

SHARON KELLY

When you wish upon a picture of a Piper, pasted to the side of a coffee can, when you dream upon the pennies you toss in, saving up for your own first airplane, you are a pretty determined little girl – especially when you are all of eight years old. Sharon Kelly never thought it particularly precocious to set her goal of \$5,000 worth of pennies – enough at that time to put down on brand new wings with a thrilling Indian name. *Cherokee Comanche*. She just knew, once she arrived at the mature age 12, one thing. She recalls: “Five thousand dollars was beyond the pale. That was a sum of money I would never see.” But did not enough pennies in her coffee can stop her? Did her earliest childhood fantasy of living life like television’s *Sky King* dissuade her? Not in the least. Oh, it may have *delayed* her while she otherwise was growing up in Ansonia, Connecticut, studying business administration in college, and eventually marrying a wonderful man (“a car guy; planes are not his thing”). But far be it for the flying dreams of little Sharon Kelly never to come true. Today the owner of a chic gift shop on Martha’s Vineyard, another equally stylish store in Avon, Connecticut,

and a Skyhawk she flies between the two, is a pilot to the childhood fantasy born. And perhaps no one is as tickled with this fairy tale ending as is Kelly herself.

“Once I got my license I was so thrilled with it,” she says. “I couldn’t imagine anyone *not* being thrilled with it.” Thrilled still and forever with a life in flying that welcomed her in 1977, at age 29, Kelly laughs at the memory of her first flight. “It was my 10th birthday and all I wanted was an airplane ride. My mother took me to the then-grass airfield in Ansonia and all I remember was the...well, *excitement*. That, and my mother’s sweaty hand, clutching mine.” Nineteen years later, it was about five minutes after her check ride when, says Kelly, “my mother insisted she be my first passenger – and her palms weren’t sweating! Bless her,” she laughs. “She’s a good sport.” Well, who wouldn’t love climbing into the cockpit with the woman who on her second or third flight with her husband took full advantage of the new travel opportunities now open by winging to fabulous Martha’s Vineyard. “He’s a great passenger,” she says fondly of her companion in airborne adventure. “He reads a magazine. If he looks up and I can tell him where we are, he’s happy.” Who wouldn’t love landing and, seized by some indescribable, freshly born boldness, buying a home? “My husband said the beautiful Victorian we saw for sale reminded him of his grandmother’s house and the next day...well, we were signing papers!”

Flying is like that, Kelly is not ashamed to admit. It can see you doing crazy-wonderful things. Like giving your parents’ beloved Great Dane – Apollo – a valium so the poor guy isn’t too anxious during flight? Something like that. “Have you ever tried to get 180 pounds of drugged black dog out of a plane?” she says. “That dog was all legs. *Spaghetti legs*.” Or maybe there’s the time Kelly flew herself



around the Hawaiian island of Kauai, snapping photos of the beauty that so moved her like she was paparazzi. “I felt terribly guilty the whole time because I could hear my flight instructor’s voice in my head, *is it the photographer or the pilot who is a fool here?*” Indeed, safety, safety, safety is Kelly’s flying mantra, and she is thankful she took a solid year to earn her wings, developing along the way experience in all manner of weather. She is also glad she never took that “most unusual” job once offered her. “There were people who said I’d be perfect for it, but a wing walker in an air circus?” Ha! Kelly would be incredulous if she weren’t simply having the time of her life in the air. She says: “My childhood plans were greatly thwarted because I had this grand list of great places I was going to fly.” Here, there,

everywhere. But with Martha’s Vineyard capturing her heart so early in her aviation travels, the island these days accounts for most of the hours she puts on her “basic Chevrolet of the sky,” the Skyhawk she acquired in 1979 and has painted a zippy red, white and blue.

Besides overseeing her shops (the one on Martha’s Vineyard is a charming, yellow gingerbread cottage called The Secret Garden that can be glimpsed at secretgardenmv.com), Kelly is collecting airborne adventures that usually make great entertainment in the telling. There’s the one about the parakeets, for instance. And how the two pets she used to shuttle between homes before she moved permanently to the Vineyard always chose to perch right seat. During take-off their little parakeet wings would assume proper flap

position – every time – and during landing their “flaps” would move into touch-down stance. Amazing! Then there’s the one about the cat...never mind. Suffice it to say that life in the sky for this easily delighted aviator is even more fun than it promised to be back in the days of *Sky King*. “Did Piper think they were wasting their money sending a brochure to a kid?” Kelly recalls of the phone call she made to the company and the pictures she later painstakingly clipped and pasted to her coffee-can bank “for, you know, incentive.” If so, it didn’t foresee that the determination of a little girl to live her dream would show up as a Kelly today totally living – and loving – the fantasy. The dream of becoming an air circus wing walker...well, that will have to belong to someone else. ✕



Above: Kelly with La Diva, a Miniature Schnauzer she says loves to sing; opposite: At home on Martha’s Vineyard