

Chapter 13

1966 (Age 26)

Pilot in the Window

*“If you hang out with chickens, you're going to cluck
and if you hang out with eagles,
you're going to fly.” — Steve Maraboli*

Over the winter, I decided to move to Greenwich Village because I wanted a change. I found a large studio with a fireplace, a large backyard, and a strange landlady. The building was on Jane Street next door to the *Éclair Bakery* and the aromas were tantalizing. I moved in with my things and Pake. I thought the change would make me happy, but it did not.

I went uptown a few nights a week to play bridge, unsuccessfully tried the local haunts for companionship, and kept very busy making money for Belmont. One day I came home from ESB, (I think I spent more time there than at my apartment), to find my apartment covered in snow. Well, it looked like snow! The snow turned out to be tiny pieces of the stuffing of cushions of my new sofa. Pake was sitting in the kitchen with the look of guilt. He did not like to be left alone for more than eight hours a day. I could not blame him. I didn't like it either.

I called JT, and with tears streaming down my face, I asked if he would take Pake back, for Pake's sake, and he agreed. I had a terrible time with the pain of losing my dog and threw myself further into my work.

To get to Belmont's office on First Avenue and 36th Street from Jane Street, I had to take a subway to 34th Street and then the crosstown bus. I was due at work at 8am, but I was always early, usually by 7 or 7:30. I didn't, and don't do *late*. I would buy the Herald Tribune from the newsstand at the subway entrance, fold it to read Art Buchwald's column, (serendipitously, his adopted daughter contacted me years later for support), then refold to the crossword puzzle which I did mostly standing up since the subway and bus were so crowded. I always put in my 35 hours and then some, and would often leave work before 3:30 having put in my 7 hours. Abe Berry didn't want to hear about leaving early no matter how many extra hours I put in, so I often called the office at 2pm and said, "I'm going up in ESB tower to measure something, so I'll see you in the morning." This satisfied them, and I got the rest of the afternoon off.

One Monday morning, I walked in and as I passed his office, Bob Willman said, "Hi, Joe, did you read about Sandy?" I froze. I knew it could not be good. Sandy worked in the next office, Hammel and Langer, an architectural lighting design firm separated from Belmont by only a freestanding divider. Sandy often came around the wall to use the water cooler by my desk. I had a big crush on her. I never had the nerve to ask her out, but fantasized a lot about it, always ending with her *rejecting* me. "Read about her, Bob?" "Yes, here," and he handed me a newspaper with an article circled. The article heading was "Woman Dies Dkydiving," and there was a picture of Sandy. The story stated that she had been a member of a sky-diving club, went for her regular Sunday jump, and her chute failed to open. I was so immediately sad and furious at Bob for dropping this bomb on me the way he did. What way would have been easy, I do not know, and I doubt that anyone knew how I felt about her. Even though we never dated, in my mind she was a girlfriend, a girlfriend in what I later learned was my Ghost Kingdom. I went

into the Hammel and Langer office and spoke to their office manager to ask about Sandy. She showed me Sandy's desk. She had cleaned it off before she left on Friday afternoon, cleaned it off like she never expected to return. Did she have a premonition, did she commit suicide? I went into my office and just cried. Her death terrified me. Aside from the sadness of losing her, I was thinking of how horrible it must have been for her those last moments, the horror of falling, my fear of flying and plane crashes put in front of me one of my biggest terrors. And to top it off, because I spent so much time on top of them, my fear of falling off ESB or any tall building became worse. Even worse, my fear of those tall buildings falling over had me in constant terror.

That summer, our annual two week National Guard duty was at Camp Smith for OCS training simulation, meaning we would go through what cadets at West Point experienced in their first year. I remember arriving, parking my car, and not knowing where I was to go. I walked over to a soldier with a blue helmet. "Excuse me, can you tell me where the National Guard group is?"

"Irp," came his very very loud reply.

"Sorry, I don't understand."

"IRP," said louder.

"I have no idea what you are saying," I said, now thoroughly intimidated.

"It means, Immediate Response Please. What is your name soldier?"

"Private Soll."

"You mean Private Soll, SIR, don't you?"

"Yes, Sir!"

"Your barracks is that way. Dismissed."

"Thank you, Sir!"

Good grief, what a way to start my two weeks.

That soldier became one of my training officers. We got even. During our close order drill (marching together as a group), we came up with a special song for him. While marching, we started singing, Hymn, Hymn, Fuck Him, over and over. We got a smile out of him and then we quit.

At one point we had war games, and somehow we came face to face with Major Haggard, our Green Beret commander. My group had a brief conference and said, "What the hell," and walked over to Major Haggerty and said, "Sir, you are now a prisoner of war, so please, hands behind your back." He was pissed, but he had to go along with us. By capturing him, we had won our war game and as a reward, he threw us a beer party. Near the end of that summer, the other Green Beret unit in our armory got called to active duty and got sent to Vietnam. I was terrified, and called a friend of my father's for help. He was also my local assemblyman. He told me that as long as I was taking college classes that I could not be called up and sent to Nam. He told me what kind of letter to write to the Army and to 'cc' to him. I wrote the letter, never got a reply, but one year later got my honorable discharge papers in the mail. I think I would have run to Canada if I had been called to go to Vietnam.

I went to Chicago often for one project or another. When possible, I took a side trip to Milwaukee to see Cousin Mac. On the way back from one of these trips, a glorious fall day in 1966, I flew on Ozark (that's Krazo spelled backwards, which seemed appropriate) from Milwaukee to Chicago to catch my American flight back to New York. As we descended on our approach to O'Hare airport, I could see the airport ahead and to my left. Our approach would take us past the airport so we could make three left turns to land on the runway that was facing us. I watched as a plane took off heading towards us. It got closer and closer and I kept thinking it was going to turn away in a

moment, but it just kept coming. I thought we were going to get hit for sure. I was terrified, yet mesmerized, and could not stop watching.

Just as it got close enough so I could see the pilot in the cockpit window of the other plane, an American Airlines 727, our plane turned violently to the right and I heard the roar as the other plane passed just over us. After I started to breathe again, my second thought (the first was Thank you, God!) was that I almost got on my American flight in a very unpleasant way.



Near miss over Chicago