

# A TIME LIKE NO OTHER

My story: 1946 – 1963

**Ken Rand**



# **Part I: 1946 – 1951 138<sup>th</sup> St and Cypress Ave., Bronx NY**

## **Chapter One “The FIRE”**

“Fiirre...Fiirre”. That’s me trying to tell a phone operator that my house was on fire.

My world, as I knew it, would soon change forever. The story that I am about to share is as vivid as if it happened yesterday. Sometimes it’s a reckless decision that sets forth a chain of events that can alter one’s history. One minute, life is normal, and the next minute can lead to chaos. It all happened so quickly. I was five years old when the impulse to play with a box of matches became the focus of my mischievous behavior. I was in my parents’ bedroom, and the forbidden box of matches was on a table next to my parents’ bed.

Please don’t ask me why I was playing with the matches, I don’t know. Perhaps it was just a case of childhood curiosity. What happened next would help to define my fragile psyche, and its emotional impact would last for decades.

While fiddling with one of the matches, it accidentally lit up. Within seconds, the entire matchbox that I was still holding burst into flames. To keep myself from getting burned, I instinctively threw the matchbox, and it unfortunately landed in my parents’ open clothing closet.

Immediately, the entire closet in my parents’ bedroom was in flames, including my mom’s recent anniversary gift and prized possession, a mink stole; I panicked. I’m five years old. I didn’t know what to do. I knew that I needed to get help. I quickly ran out of the room, closed the door, and rushed towards the front door, which led to the steps and the street.

I couldn’t speak; words were incapable of coming out of my mouth. There was no time, and I had to get help. My mom was sitting on the living room sofa, and she shouted, “Where are you going?” No time for me to answer.

When she saw me run almost literally through the front door, she said, “At least bring your coat; it's freezing outside.”

There was no time to get my coat! I ran down the fourteen steps to the street, turned right, and ran about 100 feet to the nearby candy store, knowing that it had an indoor phone booth. When I reached the store, I headed right for the phone booth and kept dialing the rotary dial, “0” for the operator. After what seemed to be forever, she finally answered. Bad news. I still couldn't speak. No matter how hard I tried, I could not get the words out of my mouth.

Finally, I shouted “FIIRRE... FIIRRE”, at which point the store owner knew something was wrong and started talking to the operator.

The next thing I remember was standing in front of our apartment with the rest of my family. The fire trucks were parked in front of the laundry store where we had our upstairs apartment, and the firefighters were spraying water on the flames that were coming from our apartment.

It was freezing outside, my family all had their heavy coats on, but I did not feel the cold; I was just happy that everyone was alive. Our apartment was totally destroyed. Almost nothing inside was saved. The cause of the fire was not yet determined, and no one knew it was my fault. In a few weeks, the fire department falsely blamed the fire on a faulty electrical switch.

I did not confess my guilt (to anyone) until about 35 years later, when I had a nostalgic conversation with my dad about the good old days. At first, he did not believe me, but I was able to convince him by going into the details of the events. There wasn't much for him to say. He was just shocked that I never told him before.

You may be wondering ‘why’ I didn't tell anyone that I started the fire. Well, I think ‘why?’ may be the wrong question to ask. The better question could be, “Are you now okay?” The answer is ‘Yes’. However, it is difficult to put into words the overwhelming feeling of shame and guilt that I felt at this time. I am five years old, and I just destroyed our home and every possession we owned.

While relaying the above story, I slowly began to remember the layout of our apartment. Living quarters were tight for a family of six. We had only two small bedrooms, so all four of us kids slept in one room. The largest room was the living room, which was only 12' by 12', and there was only one bathroom for the six of us. Using the toilet became an exercise in

patience. There were times when all six of us were lining up to use the toilet.

I remember a joke from a comedian who performed at the hotel where my dad was the band leader. He was talking about the times in which he was brought up, "When I was young, we had eight of us in our family. Waiting on a line to use the bathroom was sometimes painful. Now I am very successful. I have a four-bedroom house and six bathrooms. The problem is...now I can't go"!

Our apartment was above a laundromat located on Cypress Avenue in the Bronx, New York. In the photo below, you can see the Candy (Drug) store where I used the indoor phone booth to call the Fire Department. Our apartment was about six stores further down the street.



- **Post-Fire**

Without a place to live, our family had to split up and live with different relatives. However, we were fortunate to have family close by. My two older brothers, (Frankie and Binnie) and I went to live with our mom's sister, Aunt Marie. My younger sister (Judy), lived with my mom's brother, Uncle Bo.

The photo below shows my Aunt Marie's apartment building, which is down the street from ours. Aunt Marie's apartment was on the fifth floor, and there was no elevator.



Living with Aunt Marie and her family was a unique experience.

Aunt Marie always seemed to be cranky. "Don't touch this. Don't touch that". I am sure that my brothers and I were an intrusion on her lifestyle, but she was that way even after we moved out. I always felt that I was walking on eggshells.

It wasn't all bad. We lucked out when Aunt Marie bought a new Admiral TV console, which had all three components: a TV, a phonograph, and a radio all wrapped in one unit. See the photo below.



There was a classic television show in the '50s called *The Honeymooners*, starring the versatile Jackie Gleason, who was a comedian, orchestra conductor, composer, and professional pool player. I bring this up because, on this weekly comedy TV show, Ralph Kramden (Jackie Gleason) and his wife Alice frequently had conversations outside the kitchen window with their downstairs neighbors, Ed Norton and his wife. These scenes were identical to the nightly conversations my Aunt Marie had when she talked through her open kitchen window with her nearby neighbors.

My Cousin Gil (Aunt Marie's son) was 17 years old at the time, and he loved listening to opera, classical music, and jazz. Gil enjoyed having his cousins stay over and introduced me to the magnificent operatic voice of Enrico Caruso (*O Sole Mio*) and the rhythmic sounds of jazz band leader, Benny Goodman, whose drummer, Gene Krupa, is said to be one of the best who ever lived. I remember him saying, "You've got to listen to this, you'll love it". Gil also enjoyed listening to the other great bands, such as Duke Ellington, Count Basie, and the Dorsey Brothers.

While staying at Aunt Marie's apartment, Cousin Gil often played the Benny Goodman recording of "Sing, Sing, Sing," which had a hypnotic effect on me. It is hard not to move your body while listening to this instrumental song. This impromptu masterpiece by Goodman and his band became an all-time jazz classic and is featured in many movies.

Cousin Gil also introduced my brother Frankie to Tchaikovsky's 1812 Overture, and I think Frankie played that inspiring musical piece at our home every day for the next 10 years. If you have some time, go to

YouTube and find the 1812 Overture. Close your eyes, and you will soon hear and see the marching soldiers and hear the church bells ringing in the background.

Gil had quite a collection of Classical 33 rpm records, and his favorite classical piece was the Peer Gynt Suite, which had four movements (like four chapters in a book). I soon became a big fan of this recording, especially after listening to Movement No. 4, which featured the dramatic music of *In the Hall of the Mountain King*. Between Gil's love of the classics and my dad's background in classical musical, I had an early appreciation for music from all genres.

Despite having to live with our cranky Aunt Marie, we adapted, but there were still many moments when I missed my parents.

About four weeks later, I found out that my mom and dad were still sleeping and eating in the burnt-out apartment. A few weeks went by before I finally returned to the apartment to visit my parents for the first time since the fire. I can recall the incredible shock I felt upon arrival. The water from the fire hoses destroyed everything that wasn't already blackened and charred by the fire, and it had that unmistakable odor of fire and smoke. Even the ceiling was burnt out with huge holes in it.

As I walked up the 14 burnt and charred steps, I felt tears in my eyes when I reached the broken front door. I entered what used to be our apartment, and I could see my parents sitting in what was left of our kitchen. They were having lunch on a table that now had three legs. I was crying so much inside.

To think that I had done something to cause all this misery was overwhelming. Seeing the sadness on my face, my dad said, "Don't worry, Kenny. Everything will work out fine. Within a few months, we will be moving to a new place."

My five-year-old brain was incapable of comprehending the word 'accident'. I am not a psychologist, but I do understand that guilt, shame, and abandonment do not always have to be conscious feelings. They are, unfortunately, held inside. Being away from my parents for three months seemed like three years, especially to a scared and guilty five-year-old.



My sense of abandonment (being separated from people I love), would turn out to be a recurring theme in my life. I am sure that over the next few years I might have had reason to recall this awful incident, but I know that over the next forty years, I hardly ever, on a conscious level, thought about the fire.

Below are some photos of my siblings and me that were taken at our apartment on Cypress Avenue.

In a few short months we will +move into a new apartment in Queens, NY which is about a 20 minute trip from the Bronx.



Left Photo: Frankie (4), Binnie (3) and chubby me (6 months)

Photo: Me (4) and my sister Judy (3)



## Part VII: Bonus Chapters

### More about my Mom and Dad



As I wrote in my book, my Mom went through a lot of loneliness and overwhelming parental and financial responsibilities. She tried her best, and she was an amazing mom. I miss her dearly. Her bout with alcohol ended around the age of 50, when her doctor told her that if she didn't quit drinking, she would die. Within weeks, she went back to her beautiful personality and never had another drink for the rest of her short life. She died at the age of 62 from lung disease.

Mom: The wrong place at the wrong time.

Mom was beautiful on the inside as well as outside, and she was a very sociable person. She loved to meet new people and would spend hours at the Brown's Hotel talking to her best friend, Becky Miller, the wife of Bernie Miller Bernie (the Silver Fox), was the MC (Master of Ceremonies) during the nightly shows in the Jerry Lewis Theater.

An example of Mom's friendliness was when she and I would visit NYC to see the sights, and she would sit down next to a total stranger on a park bench and automatically put herself into her 'friendly' mode and strike up a lively conversation.

Mom was also a loyal friend and loved attending weddings. That's fine, but Mom also enjoyed going to funerals, sometimes for people she hardly knew. To my mom, a funeral was a social event and another good reason to talk to old friends and make new ones. One of the problems was that she too often dragged me along as her form of transportation. So, quite frequently, I would be attending a funeral where I knew no one. What was strange was that mom could turn on the faucet and cry for the deceased even if she hardly knew them.

One day (Circa 1974), when we were staying at the hotel, the camp director, Murray Shapiro, passed away. As usual, Mom asked me to drive her to the funeral. Though both Mom and Murray were at the hotel for many years, I don't think they ever had even one conversation with each other.

This funeral, for someone that my mom hardly knew was in Forest Hills, New York and it was a 3-hour drive. There was no GPS at this time, so we drove from the hotel to Forest Hills, looking all over Queens, for the Jewish temple, 'Beth Sholom.'

We were lost. Well, by some miracle, we finally found it. After finding a parking spot, we walked into the temple lobby, and in front of one of the rooms was a large poster with the name 'Murray Shapiro' on it. At least we were in the right place.

We entered an auditorium-sized room that had over 200 cushioned chairs; however, it was strangely only occupied by about a dozen people. Mom and I sat down, and almost instantly, Mom started to cry. Meanwhile, I began looking around, noticing that I knew no one in this room. Not even the daughter, Eileen, whom I knew quite well, nor Murray's wife were there.

OMG.....I tapped Mom on her shoulder, and through her tears, she said, "What... Kenny?" I said, "Mom, you can stop crying." With tears flowing down her face, she said, "Why?". I answered, "Mom, I think we are at the wrong funeral." We couldn't leave the temple fast enough, and we couldn't stop laughing at our mistake. We laughed so much that it made it difficult for me to drive and find the correct location. Yes, we finally found the right 'Beth Sholom' temple. Eileen and her mom were there, along with about 100 other people, most of whom I didn't know. And, of course, Mom could now cry again for the right person (whom she hardly knew). LOL.

Family:

Family was very important to Mom, and she made it a point to keep the family together, even though all of us were no longer living together. Not only would it be sacrilegious to miss a Sunday dinner, but whoever missed it would be constantly reminded of how great the food they had missed was.

My mom loved to cook, and she was really good at it. She even learned how to cook a great Italian spaghetti sauce. It wasn't

uncommon for friends who tried it to say that this was the “best spaghetti sauce I’ve ever had”.

Mom also loved to dance, especially at weddings. Unfortunately, Dad was either the band leader at the event, or he was playing at another event. That meant that I would be obligated to be her dance partner. On most occasions, this was OK with me, but there were too many times that Mom had too much to drink, and instead of dancing, I was holding her up to keep her from falling down.

Mom’s smile was infectious. I recall a time when I flew home to New York from California to surprise her. I heard from Dad that her arthritis was affecting her lifestyle and that she missed her family.

Good thing I had a key to her apartment. When I walked through the front door, I went straight to her room, where she was resting in bed. When she saw me, even though she was in severe pain from her arthritis, her eyes lit up, and a huge smile spread across her face; she shouted, “Kenny....my Kenny!” I will never forget that moment.

## Family Pranks

I think I was around sixteen years old when mom initiated numerous family pranks. I remember one night when it was about 12:00 P.M., and I heard her come down the stairs to the basement where Frankie and I were sleeping. Her footsteps woke me up, and she came over to me and said “Shhhh.”

Mom had a handful of shaving cream, and she walked over to Frankie (who was sleeping), and she slowly turned to me and again whispered, “Shhhh.” Her plan was obvious. She then

gently put the shaving cream on Frankie's entire face and quietly went upstairs.

Morning came, and Mom yelled downstairs, "Breakfast is ready." Of course, Frankie woke up to quite a surprise, feeling something strange on his face. The more he touched his face, the more the shaving cream got all over his hands. I couldn't stop laughing. Frankie, looking at me said, "Did you do this?" Groggy-eyed I answered, "Do what?" And I tilted my head up, indicating that Mom, who was in the kitchen upstairs, was the culprit.

It's not over

A few days later, Frankie came up to me and said, "I have a plan, and I need your help." I said, "I'm in", already suspecting some mischief. His plan was a little more elaborate than putting shaving cream on Mom's face. Our home had four floors. The main bedrooms were on the top floor, and there were about six steps down to the living room, and kitchen floor. Six more steps down led to the den, and then another six steps down led to the basement where Frankie, Binnie, and I were all sleeping. We usually slept upstairs, but Binnie was remodeling Mom and Dad's master bedroom. Oh, there was a door in front of the steps leading down to the basement.

Anyway, Frankie's plan was to put a full bucket of water on top of the door so that when Mom opened it, an entire bucket of water would spill all over her. The bucket was hidden because it was inside of the basement door. I recall that we rehearsed this act of treason numerous times until Frankie perfected it. Okay, the plan is set in place.

The next morning, Mom shouted from the kitchen, "Frankie, Binnie, and Kenny, breakfast is ready. Frankie answered, "Mom, can you bring it down for me, I'm very tired"? Mom shouted,

“Can’t Kenny, or Binnie, do it for you?”, Frankie cleverly lied and answered, “Kenny’s in the bathroom and Binnie’s still sleeping”. We soon heard mom’s footsteps going down the first set of stairs. We were already laughing in anticipation.

Suddenly, mom opened the door, and guess what? Frankie’s plan did not work. We were already laughing, and Mom said, “What’s so funny”? Then we pointed to the bucket of water that was directly above her, and we laughed again. Mom joined in our amusement and could not stop laughing. She laughed so much that her vibration loosened the bucket of water, and the water dropped all over her. I think we laughed for a week. Sorry Mom, but you started it.

These types of pranks were routine in our family, but most of them were started by my mischievous mom. Mom, I miss your smile and your love.

Dad:  
Sugar Pie Honey Bunch

In 1968, I was a teacher in the South Bronx JHS. During the summer, just before school started, I was one of three teachers assigned to a unique program for emotionally disturbed boys. Each of us was asked to teach a different grade level, and my students would be the 8th graders.

After the first day of the class, I went home. I told my dad that the school had a new piano room and asked him to come to the school and play for my class. He said, “Of course.”

That Friday, my dad came to my school and was able to play every song my students requested. After playing for about 45 minutes, one of the students shouted, “Papa Rand, can you play the Temptations?” My dad asked him, “Can you sing a few notes?” he soon obliged and played the requested song. I didn’t



even know that my dad knew these songs. The bell for dismissal rang, but my students called out, “One more, just one more.” I then whispered to my dad, “Can you play the Four Tops?”

Meanwhile, I didn’t realize that a relatively large crowd of students had gathered in the hallway outside the room. The crowd of students continued to grow in size by the minute, and they all hoped to gain entry to the room. Again, without hesitation, my dad started playing one of the most popular songs by the Four Tops. Within the first four rhythmic notes, everyone in the room stood up and started dancing and singing. I’m sure the loud singing could be heard in the halls and other classrooms. I can still hear the opening notes, followed by the vocals.

- Sugar pie, honey bunch  
You know that I love you  
I can't help myself  
I love you and nobody else
- In and out my life  
You come and you go  
Leaving just your picture behind  
And I kissed it a thousand times...

Four of my students formed a line in front of the room and started imitating the Four Tops' signature dance moves. The class went wild with excitement. And so did the students outside the room in the hallway.

I also couldn’t help but to start moving to the beat. One of my students saw me “moving” and said, “Mr. Rand, dance with us.” I told him, “Nope...It’s the ‘Four Tops,’ not the ‘Five Tops.’” That didn’t work. They pulled me over, and I was soon dancing with them. At 22, I am a much better dancer than a teacher.

Meanwhile, the crowd of students outside the closed door was growing larger, and they were dancing and singing in the hallway,

hoping to be let into our room. That day, many students were likely late for their next class. My dad's talents, of course, made me an instant hero with my students, but they also got me in trouble (again) with Principal Freyer.

Later, when school was over, I was summoned to Principal Freyer's office. This was not my first trip to his office. Walking to his office is like walking the green mile. I approached his office door with extreme caution and anxiety. I walked in, and he motioned for me to sit down. I choose to stand.

Freyer: "You can't do that."

Me: "Do what?"

His ashtray of cigar butts went flying by my head.

Freyer: "Sit down."

I guess he wanted a stationary target. He closed his door. Now I'm thinking, this is it. Now I'm really getting fired."

"Don't you know that you need permission to have a non-school employee enter the school?" I told Freyer that my dad played for my students. He then said, "I don't care if it was Liberace. Do you know the disturbance you caused?" That was a question he did not want an answer to.

"Sorry, Dr. Freyer, I thought I did the right thing. Next time, I'll make sure you know." Freyer, shaking his head, gave me his infamous and all too predictable closing remark, "Get out of my office." I lived to teach another day.

Richard Nixon

In 1967, Richard Nixon began his comeback to become President of the United States. It wasn't unusual for Politicians to host parties, also known as fundraisers. One weekend, my dad was offered the job of band leader at one of these parties for Mr. Nixon. Dad told Herb Sherry, his boss, that he was not a fan of Nixon and would never play for him. Herb told my dad that it was a high-paying gig. Herb said, "How about \$300 for the night?" This was a lot of money then, and my dad said an emphatic "NO." Herb then said, "How about \$500?" Again, my dad said, 'I won't play for him.' Then Herb said, "I'll make it \$1000". My dad quickly said, "What time do you need me?" End of story. It costs a lot of money to feed four kids.

## Neil Diamond

This incident happened in 1985. My dad earned his living in the non-summer months by giving piano lessons. It wasn't unusual for Dad to leave at 7:00 AM and return home at 10:00 PM, depending on how many lessons he gave and where they were located. Dad was a workaholic, which I am sure contributed to my mom's loneliness and subsequent excessive drinking. But looking back, he had to work long hours so he could support our family of seven.

On the weekends, however, my dad's income came from the higher-paying 'club dates.' In the musical entertainment industry, Club dates can include weddings, bar mitzvahs, parties, and other special events.

One night, Dad was playing with his band at a wedding, and an older couple approached him, asking if he knew any songs by the singer Neil Diamond. My dad said, "Yes, I do, and I'd be happy to play some for you." Dad found this request to be rather odd because of the couple's age, and he wondered why they would even know who Neil Diamond was.

Dad played a medley of Neil Diamond's hit songs, which lasted about 30 minutes. After the medley, the older couple approached Dad, and the husband took out four crisp one-hundred-dollar bills and gave them to him. My dad was shocked. Dad said, "Thank you, but I don't understand." The husband said, "Mr. and Mrs. Diamond would like to thank you very much. You were great." My dad now understood. The couple were the parents of the very popular singer/songwriter, Neil Diamond.

### A Sense of Humor: A Bigger Bed

Here is just a small example of my dad's sense of humor. Dad was staying with me and my family in California in 2013 - 14, and it was becoming more and more challenging to manage his care. After many discussions, Dad finally agreed to let us enroll him in a senior healthcare clinic. Dad, who loved to be around the family, was highly reluctant to go.

When we arrived at the care home, an adorable and friendly nurse escorted Dad to his room and assisted him in bed. I told the nurse that my dad did not want to be there, and he may be very stubborn with her. I also told her that his hospice caregiver at home was very affectionate with him and that he loved the attention. With that said, the nurse leaned over to my dad and kissed him on the cheek. My dad finally smiled and said out loud, "I think we are going to need a bigger bed." (I'm laughing while I write this.)

### The Shower

Some more of dad's humor. While he stayed at the nursing home, the nurses would often take him to the shower where they would help him clean himself. At the age of 98, Dad's balance was not

too good. As the shower continued, my dad, being dad, told them, "You are so good at this I think I'll just watch", When the shower was over, the nurse told him that he could dry himself. Dad said, "Can you help me". When the nurse was finished, she said, "All Done". At which my dad looked at the nurse, and simultaneously looked down below his stomach, and said, "I think you missed a spot." My 98-year-old dad had a dirty mind. I can't wait until I'm 98.

## Tug of War

The following incident happened a few months before Dad went to the care home. My dad had a buzzer around his neck that he would press to alarm me if he needed attention. One night, at about 3:00 AM, the alarm went off. When I went to see him, he told me that his dentures were stuck and that he couldn't take them out to sleep properly.

Earlier that day, Dad asked me to buy him some denture cream because his dentures were too loose, especially at night. After I bought the cream, I came home, and I put on the cream on his dentures. However, this was the first time I had ever put cream on the dentures, and I guess I must have overdone it.

Anyway, Dad asked me to help him remove the dentures from his mouth. What happened next is worthy of a scene in a comedy movie. No matter how hard I tried, I could not remove his dentures. I even sat in a chair, braced my feet against his hospital-style bed, and put my hands and fingers in his mouth, but it was to no avail. It was both frustrating and comical. Then I remembered that when a car gets stuck in the mud, the best thing to do is rock the vehicle forward and then rock it in reverse. After numerous attempts, the car would eventually free itself from the mud.

So, here's the picture: The two of us have our hands in his mouth, rocking back and forth, Dad in his bed and me on a chair, bracing myself against his hospital-style bed. After about 10 minutes of intense struggle and rocking back and forth, the dentures finally loosened, and the process was successful. Remember, this is at 3:00 AM. When victory was finally achieved, my dad and I looked at each other and laughed uncontrollably for the next 30 minutes. Going back to sleep was no longer an option.

I hope you enjoyed these few bonus stories about Mom and Dad. They have nothing to do with the 50s and 60s, but to me, they are priceless and entertaining.

### The Impossible Dream:

This dream helped me fulfill a wish I have had ever since my dad passed away. Let me tell you about it.

My dad was my best friend throughout my entire life. He was always there to support me in whatever I tried to do, and he never judged my numerous mistakes. There are many things I miss about Dad, and one of them is simply listening to him play the piano. What I would give to hear him play again.

Dad passed away at the age of 99 ½ on April 23rd, 2015. Another reason I won't hear him play again is that, for some unknown reason, there are no recordings or videos of Dad playing in our family, at events, (or anywhere else).

It seems that my dream will never be fulfilled.

That was, until the evening of April 22, 2025, when I had the most incredible dream. I dreamt that I was in the first row of a large auditorium filled with about 2000 people. I was sitting there when



the lights began to dim, and in my dream, my dad came on stage in his black tuxedo and sat down at the piano. No orchestra, just him and a piano.

My dad started to play the song titled “Rhapsody in Blue” by American composer George Gershwin. This was Dad’s all-time favorite (non-classical) musical piece. Dad loved the classics by Bach, Mozart, and Beethoven, but he also loved the difficulty and intricacies of Rhapsody in Blue. In my dream, Dad played it as if he had been possessed by George Gershwin himself. Even minutes before he finished the song, the entire audience got up and gave him a standing ovation.

I woke up from my dream with tears in my eyes. What I thought was impossible had no longer been impossible. On the eve of my dad’s death, he fulfilled my dream, and I will forever be able to hear him play by recalling this incredible dream. Dad passed away in his sleep at the nursing home at the age of 99 ½. I miss you so much.