Falling Through the Earth

Danielle Trussoni

Published by Picador

Extract

· PROLOGUE ·

The guide knelt before the tunnel entrance. Old, energetic, and clearly happy with his job, he smiled as he listed the booby traps he had planted to kill American soldiers: the punji sticks and scorpions rigged into bamboo cages, the explosives packed in Coke cans. The Vietcong, he said, made weapons from whatever they could find, old C-ration tins or beer bottles. Matériel was never a problem. The Americans left a lot of trash behind.

Hundreds of entrances survived the war. This one—much wider than the wartime tunnels—had probably been expanded to accommodate Western-sized tourists. The guide motioned for us to kneel next to him, above the gaping hole in the earth. We formed a semicircle, knees upon the hot sun-baked clay, watching him lower himself into the ground, demonstrating various styles of entry. He went in feet first, then head-first, grinning all the while. I got the feeling he would have come to that patch of jungle even if tourists did not. Maybe the tunnels were a kind of haven, a place to retire to. A Vietcong's own private Florida.

My father volunteered to be a tunnel rat in 1968. The job consisted of crawling through webs of tunnels and rooms searching for men like my tour guide, Vietnamese guerrillas hiding out underground. Tunnel exploration was considered one of the most dangerous assignments in

Vietnam. The distinction set my father apart from his platoon, bumping him into the Hazardous Duty pay grade and increasing his chances of dying tenfold. Tunneling was a suicide mission, but he chose it. He saw men die underground, and yet he kept going down. It takes that kind of person—two parts stubborn, one part insane—to fight in a tunnel. Dad fit the bill. Only a man determined to see the worst that war had to offer—and to beat it—would volunteer to be a tunnel rat.

Tunneling, my father always said, was the scariest thing on earth. As I stood above the entrance, I knew he was right. I used to think Dad was all balls and no brains, a man caught up in being a cowboy. But perhaps his attraction to the tunnels was more than bravado. Maybe my father looked into the tunnels and saw what I did: a mystery, a test, a challenge hard to walk away from. Perhaps the tunnels called to him with the same rich voice I heard thirty years later, dangerous and seductive. I crouched before the entrance. A jittery adrenaline-rich sensation filled my stomach, and I knew I wanted to go down. I wanted to feel the fear, the heat, the thrill of making it through. At heart, I was my father's daughter.

I followed the guide into the tunnel. A pool of sunlight fell from the entrance shaft and expanded around me, becoming darker by degrees. The tunnel was just as I imagined it would be, a shock of darkness that gave way to a narrow communication shaft. The old man crawled ahead but turned back when he realized that I was not close behind. In the weak light I saw his face, inches from mine. As our eyes locked, I imagined a knife in his hand, its cool blade brushing my neck. *Follow me,* he gestured, and crawled off again, ahead. I let my eyes adjust to the dark and pushed forward.

As I crawled deeper, the tunnel narrowed. The heat thickened; the air thinned. My T-shirt clung to my skin. Deeper, deeper we went. I paused, to scratch a wall with my fingernails, a sensation that sent shivers up my spine, a spidery prickle that asked, *What in the hell are you doing here?* I breathed, slowly. Suddenly, I was alone. Where had the man gone? I saw nothing but dark in front of me, nothing but dark behind. I moved my hand, my knee, my other hand, my other knee, forward, going deeper and deeper.

· ONE ·

Winter of '85, and we were on the run.

Dad veered the truck into an alley, cut across a parking lot, and merged with traffic running alongside the frozen Mississippi. "Cops don't come down this road," he said, checking the rearview mirror. "If they're here, it's because they followed us." My father was prone to paranoia, but the police were real. We'd been picked up twice for drunk driving that year. After the last arrest, he'd lost his license. We tried to keep a low profile, but the cops knew our truck and where we lived—*Those sons-of-bitches got nothing to do but bother hardworking taxpayers.* Faster, faster we drove. If they caught us again, Dad would go to jail.

Streets expanded before us, eerie and lonesome. Salt and steel-link tire chains had beaten the snow thin. Pawnshops and motels and tattoo parlors fell away as we passed. I unrolled my window. The city was cold and sharp-angled, as if emerging from a block of ice. I couldn't help but wish for spring. If it were warm, we could escape on a riverboat. We could float past Illinois and Missouri, down south to Louisiana. But it was deep winter, the river frozen, and the only hope for a quick getaway was the ironwork bridge that scaled out to Minnesota. I stared at it as we drove past, my vision ribboning its girders. Dad looked over his shoulder, listening for sirens.

My father was running from the police, from his first ex-wife, his creditors, and his dreams. He was running from his second ex-wife (my mother), his illegitimate children, and his past. He was running from himself, and I was right there with him, an eleven-year-old accomplice to his evenings of escape. I had been at his side for the last year, since my mother divorced us. Mom kept the house and my younger sister and brother; Dad kept me. No matter how far or fast we ran, I was there. I was all he had left.

We slowed down before Roscoe's, Dad's favorite bar, and parked near a set of rusty snow-packed railroad tracks. The lot was dim, as if seen through a starlight scope. Bleak electrocuted trees tangled before the buildings' brick façades. A blue boxcar had been abandoned mid-line, a pretty stranded Christmas present, but it wouldn't be long before an engine hooked it and trolled the freight to a warehouse beyond the city limits. Wisconsin winters were fierce. Nothing was left in the cold for long.

Dad locked his truck and walked ahead. Like most tunnel rats, he was a small man—only five feet eight inches and a hundred and fifty pounds—but quick. Impatient by nature, he always moved fast. I tried to match his pace, jogging to keep up. A neon beer sign blinked, sending chills of pink over his face. As he turned his head to light a cigarette, I saw myself in his olive skin, the hint of haughtiness in his profile. His eyes were deep brown, his face thin. He had lost his hair in his twenties, just after returning from Vietnam, a premature baldness that was beginning to look natural only now, as he neared forty. The empty nickel-hard sky bowled overhead, framing my father in a background of gray. He looked at me, his smile boyish, and pulled the door to Roscoe's open. "After you, Danielle-my-belle."

Roscoe's Vogue Bar was a mouthful, an unchewable four syllables. Everyone who was anyone called my father's favorite tavern Roscoe's or The Vogue. I called it Roscoe's. Rigid in this preference, I made fun of those regulars who called it The Vogue, finding it hilarious, with a preteen's sense of ruthless snobbery, that the worst-dressed women in America hung out at a place named after a slick fashion magazine. When I felt contentious (which, at eleven, was all the time), I told the women parked on their bar stools that they were looking *very Vogue*. That afternoon I said, "Barb, those Wranglers are great. Very Vogue." Barb tipped her beer my way and said, "You look beautiful too, smart-ass."

And she was right: I looked fantastic. My father had picked me up from school, and I hadn't had time to change. My uniform was a starched navy-blue skirt, white cotton blouse, and a stiff-necked navy-blue blazer, an ensemble I hated. I'd dressed it up with red knee socks and Doc Martens. I'd smeared on glittery eye shadow and purple lip gloss. My ears had been pierced five times; I'd written lyrics from my favorite songs (by semi-obscure and hundred-percent-depressing British bands) on my arms with red ink. I told myself that I was a post-punk rebel ready to take on the world, and it was true: I was ready to have a go at everyone, single-handedly. If it weren't for my name, people might have thought that Catholic school had done strange things to me. As it was, everyone in town knew I was Dan Trussoni's girl. This pedigree explained a lot.

During happy hour, Roscoe's was crowded. Drinks were cheap and the jukebox plugged with quarters. The way I remember it, Roscoe's was always the same—the barroom was packed (Dad and I had to squeeze onto our stools), the music played too loud, and I was forever a child, quick on my feet and dull to the truth that my father, with all his speed, could never outrun the past.

Dad ordered a round of drinks—brandy and Coke for him, a cherry Coke for me. He stubbed out his cigarette in a black plastic ashtray and lit another. My father had spent most of his adult life (aside from his tour in Vietnam) laying bricks, and his hands proved it; they were tumescent and covered with scars. The knuckles were cracked, as if cement had dried in the creases of his skin, splitting it. Dad worked harder than anyone else I knew—twelve-hour days in the summer, sometimes fourteen. When I was little, I would wait for him to come home from work and run down the driveway, meeting his truck at a gallop. I was his tag-along daughter, his dark-haired namesake, the shadow girl chasing after him wanting love, love, love. He would throw his toolbox in the garage, slap me on the back, and hit the shower. I would lean my head against the bathroom door, pressing my ear to the wood. He had not showered yet that day, and as we sat at the bar I wanted to take a toothpick from the dispenser and pry the pieces of coagulated concrete from his cuticles. I wanted to free his fingerprints of dirt.

I watched him, assessing his mood. When Dad was in high spirits, he was the most charismatic guy in the place. His buddies would walk by, shake his hand, tell him a joke, and ask how business was going. Drinks

would arrive, bought by women we'd never met before. He filled the room with his presence, wherever he went. But if my father was stuck thinking of my mother, he would be surly. He met my mother the year he came back from Vietnam, when he was wild and haunted. Maybe she liked that about him—how much he needed her. I've seen pictures of my parents taken the year I was born; they were holding hands and kissing, so in love it appeared nothing in the world could stop them. After Mom left, Dad became unrecognizable. He spent all his time at the bar, drinking from early afternoon until late in the night. When Dad got drunk, memories of Vietnam crept back on him. I never knew what had hurt him more, the war or my mother.

The drinks arrived as the jukebox came to life. Patsy Cline's soft voice filled the bar with sound. A row of taxidermy hung above the jukebox: a deer head, a beaver, and a sorry-looking turkey. My father sipped his brandy and Coke in silence, his gaze fixed on the turkey. After the second round, he squinted slightly, scanned the perimeter of the bar, tipping his Stetson to anyone who met his eye. Sometime between the third and fourth drink, he loosened up and began to talk. Not to me, exactly, although I was the only one listening. Dad didn't need me. He always went back to the war alone.

"Have I told you about the Vietcong prostitute and her mother?"

"No, Pop," I said, although I knew that he had.

"We were close to Cambodia, near the Black Virgin Mountain. We walked all day through the jungle, set up a perimeter, and the village girls hung around the concertina, watching as we dug in for the night. Smart little things, those girls were. They'd finish their work and then tell us they were giving the money to the Vietcong. We didn't care, though. They snuck around the concertina and into the perimeter all the time. This one slipped right into camp, slid under my poncho, and started doing her business. Usually, I would've just let her go about it, but I didn't have any cash, not even script, so I pushed her back. I said, *No money.* Them Vietnamese girls didn't know how to talk, but they knew the word *money* all right. The girl said, *No money, this love,* and went right on with what she was doing, which was fine by me. Who am I to argue with a free meal?"

"Not you," I said. By twelve, I thought I had seen and heard it all from Dad.

"*No money, this love,* the girl says, and that was that. It was near morning

when we were done. She gets up to go and I see, by the perimeter, an old lady standing by. The girl's mother had been watching us, I guess. I feel creepy all of a sudden, like maybe I shouldn't be screwing her daughter for free. Sure enough, the girl starts asking for her money, making a big to-do. They'd probably planned it this way, because the old one starts in too, screeching like a duck about *money, money, money.* I didn't have a cent on me, so I took that girl and tossed her clear over the concertina, to her mama. The old lady got mad at that. She screamed louder, so I got my M-16 and pointed it right smack between her eyes. That shut her up quick. *This one is for love,* I said. *This one's for love."*

Dad told a lot of war stories, but there were a few he always returned to. When he'd had too much to drink, he would start complaining about the police, or the price of gas, and suddenly he would plummet into the jungles of Vietnam. A shadow would fall over his face, obscuring him from me, and I knew he had disappeared into the past. If I reached for his hand, it was rough and cold. He was no longer there.

When Dad spoke, the bar became quiet. Vines slithered up the bar stools; tunnels opened at our feet. And Tommy Goodman, my father's tunnel-rat friend, a man I had learned to imagine from Dad's war stories, pulled up a seat next to us and rested his head on the glossy surface of the bar. *Glad you could make it,* I imagined myself saying. But Goodman and my father never paid attention to me. Before I knew it, they would be gone, two boys headed out to the war. I trailed behind, mopping up blood with cocktail napkins.