

A Marriage of Twenty Years (and two months)

Some time ago, I wrote about my courtship of, and marriage to Sylvia. I tried to be honest and I tried to put into words my feelings, my hopes and dreams as we were about to start our life together. I acknowledged that ours was not a story-book romance, though I saw myself as a 23 year old who was deeply in love. I rationalized that Sylvia's initial reluctance was the way women thought they were expected to react to an expression of love and a proposal of marriage. We didn't have a traditional wedding because we didn't have the money for a traditional wedding. I wanted to believe that we loved each other and that life would be wonderful.

We were young, we were smart, we thought alike, we were adventurous. How can it go wrong? The world is our oyster, whatever that means. December 22, 1951 represented the start of a magical life together. We transformed apartment B63 in 783 Fox Street into our love nest. We hitch-hiked across the country the summer after we married. We worked, went to school, partied with friends, went to the theatre and concerts, and traveled. In June 1954, I was drafted. When I was sent to Camp Rucker in Alabama, Sylvia joined me, and when I was reassigned to Camp Gordon, Georgia, we packed up and made our life there.

I felt I was able to make the best of every situation. We had a lovely little home off-post. Sylvia got a job on post. We went to work together; we came home together. We took advantage of all that Augusta had to offer. When I had leave, we drove home to New York. We had it made. And when we decided to make a baby, we made a beautiful baby. Sylvia got the best medical care at the army hospital. When her water broke the morning of October 12, 1955, we drove to Camp Gordon and went to the nice OB-GYN doctor. He examined Sylvia and told her that she should go home. She hadn't dilated, despite the fact that she was having labor pains. Sylvia went to the army library. Later in the afternoon, she called me and we returned to the hospital. Sylvia was admitted, was taken to the labor room, then to the delivery room, and at 5:25 pm, Carol was born.

We were thrilled. Our baby was gorgeous and healthy. Everything was going our way. Five months later, I had manipulated an early discharge, and we returned home to Fox Street. I returned to work and school. Sylvia was a wonderful mother, and she had help from her mother. Our friends were beginning to have babies as well. A pattern had emerged: everyone got married by their mid-20s, and over the next ten years or so had three children. My gang: 1955, 1958 and 1962. Eventually, we all left the neighborhood, but we remained close.

We moved to Brooklyn in 1957. By 1962, we had three wonderful children. We were involved in the community: the Committee for a Sane Nuclear Policy, picketing Woolworth's. Sylvia joined an amateur theatre group. We found a lovely summer place on Bantam Lake. We were happy. I loved my job. I loved my children. I love my wife. There were tensions, but everyone has tensions. Sylvia found a psychotherapist. Sylvia stayed out late at rehearsals.

In the fall of 1964, I was offered the position of Education Director of the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees in Washington, DC, a very exciting prospect. Sylvia and I talked it over. Let's do it. We found a lovely house for rent in the Shepherd Park section of Washington, the family moved from Brooklyn to Washington in December, and a new life. Carol and Lewis loved their new school, and Sylvia got involved in our neighborhood organization Neighbors Inc. I felt that we made a smooth transition and that we have a good marriage. Sylvia found another psychotherapist and suggested that I find someone as well. I did, but it wasn't a good fit. Tensions continued, but I didn't give it much thought.

More pressing were problems at work. The job wasn't working out, and I started looking for something with the Federal Government. First, the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission which didn't materialize; then the US Commission on Civil Rights, which did. Another pattern of the times: wives didn't return to the labor market until their last child went off to school. We still had a few years before Martha would join her brother and sister at the Shepherd School. When that time came, Sylvia found a job with the Internal Revenue Service as a technical writer.

Vacations: Living in Washington, most people vacationed at the beach resorts in Delaware or Maryland—Rehobeth, Bethany, Ocean City. I discovered the State Parks in West Virginia which were cheaper, cooler, and to my mind, much more attractive. I loved the cabins, the lakes, the woods, the mountains. Sylvia preferred the ocean. We alternated. Driving to places we hadn't been before was always tension-producing. I became anxious. Sylvia became annoyed. The kids became upset. As Martha became older, she took over as navigator.

As our seven years together in Washington passed, our children were growing up, developing their personalities, and their talents. We took pride in their accomplishments. (It is true that Carol picked on Lewis and Lewis picked on Martha, but that is the way of the world.) They did well in school; they asserted themselves; they made friends; they became real Washingtonians. We had moved from one "integrated" neighborhood, Crown Heights, to another, Shepherd Park. We were making a political statement, but Sylvia and I were in total agreement. I think that, for the most part, we were good neighbors and good parents.

We loved the area. After a year in our rented house, 8160 Eastern Avenue NW, we began to look for a house to buy in Shepherd Park. We found just the place: 7516 14th Street NW. My nasty little joke of the past several years: In 1966, we bought our house from a little old lady who was living there all alone. Forty years later, there is a little old lady living in the same house, all alone. I really loved that place. My first opportunity to play "Harry Homeowner." For the next six years, I did all the minor repairs: plumbing, carpentry, electrical work, painting, and gardening. We bought tools, a hand mower, and I became a regular customer of Hechinger's, Washington's home supply chain store. In the last year, before our separation, and in anticipation of Lewis' Bar Mitzvah, I finished the unfinished basement, with a little help from our friends.

As I look back over those last years of our marriage, I recall areas of disagreement, but (though I may be kidding myself) more areas of agreement. We went to the theatre and concerts. We had a wonderful circle of friends, and maintained close contact with our New York friends. Early on, we agreed that whomever feels more strongly about anything, will prevail. There was the classic division: I dealt with the big issues like Viet Nam, civil rights, and economic policy, and Sylvia dealt with the small issues like our children's education, health, after-school activities, and the house. We did have different views about our children's Jewish education. I wanted them to go to a Shule in Silver Spring; Sylvia didn't want to shlep out there. Carol endured it. Lewis started there. Then we sent him to the Hebrew School at the nearby Tifereth Israel synagogue where Martha went as well.

Bickering increased. I realize now how unpleasant it was for Sylvia to have a frugal husband. I resisted spending money, always looking for a bargain. (Unfortunately, I haven't changed.) When we went out to a restaurant and if expensive dishes were ordered, my annoyance was evident. Yet I never thought that it was the sort of thing that could precipitate the end of a marriage. I didn't see myself as controlling. I looked on our relationship as a partnership.

In the last year of our marriage, Sylvia made it clear that she wanted out. (All this is very hazy. I can't remember if there was a precipitating incident, or a particular conversation, though there must have been.) We may have been just hanging on at the time of Lewis' Bar Mitzvah. I suspect we put on a good act in front of our friends and family. I may have not believed it would happen. I know that in our conversations about separating, I kept insisting that our relationship was not any worse than any of our friends. I asked Sylvia to participate in couple's therapy. She refused.

By the late fall of 1971, the handwriting was on the wall, and it was beginning to be transmitted to legal documents. Sylvia found a lawyer, and I was advised to get one. I kept hoping this was a bad dream and I would wake up. I have two distinct memories of those last months when we were acting like a married couple, though the marriage was falling apart, and I was in real pain. We had tickets for a show. We went. We were sitting in the dark, and I began to feel very sad. I left my seat and went out to the lobby, and remained there until it was over. The other memory: Our friends, Dan and Ruth urged us to go with them to a club to hear a musician Danny liked. Again, we went. And again, I began to feel very sad. I then told them that I was in pain because our marriage of twenty years is ending. I cannot close my mind to that reality, and enjoy the music.