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My Father's Vietnam Syndrome

By MONIQUE TRUONG

MY father never read my first novel, which was dedicated to him. He died in 2002, a year before it was published. The dedication was simple: "For my father, a traveler who has finally come home." He would have liked being called a traveler, because tucked inside this word is the story of his life.

My father was not an old man by first-world standards. But at the Vietnamese-American-owned funeral home his third wife had chosen for him, the prevailing sentiment was that the deceased, age 65, was entitled to red roses on his coffin. If he had died a year earlier, the color red would not have been recommended. Red signifies the luck of having lived a long life. His funeral was held in Houston, where the yellow and red flag of the former South Vietnam flies high above suburban strip malls, a place where the sensibility of the third world can trump the first.

My father was a mixture of both. He was born in Vietnam, sent at an early age to France and England for schooling, and returned home with a Swiss wife and a baby daughter. Upon his arrival to a country that, in his absence, had split itself in half, he had to relearn its language. He could speak Vietnamese, but he could not write it. Not a business letter. Not a love letter.

My father was instead fluent in French and English, the languages that raised him. Along with his flat nose and his hot temper, I as an adult would share with him the frustration of having to reach for Vietnamese words, like an itch at the middle of our backs.

I know little about his life during the first years of his return. I know that his marriage dissolved, that his Swiss wife and baby returned to Europe. I know that he was movie-idol dashing. I know that my mother, breathtaking at the age of 20, fell in love with him, and that he converted from Buddhism to Catholicism to marry her. His wealthy parents were relieved that this time he had chosen a Vietnamese woman, but they frowned at her family of intellectuals and dreamers. Five years later, in 1968, my mother gave birth to me, my father's second daughter and the only one of his three girls to be born in South Vietnam. Between contractions, my mother heard the sounds of bombs cratering Saigon.

A photograph shows my father in army fatigues holding me. I am crying, infant arms and legs pushing away from him. My mother tells me that this was the first time I had seen him, that I was afraid of him, of his crew cut, of his uniform.

I think the fear she remembers was hers. She was the one who knew enough to be discomfited by the sight of the movie idol dressed to die. From that awkward introduction on, whenever my father left on an overnight trip or longer, I would get a cold. Always a snuffle, a slight fever, an ache. I take that as proof that I had not feared him but loved him at first sight.

My father was not a soldier for long. He soon returned to civilian life and to his position with a Dutch-owned oil company. He was multinational, multilingual and multitalented. He was a businessman for the future of South Vietnam. Unfortunately, that country did not have a future.

In 1975, a few weeks before the fall of Saigon, my mother and I were airlifted out in an American Army cargo plane. His company had asked him to stay behind to oversee its operation. When he finally left, he went by boat. It was a pitiful journey during which he had little to eat, and someone tried to steal his shoes.

The theme of flight, albeit with a different meaning, accompanied my father's life here. As refugees, we first lived in North Carolina, where the license plates proclaim "First in Flight" in commemoration of the Wright brothers' feat at Kitty Hawk. Four years later in Kettering, Ohio -- dubbed the "Birthplace of Aviation," also in honor of the Wright brothers -- my father and mother had a baby girl. By 1982, our family had moved on to Houston, home to NASA.

This dream of air travel, which hovered in the background of all the places where my father tried to make a home for us, brought with it visions of heavy bodies soaring, of fair winds and infinite possibilities. All the things my father had lost and tried to regain.

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