

FALLING THROUGH THE EARTH

(Excerpt)

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The guide knelt before the tunnel entrance. Old, energetic, and clearly happy with his job, he smiled as he listed the booby traps he planted to kill American soldiers—the punji sticks and scorpions rigged into bamboo cages, the explosives packed in Coke cans. The Viet Cong, he said, made weapons from whatever they could find, old C-ration tins or beer bottles. Materiel 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 sat in a semi-circle, 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 headfirst, grinning all the while. I got the feeling that he would have come to that patch of jungle even if tourists did not. Maybe the tunnels were that kind of haven, a place to retire to. A Viet Cong'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

guerillas hiding out underground. Tunnel exploration was considered one of the most dangerous assignments in Vietnam. The distinction of it set my father apart from his platoon, bumping him into the Hazardous Duty pay grade and increasing his chances of dying ten fold. Tunneling was a suicide mission, but he chose it. He saw men die underground, and yet he kept going down. You need that kind of person—two parts stubborn, one part insane—to take on a tunnel. Only a man determined to see the worst 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 what he had felt--the fear, the heat, the thrill of making it through. At heart, I was my father's daughter. What I needed to know was--did I want to be? This is was the real reason I had come to Vietnam.

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, when he realized that I was not close behind, turned back. 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, spidery prickles 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 a hand, a knee, my other hand, my other knee forward, going deeper and deeper.