How long is this trip going to take?
148

149 YANG:
150 Seven day.
151

152 JEFF:
153 Seven! They told me four.
154

155 YANG:
156 (LAUGHS) Four if young. You not young.
157

158 JEFF:
159 (INSECURE) I'm not going to hold you back, am I?
160

161 YANG:
162 (LAUGHS AGAIN) Nooo. Others go slow too!
163

164 (HE GIVES JEFF A FLASK OF WATER.)
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YANG:
This (your water--) must last. Only wet tongue. Ming
and Sung help you. Have gift for you.

(SUNG HANDS HIM A SMALL, BEAUTIFUL CHIME (OR
OTHER SYMBOLIC OBJECT))

SUNG:
Gives good luck.

(HE RINGS IT)

JEFF:
Gee. Thanks. (It's beautiful.)

YANG:
Brings spirit. Take to America. Remember.

.....

(FROM THE DARKNESS, STAGE LEFT, WE HEAR THE MUSIC OF A
BABY'S WIND-UP MOBIL. SPOT UP
ON BUNNY. SHE MAY BE HOLDING
THE BABY.)

BUNNY:
Look at her.

(FLOODS STAGE LEFT FADE, LEAVING YANG, (MING AND SUNG)
IN A SPOT. THE CURRENT
LIGHTING IS THREE SPOTS--JEFF
IN BETWEEN HIS WIFE AND
TIBET.)

JEFF:
Yeah, she's real cute.

BUNNY:
You barely hold her.

.....

YANG:
Please tell America.

MING:
Of our life.

.....

BUNNY:
You're gone for a month. You miss Anna's birth.

JEFF:
PLEASE don't do this to me.

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BUNNY:

What happened on that trail? It's like you left something behind.

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(TIBET'S FLOODS RISE TO DIM. RIGHT SPOT ON BUNNY FADES TO BLACK, CENTER SPOT ON JEFF FADES TO DIM, WHO WATCHES.)

(IN THE DIMNESS, WE HEAR MOANING FROM OFF STAGE. ENTER, STAGE LEFT, MING AND SUNG. MING IS HELPING SUNG. SUNG NO LONGER HAS HER PACK ON, AND IS USING A WALKING STICK. THE "PATH" GOES FROM STAGE LEFT TO RIGHT.)

(AFTER A FEW VERY SMALL STEPS, SUNG DROPS, STAGE LEFT. FLOODS RISE SLOWLY AND GENTLY.)

MING:

(LOOKING OFF STAGE RIGHT, NERVOUSLY) Get up. Get up, before he sees you.

SUNG:

I can't. I must rest.

MING:

Then stand. Stand and rest.

(THEY TRY TO STAND HER. SHE FALLS AGAIN.)

(SUNG BEGINS TO CRY.)

MING:

Don't cry. That won't help.

SUNG:

Oh, what can I do? I can't keep up.

(FROM THE BLACKNESS, PERHAPS WITH SOME ECHO.)

BUNNY:

You're getting the Pulitzer Prize! Can't you relax and enjoy? Hold your child?

JEFF:

(DISTRACTED) What?!

MING:

You must get on your feet.

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SUNG:
Here he comes.

MING:
Quick, try to stand up again.

SUNG:
(STILL CRYING) Noo.

(YANG ENTERS, STAGE LEFT. HE IS CARRYING SUNG'S PACK AS WELL AS HIS OWN.)

YANG:
Ming, we must keep moving.

MING:
She needs to rest.

YANG:
No more rest. I already carry her pack.

SUNG:
Please, Yang, just a moment.

YANG:
No. Get up now.

SUNG:
I can't. My legs...
.....

JEFFREY:
(IN SYNCH WITH ABOVE) My legs!
(SPOT RISES GENTLY ON BUNNY.)

BUNNY:
What?

JEFF:
I don't know, my legs have been killing me. Shoes make it worse.
(SPOT ON BUNNY FADES TO BLACK.)
.....

YANG:
Sung. The hepatitis. Stopped you before.

SUNG:
I'm stronger now.

YANG:
Three in my party, if caught, will be killed.

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SUNG:
I can't go back.

YANG:
(HARSH) Then stand! Now!

(SUNG TRIES TO STAND, STILL CAN'T, CRIES.)
.....

(BUNNY HAS CROSSES CENTER TO JEFF, WHO IS WATCHING THE SCENE.)

BUNNY:
Look, your collar is uneven. Here--
(SHE MOVES TO FIX HIS COLLAR. HE SWINGS AROUND, ANGRY.)

JEFF:
Leave it alone!

BUNNY:
I was just trying to... (SHE CRIES)

JEFF:
Sorry, honey, sorry...

BUNNY:
Why don't you wear your wedding band any more?

JEFF:
I can't find it.

BUNNY:
Can't find it?

JEFF:
OK, I dropped it.

BUNNY:
Dropped it? Where?

JEFF:
On the trail.

BUNNY:
How do you drop a ring? Are you having an affair?

JEFF:
No, no... Bunny...
(BUNNY CROSSES RIGHT, INTO THE BLACKNESS)
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386
 387 YANG:
 388 (TO MING) You must take her back.
 389
 390 JEFFREY:
 391 (TO YANG) You can't send her back!
 392
 393 SUNG:
 394 No! I won't!
 395
 396 YANG:
 397 (TO MING) She is danger. To all.
 398
 399 JEFF:
 400 Can't we carry her?
 401
 402 YANG:
 403 No! Path is steep. Air is thin. Each man must be
 404 strong for himself.
 405
 406 JEFF:
 407 We can take turns.
 408
 409 YANG:
 410 You! You not with us!
 411
 412 JEFF:
 413 We must try!
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 416
 417 BUNNY:
 418 Try what?
 419 (FLOOD RISES ON BEDROOM, FALLS ON TIBET, JEFF CROSSES TO
 420 BEDROOM, CENTER SPOT FADES TO
 421 BLACK.)
 422
 423 JEFF:
 424 Try to help her.
 425
 426 BUNNY:
 427 Help who? Oh, the priestess. In your story.
 428
 429 JEFF:
 430 It's not a story. These are real people.
 431
 432 BUNNY:
 433 They are back in their world.
 434
 435 JEFF:
 436 I don't know where they are.
 437

438 BUNNY:
 439 Who cares?
 440
 441 JEFF:
 442 I do.
 443
 444 BUNNY:
 445 Jeff, it was just an assignment. To help pay the bills.
 446 To get out of this dump!
 447
 448 JEFF:
 449 Yeah, real neat cash.
 450
 451 BUNNY:
 452 (IMITATING HIM) "They need a story for the Christmas
 453 issue. Lots of schmaltz. I'm best at human interest."
 454
 455 [MORE ARGUMENT? BIGGER?]
 456
 457
 458 (BEDROOM FLOODS FADE, LEAVING JEFF IN SPOT IN BEDROOM,
 459 TIBET'S FLOODS RISE)
 460
 461 YANG:
 462 (TO MING) She tires second day. Five more days. To
 463 climb. Ming, you must take her back.
 464
 465 MING:
 466 (NOW THE ONE TO CRY) But they will torture me.
 467
 468 YANG:
 469 Is the only way.
 470
 471 MING:
 472 She can go back alone. The trail is clear.
 473
 474 (SUNG, STILL ON THE GROUND, LETS OUT A WAIL, GRABS
 475 MING'S LEGS.)
 476
 477 SUNG:
 478 Nooo! You can't. You can't leave me here!
 479
 480 JEFF:
 481 I'll take her back.
 482
 483 YANG:
 484 They make you prisoner. They make example.
 485
 486 JEFF:
 487 I don't care.

488
489 BUNNY:
490 Jeff, Jeff, what's happening to you?
491
492 (SUNG IS STILL CLINGING TO MING'S ANKLES:)
493
494 MING:
495 (TO YANG:) Please. Let me go with you.
496
497 SUNG:
498 Ming! Don't leave me!
499
500 MING:
501 I can't go back.
502
503 SUNG:
504 I won't let go.
505
506 MING:
507 Yes you will. You will let go of me.
508
509 (THEY STRUGGLE, BOTH CRYING, MING FREES HERSELF AND GOES
510 ONTO YANG'S SIDE OF THE LINE.
511 JEFF CROSSES TO TIBET.)
512
513 SUNG:
514 Nooooo! I am not a runt!
515
516 JEFF:
517 (YANG) Can't I do something?
518
519 YANG:
520 No.
521
522 JEFF:
523 Please. Here. Take my jacket.
524
525 YANG:
526 No.
527
528 JEFF:
529 How about my credit card?
530
531 YANG:
532 No.
533
534 JEFF:
535 I have to give her something.
536
537

538 YANG:
539 Give her ring.
540
541 JEFF:
542 But, this is my wedding band.
543
544 YANG:
545 Is small. Can hide. Can trade.
546
547 JEFF:
548 OK.
549
550 (JEFF TAKES OFF HIS WEDDING BAND AND PUTS IT ON SUNG'S
551 FINGER. MING IS STILL CRYING)
552
553 YANG:
554 Both of you! Go to the others.
555
556 (PAUSE. THEY HESITATE.)
557
558 YANG:
559 Now!
560
561 (MING EXITS RIGHT. JEFF GOES BACK TO BEDROOM STAGE
562 RIGHT, WHERE FLOODS RISE
563 GENTLY. LIGHTS FADE A BIT ON
564 TIBET, SHOWING A BIT MORE
565 SILHOUETTE.)
566
567
568
569 BUNNY:
570 It's each man for himself. In Tibet. And in America.
571
572 JEFF:It keeps coming back.
573
574 BUNNY:
575 What are you going to do, feel guilty for the rest of
576 your life? Ruin our life?
577
578 JEFF:
579 I don't know. I gotta... try to...
580
581 BUNNY:
582 Jeff, you can't change their world.
583
584
585
586 (SUNG CONTINUES TO CRY. YANG MIGHT SHED A FEW TEARS.
587 HE GETS DOWN ON HIS KNEES. HE

588 HELPS SUNG TO SITTING, AND
589 PROPS HER WITH HER PACK.)

590
591 YANG:

592 Here.

593
594 SUNG:
595 Thanks. Please, Yang, take me. I can't go back.

596
597 YANG:
598 You must make sacrifice. Or we all die.

599
600 SUNG:
601 (CRIES) They shock me--with cattle prods. You know
602 where?

603
604 YANG:
605 Yes, I know.

606
607 SUNG:
608 They shame me. In front of criminals.

609
610 YANG:
611 All of man is shamed. By this--evil. But we must
612 endure. Until peace comes...

613
614

615
616 JEFF:
617 I can't wear this! (HE STARTS TO TAKE OFF HIS TUX)

618
619 BUNNY:
620 Jeff, stop. Stop. Please stop.

621
622 JEFF:
623 I'm not going.

624
625 BUNNY:
626 Jeff! Please! My mother is going to be there.

627
628 JEFF:
629 I'm going back.

630
631 BUNNY:
632 What!?

633
634

635 (YANG REACHES INTO HIS PACK, GIVES HER A BOTTLE).

636
637

638 YANG:
639 Here. Extra water. Will help.
640
641 SUNG:
642 You need it!
643
644 YANG:
645 Take it! You can do it, Sung.
646
647 SUNG:
648 (CRYING) You must go. It is getting dark.
649
650 (HE LEANS OVER TO HER, IN A VERY SOFT VOICE:)
651
652 YANG:
653 I promise, Sung, I will come back. I help you escape, I
654 carry you--on my back, next time.
655
656 SUNG:
657 Thank you, Yang. My love, and God's, go with you, and
658 the others.
659
660 (YANG BREAKS (CRIES), THEN QUICKLY RECOVERS.)
661
662 SUNG:
663 Now go save them.
664
665 (AS YANG EXITS, STAGE RIGHT, TIBET'S FLOODS FADE,
666 LEAVING SUNG IN DIM SPOT,
667 MOUNTAIN BACKLIGHTS RISE
668 DIMLY, CREATING A SOFT
669 SILHOUETTE OF SUNG. BEDROOM
670 FLOODS RISE.)
671
672
673
674 JEFFREY
675 Bunny, I keep pushing it away, and it comes back st
676 ronger.
677
678 BUNNY:
679 I think you should see a doctor.
680
681 JEFF:
682 What is a doctor gonna do? Tell me it was OK? ~~That I~~
683 ~~couldn't have changed it?~~ I wish, at least, they hated
684 me.
685
686 BUNNY:
687 What if you make a donation?

688

689

JEFF:

690

I look at my new daughter and all I see is Sung. Yang did go back, but for all I know, he was caught. I have to find out what happened. Even if...

691

692

693

694

(HE GOES TO CLOSET AND TAKES OUT A SUITCASE, BEGINS TO PACK)

695

696

697

BUNNY:

698

You screw up our life?

699

700

JEFF:

701

(CONFUSED) No...

702

703

BUNNY:

704

Jeff, please, come back to us.

705

706

JEFF:

707

I'm caught, my soul left on that trail with Sung. I can't escape from Tibet. (LONG PAUSE) I have to go back. I have to... get back... my soul...

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711

(FLOODS DIM, LEAVING JEFF AND SUNG IN SPOTS, THE MOUNTAINS IN SILHOUETTE.)

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713

714

(THE SPOTS FADE, LEAVING THE CHARACTERS IN SIHOUETTE.) (BLACKOUT.) (THE END)

715