

# 1968 Happened.

A convergence at the  
family dinner table



Allen Ginsberg testifies at Chicago Seven Trial

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*1968* happened.

A few weeks earlier at another lively dinner table conversation Dad quietly said, "Let's have a moment of peace, Ommmmmmmm." Dad calmed the dinner chaos. We all surprisingly hummed, then laughed. He'd just come from Allen Ginsberg's peaceful protest in Lincoln Park with about a hundred people. It ended quietly with police shouting through bullhorns as the park closed at 11 pm, August 24th. The first protest on Friday included a black and white pig named "Pigasus the Immortal" advanced as a presidential candidate at the Civic Center. Jerry Rubin was arrested. Each night was progressively more violent with fatigue, hunger and thirst winning. Protestors chanted "The streets belong to the people" and "Revolt" after police bludgeoned teens to the asphalt, clubbed photographers. Overworked police were fatigued, hungry and dehydrated. By Monday, August 25<sup>th</sup>, the first day of the Democratic Convention, Chicago was prepped for a battle scene.

Wednesday, our family jumped in our Volkswagen van for the Democratic Convention. I jammed in the third seat fretting about my 6<sup>th</sup> grade homework. We couldn't get near the barricaded Convention at the International Amphitheatre, so Dad sketched candidates as they were speaking in the Conrad Hilton Hotel lobby. Mom audio taped interviews with people in the audience and hovered with the younger kids. The rest of *us* scattered. No! a McCarthy straw hat, on a chimpanzee! A tall man leaned over to hold the chimp's hand. The toe of my worn Keds tripped on a watch. I leaned to pick up the heavy silver band with a large ticking clock face. The

chimp had already been escorted out. While walking down a long hall to find lost and found, my brother came running, “*Come on! We got to go now!*” with unquestionable panic. I ran out into a crazy, mixed-up street and jumped in the van side-door with tear gas in the air.

“Close the windows!” Dad maneuvered the van through the shouting, disordered scrambling crowd, turning west on Balboa. The ’68 Battle of Michigan Avenue broke wide open. Mom hugged my brother on her lap. The chaotic buzzing with shouts, horses rearing on hind legs, thumping and stomping quieted as the windows were rolled closed. We listened to the muddled radio broadcast on the way home. Distressed commentators started to tell a confused story. Something else happened. As events rapidly unfolded, they told the next compelling story. Safe at home, we watched the hectic and unruly violence on t.v.. Police chased down teenagers, bashed them. Some fought back. The police kept clubbing the teens. The Chicago Seven defendants were arrested.

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Rearranging snapdragons or poetic rhythms calmed me before the nightly dinner discussions. Unraveling Canterbury Tales gave me something to digest while six older teens, Frank, Mark, Mary, Deb, Pat and Hugh, sorted their lives. Dinner table conversations revolved repeatedly around who got one of the two cars, menacing draft registrations, or conscientious objection to the war. I slipped snapdragons into a vase expecting a long-lost cousin who was coming for dinner.

The doorbell rang. A golden sunset through September leaves streamed into the dark oak foyer. Kathleen had reddish wavy hair, deep dimples of a familiar Roger’s smile accompanying her charming entrance. We were introduced in the living room as Mom set down a tray of

purply grapes, candied pecans, cheeses, and Triscuits. After lemonade, mixed with a silver spoon, and cocktails in the living room, we walked through the dining room to the dimly lit screened porch. Hand-print sand castings hung on the stucco wall around a triple, eight-pane window. Bees bounced against the north screen, drunk with cherry juice from the north woods.. The lake, on the east, reflected back the orange-red sky at dusk.

Tart, spiced chicken was served with crispy, hashed potatoes and a heaping salad bowl filled with carrots, iceberg lettuce, celery and tomatoes, oil and vinegar, salt and pepper. Ice cream bowls waited on the sideboard buffet. Iced water, frothing milk and white wine surrounded the snapdragon arrangement, of mauve to purple tones, on the lazy susan. Dad's wise and witty remarks were not part of this conversation yet. Quietly, quite patiently, he waited for the subject to catch his fancy.

"Tell us about your work as a flight attendant, Kathleen?" Mom said.

"I've been part of the commercial MAC Operation since '67. I've flown thousands of Viet Nam bound military men around the Pacific," Kathleen said. "My father didn't want me to fly military to the Pacific, so I didn't tell him. The marines were a cross section of America that all had the same haircut. My older brothers served in the Pacific during WWII, this was my chance. At times, you could hear a pin drop. Or, pillow fights erupted. Part of the Marine code was that everyone was a winner!" They drilled that into our heads during the flights.

Mom stopped eating, passing plates and serving. Memories of flying with United Airlines in 1944 overwhelmed her. "When I was flying I felt on the edge of my life," she said. "The closest I'd ever felt to being me while facing the fear of the unknown. I could feel the blood moving in my skin, my fingernails growing. My hair and face were full of electricity! I glowed silver. When I was flying, I was in control of myself. I knew who I was."

“I was twenty when I first started flying,” Kathleen said. “My first Viet Nam assignment was MAC, leaving Viet Nam with a plane of tired, weary men who had just a few months before been boys. Within a month, my spirit was as old as water. They saw our round, not Asian, eyes and didn’t say a word. That told us, the flight attendants, how it was with them. We didn’t expect them to talk. We were proud of them. We were happy to welcome them home to Honolulu or El Toro or Travis or some other base. We knew returning home would be tough for them. Nobody, besides us, really understood.”

I looked to Dad. He remembered his being stationed in 1945 Molesworth, England between bombing missions over Germany. “The waiting was worse than the flights.” He said. “Imagination could be my undoing, so we kept ourselves occupied in London, with theatre, movies and dinner. It lightened our load of worry, the load of memory. It lightened the load of what we shouldered that others couldn’t. I carried the soil from training in Texas and Arkansas, soil from Glenview and Pennsylvania. The soil of England was still in the seams of my clothes when I parachuted from a burning plane into Pirmassens, Germany. London dust was caked in the cuffs of my pants.”

Kathleen told us, “My airlines scheduled a Christmas Eve flight with the Marine Corp on the same flight from El Toro to Da Nang—that had not happened before. We had said our good-byes to the Marines in Honolulu and thought they went on. Cicadas hummed a beat, blue jays cawed in the rising dusk. Forks and knives scraped the plates.

“There were the Marines, the next day, waiting to go to Okinawa with us. Like old friends, we sang Christmas carols and actually made gifts for each other—mostly poems.” *Pause* “The twelve hour flight was filled with stories of “The Best Christmas was (or will be) with...? We landed in Okinawa after all flights were cancelled. We’d be leaving for Da Nang the next

day with the same passengers at 11:00 pm-Christmas Eve. After a little sleep, the crew met up for a shopping trip. We had 165 friends to shop for! I hit a lot of bakeries and bought decorations. Someone bought a tree. I can't remember if it was one of us, or a Marine. It didn't matter...it was Christmas!" The telephone rang several times, "You have reached the McMahons, Please leave a message. CLICK, Hummmm" No one got up to answer it. Four brothers were braced for the impending draft, scrambling to find a way out.

The third oldest brother thought, "Is my college application essay going to be about learning or war? Learning seems another lifetime, another person. I'll be told to kill someone or be killed for my country, by our legal system, by my loyalty. My choice is to follow this order or give up my girlfriend, my home, my family. What would the basketball team say? No one could order me to shoot another person. I could die. Could I become Canadian? Could I bond to another country? Imagine looking someone in the eyes and trying to shoot. My innards drop. My stomach aches. It flips hot like a flapjack. Hot grease drips in the spaces between my organs. Maybe my birth date will be a high number?"

Kathleen's said, "The flight from Okinawa to Danang is not that long, but we made the best of every minute. We were so young. So far from home. But, Good God we were brave and we did have Christmas. The crew had made this landing many times before. Everyone knew where they were going. We all saw the red flares dotting the sky all around. Blasts of hot, humid air swallowed the coolness in the cabin. We became quiet on final approach. A voice from the middle of the aircraft started to sing *Silent Night*. Softly, we all joined in until the plane landed and they opened the door. Maybe our flight would not make "The Best Christmas was...?" list, but it's one I will never forget."

We looked at the crumbs on our plates as the cicadas' hum rose and fell with the crickets. Darkness descended. The glow from dim lights cast shadows. The snapdragons smiled a darkening blue menacing from their vase.

"They'd get me first. I couldn't pull the trigger. My skin feels tight." my second brother imagined. The screen porch spun around. The windows vibrated like a breathing membrane. "Leave my country forever? Stay and be killed? What about allergies, hernias? Get a physical and find something wrong. This cannot happen," he said. The separation from home began. The separation from trust of government, belief in school, religion, education, sports dissolved. The only reality was to accept this luckless fate or run like heck. Mom ached. Dad went stone-faced. I tried to understand.

Across the table and above the alert snapdragons, my oldest brother squirmed in his seat scared of his thoughts, "What is this War that I oppose?" he said. Shame. Such shame. Hot stupid shame! The squeezing pressure was on me. In my stomach. My intestines went limp, then froze solid. Disgrace before God, my family, my classmates, my girlfriend, for my fear of going. Turncoats are mocked. "As long as I am in college I'll express my conscientious objection to war," he said.

Dad recalled landing after his fifteenth mission in England. "The release from tension on returning to home base," he said. "The intense pleasure of aliveness as the B52 landed back in Molsworth. We'd defied the angel of death again. Triumph in life! Exaltation of nearness to death brought everything alive! The smell of grass mixed with burnt fuel, the soil and singed rubber, the asphalt and holly. I wanted to be all of the goodness and decency after that evil, wanted to be for justice and courtesy, wanted to be a good man. Recognition of colors brightened in England's winter, reddish roof slated with blues. What is valuable became crystal

clear. The sunset became worthy of study and capturing each and every streak and pink-lined grey cloud. I wanted to be what is the best of the world.” Dad remembered he was in a place he didn’t belong that had become his reality.

Dad couldn’t tell his World War II story. It was beyond telling. There is no moral to attach. There is no advice that comes from any episode. The thrill of life and death meeting can’t be explained. The excitement of those flights was like trying to tell someone how chocolate tastes. They won’t understand. The adrenaline from pushing beyond what is humanly possible is not fatherly advice. The same 1942 draft was being reinstated next year and four of his boys were of age. “

Mom had barely breathed since the beginning of Kathleen’s story. “The adrenaline rush of taking off became a necessity. Then, a craving. The intense glow fueled an energy. I could have flown without the airplane.” Mom told us of her propeller plane transports. “It is the stiches of tragedy and loss that remains.” She said. “The loss becomes part of us. The trauma barely happened, but it is the object in the room that entered our lives and wouldn’t leave. None of us died but a part of each of us did.” Mom remembered the intense migraines, the long-lost look in the returning military men’s eyes. She poured chocolate sauce over vanilla ice cream for peanut-sprinkled sundaes, a maraschino cherry topped each before being spun around to be shared from the lazy susan. The snapdragons glared purple above the disappearing sundaes.

Over the snapdragons, I could see my glum sister was missing her friends. She had another week of being grounded and knew her friends were all together. After having joined my sister and her friends in a Peace March singing *Give Peace a Chance*, *Kumbaya* and *Let it be*, I set the table and arranged the flowers. She was suspended for wearing pants to school, yet allowed to protest the Viet Nam war. “As long as you take your sister.” Mom had said. The march had been



after school. *We* questioned our government, parents, teachers, religion, clothing -even ourselves. Students for a Democratic Society organized this sit-in rally starting at Lake Forest High School and ending at Triangle Park. “Dwell in the positive,” Mom had warned on the way to the protest. At the sit-in I caught up on Chaucer’s character list and grasped the plot of Canterbury Tales being about people interacting along a traveler’s road. I was woefully behind for tomorrow’s Great Books discussion. “I can’t see them because of wearing pants to school.” Mary said. “We can’t call on the phone. There are people dying of hunger in Africa while we are punished, suspended, grounded for what we wear!”

My fourth brother skidded his chair back, “Can I be excused, I’ve got wrestling practice.” He stood up stiffly and walked away wooden. Another brother did not speak a word. A melancholy transitional air draped the conversation. This table of yearning yuppies transpire through time to their own unique beginning. No one noticed the increasingly louder crickets dominate the porch. The snapdragons began to go limp.

Kathleen had everyone’s attention and said, “I recall a Texan becoming fast friends with New Yorker. You couldn’t get a word in between their stories that overlapped. Neither listened. They both just talked.”

Dad and Mom cringed from the awkwardness of their 1945 rekindling of their high school romance. Looking at them from a distance they seemed the two happiest people in the world. Walking past the Wrigley building, hand in hand, for a dinner date. Discussing Buckminster Fuller’s Geodesic Dome over bacon, lettuce and tomato sandwiches on Michigan Avenue after an Institute of Design lecture. They walked to watch the glistening grey-blue of the Chicago river flow past. “The Wrigley building is made completely of spearmint chewing gum”

the Wendella tour guide announced on the loud speaker as the boat rippled a path beneath them. At close range their faces showed tension. They were too polite with each other, too thoughtful. Dad had broken the silence, “Do you think Bucky should get the credit, or the student who found the correct angle for the strength of the geodesic dome?” He postured self-assurance with poise. She tread lightly on their fragility. They pretended nothing had come between them until nothing had. Not blasted souls nor broken bodies from an industrial aerial war. Nor the world in utter chaos. They were healing from losses.

Conversations flowed about their upcoming wedding. A neighbor of Gramma Mac’s arranged their reception. Plans at the Knickerbocker was detailed with flower colors and table cloths. They talked about how many children they would have. Would they travel first? Would they live in Chicago? Maybe a house in the northern suburbs? “It’s where the artists are going,” he said. Guests lists, press photos filled their awkward space. Flashes of the photographer’s bulbs triggered flak explosion memories. Their smiles were too intense. Their jokes strained. They held hands too tightly and hugged liked they never wanted to let go. They had dared their lives, in the newest technology. In aircraft. They learned to walk together understanding they had shared experiences no one else would know. They flowed like water through the dark.

Kathleen said, “When the guys left the plane I often stayed behind to sign paperwork for our cargo or fallen soldiers. I helped a Latino family walk from that chain link fence at Travis. At the aircraft, they received their son’s coffin. *Pause.* I held the grandmother’s fragile hand as the flag was placed right before us. She was such a little woman. She wore a black mantilla. The massive red sunrise was orange and purple and seemed to hold us all in its brilliance. I looked straight into it as I placed my hand on the flag for just a moment. We heaved great sobs. Back in the bus to San Francisco, I watched the sunrise disappear in clouds.”

The scraping of passed plates softened as the night enveloped the tenderly lit faces reflecting each other. A human soul is a slight thing. Is it our duty to care for our body so the soul can progress? Or is the soul directing us? Are we to listen to it? Are we stewards of the soul we carry so that it remains whole and healthy to life's end? Or is our soul the same since the beginning of humankind? It is a vague slight notion of who we are and become in a lifetime. It is the only thing we are measured by in God's eyes. Are we to grow a soul to be more than the one we were given? Are we stewards of the soul we carry so that it remains whole and healthy to this life's end? Does a soul tarnish or shine through our lifetime or merely pass through us?

After the dishes were loaded into the washer, the pots were tipped to dry. With dripping hair from the shower, I dove into bed with Canterbury tales trying desperately to catch up before dozing off to sleep. From chivalry on horseback conquering countries in exotic Egypt, carrying home brides from the Amazon to lands plowed by oxen. Jettisoned to airplanes landing in jungles with flaring fighting all around. One true sound repeats. That of wailing women and children who should be swooning. A pity for their woe. Wretched weeps and wails for a husband, a father dead. Cursed be the day! Where flees compassion? What strengthens love? How deep into a heart doth a sorrow sink? Ransack and slaying, burning fires and heaps of bodies in 1968 as it has always been. Naked, skinny child running down a dirt road between burning hatch roofs. That is how it was