In the Air Tonight

by Jerry Ratch

That last night in Europe, getting ready to fly out of Amsterdam back to the States, I heard this Phil Collins song on MTV, “In the Air Tonight,” which expressed some of the turmoil and confusion and whole-life hysteria I was feeling inside. Waves of frustration and cosmic confusion about what I was doing with my life. My month-long vacation in Europe had come to an end, but it was that vacation that allowed me to take one huge-mother giant step back from work in real estate, which had been steadily eating me up for the past seven years. Seven years without taking a break. Seven long years. That is insanity. No one should have to endure something like that. The brain stops functioning in any human sort of way after a time, and you lose track of who you are, who you were, or who you wanted to be.

We had driven pretty much non-stop from the boot of Italy at a break-neck speed, up through Southern Germany, where I stopped at a roadside Motel one night just outside Munich. The girl at the desk immediately began speaking to me in German, assuming I was one of her race, because my ancestors were Bohemian, more or less right over the border. I realized suddenly they all looked like me! I couldn't believe what I was seeing. You never saw that in America. These people looked like nothing had changed in their basic facial structure in ten thousand years. And it was that sense of the depth of my roots that so struck me, and stuck to me. I just couldn't shake it.

The girl at the desk took a good look at me. She seemed puzzled, and then amused, because she had also gotten a good look at Elizabeth when she passed by on her way down the hall, dragging her suitcase. It could only be described as plodding. I looked after Elizabeth, who had passed by the desk clerk without saying a thing, not even a polite nod.

“That will be just the one room? Or this will be two?” asked the girl at the counter. She smiled at me.

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I blanched. I opened my mouth and nothing came out. I almost said: *Make that two.*

What was I thinking, what was I thinking? That maybe the girl at the desk, easily a dozen years younger than me, would come down the hall in the middle of the night and sneak into my room?

Well — maybe!

I was off and running in my wildest dreams now. My imagination got the better of me, and it was only a matter of time. I was a marked man. And had it been so easy to upset my little wagon, with the simplest of questions, and on the outskirts of Munich yet? The scene of the infamous beer putsches leading up to the rise of Hitler and the Second World War? The most fertile grounds for that kind of ego? But hadn't it started really quite some time ago already?

Yes, yes, and yes. It was so easy, you could say, and yet it had also been a long time coming. And there it was.

When we got up to Amsterdam, there was this wonderful song on MTV by Phil Collins, and it began gnawing at my soul and at my heart.

Where had I been for the past dozen or so years? Why had I abandoned my center? How had I veered so widely from my original path? What would it take to put me back on track?

I remember lying on my back on the made bed with my shoes off. My wife was stuck in the bathroom for an hour, as usual. And I began to feel free, somehow. A sense of freedom began rolling over me with the music. I hadn't felt this kind of sensation in at least a dozen years. And out of nowhere I experienced an erection that just would not go away, until my wife came staggering out of the bathroom, drunk as usual.