I was born a week after the end of World War II, September 10, 1945, in Wichita Falls, Texas. “He looks like a monkey” was my grandfather’s first impression. I had a mop of shaggy black hair and, just like a chimp, outward-deployed adult-size ears. Through my early childhood, my mom fought to correct this defect. At bedtime she would adhesive-tape the billboards to the sides of my head, hoping they would grow backward. But it was a lost cause. Somewhere in the night, nature would overcome adhesive and my ears would sprong outward like speed brakes on a fighter jet.

As I had told Psych One, I was the second child in a Catholic family that would ultimately include six children—five boys and a girl. When I was born my dad was serving as a flight engineer aboard B-17s in the Pacific, so it was left to my mom to name me. She picked Richard. I was only a few hours out of the womb and already burdened for life with wing-nut ears and the handle Dick. It was no wonder when my dad returned home he began to call me by my middle name, Mike.Christ, give the kid a break, I imagine him thinking.

Though the war had ended, my dad remained in the service. My earliest memories are of weekend visits to air-base flight lines and sitting in the cockpits of C-124s and C-97s and C-47s and other cargo planes, where Dad allowed me to grab the control yokes and “steer” the parked monsters. He also took me to base operations, where aircrews were arriving from all corners of the globe. They would give me silver wings right off their chests, brightly colored patches, and strange coins from faraway lands. In my eyes they were heroic beyond anything Hollywood could conjure.

My dad was a New Yorker, an Irishman born and raised in Manhattan. He was full of amazing, colorful, exaggerated, and frequently untrue stories. No doubt his blarney was a source of inspiration for me. He made flight out to be a thing of grand adventure, particularly his flying experiences in the Pacific theater of WWII.

He described being attacked by Washing Machine Charlie, a Japanese pilot who kept the Americans from getting any rest by flying over their Philippine base at night and dropping pop bottles from an antique bi-plane. The air whistling over the openings would produce the scream of a bomb, sending everybody out of their bunks and into shelters.

“Boys, we named him Washing Machine Charlie because that damn Jap [with my dad, Japs were always “damn”] had the worst-running engine we ever heard. I know he tuned the engine wrong just to make it sputter and backfire and keep us awake. It

sounded like a dying washing machine." Then Dad would put on a goofy Red Skelton–like face, purse his lips, and produce a litany of fart sounds to describe the offending machine. My brothers and I would laugh and laugh and beg him to "pretend to be Washing Machine Charlie."

A boom of thunder would put us on another flight. "Boys, one time our damn navigator [like Japs, navigators were always "damn"] got us lost in a thunderstorm. Lightning hit our plane. I could feel it crawling all over my body. My hair exploded off my head, which is why I don't have any today. It heated the fillings in my teeth and I burned my tongue when I touched it to the silver."

On other occasions he would swoop through our room with arms outstretched describing how gooney birds (albatrosses) would perch on the wings of his B-17 and hitch a ride during takeoff. The birds would spread their own giant wings and use the rush of air to achieve flight.

I suspect my dad, flying late in the war, never really saw a Japanese fighter aircraft but you would have never known it from his stories. He told of being shot down and parachuting into an island jungle. He and his crew teamed up with native freedom fighters and fought their way to the coast, where an American submarine rescued them. I now know this never happened, but his colorful fiction planted a seed in my soul. I wanted to live this same adventure. I wanted to fly.

Every year or two my dad would be transferred to another base and like Bedouin tribesmen we would pull up stakes and head for a new horizon. Locales in Kansas, Georgia, Florida, Texas, Mississippi, and Hawaii would ultimately boast a Hugh J. Mullane mailbox. For me every move was eagerly anticipated. I couldn't wait for the moving van to drive away and a new adventure to start. Curled in a blanket in the back of a car, like puppies in a basket, my brothers and I would fall asleep to the rhythmicthump-thump-thump of the pavement. It was the heartbeat of anticipation, of the unknown. Sometimes I would awake in the middle of the night and savor the smells of a new climate or watch lightning flash in the distance. During the day we'd stop at weathered signs advertising fresh fruit and buy buckets of ice-cold sweet cherries. We'd stop at gas stations with signs reading, "Last gas for 100 miles." I would watch my dad fill a canvas bag with water and hang it over the Indian-head hood ornament of our Pontiac station wagon. I was giddy with the thought of a highway that would be empty for one hundred miles. Later I learned there was a gas station every twenty miles with the same sign. But at that age, twenty miles was as good as a hundred. I would lean forward in my seat and stare over my dad's shoulder at horizons so crystalline they looked as if they were painted with a single-haired brush. I'd watch watery mirages sheen the blacktop in front of us and spinning dust devils, and blue-black thunderstorms pregnant with rain walking on stilts of lightning. And there was that unending song leading me into the emptiness,thump-thump-thump
.

Another source of adventure was family camping trips into the wilds of the west. Why my New Yorker dad had such a love for the outdoors remains a mystery to me. Perhaps it was the very fact he had lived for so long in an asphalt jungle. My mom was even more afflicted. She was born a hundred years too late. I could easily see her striking out from Independence, Missouri, in a wagon train bound for Oregon. As a seventy-five-year-old widow she drove with another septuagenarian girlfriend from Albuquerque to Alaska. I was only surprised that she didn't walk. She craved a tent and rock-ringed fireplace more than most women pined for a remodeled kitchen. Happiness for her was standing over a smoky campfire and cooking pancakes and bacon while dancing from foot to foot trying to shake off the morning chill.

In preparation for these trips we would pile the accouterments on the roof of our car: a couple of Coleman coolers, a white gas stove, lanterns, tents, fishing poles, aluminum lawn chairs, and bags of charcoal. There were axes, shovels, thermos jugs, cooking utensils, and sleeping bags all cinched into place and covered with a tarpaulin. We were carrying a canvas iceberg. The car interior, containing a brood of kids and two dogs, was no less cluttered. If they could have seen us, Okies right out ofThe Grapes of Wrath would have felt sorry for us.

We set sail on the roads of the American west. And when I say roads, I don't mean interstate highways. My parents avoided those like watered-down gas. There was no adventure in traveling an interstate. Those were for wimps. Instead, they would search for the most obscure byways, take forgotten trails through sleepy towns and gravel-covered mountain passes. The sight of a sign reading, "Danger: Unimproved Road," might as well have said, "Gates of Heaven Beyond." My dad steered for those passages like an ancient Greek heeding the call of a Siren. I recall one occasion when a locked chain between two wooden posts held just such a warning sign. My dad took it as a challenge and dispatched his army of boys to rock one of the posts back and forth until it was loosed from the earth. We pulled it up, drove the car through, and replanted the post. Not only was it an unimproved road, now it wasour road.

My parents navigated trails in a Pontiac station wagon that a modern army tracked vehicle would not attempt. A fallen tree or boulder in the way? Not a problem. Like Chinese coolies, the Mullane boys would saw, hack, lever, or sheer-muscle any obstacle out of the way.

Not that some of these excursions didn't put us in peril, like the time we were deep into the mountains of southern New Mexico when the radiator boiled over. It was obvious from the virgin dust there had been no traffic for many days, possibly weeks, maybe never. This was long before the days of cell phones. There would be no call to a tow truck. We were facing Donner Party extinction.

My dad, an expert at repairing planes, always carried an extensive set of tools in the

car. Unfortunately, it seemed every time we broke down we were missing that one tool we needed. Apparently, our station wagon didn't have the engine of a C-124.

On this occasion, though, no tool was going to help us. We needed water and there was none around. But my dad was nothing if not resourceful. He directed us to tear apart the car looking for anything wet. A couple cans of Coke and beer went into the radiator. A jug of cherry cider that my older brother had purchased from a roadside fruit stand was quickly enlisted. Several oranges were squeezed into this Prestone.

Then, my dad noticed my younger brother wandering away. "Where are you going?"

"I have to pee."

Soon we were all standing on the grillwork of the car peeing into the radiator. "Steady, boys. That's a damn Jap Zero you're aiming at. Don't waste a round."

It was enough. Smelling like an overripe Porta-Potty, our hissing wagon limped into a gas station. The gagging mechanic asked if something had died under the hood.

On another occasion, overheated brakes threatened our descent from a mountain pass. No doubt recalling his earlier success with the radiator, my dad had each of us boys pee on a wheel to cool the brakes. Nobody has ever used urine as skillfully as my father.

These were wonderful and formative times in my life. I became my parents. I had to know what wasbeyond …beyond the next mountain, beyond the next bend, beyond the next canyon. There wasn't a national park, monument, snake farm, meteor crater, volcano, or rock shop we didn't visit. The side-rear windows of our car were covered with the colorful decals of our journeys: gift-shop stickers of Yellowstone's Old Faithful, the jagged spires of the Grand Tetons, the Grand Canyon, Glacier National Park, Canyon de Chelly, White Sands, Death Valley, Monument Valley, Glen Canyon, and innumerable other sights on the byways of the west. We had July snowball fights at mountain passes named Engineer, Independence, and Imogene. We tumbled in sand dunes and fished mountain streams and hiked cloud-scraping peaks just to see over them. We collected treasures of feldspar and fool's gold and quartz and petrified wood. My mom's scrapbooks are full of photographs of the family under state welcome signs—Arizona, Colorado, Utah, Wyoming, Montana, Nevada, California. In these states and more I would crawl into a sleeping bag wrapped in the smells of adventure—wood smoke and tent canvas—and watch the star shine outline our forest cradle. And my dreams would be of the greatest adventure of all…flight.