

The Letter

June 4, 1968, was a warm, sunny morning. The red and lavender rhododendrons that lined the government building's sidewalk were in full bloom, ideal weather to ask for a half-day off from my entry-level clerical job at the IRS in Andover, MA. I showed the letter to my hefty Italian Supervisor, who said, "Mingya! ... Okay."

I used the pay phone on my break and left a message for my girlfriend at her high school's office. Knowing I'd pick her up early, she was graduating in a few days and would cut her last class. I started my red '62 Chevy Nova convertible, pulled off my tie, and stuffed it in the glove box with my letter. I drove off and sang along with Simon and Garfunkel's "Mrs. Robinson."

"Joltin' Joe has left and gone away, hey, hey, hey ..."

I parked outside the school, dropped my convertible top, and spotted my girl. The French brunette beauty scampered toward my car. Her lovely smiling face featured glittering green eyes and high cheekbones, surrounded by long brown hair draped over the sleeveless navy blue top that she filled out perfectly. She slid her shapely legs and revealing thighs in her plaid mini skirt across the red bench seat, gave me a hug and peck on the lips, and we were off. Her hair fluttered in the top-down eighty-degree weather as we cruised into a nearby ice cream stand.

She looked enticing, licking her chocolate chip cone while I slurped a chocolate root beer float. Her parents worked in a shoe factory, and their suburban gambrel house was empty for the afternoon. We'd been dating exclusively since '67, and when we'd sneak away, our favorite song was Tommy James' "I Think We're Alone Now." When I parked in front of her house, the birds were tweeting, and the bees were humming around the pink Azaleas. We went straight to her

room, kissed passionately, and deftly helped each other undress. The afternoon delight felt oh so right!

After tidying her room, we sat on a loveseat on the front porch to wait for her parents. They parked behind my car. Her mom looked at us suspiciously and asked why I wasn't at work. I showed her my letter, similar to one her son had received; he was still on active duty. She invited me to dinner.

I left their house that night, knowing I'd be reporting for basic training in two months. I thought about my dad. He'd served six years in the National Guard and four more in WW II. The medic came home disabled, now worked at the VA Hospital caring for his fellow Vets, and served on the local draft board, which I feared. A few months earlier, on April 1st, I turned eighteen. Four days later, Dad and I were watching news coverage of Dr. Martin Luther King's assassination and Bobby Kennedy's heartfelt unifying speech. When the news changed to updates on Vietnam, I said, "Dad, I don't support the war. But if it's okay with you, I'll join the Army Reserves. If my Division gets called up, I'll fight like you did in Europe." He just nodded.

When I got home from my girl's house, Dad was excited. The man he'd campaigned for, Robert Kennedy, had just won the South Dakota Democratic Primary and was leading in California. He smiled and said, "Bobby will end the war by the time you return from boot camp."

"Hope so," I said and went to bed.

The next morning, I heard the TV in the living room, where I found Mom consoling Dad, who held his head in his hands. RFK had been shot late last night in California! I was stunned and sick to my stomach! "Not again," I said, vividly recalling the dreary November day I came home from school five years earlier. Mom was weeping, and Dad was kneeling in front of the

TV, praying that JFK would pull through an emergency operation. Dad's praying quickly turned to uncontrollable sobs when Walter Cronkite announced that President Kennedy had died. Back then, I was young and helpless. This morning, I hugged my trembling, distraught father. He took the day off, and I headed into the IRS, dazed, confused, and angry.

In late August, rioters outside of the Chicago Democratic Convention shouted, "The whole world is watching," when the Police violently beat on war protesters, journalists, photographers, and bystanders; hundreds were injured, and eleven died. Meanwhile, I crawled on my stomach under barbed wire, toting my M16 in the dense tropical woods called 'Tiger Land.' My basic training was in Fort Polk, Louisiana, where its humid weather and jungle-like terrain would simulate the conditions in Vietnam.

In November, Nixon won the presidency in an election in which most soldiers and I were too young to vote but old enough to carry weapons and take an oath to defend our country and its constitution. I was fortunate to remain state-side, but many of my fellow recruits went to Nam, didn't return, or came back carrying lifelong burdens. We could only say, "Welcome home, and thank you for your service."

When I returned from active duty, my attractive girlfriend, now a stunning young woman, was working full-time. I felt like a casualty of war when she said, "It's time we start dating others." In '69, I left the IRS for a better-paying position with Raytheon, a defense contractor. I traded my Nova convertible for an ice-blue '68 Dodge Charger with a black vinyl roof, matching interior, and hidden headlights. That summer, when many of my long-haired friends slept in tents and partied peacefully for three days in Woodstock, NY—I, too, slept in a tent in upstate New

York. But instead of my bell-bottom jeans—I'd worn the same green army fatigues for two weeks of training and bivouac at Camp Drum, NY.

In October, my buddies and I drove to Boston and luckily got into the renowned Tea Party Nightclub to see Jesse Colin Young and the Young Bloods. The smoky venue, packed with Hippies and college kids, swayed to the music and sang the chorus of "Get Together."

"Come on, people now

Smile on your brother

Everybody get together

Try to love one another; right now,

Right now,

Right now!"

In March of '70, I joined Digital, a computer company that reimbursed tuition for my evening programming courses. A coworker and close friend was also in my Army Reserve unit. War protests were ramping up on college campuses. Our Army meetings focused on riot control training, marching with gas masks in a V-formation, and leading with our bayonets to break through the protestors. I hated it and hoped we'd never patrol a protest demonstration. We were weekend warriors with guns and riot gear but ardently integrated with the counterculture.

We had our favorite girlfriends, and on Friday, May 29, 1970, we saw an earth-shaking Crosby, Stills, Nash, and Young performance at the Boston Garden that overshadowed every concert I'd seen before or since then. We drove into town in my Charger and were already quite mellow before entering the smoke-filled, highly charged, jammed-packed Garden. After their

crowd-pleasing super harmony hits— “Suite Judy Blue Eyes,” “Teach Your Children,” “Long Time Gone,” and “Carry On”—everyone was screaming, rocking, and reeking of pot.

Stephen Stills calmed the audience and announced they were debuting a song that Neil Young had written days earlier. Slowly, Young’s bold, haunting lyrics began to evoke the turbulent mood of outrage and shock in the wake of the Kent State tragedy that occurred three weeks earlier.

“Tin soldiers and Nixon’s comin’

We’re finally on our own

This summer, I hear the drummin’

Four dead in O hi o.

Gotta get down to it

Soldiers are gunning us down

Should’ve been done long ago

What if you knew her and found her dead on the ground

How can you run when you know?”

When the crowd caught on and joined in repeating the gut-wrenching line “Four dead in Ohio,” my body was rushing, my heart was racing, and I held back tears. They closed that concert with Steven Stills’ sobering song “**Find the Cost of Freedom.**” ...

“Buried in the ground. Mother Earth will swallow you. Lay your body down.”

That concert shook me to my core. Ohio was banned from the radio by the Nixon Administration for over a year, but it sold more CSNY albums. Whenever I heard Ohio, it made me pine for those Kent State students and the Guardsmen who had been trained like us.

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Over fifty-eight thousand US troops died in Vietnam. Thankfully, today, we are not engaged in war. Yet, the news, social media outlets, and political pundits highlight the Gaza protests of needless violence and antisemitism, which fuels more hate and divisiveness. It evoked a series of decades-old painful memories and mixed emotions. I coped by writing about them. Peace be with you.