

Bruce Guernsey

Digging to America

When I was a little kid, I was sure I could dig to China. If you dug a hole deep enough, the grown-ups said, that's where you'd come out. The big tall plumber said it was so when he came to see why our pipes were leaking. He said they were that deep, and my father, who told him he could fix them himself for less, seemed to agree. He did until he hit something that got him all wet. Then he started yelling more about the hot place and where the plumber should go other than China.

Oddly, the Orient and hell seemed to be in the same location, underground, as were so many other things back in the Eisenhower years, like the bomb shelters we had to practice walking calmly down into, following the big yellow and black signs to the safety of a church basement or school gym. Or the truth about sex, kept hidden from us like buried treasure, and the secret intimacies of family and neighborhood life cloaked in Republican propriety until Elvis and *Peyton Place* came along.

My good friend, Freddy Gumm, who lived next door and was already ten, shared my fascination for whatever was under. I guess that's why he liked looking up girls' dresses so much. The two of us had been digging like crazed puppies in the bushes behind his house for a couple of weeks. We were nearly in Shanghai when my father, on his way home from Mr. Pumphrey's, dropped suddenly out of sight.

He'd gone over for a night-cap, one of those that lasts till sun-up, and was taking the short-cut home. The plywood board we'd covered with leaves wasn't strong enough to hold his wobbly foot and down he went to China, a four foot drop that got him muddy and mad as hell, the word I wasn't supposed to hear that he used again. It served him right, my

mother said, who was prudish about booze and probably wondered where he really went. I was about to have a sister again, or maybe with luck my first brother, and she said some things to my father that made him even madder at me. An eight-year-old in those times knew only rumors about where babies came from, and God and Communism and all that was mysterious about life were mixed together in my imagination.

Fred's old man and mine stood watch over us like prison guards until we'd filled our tunnel up. China could not have been far, the hole seemed that deep. I can still hear our shovels scraping, the rocks and clods falling back into place, a sound that soon would make a mockery of all our fanciful digging. Freddy's little brother was only five or six months old when he didn't wake up from his nap a few weeks later. "SIDS" is what we'd call it now, but there wasn't a name for it then. No matter: he simply died without reason one April day, snug in his carriage near the bushes where we dug. The sun was even shining.

Freddy Gumm was the toughest kid on the block and could throw a baseball higher than anyone, so when I saw him crying for the first time, I knew it was okay to do so too, especially when he moved away the next year after his parents, who always had the best candy at Halloween and seemed so nice, got divorced. The hole we dug together has taken on huge meaning ever since. Finally getting to China a few months back, I realized that had I been a Chinese kid, I'd perhaps have been digging to America instead. I wondered where I would have surfaced. Little did I know that I'd come crawling out in my old neighborhood like my luckless father in the Gumm's back yard—that I'd end up just where I'd started, at home.

My son and I were on a train to Hangzhou, the city Marco Polo called the loveliest in the world. Marco had taken an overland route instead of under, and Brendan and I had come by sea, its watery cradle reenacted by the rails whose rocking had put my son to sleep. He'd been up too late, hanging out with other Semester at Sea students on our ship and had slipped into dreamland with his head on my shoulder. I was a faculty member for the fall voyage, and my son was able to come along to finish his last term in college. Now in his early twenties, he would not have rested his head that way as he had once, but we were crowded in by the many Chinese, so there he was leaning against me, a little kid again but snoring like a man, his Red Sox cap tilted askew.

When he was the age of Freddy Gumm's baby brother, how could I have imagined such a scene?—dozens of curious Chinese staring at my son and me on a train through the mist and drizzle of rice fields. What were they thinking, I wondered, feeling a bit uneasy from their intense looks, their constant watching. I was programmed in the '50's to believe that under those straw hats lurked the lust of Communism, a mystery that rivaled even sex in legend and power. I'd hid underground from these people, or from the Russians, at least. They were all Communists, so what did it matter as the sirens sounded every Tuesday at school. And why wouldn't I hide! After all, the Commie Chinks reproduce faster than we do, I heard in a barber shop one day. Seven months and they hatch, one guy said; more like six, the big man with the crew-cut replied.

In fourth grade and good at math at the time, I quickly figured how many more Chinese there would be than Americans and here they were all before me, leering and scary, until my son's cap fell off and skidded across the train floor and everyone was suddenly laughing. It came to rest at the feet of a tiny woman, huddled alone and very old, who picked it up as if it were holy, staring at the crimson "B." For some reason, as she stood and bowed before my groggy son, a powerful *deja vu* experience washed over me. Where had this happened before?—the way she held the hat in front of her and returned to him his emblem of home, more lines in her face than I'd ever seen in anyone. I felt at ease on the train and in China from then on but was unnerved by my own vague memories.

In Viet Nam a few weeks later, I watched that same cap disappear into the Cu Chi Tunnels, a network of underground passages originally part of the Viet Minh's fight against the French but repaired and rebuilt by the Viet Cong. Like Freddy and me they dug all of the 200 kilometer system by hand. Their trap doors, however, were far more effective than ours, invisible to the enemy eye or dog-sniffing nose. In their own way, and a brutal one it was, the Viet Cong were digging to America, using the tunnels for mounting surprise attacks against our troops.

Seeing my son descend into one ahead of me, then turn back to give me the peace sign, a grin on his face, made me shudder, as if he were the point-man on a patrol. From the dark room of my memory came a picture of my father taken during the Second World War. Climbing into a tank, helmet on and waving, he was smiling like Brendan. I vividly remember how I used to stare at that hole in the top of the tank where his body disappeared. I have no idea what I was trying to see. The wheels

and gears, I guess, whatever was down there, as mysterious to a boy as the facts of life, and death. My mother always claimed that my father was never the same after the war, that he never smiled quite that same boyish way again as he did in the photo from Fort Sill before he went into combat. Whatever was inside that tank took something inside of him away.

I was my son's age now when President Johnson sent the first big wave of troops to Viet Nam, and like many young men and women at the time, I wanted to believe that what my country was doing was right. We were as naive as my son at Cu Chi and my father in boot camp, until the horrors of Viet Nam came home to us on the screen or in a plastic bag. "And babies?" Mike Wallace asked. "And babies," the anonymous soldier replied, America's collective heart stopping during that television newscast, the truth of the Mi Lai massacre revealed to us all. America could kill babies on purpose?! I cried again, just as I did with Freddy, and so did the country, a hideous secret unearthed.

Memory is a labyrinth of tunnels that are somehow all connected like Cu Chi. My father had told me to clean out the leaves from the hedges, the spring chore I hated most, and I was deep into the briars when I heard a noise I'd never heard before and never heard again until those scenes from Mi Lai. A moaning sound, too low to be a cry, but a crying that went with it. There are no words for this kind of grief, and I stood up to see where such a sound was coming from. On the sun-porch next door I could see Freddy's mom rocking forwards and back like someone sick and about to throw up, but there was something in her hands, something that she held out in front of her the way Father Davis carried God in the chalice at church. And on the television screen there she was again, running from the flames, the torched thatch behind her, clutching her soft bundle of pain. And was that her, too, on our trip to Hangzhou, retrieving my son's innocence, his cap with its mysterious red symbol that she cradled like an offering? Is this where I'd seen that old, old woman before, next door?

When my country dug to China in the early sixties, by intention or mistake, it got to Viet Nam instead. When I found myself digging to America while in China and Viet Nam, I ended up in my old back yard. I had heard there for the first time in my life the deepest sound there is: the sound of sorrow at the death of a child. Never before had I felt so alone, and I was afraid as if I'd traveled to some place far away where

not only the language was strange but even the very sounds. Like China, perhaps, or Viet Nam.

That's where I was that April day, though I hadn't gone anywhere; that's where I had returned forty-five years later, despite being on the other side of the world. Digging to America meant unearthing my deepest memories, and I was beginning to see how deep were the underground connections between me and my nation's recent history. "And babies?" "Yes, and babies." The train to Hangzhou, the tunnels of Cu Chi, had brought me back to that hole in Freddy Gumm's yard and the sound of the earth falling back into place.

Where we grew up and the experiences we had in that time which is also a place are the soil on our boots wherever we go. After Freddy and I had finished our secret digging for the day, I hid my shoes in the basement so I wouldn't track mud on the carpet the way my grumbling father did. But there is no washing off the earth when we dig in it deeply. It sticks to the spirit and is our history.

Bruce Guernsey is Distinguished Professor of English at Eastern Illinois University. His essays are in recent issues of *Sport Literature*, *The Virginia Quarterly Review*, and *Chronicles*. "Digging to America" is the title piece to a collection he is working on.