

## **Chapter 3**

### ***Fish Flying Deftly in the Air***

*a porch where no one sits,  
wicker chairs,- lonely, silent ghosts  
- mushroom enemies remain--Haiku*

There is almost no better feeling in the world than seeing someone in a plane wave at you and then waving back at them. I have heard that the airmen stationed at Hickam field on Oahu on December 7<sup>th</sup> waved because they could see the smiles on the faces of the Japanese airmen as they formed aerial scythes to strafe the neatly lined up chaff of aircraft, to shred them into metallic chef salads. Their faces looked so happy and contented as they barreled in, one after another, ubiquitous and deadly as Ginzu knives on a home shopping network infomercial. At first the men on the ground couldn't believe it was an actual attack, an attack seemed at first just too impersonal and they seemed to happy. Heyy—I'm walkin' here!! .

The P-26's that were outside the hangars that day were not as badly shot up as the P-36 and P-40s. This is because they were in a peripheral area, slated for disposal by the army. By 1940, the P-26 was no longer even a candidate for front-line service, having been replaced by the faster and better equipped P-36 and P-40s. Months before we entered the war in Europe a few of them had been repaired and sent to the British aboard merchant ships on lend-lease. This was only a few months before the P-51 came online, but these were the ones that were left there at Hickam; the ones that were barely flying still.

I personally was not there that day in 1941, but I was however there on a different day, a much later, but also bright and sunny day, -when some other gleefully smiling people drove their airplanes into two large somewhat impersonal buildings; rendering them suddenly, intensely personal. Ironically, it was also not until those aircraft became suddenly and intensely personal that those airmen at Hickam field would realize that their attackers' expressions were not ones of comradeship and warmth or had there been anyone been there looking, polite confusion at being lost, but rather manic glee at the destruction taking place. It could be argued therefore, there is some measure of poetic justice to be found in the fact that a military piece of flying junk had been re-personalized, converted to the personal property of an ex-army airman, near the Little Lake here in Orange County. As for those other planes, no one, at least I don't think anyone should keep a piece of those other aircraft, or want to, no one will take them home piece by piece, rescue them from the wisps of smoke rising from that imploded rubble. That debris belongs to titans and not to human legend.

The Army in peacetime had ordered some one hundred seventy four copies of the P-26. By 1941 they were obsolete but about twenty of these were still officially stationed at Pearl Harbor when the Japanese attacked, waiting to be mothballed. It was one of these of which Barky Dulgarian eventually got a hold of. Barky being an airplane pilot and mechanic both made sure the one he had in our backyard flew and fly it did, often close enough to the top of our house to cut the peel off an orange if you tossed it out the window at the right time.

Barky was a wild Armenian who along with his brother Corky owned the airstrip across from my grandpa's barn. He was there most all the time puttering around the shed, just inexcusably and

unapologetically just around, except that is when he flew his plane that being mostly on weekends, or, at least in those later years, when he was working part time at the dump. In 1958 he owned the P-26, which was a fighter plane that he kept in that run down shed across from the barn, not far from the lake. There was a helicopter in there too but that didn't fly, at least I never saw it, and a second plane also, for parts. Sometimes, in later years I thought I could see him, forming himself from wisps of smoke or haze, just as he had from those hovering there just outside that barn near the shed that housed his airplane before they were blown away by the wind, or the backwash of a propeller. So even these vague apparitions, the downward pull on the prop that helps you get started, to begin, or to soar, they too seem to disperse almost effortlessly now as they did then, the directionless suspensions of life scattering it like a school of scared fish. Once thus engaged, once driven by the roar of curiosity one is impelled to peer through the dispersing haze of memory, vision, tentative fingers peeking through these fragile reeds of smoke, to feel, to distinguish what does and what will not evaporate and what to hold on to as the morning sun erases the gaudy noise of night. Sometimes as we have said though, things are so real that nothing can blow them away, nothing can disperse them, --these, in time, become points to help you find your way onwards or back or here or there, mental landmarks seen from above, and not, as the bearer of the coarser, kosher salt of fate would have it, preserved from change as much as preceding it.

The P-26 airplane was a stocky single engine brawler of a machine, called affectionately the 'peashooter', and was a legend in its own right. It was the first all metallic monoplane that had been in the Army Air Corps' or at least the first all-metal production aircraft. With aggressively fixed landing gear the external bracing for the wings merged into the wheel base causing it to resemble nothing so much as a barely restrained pit bull when it finally pulled up to a growling halt on the ground. When you heard it coming overhead, with its guttural rasp, the noise was enough to send your balls running upstream to find your asshole. Though Barky never actually hit anything, it looked like he was always about to. Barky's plane though was, at least through the late 1950s, king of the air of Southern Orange County as he flew over the gradually dying farms, sometimes landing on (the old) State route 17, taxiing up to the Esso gas station to fill'er up with regular or stopping at the Red Apple Rest to grab a bite. Once in the winter he landed on Round Lake when he ran out of gas where one wheel promptly punched through the thin ice leaving the entire plane askew. They had to tow him out from the shore with a chain.

Across from Barky's airfield stood my dad's cornfield and the barn. Where my barn met the curve in the 'road' which was really a cowpath leading to the little lake, was the softball field (I refer here to it as 'mine' even though I was just nine at the time, for legal and emotional reasons that will be clearer later on). Barky in order to get a running start, would roll the plane up the slight hill in back of home plate. Jumping in, by the time he got to the cowpath, which was foul ball territory, he was airborne. All this was in the flat and the flat is not good for grapevines, or so I have been told. I still own the hill but the rest has become the Lakehill Farms, a subdivision where people mostly smile, play the drums and do not wave much.

Clearly he had brought back both the plane and a helicopter (which he never flew) from the war, although, I, for my part, can't figure out how he managed it both being obviously too big just to shove into your rucksack, even in pieces, which, as legend has it, was exactly what he did, albeit, just as obviously, in several trips. (But, just as obviously, anyone who owned an airfield could have figured out this relatively minor logistical question.) So, without really requiring any better explanation of how they got here, than there was for the Sunnies in the little lake, there they both stood, in a shed by the airfield with Barky's vast array of tools strewn, erupted like a lexicon of greasy Artesia nearby on the dirt floor.

## The Visible Man

Unknown either to me, (or to Barky either I suppose), there were, back then, another pair of covert eyes peering from behind the high reeds back of the cow barn and from between the cat tails at the edge of the field, a pair of eyes watching all this flying and fishing and fouling out; they belonged to someone, someone who was more at home here than I, practicing his golf shot with the snapped off reeds, unlike me, a freckle faced city kid, always somehow lost, aloof, adrift in golden fields, me an intruder while he was at home. A patient golfer he was I am quite sure, watching and quietly observing and waiting and parsing the law ensconced in nature with sporty tweeds. These ears, quick and apt to the stories of the hills perhaps spawned the streams gurgle that fed the little lake while, lounging there in the cool shade, dreaming of golf, even while recognizing that they we were all somehow doomed. In those rushes at the edge of the airstrip lay this three handicap Moses, not floating, but lurking like Bacchus in a basket made not of bulrushes but of grapevines and who in later years would shatter the idolater's club with his putter, and then part the subdivision greens with his seven irons. Who knew?—after all, no one knew.

Barky never smiled; when he buzzed the roof of the house, you could see his peaked hat and that he too needed a shave even as he skimmed the hirsute scrawny treetops of their dander, - he always waved but never smiled. Funny now how something so insubstantial like a wave can forge a bond between people sometimes, even people who may have never met. A wave is not like praying, or smiling, both of which require some exercise of will; but it flows rather from a deeper source, one forged into the very structure of the universe itself, effortless. Being the most casual of gestures, it is yet the most lucid and the most binding.

It is a different world now, though, - there are no more P-26s that you can land at the Esso to fill'er up. There are no more personal, impersonal buildings or handicap Messiah golfers in the bulrushes. Stealth technology has made bombing itself impersonal now. Nevertheless, everybody should at least once know how exhilarating it is to be buzzed by a low flying aircraft, right?, before they die, to hear the dull low rasp low like sandpaper praying in the distance then suddenly present, enveloping, loud, hosannas of bees, drilling, dialing into the back of your head repetitive as a rosary or an unwanted phone call, a portable banquet of delicious honeycombed fear, that just as quickly melts, dispersing in the air like a phantom cry. Then again, --who knew.

I don't think the people in those other planes, the ones I saw myself on TV, were waving as they drovethoseadamantlyhorizontalslivers of personalized metal into those two | resolutely | vertical impersonal pieces of steel, there was no inexplicable sweetness. But, I am certain they were smiling,- smiling as they were consumed by that fuel accelerated fiery flower, a bloom that produced human pollen floating momentarily through the still, bright September air, but I did see enough of to fertilize the seeds of anger in my heart. Yes, I am quite sure they were smiling and praying, -- not waving and there was no one there who would mistake those smiles for friendliness.

There seems to be a lesson all in this, somewhere,--or should be. When I last saw Barky he was sitting astride a bulldozer at the dump, - it was some years late, he still wasn't smiling but he wasn't waving anymore either, -and for me, it wasn't all that exhilarating anymore to see him either. By then it was safe to say he knew where the bodies were buried, (just as we all did later on). By then, instead

of a monoplane he was ferociously piloting a Harley motorcycle up and down Route 17,--buzzing the new double lane paintstripe. That was the same year I went back to the hillside overlooking the old ball field, where the housing development called Lakehill Farms now spread out across the suddenly nondescript valley floor, excitement gripped me again as I clutched some scrawny grapevines in my fist. Finding a little clearing, a little bit of a meadow in the midst of the stunted cedars I put the five Concord vines from the nursery in Newburgh into the ground. They looked really pathetic. If anyone had seen them, they would have laughed not knowing or caring how they got there. They were as inconsequential as a light dying in the belly of space. As "Sunnies" in a little lake with no name. As praying bees consuming human pollen floating the the September sky. As a plane in the cotton heaven of mothballs.

The next year, I went back to see how the vines were doing. There was no trace of them at all. Vanished, It was as if they had somehow, like smoke, dissipated into the air. That second year was the year that Barky got smashed by a car as he sheltered under the Arcadia overpass with his motorcycle from a passing rain shower. He had known where the bodies were buried, and now he was one. He lay there shattered on the highway pavement with one arm outstretched like a football quarterback amid the unforgiving smoking debris of the Harley, still in his peaked cap, almost but not quite waving, still needing a shave. They said he maybe was waving at the car that hit him, that maybe he even knew the driver? I think perhaps he was just throwing a forty yard pass to the angels. It was 3<sup>rd</sup> and 1.

What is it about the vine,-it is so utterly irresolute. It will not stand up straight unless you virtually force it over a period of many years,-it will not grow in any particular direction like a tree or a shrub unless you methodically take away every other option. Even when forced to take the path of least resistance it has no substance to speak of; - I remember once I cut a trunk by accident with the tractor mower, killing the vine, when I mournfully lifted the trunk like the corpse of a fallen comrade, I was shocked. It was so light, like whipped cream, mit Schlag, or as Milan Kundera would say, the 'incredible lightness of being'. When you see a vineyard it looks so substantial and the trunks, like stalwart soldiers in a little army, - but then when you actually feel it, it is like almost not there, - strange,-how it is, unless it has just rained of course. Maybe it is only war that has this same incongruous fleeting insubstantiality, I don't know myself, personally, all I know is that the sensation was singularly disconcerting and memorable, similar to the one time I heard Robert Mondavi speak; I had expected to hear this profoundly mellow, Cabernet-infused depth and smoothness, with hints of raspberry and basso profundo pepper, instead he had this raspy raspberry, Mike Tyson-like tough, in your face, but comic book, vocal quality. "Heyyy! I'm walkin' here", like Mickey Mouse had escaped from Fantasia and somehow magically ended up in Napa with a glass of Cab Sauvignon gripped tightly in his three fingered hand waving at the kids with his other one.

### **Isn't it Anti-Romantic**

It must be that I'm just not paying attention. I forgot to mention it, -there was also a small concrete dam at one end of the little lake. Once, while I was standing on that dam, fishing in that sun-dappled pond, one September day, it was the weekend before school started I think, I wandered off with my fishing pole, again not paying too much attention, again thinking, daydreaming about how the Japanese Zero pilots were smiling as they strafed the planes neatly lined up in a row like pins in a bowling alley at Hickam AFB. As I imagined them cutting the nearby palm trees in two with machine gun bullets and sending startled soldiers flopping around the tarmac scrambling for shelter, rat-a-tat-tat, then suddenly, I actually had a fish on the line, I really did not know how it got there, it just kind of sneaked up and startled me. There was a Sunny tuggin' on that K-Mart hookup. As I stood there atop the dam that had created the little lake, momentarily triumphant, then I pulled up that sunny and watched as it lay there flopping on the concrete for a while, I froze. I didn't know what to do with it really; --pride was competing guilt, with my natural instinct to throw it back in the water where it would be comfortable. What did it make of that situation? Being suddenly made to feel too solid, too substantial, it was used to freedom, fluidity and lightness and here it lay on this hard dry stuff. And it did not know how it got there where when it flapped, nothing happened. It was out of its element,--as I would be when,--confronted by something too solid and too substantial in years to come.

Most people, I venture to say, if they aren't scared shitless out of their wits half the time are much happier when flying, --they have a plane, there is, by default, a certain indisputably detached context it provides, an alternate substantiality, like being apart from, yet securely attached to your everyday life. Maybe that's why those Japanese pilots were smiling. They didn't know yet that they were not legends, just because they had the planes that weren't chef salad. Planting a vineyard is like that, like willfully trying to start a legend. You find in the end you really can't and even if you could, it wouldn't be worth it. This is because the physical actions, the calculus of motions, in themselves compose the event as whole, like the motions of those pilots without some abstracted yet concrete context, they are not the least bit heroic, just undifferentiated irrationals as they say in the calculus of infamy. In my case it was sticking scrawny, zigzag twigs into the ground, hoping the end result would be something good to drink, in five years, maybe,--but, it feels like you are doing something more at the time, it feels like something a lot more--something substantial. Maybe it is the venerable antiquity of the act, that stirs some instinctual, primordial sense of self satisfaction linked to the anticipation of the vintage—who knows. It be just like that. Just like the moment in the movies when the romance

becomes real when you want desperately to be kissing that woman up on the screen too even though you don't even know her, even though they she's not even really there, like love chasing you from behind.

Orange County, New York, where Barky ended up finally, fractally, frantically splayed under the Arcadia overpass in Goshen was never really known for its vineyards but more for its dairy farms. We were the birthplace not only of Liederkrantz and Velveeta but of Neufchatel as well, (if you can believe that) But, you know, milk also has been around a long time too, -and nobody really romanticizes milk, -in fact, milk is even kind of humorous, wine is serious though—nobody has a wine moustache, -. Why is wine taken more seriously? It could be because of the alcohol content. But then, following that argument, the Tibetans drink fermented yak milk,—so far as I know there is nothing remotely legendary about this and the Tibetans will notoriously make a legend out of anything,- they made a legend out of a guy who ate nettles, Milarepa,— what was that about? What are nettles anyway? So he got tired of fermented Yak milk. The legend was Milarepa had a will of iron. Anyone who drinks yak's milk probably has to have a will of iron,— and a stomach of iron and probably balls made out of brass, to paraphrase the limerick. Anyway,

I was reading the Time magazine section today and saw a “retro” ad for Doctor Strangelove that caught my eye. There were the words, standing out in obvious computer typeface; “an essential madness”. I guess in the end that is why people plant vineyards. The same reason as they gave for the cold war, the same reason someone would fly a P-26 so close the ground that it could shake the lint out of your underwear, the same reason it all just evaporates one day. Its value is that it is an essential madness. The Japanese pilots, no matter how brave, did not seem to understand that. They just had been convinced they liked the nettles. I also have listened to the ads. I've read Time,- and unfortunately, without a better explanation, and, I still don't understand.