



LOOP DE LOOP

In 1966, my father left for Vietnam as a civilian engineer. He was forty-seven years old and I was sixteen years old. He worked in the jungle, near Cambodia, and trained mechanics, on site, in the field, with a small device, to detect imperfections in the helicopter blades manufactured by Boeing-Vertol. This application apparently eliminated the necessity to remove blades, ship them to Saigon for inspection, and endure the long wait for them to be sent back upcountry to the remote air bases for reinstallation. And it avoided the expense.

My father was part of the team that checked those blades while attached to the choppers, insuring a safer and faster way for helicopters to dominate the air war and to reduce crashes due to factory imperfections.

This is what my father said he did while he was in Vietnam.

Nineteen sixty-six was still early in the war; we hadn't heard of the Hanoi Hilton; we didn't know how long hostilities would drag on, no one knew the cost, in dollars, in lives and relationships. By the end of the war, in 1975, five million were dead: ours, theirs, others in Laos, the three million killed by the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia, and the innocent animals: dogs, oxen, elephants, and the monkeys whose faces peering from the jungle canopy looked so human.

Afterwards, government agencies estimated that the United States had spent nine dollars to inflict one dollar of damage on Vietnam. It seems to me that casualties other than those calculated in dollars were more deep-seated and damaging, spreading through lives as tenacious as the vines spread through the jungle.

Fifty years later, I still have Daddy's expired passport, stamped and officially emblazoned, along with the record of his inoculations written in fountain pen ink: typhoid, malaria, influenza, a polio booster, tetanus, and small pox. In his photograph he looks stern, straightforward. He is a man looking past the camera lens, perhaps into another world. All my father's pictures share that otherworldliness, and this is how I would describe him to you today: a man who saw past himself.

After ten months away, and very little communication, when he returned in the summer of 1967, my father made a single comment. "Saigon is the filthiest city I've ever seen." After that, he never again referred directly to his time in Vietnam and it was clear he was not open to questions. Even now, armed with long over-due government statistics chronicling a war fought in secret, and my own generations' final denunciation of that war, I am dissatisfied with explanations of that time in our lives, and am perturbed that I don't know more about the most mysterious of all my father's travels.

I used to call him ‘Secret Frank’. I regret not having asked him more, having accepted his avoidance, holding myself away from him. He did not die until he was in his mid-sixties, so I had ample opportunity to enquire how a man could have left his family, how a man could have lived upcountry for so many months, and say so little. In the aftermath of the government subterfuge and deception, I had many years to ask him about his work there. I did not do that.

At first I believed he did not have to speak of what he had done, what he had experienced, because a part of me understood. When he returned home, he was thinner, more wary, yet exhilarated. If I examined him closely I could see how the freedom of war had wrapped around his heart in a way our family had not.

In Vietnam, my father had spread his arms wide and let the air rush through side to side. He suffused his spirit with the thrill of not quite dying. He had opened himself to death and snorted the high of inhaled danger. He had tricked all the apostate angels and laughed. I could see this on his face, but more telling was how he behaved when we were alone.

After he came back from Vietnam, we flew again together in a small two-seater, his souped-up homemade airplane with rusted spots on the floor. As usual, I sat in the right-hand seat of the plane and adjusted my headphones, although there was no tower, no one telling us what to do. We wore the sets to speak with each other, but even that language was limited and almost unnecessary, as we had flown together so often. It seemed natural to be next to him as we rattled down a private grass runway near the Brandywine Battlefield, which dropped off, after only a thousand feet, into a vast chasm.

We had flown there during airshows with gliders, and huge pits of grilled chicken, and tail-gate picnics. When I tell you it was not much of an airstrip, you should envision port-a-potties, and perhaps an old geezer monkeying with a dismembered World War II engine. Or

maybe no one around except for us, and the Black-eyed Susan's and the Queen Anne's lace waving in the high grasses. Someone had run a mower down the field and from the tire tracks, I knew we weren't the only aircraft that played in that field on lazy afternoons.

In order to take-off, our aircraft gathered speed sufficient to lift it into the wide expanse of the sky. While the wheels were still on the ground, the earth rushed underneath and my body smashed hard against the sprung seat. The noise around us shrieked its high-pitched whine.

We probably weren't going more than 80 miles an hour, as our speed increased to rotation, fast enough to allow for us to become airborne, I looked at my father's face, as I had done as a kid.

Even before he left, we had flown together in many private planes. I hung out at Teterboro Airport where the A&W Root beer stand was our favorite stop. During those times, when I was seven years, perhaps ten years old, I felt close to my father.

I had been five during my first bumpy ride, and we had been in a hail storm. I think I will always remember him with that expression of attention, concentration and a pleased smile on his lips, as he controlled his aircraft.

When I was that young I couldn't see out the windshield. I had to trust in him entirely, and place my faith in him, in his skills, in whatever lesson he wanted to teach. My father was fond of lessons of life, always taught in oblique ways. His favorite sport, when I was very young, was to spin me around, set me down and ask me to point to north. In the evening, he would take me outside, wait for my night vision to kick in and demand I showed him first the North Star, then the constellations, not the easy ones like Orion, but those more complicated and less well known: Cassiopeia, Camelopardalis, Canis Major and Canis Minor.

Once he took me to Henry Hudson's grave in lower Manhattan and told me the story about Hudson's men who had abandoned him, leaving him alone to freeze on his boat, *The Half Moon*.

I thought I understood what he wanted me to notice, what he was sharing of himself with me. It took time for me to process what he might have meant, and the musing was part of the experience. As much as he enjoyed control, he enjoyed ambiguity more.

Sometimes I wake up, many years later, wondering if I learned what he had hoped, if he would be pleased at who I have become as an adult. I still lay on the grass in the winter and stare into the darkness until the beams of light tell a story; I play with a slide rule, and I read his mechanics handbook from 1947.

But on that hot August day after he returned from Vietnam, I looked through the plane's smeared windshield, and at the shortening runway. The metal capsule sped fast, faster and faster, defying the pull of gravity, and my stomach was not entirely where it normally sat. I recognized our danger was of a deliberate sort, one he had created for the excitement, the delight, the ecstasy of lingering on the edge until the last moment. I still believed in him, and imagined this was another of his impenetrable lessons.

I suspect he was encouraging me to get on with adulthood, to remember not everything stays the same, to take the ultimate risk, no matter the consequences. We, specks in the universe, should not expect to be taken too seriously. I'm not certain this is the type of father-daughter conversation most families had before college. My father pulled the yoke hard.

He acknowledged me with a quick nod of his head, a toothy grin, and said, "Hold on, baby girl."