

Relationships

[TWO-MINUTE MEMOIR]

The Fall

THIRTY YEARS AFTER VIETNAM, A FATHER AND SON RETURN TO TRY TO DISCERN THE WAR'S EFFECTS ON THEIR FAMILY. **BY TOM BISSELL**



PARENT TROOPER
The author's father,
John Bissell, age 22,
Quantico, VA.

WE DROVE OUT of Danang, past Monkey Mountain, past Marble Mountain, while my father told our guide, Hien, the story of how he had saved the life of my godfather during Vietnam. This had happened at the village of Tam Ky, a few hours south of where we now were. Suddenly Hien informed us that Tam Ky was where he had grown up.

"Really?" my father asked. "Because I was in Tam Ky a hell of a lot."

"I used to stand beside the road," Hien said, looking back at us, "and wave and say,

'Hello, GIs!' And they would throw me candy and cigarettes and C-rats."

My father stared at Hien. Something watery and bottomless in his gaze began to harden. "Hien, I used to toss C-rats to kids around here all the time."

Hien laughed. "I know!" he told my father. "I remember you!"

This was clearly intended as a joke, but my father did not laugh. Instead, he looked even more deeply into Hien's eyes and took Hien by the forearm. "Maybe it was you," my father said. "Maybe it was." Hien

gave my father's arm a game return shake but quickly looked away.

Any glimpse we get of our parents prior to our incubation is liable to haunt and astound. It is hard to accept that your parents were once young, uncertain people, driven by passions and miscalculations. I once found a letter my father wrote to my mother, probably in the mid-1970s when things between my parents, who divorced in 1977, were especially toxic. Reading it sat me down with damp, scalding eyes. This was not a sepia snapshot of two smiling strangers in superannuated clothing who somewhat resembled my parents. This was a narrow psychic tunnel into the subterranea of their marriage.

What was it about this letter that hit me so roughly? Perhaps it was the discovery that these two human beings who treated each other so awfully when I was growing up once loved each other so much, and so indisputably.

Among other things, history is the arrangement of memory. History is an argument with the past. My parents' marriage fell apart because of the emotional collapse my father suffered after the fall of Saigon in 1975. Or maybe the marriage was over long before. Nothing is so impossible to imagine as disaster—until it is upon you. In the letter, my father wrote my mother that he wanted to be with her for 2,000 years. At the moment he wrote those words, any other fate must have seemed inconceivable. Henry Kissinger wrote that "the total Communist

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These two people who'd treated each other so awfully had **once loved each other so much**, and so indisputably.

takeover" of Vietnam would be a disaster. The unthinkable disaster occurred nonetheless, and I—we all—live in the paradoxical normalcy of its aftermath. Of course, I do not intend to equate the destruction of my parents' marriage with the collapse of South Vietnam, yet in my mind they are endlessly connected, just as the largest house can be entered through its smallest door.

On April 29, 1975—the day Saigon fell—my father was losing something of himself. He was losing what was at that time possibly the largest part of himself. This was his certainty that what he had suffered in Vietnam—making decisions, he would mercilessly remind himself, that had gotten his best friends killed—was necessary. He was losing his past and future all at once. He would lose much more.

What finally ended my parents' marriage? Neither claims to remember the precise event that drove them both toward the false rescue of infidelity, and there the matter hangs. My birth, in January 1974, was an accident. Neither of my parents wanted or expected another child. As if to embody their apprehension, I was born a sickly, tiny thing, and contracted pneumonia immediately. At one point a priest was summoned to give my days-old Catholic soul its last rights. My father spent that night in the hospital's chapel, praying. During the first, frail year of my life, I kept them together. When my condition improved, my mother remembers a near rebirth of goodwill between her and my father, then its sudden inexplicable collapse. But what caused this collapse? Again, neither remembers.

AS WE APPROACHED Danang, the architecture began to change. We passed a disused airport runway, one of many reminders in these vicinities that Danang

once headquartered the U.S. Marines.

"Do you think Vietnam is the reason you and Mom divorced?"

My father looked out the window at a long stretch of empty beach. "We became incompatible," he said finally.

I did not know what to say to that. Scars deadened the skin but we're also easily torn. My father did not know why they had divorced. It seemed amazing, our inability to understand our own lives. He cleared his throat. "Divorce is like a cancer that never goes away."



I looked at him. "It's painful," I said.

"Not anymore."

"To think about, I mean."

"Those were sad days. Be glad you're too young to remember them."

We stopped in a lonely parking area. After Hien gave the area a thorough sweeping for snakes, we started off down one of the grown-over paths that led off to the former base. I took up the rear and while watching my father saunter confidently through the scrub—his large feet lifting high with each step, his head up and

alert, his shoulders squared—had a vividly aggregate memory of all the times I had gone bird hunting with him as a boy. He hunted birds exclusively because, after Vietnam, my father found he could no longer hunt "mammals." The starkness of this morally Linnaean line had often troubled me as a boy. I was not a particularly able hunter. Yet, wanting only to please my father, I went with him into the woods again and again.

He was different in the forest: more patient, but also more humorless; more fatherly, but also less friendly. He had a ranger's silent confidence in areas I knew he had never hunted before. My father was good in the forest. He knew every answer and did everything so well, from the delicacy with which he loaded a shell to the mechanical ease with which he raised his gun and fired. When he knocked a bird from the air, he did so without emotion. He would crouch beside his downed pheasant, looking at it neutrally, then lift the carcass up by its legs and gently lower it into his game bag. I had always loved my father a little more while we were hunting and now I wondered why I had ever stopped going with him. Then I remembered. I had shot a mallard, blown its beautiful Christmas-ornament green head right off, and in the car cried all the way back home. My father said nothing to comfort me but also nothing to chastise me. He was silent while I shivered and wept. The erasure of a life—its totality—was something my father understood. Mammals. I was a mammal. So was he. I loved him so much that day. I loved him so much. He never took me hunting again.

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