FIGHTER PILOT'S DAUGHTER: GROWING UP IN THE SIXTIES AND THE COLD WAR

Mary Lawlor

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Introduction: The Pilot's House

The pilot's house where I grew up was mostly a women's world. There were five of us. We had the place to ourselves most of the time. My mother made the big decisions--where we went to school, which bank to keep our money in. She had to decide these things often because we moved every couple of years. *The house* is thus a figure of speech, a way of thinking about a long series of small, cement dwellings we occupied as one fictional home.

It was my father, however, who turned the wheel, his job that rotated us to so many different places. He was an aviator, first in the Marines, later in the Army. When he came home from his extended absences--missions, they were called--the rooms shrank around him. There wasn't enough air. We didn't breathe as freely as we did when he was gone, not because he was mean or demanding but because we worshipped him. Like satellites my sisters and I orbited him at a distance, waiting for the chance to come closer, to show him things we'd made, accept gifts, hear his stories. My mother wasn't at the center of things anymore. She hovered, maneuvered, arranged, corrected. She was first lady, the dame in waiting. He was the center point of our circle, a flier, a winged sentry who spent most of his time far up over our heads. When he was home, the house was definitely his.

These were the early years of the Cold War. It was a time of vivid fears, pictured nowadays in photos of kids hunkered under their school desks. My sisters and I did that. The phrase "air raid drill" rang hard--the double-a sound a cold, metallic twang, ending with *ill*. It meant rehearsal for a time when you might get burnt by the air you breathed.

Every day we heard practice rounds of artillery fire and ordinance on the near horizon. We knew what all this training was for. It was to keep the world from ending. Our father was one of many Dads who sweat at soldierly labor, part of an arsenal kept at the ready to scare off nuclear annihilation of life on earth. When we lived on post, my sisters and I saw uniformed men marching in straight lines everywhere. This was readiness, the soldiers rehearsing against Armageddon. The rectangular buildings where the commissary, the PX, the bowling alley and beauty shop were housed had fall out shelters in the basements, marked with black and yellow wheels, the civil defense insignia. Our Dad would often leave home for several days on maneuvers, readiness exercises in which he and other men played war games designed to match the visions of big generals and political men. Visions of how a Russian air and ground attack would happen. They had to be ready for it.

A clipped, nervous rhythm kept time on military bases. It was as if you needed to move efficiently to keep up with things, to be ready yourself, even if you were just a kid. We were chased by the feeling that life as we knew it could change in an hour.

This was the posture. On your mark, get set. But there was no go. It was a policy of meaningful waiting. Meaningful because it was the waiting itself that counted--where you did it, how many of the necessities you had, how long you could keep it up. Imagining long, sunless days with nothing to do but wait for an all clear sign or for the

threatening, consonant-heavy sounds of a foreign language overhead, I taught myself to pray hard.

I remember my father warning of sudden invasions, Russian tanks and banners poring through the Fulda Gap from East Germany into the West. Jack taught us to expect these advances, the sudden appearance on a near horizon. I imagined the aftermath of the lost war. American kids and mothers too lined up like soldiers submitted to an oppressive regime's harsh discipline.

These scenarios were worse in some ways than the nuclear nightmares, the scenes of the great nothing--empty streets, trash blowing in the toxic wind; no people, no nature. The bomb, soon after it was launched, would wipe out everything. Readiness would prove an illusion. Suddenly engulfed in toxic airwaves, my sisters and I--if we were still alive--would have to grow up fast. Left to wander a scorched earth, we would "live" in bafflement at the memory of our duck-and-cover preparations.

In spite of all the breath-holding and panic practice, my sisters and I were given to think ours was a world of sunny liberty; and the target, of grim, determined men far away. They watched for the chance to catch and smother our happiness. The horror visions came and went because we, like millions of other kids, were told again and again that liberty, the exclusive property of America and its friends, was and always would be held up by its own, natural strength. This strength had to be cared for, tended, groomed, protected. That's what our fathers did. They took care of liberty. The carefully guarded strength meant the invasion might not happen. But then it might.

Our fathers knew the particulars in threats of war, but we, the daughters, sons, and wives known collectively as "dependents," found ourselves on the receiving end of

terrifying, half told stories of what sounded like imminent catastrophe. The stories were maimed by our fathers' commitment to a code of military secrecy, to a self-censorship we *sort of* knew about. That was how things were, floating, half told, partly known but mostly not. Dads were present, intermittently, but even the youngest kids could sense there were limits to what you could ask, fences around what they could say. Our fathers were divided, distracted, distant, even when they paid attention to us.

When I think back now, this not-knowing was one of the strangest things about life inside the walls of our "quarters," as houses on the post were called. The waiting and watching weren't based on the *knowledge* of anything. We tried to decode our mothers—to interpret their facial expressions and body language—while they tried their best to fathom the moods of our fathers. Growing up in a military family during the Cold War was an experience in not knowing. It was like living in a censored document; with black tape partly blocking everything you saw and heard. If Dad understood things clearly and definitively, he never let on. So we lived in this half-light. It was as if something was always up, something threatening on the edge of what you could see and hear, but you never knew what it was.

In our household, the horror of imminent, total destruction was compounded by the sort of Catholicism we practiced. Our religion emphasized the last chapter of the Christian narrative, the story that told of the end of the world, when time itself would come to a conclusion and we'd all be judged. The image of Christ coming in a fury to sort the evil from the good faded as my sisters and I grew older, but while we were young, it sat reasonably well beside the fearful image of a bombed and desolate planet. The ruins of the nuclear nightmare would simply be a prelude to the judgment. The

United States, gone up in mutual destruction with the malignant powers of the Soviet Union, would be resurrected in the aftermath. Christ would come riding in on a cloud; point this way and that as trillions of souls climbed out of their graves. The sorting would send the mournful damned to an eternal twisting and turning in endless discomfort. It wasn't pain exactly, not everlasting torture, but a constant squirming and fidgeting, a ceaseless effort to position yourself comfortably. The good people, on the other hand, who were more substantial than just souls, would get clouds like Christ's and ride up to heaven with him. You would always be at home there, light, comfortable. And heaven would be full of Americans.

Visions like these would later seem laughable, but in the 1950s they were powerful motivators for good behavior. If you didn't do all the things your parents and the military leaders wanted you to, you could weaken and fall prey to the devil. He--the devil was absolutely, profoundly male--was always around, hankering, watching, waiting to get at you. So you had to be good all the time. Goodness was a shield, a force field that kept the devil back. He was always ready to slip inside the webs of imagination, whisper something in your ear, put an image in your mind that was bad, bad, bad. If you weren't washing the dishes or doing homework or giving up some shiny object you liked so your sister could have it, the devil could get at you.

Similarly, if you weren't careful and aware all the time of the kinds of ideas you heard, you could be influenced by communists. A communist would whisper *mal* influence in your ear, like the devil did, or slip you a note with some corrupting thought scrawled on it, now in your brain forever. These were some of the arguments J. Edgar

Hoover spelled out in the doggish prose of *Masters of Deceit*, a book I never read because I was afraid it might show me more about communism than I wanted to know.

We were quiet when our father came home from work every day and even quieter when he came back from TDY—temporary duty assignments that could take him away for a week or months at a time. Mom and Dad would have a cocktail, alone in the living room. They murmured to each other in tones we could barely hear. Dinner was formal. We used the silver every night, a linen tablecloth, and candles. We sat up straight, napkins in our laps. We used the knives and forks in a very particular way. My three sisters and I were raised to be "ladies," to reflect my mother's identification with an Irish Catholic, anxiously upper class culture. Being a lady didn't necessarily involve being feminine. It was the right set of codes for the class my mother--we called her Frannie behind her back--wanted us to mirror.

Not long ago the journalist Mary Edwards Wertsch, another Army daughter, published *Military Brats: Legacies of Childhood Inside the Fortress*, a vivid account of military family life with *The Great Santini* tagged as "our first family portrait." The general tone of discipline that characterized the Santini household reflects pretty accurately the obsession with order and control in many of the military homes I saw growing up. And Santini's acute consciousness of how the family looked to his superiors--the men who would decide on his next promotion--reflects the careerism deeply embedded in military culture. But formal rituals of inspection and strict daily codes like the Santini kids had to endure under their father's literal command, wasn't the pattern in our household. We followed our father's rules for being tidy, punctual, and concise because there were no

alternatives. These practices were internalized in us early on. Drills and inspections at home would have been redundant.

Of course, many of the formalities of military professionalism as it was conducted on post found their way into daily life at home. In our house, your bed had to be made as soon as you got out of it, and you couldn't sleep late, even on weekends. If I was too sick to go to school, my father would keep a close eye on me, as much out of suspicion I might be playing hooky as for concern about my health. But Frannie would never have put up with his addressing us as soldiers or line us up for inspection.

It was a matter of taste. At the dinner table, there was a certain script we were expected to follow, but it had more to do with my mother's concerns that we be shaped according to the expectations of our social class than with military rigor. My parents would start the dinner conversation, and we spoke whenever we found an opening. If one of us was in high spirits, we might tell a story or try out some joke, and laughter might follow. Still, when the story or the joke fell flat, you felt estranged and lonely. It was the loneliness of an isolated voice in a frightening time, a voice cut away from the common banter, left out, understood by nobody.

My father, John LaBoyteaux Lawlor, known by everyone close to him as Jack, was a decorated military pilot. He was awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross for action during the Korean War, eight Air Medals, and the Cross of Gallantry for service in Vietnam. Because he specialized in testing new planes and teaching people how to fly them, we moved a lot—almost every two years. I went to fourteen schools by the time I graduated from high school. This was not unusual for military kids during those years, and I know of many who moved even more.

My mother was Frances Walsh, who everyone knew as Frannie. Her people had been well positioned socially, inheriting, losing, rebuilding small fortunes over the few generations they'd been in the US. Frannie always had mixed feelings about military culture, embarrassed by the uniformity, indignant at the obsession with polished brass and straight lines. But she was also proud of the worldliness in military life and the ethics of heroism. Although she took a back seat to Jack whenever he was home, Frannie was "outspoken." She often refused to acknowledge his opinions or desires when they conflicted with her own, revealing a sharp anger at the patriarchy that always counted her second. Of course, she never said a word about women's rights and certainly never used the word "patriarchy."

Jack and Frannie fought a great deal; but between the fights they liked each other immensely. Their experiences during the many separations were vastly different, and I think it was hard for them to understand each other, to really get what the other had been through. Jack would have been in an all-male environment, sometimes for as long as a year, under conditions of ever threatening violence. Frannie would have been trapped at home with kids, trying to entertain herself and keep her idea of a cultured imagination going. The uneven communications hampered their ability to fathom each other too. Dad didn't write regularly. During the longer absences, we sometimes wouldn't hear from him for months. Frannie, on the other hand, sent off letters to him every week. He had the reports of our accomplishments and of mishaps in the household, but we got few pictures of the man's world he inhabited.

When he came back Frannie would be gleeful, nervous, expectant. Things between them would seem romantic for a while. Eventually her not-so-subtle forms of resistance

would irritate Jack. My sisters and I heard and saw a lot of tension and open hostility between them. The sharp words and ice cold tones got to be so common we took them--and the dramatic zigzagging between tension and affection that defined our parents' marriage--for normal.

The moving fostered a feeling of not belonging. To the degree identity depends on place, we were out of luck. These days the Department of Defense maintains a "Youth Sponsorship Program" that puts military kids whose families are about to be transferred in contact with their peers at the new location. This child becomes an information source and social guide for the new arrival. Nothing like this existed for us. A Family Services Program was created in the office of the Army Deputy Chief of Staff in 1962, but for us this never meant more than a sponsor meeting us at new postings. The sponsor was first and foremost a liaison for my father at his new job. Any help from the sponsor's family for the rest of us was secondary. The kids weren't necessarily eager to show you the ropes. When my sisters and I were older, we had access to the post teen clubs. These could be interesting, but you had to find your way into them, just as you had to negotiate space for yourself at each of the many new schools.

I had lots of fantasies of belonging. I dreamt of living with my New Jersey cousins, of going to the same school with them, year after year. Of living, like they did, in the same house until I would go away to college. But place wasn't something we could ever claim.

For the kids at the new schools we'd soon leave behind, I made up identities. My family was rich, and I had lots of fancy clothes. What did they know? How would they

ever find out? Identity was a streak of invention, nothing real necessary. So I made stuff up whenever I felt like it.

For all the fearful religion in our house, ethics weren't cultivated much. Manners, good manners, but not ethics. Sometimes I think it's lucky I didn't turn out to be a professional fraud, a con artist. It would've made sense for me to become an identity thief. I think it was the fear that kept these things from happening as much as anything else: fear of God, of all authority; fear of the end of the world as pictured in the Bible and in all those stories about the bomb.

The experience of being a constant stranger taught me many things, among them a shallow sociability. I see now there was something thin about my connections to others as a child, and a corresponding lack of dimension in myself. Even then I felt as if I could evaporate at any moment. This thinness and a nagging sense that the lack of substance paradoxically shows itself even now was part of what drove me to write this book. If I could take the sights and sounds and fleeting bits of dialogue out of memory and put them on a computer chip, I might be able to see the substance in the story of my growing up. Finding the borders of something that's lacking is a tricky thing to do. I depend in this book on the people, places and events of my upbringing to tell the story, but the sensations and the feelings I register in response to them are my own. I can't claim my sisters always share the perspectives on these pages. They were and are my closest friends, but they have their own stories to tell.

As we got older, ordinary worries--do other kids like me, should I speak, am I pretty--really shot out of proportion. Always in new territory, unfamiliar faces judging our looks, speech, movements, we spent a lot of time dazed and tentative. One morning--our

first day at a new high school--the four of us were following a narrow cement path into the cafeteria, carefully avoiding the wet ground. My foot slipped into a big puddle beside the path. Now our anxious little skirts and blouses were dotted with mud, and we had the whole school day before us. In a way, the mud splash was a relief. It broke through the steel trap of self-consciousness and put the edginess out in front us. The awful moment brought us back to ourselves, to our reality as outsiders who belonged only to each other. But I'm sure my sisters didn't feel that way, and I didn't either at the time. I wince over it now, how that mud made them feel. We couldn't even try to be cute or blend in. We crept through the day trying to hide the mud and ourselves from the silver disdain in other girls' eyes.

Puberty and adolescent social life presented the same traumas girls everywhere endured. Without a neighborhood or a set of old friends we could take for granted, the physical developments compounded the feeling of alienation. The bumps, the hairs, and bleeding were signs of my strangeness--to myself now as well as in the mirrors of other kids' faces. There was something sinful about these things. Their origins lay in my secret, devil-inspired thoughts. Self-consciousness got louder. At the same time, the acquaintances that passed for friends on the post got more serious: talk went to the bodily changes and boys. A feeling of closeness might develop. When the time came to move, those girls receded in the back window of our station wagon. The connection would be lost. At the next place, first day of school: isolation all over again.

Behind the social fears and disconnections lurked this monster feeling that large-scale disaster was waiting to happen. I don't mean the prospect of nuclear holocaust caused the social anxieties. The niggling apprehensions about what other kids thought had their

own origins and didn't need a global horror show to keep them going. It was more like when you looked up from one panic and saw this heavier, darker dread looming on the horizon, the sense that all was not well deepened and hardened. There was one option: you could look way up, past the world before you to visions of Mary and Christ. Interestingly, that could help with bomb terror, but it wasn't so effective against social alarm.

In spite of all the trouble it brought us, the moving gave my sisters and me the chance to see and feel, if not exactly know, places that would've been out of reach if our father had kept on as a salesman for National Cash Register and Purina Feed in South Orange, New Jersey. We lived in the North East and the Deep South, in Miami, California and Germany. Each new place refreshed our disconnectedness, but it also had its intrigue--even Alabama. The spookiness of the South brought out not just timidity but adventurousness. California showed us there was beauty in the world. It was worth seeing even if it didn't belong to us, even if we had to leave it behind. If Europe brought on a deeper alienation, it also made us feel more *American* than we ever had. Talk about adventure, Europe was this in spades. And through it all, my sisters and I shared not just anguish but amazement at so much that was constantly new.

Strangers to everybody else, the four of us became each other's most important company. We were our best friends and most aggravating intimates. The twins, Nancy and Lizzie, were the oldest. Four minutes apart, and fraternal (the kind of twins who don't look alike), they were simultaneously very close and very different from each other. Nancy came first, and she was always our leader. Her sandy colored hair was lit by a brilliant streak of blonde across the front--the kind of thing women pay serious money for

at the hairdressers'. It was like an advertisement for the lightening in her character--the smarts, the fun, the energy. Lizzie was dark haired, shy, soft spoken. Her bangs protected her brow and eyes from too much direct contact with the rushing world. Photos show them holding hands, ready for school, Lizzie's smile showing her sweetness and reserve, Nancy's aimed at the plans she's cooking up for the moment the camera turns elsewhere.

Sarah was the baby. Because she was a plump infant, the unfortunate nickname "Pudgy" followed her through girlhood. We stopped calling her that as she grew into a svelte, elegant woman. The littlest, Sarah got lots of pinching and cooing from everybody. She and I were a pair, the "little ones," while Nancy and Lizzie were always "the twins." They had a room, we had a room; they had bunk beds, we had bunk beds. For how many years, Sarah was either above or below me, tossing around in the narrow space our bed took in the narrow bedroom of our quarters? As we grew older, the twins and I punched through one wall of generational difference with my parents after another, leaving the openings a little easier for Sarah to come through. Sharply perceptive even as a teenager, she saw the elementary struggles under way that she wouldn't have to face. Amazingly for one so young, she acknowledged our fumbling efforts, worried about what marks they left.

It took a long time to get to the point of resisting Jack and Frannie's authority. In the teen years, when most people our age were breaking away from their parents, creating their own worlds, we still spent many evenings and weekends with ours. They were in our bones. If moving made friendships hard to fasten, the tight family culture kept us isolated too. It made us less available to others. We didn't know how to manage the

different expectations that came with friendships—the easy, fluent movements, the sharing, the airy feeling of not *having* to be together.

As they were for many other military kids of our generation, friendships were also hobbled by the blazing reality of social class in Army society. Subtle differences in rank counted for a lot in our eyes. My parents would gloss them over, claiming it was character, intelligence, and whether a person was interesting that mattered, not their rank. But my sisters and I felt the differences sharply. Most Army kids did. We knew the ranking system too well; and could be rigid, mean, short sighted in our class prejudices. Our fathers' ranks were the first marks of our own identities in the small, intricately woven post societies. An officer framed himself and his family in the straight, elegant lines of a portrait, with depth and shading for romantic appeal. Enlisted men, from our point of view, were formless people who maintained the facilities, whose families lived in smaller houses, whose kids dressed in bad taste.

When I was in second grade, Jack transferred from the Marines, where he'd had the rank of Major, to the Army, where he was made a Chief Warrant Officer. A CWO is an officer, but it's an odd rank occupied largely by aviators and military police--professionals in particular, technical fields. It's rather obscure in the Army hierarchy, and I felt more than a little anxious about it. Such a ratty feeling is hard to admit, but it was the source of deep sensitivity. People who didn't know would ask if a CWO was some non-officer rating, and I was quick to clear them up. It was crucial to see and represent myself as an officer's child; otherwise my family would flounder on the margins of acceptability. The fear was real whenever rank came up, and it came up often.

In addition to the murky status within military society and the alienation that came with the shifting series of schools, I felt tertiary inside the immediate family. I was in the middle, without a clear corner in the family structure; my sisters, including baby Sarah, seemed more significant and clearly placed within the household and more confident than my declining self. On the edges of family life, I was suspicious of myself. The stern eye of Cold War Catholicism was well internalized. I wanted to be honest, disciplined, saintly, but that eye always picked out the deceit and the indulgence. Being alone so much wasn't an effect of our migratory life: I was selfish, willfully isolated. Fractured in myself, withdrawn inside the family, intimidated by kids on and off the post, I was nowhere and nobody in particular. It took decades of weaving in and out of situations and identities to give up the dream of finding bottom and seeing I had a presence anyway.