The Fourth Monkey

Sometimes in the night, I used to dream that my father was looking for the son he had never seen. He would just pop up on the porch and I would come to the door to meet this man I had never met. When I would wake, I always realized it was only my dream and that I did not even know what my father looked like.

In my village in Vietnam, it was said that if you dream a dream enough times, it will happen. So I waited for many years, but my father never came. I tried to make myself heartless about him and I kept doing what I had to do with my life. I told myself not to be sad, for now I live in America, where people can have whatever they can dream if they work for it. Today I have a beautiful wife and two smart daughters. We live in a fine house with four bedrooms. And I am the boss of myself, owner of two nail parlors with luxury pedicure chairs and private waxing rooms. But still, I do not know my father.

Nearly twenty years ago, about seven years after the war was ended, the US government came back to Vietnam to clean up their mess and to pick up whatever was left, meaning mostly a lot of kids like me who had American fathers. We were the leftovers: some in orphanages, some on the streets, and some hidden with relatives. I lived with my grandmother, Ba. Once every few years, my mother brought my sister, four years younger, to Ba's village to visit us. It was never a good visit, for Ba was still angry with my mother for giving me to an orphanage when I was two months old. Vietnamese people hold large prejudice about American serviceman and Vietnamese woman. My grandmother would say that my mother had disgraced herself by being with my

American father, but again a hundred times more when she abandoned me. So Ba came to get me and took me to live with her and my uncle. Ba's friends treated me politely, but even as far back as I can remember, other children taunted me, stuck out their tongues, made faces, and called me 'mix.' When I was a little older, I had two close friends who never mentioned me being the son of an American soldier, but the other kids pushed and shoved me. Ba had taught me to stay quiet, to walk away from their taunts. Mostly, I did. But there were some kids who thought they were tough because their fathers were important or were gangsters, and they would lay their hands on me. Then I fought back. Even though no one ever taught me kung fu or how to fight, I would nearly always win. Then their parents would come after my family. So Ba tried to keep me always inside. It was a chain around my neck.

When I was fourteen years old, my mother began to visit a lot. She came every few weeks and would sit with Ba and my uncle, talking, talking, talking, because she wanted to go to the United States and I was her ticket. Ba told me I should be angry at my mother. But I was not. I was happy because now my family had the chance to be together. The US government accepted me for being a mix, the first time it was ever a good thing; and along with me could come my mother and any brother or sister who had not finished high school. I was no longer dust under my mother's feet. I was gold.

I started tenth grade when we got to Kentucky. I spoke not one word of English, took ESL with my sister and the other kids like me for one hour each day. My mother found work as a seamstress in a factory. With food stamps, it was good enough to hang on and we were not as poor as we had been in Vietnam.

One day, after we had been in America for nearly a year, I came from school to find a large envelope hanging on the door of our small apartment. It was addressed to me: Le Tuan,

though I am called Tom Lee now, because no one in my high school could understand Tuan or Le. Inside was a letter and a photograph of a man I could hardly see, a woman about his age, and two young girls. I am sorry I did not keep the letter, but I remember every word. It said he was on military business in Fort Knox and he was passing by… we lived only a half hour from there… and he was sorry that nobody was home. “I guess you are in school,” the letter said. “See you later. Dick” Then he signed his full name, Richard H. Singer, Command Sergeant Major, United States Army. But there was no address or phone number.

When I showed the packet to my mother, she said nothing. But she looked a long time at the photograph. Every day after the letter, I returned from school, hoping to find my father on the porch, like in my dream. My mother and my sister didn’t care; it made no difference to them. But my father was in my heart now. I hoped he would come back to look for me, but after a year, I decided he was a cheap-ass American. So I threw the letter into the garbage. Vietnamese, we come from nothing. But when we have something, we share it. American men think only about themselves. My father, I realized, was one of them. So I kept doing what I had to do with my life.

After high school, I went to technical school to learn machine shop. My English was still difficult. I understood only fifty percent. But I studied hard, didn’t hang out like the other boys, and I finished the two-year program in one-and-a-half years. The last few months, my teacher got me a job. It was only grinding, not real machine work. It wasn’t my fault that I got in an argument with the redneck supervisor; he was trying to piss off on me. When I told the teacher, he got me a different job. I didn’t like working for supervisors, so even after school was finished for more than a year, my teacher helped me to get a government loan to open my own business. I was just married to a beautiful Vietnamese girl who had come with her family to Kentucky a few

years before. I wanted a machine shop, but together, with both of us working in the business, we could get a loan to open our first nail parlor. After only a few years, we opened another on the other side of town, and now, after ten years of hard work, we hope to open a third one.

This is the first time in my life I can feel really good about myself. I have money. I have a smart and hard-working Vietnamese wife, Molly, and two beautiful daughters. I have reached the age of thirty. At last, I feel confident. Waiting for such long years, I have dreamed my dream many times. And maybe what they meant in Ba's village is that if you dream enough, it is you who will make it happen. Fourteen years have passed since my father left his picture on my door and I am thinking that if he doesn't look for me, then I will look for him.

I ask my sister Ngan, who lives with my mother still, if she will help me look for my father. She lost her job so she has nothing to do, and she doesn't like working in the nail parlors. Very clever, Ngan, and she finds on the Internet seventeen addresses for a man with the same name as my father. Two of them are in Fort Stewart, Georgia, where there is a military base for the US Army. I had to spend thirty bucks, but I am happy to know the places where he might live. Less than one dollar for each year of my life.

My girls are in school now and my wife can run the shops, so I decide I will go to Fort Stewart to see if I can find him. Still, I think many times: should I go? I have been saying no to myself because I was afraid he would think I wanted money or support. With a house and a business and a family, with these things in my hands, I can look for him.

In February, I drive to Fort Stewart. My sister is in the car, knitting all the way to pass the time. We find the first address and I go to ring the bell. The man who answers the door does not know anyone by the name of Richard H. Singer and closes the door in my face. When I walk back to the car, I do not look at Ngan. It is getting dark and cold, late in the afternoon, and we

have been driving since early morning. But I must find my father while there is still a little light. We go to the other address. I am not sure he will live in this house either. I sit in the car, saying nothing. Ngan, too, is quiet. She is still knitting, and the only sound is the soft click of her needles, one against the other. We have had no food since breakfast, before we left Kentucky, and I know Ngan is hungry and tired. So I go quickly to knock at the door, but I don't expect to find my father there.

A light comes on, a yellow bulb that illuminates the small porch. The man who opens the door doesn't look like how I remember the picture at all, not anything like what I expected. But I know it is my father, because when you see it, you know it. And I can see he has the same feeling about me.

"I'm Tom," I say. I do not smile. I am just surprised.

He looks at me, as if he wants to find himself in my face. We stand and stare at each other, saying nothing, on opposite sides of the screen door. He looks terrible. He is very pale, with only a few tufts of hair, like bent wire, on his head. But I can see the line of his hair, where it was, and mine is the same, though it is darker.

"I just came out from chemo," are the first words my father says to me.

I don't know what to say, so I don't say anything. I want him to ask me to come inside, but he doesn't. He moves with difficulty toward the interior of the house, a few steps, looks around a corner, then returns. "I must go back to bed. I am very weak."

I nod.

"Where are you staying?" he asks.

“In a hotel,” I say. He asks which hotel but I don’t know how to answer him. It was nearly dark and I was afraid I couldn’t find the address, so I searched for him before I found a hotel. When I don’t answer, he asks for my phone number. I am glad I have a cell phone.

“I’ll call you tomorrow morning, eight o’clock. We’ll go have a cup of coffee.”

The next morning, I open my eyes and I am just happy. It’s about time. Face to face with my father is all I can think about. For me, the sun is shining, even though I can’t see outside the thick curtains of the motel window. My father calls at precisely eight. We agree to meet at a gas station near his house. I leave my sister with her pillow and her yarn.

My father takes me to Angelo’s, a coffee shop that he says he likes. He orders eggs and bacon and whole wheat toast and grits and coffee, then orders the same for me, without asking what I want. The waitress looks at him, then at me, then back at him. I am sure that she knows he is my father. Even though he is thin and his skin is gray, we look like father and son. Even though I look Vietnamese in my color and the shape of my eyes, we look like father and son. And even though we have never seen each other, we look like father and son.

My father explains to me that he does not have much time, because he has an appointment with the doctor. But we have one hour, he tells me. I don’t say anything. I just want to look at my father and hear his voice and feel him near me. I want to concentrate on this moment I have waited so long to have.

“I’m doing chemo,” he says. “Doesn’t look good. Maybe six months.” And then he tells me about his illness. While he is talking, he twists a ring on the finger of his right hand. I think that maybe it is loose because he has lost weight. Or maybe he twists it because he is nervous.

“Father, I am sorry to hear you are sick,” I say.

“Call me Dick,” he says.

But I cannot. I will always call him Father because it is a respectful title.

He tells me then, as he would tell me many times later, about my mother. In Vietnam, in 1966 and 1967, my father delivered gas and bombs from one place to another, sometimes hiding them. When he wasn't working, it didn't matter much what he did. But at 2100 hours, the gate was locked and all soldiers were supposed to be on the base. The way he told it, he was in love. So he sneaked out every night, jumped over the fence and ran to my mother's village where he would stay until dawn. They locked him up a lot, he said. But still, he ran to my mother every night. Then one day, they called his number, told him to pack, and sent him back to the United States. He didn't have the chance to even say goodbye. A few years later, the military returned him to Vietnam because he knew where to find the bombs and the gas. He said he came to look for my mom, but her village had been destroyed and everything had changed. He couldn't find her.

Before we part, he tells me that he feels sorry that he left me back there and that he didn't mean to do that. He explains that now he has a wife and two daughters who are a few years younger than I am, and that he has two grandchildren. Then he says he must go, for me to return home and wait two weeks. His wife and daughters do not know about me and he will tell them, but it will be difficult.

I go back to the motel to pick up Ngan and we drive back to Kentucky. Even though it is raining, I feel the sun is shining.

Two weeks later, on Saturday, his older daughter phones me. "This is your sister, Katie," she says to me when I answer. She is really happy. She tells me she heard the story late last night and could hardly wait until this morning to call me. Every week after, on Saturday, my father and

Katie call me. Sometimes Karla, the younger daughter, says hello. But not the wife. Her name is Joy, which I think is curious, because she has no joy.

Every year until now, I have taken my family to Florida for vacation, in spring when my girls have Easter break and in late summer before school starts again. Now, instead, we go to the beach in Georgia for three days, then spend two days at a motel close to Fort Stewart to visit my father. And we go more often now, four times in a year. One day after we are there more than a year of visits, my father says the time has come to stay in his house. I say no, but he really wants me to come, I can feel this, so I agree. Joy will not be happy, but I know she doesn't have a choice.

When we get there, my father has fixed up his garage like a house. There are two small bedrooms and a bathroom. He made it just for me. My wife and my girls and I sleep there, and come inside the main house with my father and his wife when we are awake. Joy does not try to hide her misery. Her mouth turns down at the corners and she does not look at any of us, not even at my beautiful little daughters.

My father is so happy I am there that he has a party to introduce me as his son. He invites his friends and neighbors for beer and bar-b-cue. I am happy, too. And Molly and my girls go to the mall with Katie to buy new outfits for the party.

On Saturday, when my father's friends begin to arrive, Joy stays alone in the kitchen, making her arms across her chest, like she has pain. She says not one word, even with all those people there. When all the guests have left, she walks back and forth, back and forth. Finally, she asks me, "What do you want?"

"To know my father," I say. I can see in her eyes that she does not believe me. I look to my father and he does not know what to do. I don't want him to have a hard time. So I decide to make everybody happy and go home two days early. We drive all night to get back to Kentucky.

After that, I forget about visiting my father, though we still have telephone calls every week. He begins another round of chemo, and he has diabetes, too, so the doctors take his leg. My father tells me that he has not even one year left. He is now two years past how long he said he would live the first time I met him, so I think maybe he lasts for me. One Saturday, he tells me the time has come for him to make it to Kentucky to see me just one more time before he dies. He says that without daily medical care he can die at any moment, but he is coming anyway.

My wife and I are opening our third nail parlor. As the ones before, we do all the interior construction ourselves to save money. My father says he wants to lend a hand. He cannot stand for more than a few minutes, but he helps us choose the paint colors and even paints some of the trim while he sits in a chair. He is very happy here and I realize, now that he is away from Joy, he is a man who likes to laugh and to make jokes. He shows me every day about three monkeys who see no evil, hear no evil, speak no evil, and he puts his hands over his eyes, then his ears, then his mouth. In my father's story there are four monkeys. He puts his hands over his crotch for the fourth monkey and laughs. I wonder, but do not ask, if he is thinking about my mother and me, if that is why he is laughing.

One day while he is with us, my mom comes to our house to see him. They sit in the kitchen at the table, but do not have many words to say. Later, she tells me she doesn't care about him, but she is happy she did her part. What part, I ask her. And she tells me that when we first arrived in the US, she wrote to an American friend from wartime to ask for help to locate

my father so he would know his son. I think really that she wanted my father to help us, but she did not say that. The friend would not tell my father's address, but said to write a letter and that he would send it. Now I know that is how my father found me fifteen years ago, when he left the envelope on our door. I am sad my mother did not tell me this until I found him. Parents and children in Vietnam aren't open for each other, they don't share the past. My father, I am glad he is American. Now that I have met him, he tries to share himself with me. But still, I do not know him.

In the evenings, he and I sit on the porch on the swing. It is getting cold outside, so the girls stay inside. This gives us a chance to talk like fathers and sons. But mostly, we don't say anything. We pass the time sitting next to each other, listening to the squeak of the swing and feeling the gentle rocking. On one of these nights, he asks me if there is anything I need from him.

"I don't need anything," I answer.

"No, really, I want to help you. What do you need from me?"

"Nothing," I say. I decide my father is making this offer not for me, but to make himself feel good. As much as I want to please him, I deny him that. I don't want his money. But I am thinking: who doesn't like more money?

He takes the ring off his right hand and he puts it in my hand. The ring is gold and heavy, flat across the top. Stamped into it is a black striped shield, like the patch on a military shirt. Above and below the shield are bars with the words US ARMY and CSM. In the center of the ring is a small diamond, which does not sparkle. I look hard at the ring, then at his face.

"I don't want the ring," I say.

“I want you to have it.” My father looks at me with eyes that pierce mine. “It’s a very important ring. When you get to the rank of Command Sergeant Major, you get this ring. I am proud to wear it. And I want my son to have it.”

I put the ring on my finger. But only because he insists.

He leaves our house after nearly two whole weeks, and I feel good because my father made it to see his son’s success. Everything for me is solved, and my life is more open. Even so, as soon as he leaves, I take the ring off my finger and put it into a small wood box, intricately carved in Vietnam, that has a lock with a key. I put the box on the dresser in our bedroom, and hide the key under the lamp, but I don’t like to look at it every day, so after a few weeks, I bury the box in a drawer under some sweaters.

Only two months later, Katie calls to say he is unconscious. My daughters and Molly have already gone to bed, but I wake them and get them in the car, and we drive all night to see him. We get to the hospital at nine in the morning and we stay all day there. Joy does not speak to us, but Katie and Karla come in the afternoon and we go with Katie to the hospital cafeteria for something to eat. When we come back to his room, my father still only sleeps, having half-closed eyes, so we drive all night back to Kentucky so the girls can go to school the next day.

A week later, he is gone. When Katie calls, we pack up the car again and Molly and my girls and Ngan and I go for the last time to Fort Stewart. My father will have a military funeral in a new cemetery. I look at my wife and my sister and my girls, who are now eight and eleven, and am surprised that they are all crying. But I am brave. I am not going to drop any tears.

At the funeral, we stand together as a family, but apart from the others who are there. When the soldiers drop the coffin into the ground, I lose something and my tears do not stop. If

you hold something inside you for so long – thirty-three years I held it – and you can let it out for people to share, then you feel release. I am free.

When the funeral is ended, Katie comes to me and hugs me. “My brother,” she says, and promises to call me soon. Joy and Karla, standing together, do not even look at me.

I have only gladness that I was able to spend three years in trying to know my father. I think sometimes that if I did not go there when I did, he would have died very soon. I tell myself that he lived long with his cancer only to have time with me, his son.

I still dream about him sometimes. He pops up on my porch, holding his hand in the air to show his ring. When I wake, I get out of bed and get the key to unlock the little wood box to be sure the ring is still there. I think there is something secret about it and I try to figure out what it is. But I haven’t discovered it yet.

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