

#16 My Courtship of, and Marriage to, Sylvia Feig

The fall of 1947 was much like the fall of 1946 and 1945: classes at CCNY started right after Labor Day and I had a heavy schedule. I was also working after school at Reich and Schrifft, a stationery store a few blocks from CCNY on Hamilton Place and 143rd St. At 19, I was busy discovering the world: politics, literature, theatre, movies, art, music, as well as spending time with friends, and trying to meet girls.

My first class at CCNY usually started at 9 AM. I would leave the house a little after 8 AM, take the Southern Blvd trolley to 149th St. and then transfer to the crosstown trolley. I would occasionally meet some friends on the trolley and we would walk together to school down Convent Ave. When we went to Stuyvesant High School, many of us would meet at the 125th St. subway platform and ride the express together, but going to City, it was every man for himself.

One morning, I had gotten on the trolley at Longwood Ave. and at 156 St., my friend Phil Bernstein boarded in the company of a young woman. Phil introduced me to his friend Sylvia Feig. She had started in evening session the term before and had switched to day. She was wearing a low cut, green tailored blouse, and was very attractive. She had gone to James Monroe High School, and also lived on Fox Street. I hoped that we would meet again on the trolley, or at school, or in the neighborhood.

I wasn't very good at meeting girls. The few times I went to the dances at the 92nd Street Y, I felt awkward and nothing much happened. The way I met girls was by asking my friends who had girl friends if their girlfriend had a friend. They usually did, but they also usually lived in Brooklyn. I didn't meet anyone for whom I wanted to take that endless subway ride back and forth. I dated several forgettable (and not so forgettable) young women in those last years of college. Then, in February 1951, Phil Bernstein married Martha Fontek.

For the previous four years, I always thought of Sylvia as Phil's girl friend, but now that he was marrying Martha, I finally realized that Sylvia was not Phil's girl friend. Soon after Phil and Martha's wedding, I went to Cleveland for a two month organizing assignment. The following month, on March 12, my mother died. I returned to New York in a state of shock, made the funeral arrangements with the help of my cousin, Louis Goldstein, went back to Cleveland, and in April 1951, was back in the Bronx, in the apartment that I had shared with my mother.

One evening in April, I impulsively called Sylvia and went over to her house. We had seen each other from time to time at school and in the neighborhood, but we had not dated. Now that Phil was married, I thought it would be a good idea to get to know her. Nervously, I rang the bell. She came to the door, her hair wrapped in a towel, wearing a bathrobe. She had just washed her hair, and there was something radiant about the way she looked. Sylvia greeted me with a warm hug and a kiss which surprised and delighted me. She asked me in, and we went to her room. Her folks were home, but she did not introduce me to them. We spent the rest of the evening talking, she telling me about school, and I about my work in Cleveland.

From that moment, I couldn't get her out of my mind. I was smitten. I called her. I wrote her notes. We went out a great deal, and I went to her graduation from CCNY. However, we were both caught up in separate plans for the summer. Sylvia was going to be a counselor at Camp Wel-Met, and I was facing the prospect of the draft. As she went off to camp, I went to the Brooklyn Navy Yard, thinking I could get a job which would keep me out of the Army. I had worked there as a junior draftsman the summer of 1945, after graduating from high school. The Personnel Office staff was very cooperative, but they made it clear that working at the Yard would not keep me out of the Army. They looked over my resume and I was offered the position of a teacher of academic subjects in their apprenticeship program. I took it.

Sylvia and I wrote regularly, and at Wel-Met's mid-session, I visited her at camp. It was wonderful seeing her and she introduced me to two counselors with whom she had become close friends: Connie Wain and Mel Schwartz. Then she told me that one of the male counselors was being let go, and they would need a replacement. I applied, got the job, left the Navy Yard, and spent the rest of the summer with Sylvia.

For many counselors, summer romances are passionate affairs, the opportunity to get to know someone intimately, to spend all your free time with the person with whom you were brought together by a magical accident, free from parental peering. I suspect Sylvia may have had misgivings about telling me of the position. She had been involved with another counselor which didn't go anywhere. We did spend our free time together, and our days off with Mel and Connie, but it was not as passionate as I would have liked. But we were together.

When camp ended, I enrolled at NYU graduate school as a full time student which enabled me to get a deferment, and went to work for the ILGWU as an organizer. And we continued seeing each other. And I continued telling Sylvia how much I loved her and wanted to marry her; she kept saying she was not ready for marriage.

However, one memorable evening in October, Sylvia said yes. And over the next several weeks we began to plan a very modest wedding. We spent a great deal of time in Greenwich Village looking for wedding rings. (Why this was so important, I can't remember.) But we found the perfect ones. Then we picked a date. It would have to be during our winter vacation, and we chose December 22. We then looked for a Rabbi in the Bronx to perform the ceremony which would take place in his study in the presence of our friends and relatives who were our age. What some people spend a year to plan, we did in a few weeks: The Rabbi came out of the Bronx yellow pages—Israel Miller. We met with him and found him very accommodating.

We sent out invitations; some of our friends came to the Rabbi's house, and others to "our" apartment after the ceremony. We had prepared refreshments including a wedding cake and champagne. Sylvia's parents were asked to host a wedding party for the older folks: her relatives and mine, and when we returned from the Rabbi's house, officially married, we dropped by at the Feigs and spent some time visiting and accepting their congratulations. Then we returned to our friends and partied. We had a great time.

I am not sure when I realized how thoughtless this arrangement was. It was certainly different from the weddings that were taking place all around us. Sylvia's parents weren't in a position to pay for even a modest wedding, and we did what we wanted to do.

We were "cool." We were certainly unconventional. However, if we were truly unconventional, we would have simply lived together without bothering to get married. But what we did was to by-pass the traditional wedding and got married on the cheap. The event was recorded by the one friend who had a good camera. We eventually went to a photography studio and had a formal wedding portrait taken which we sent to relatives.

The day after the wedding, December 23, I went to a meeting with the other graduates of the ILGWU Training Institute that I had arranged at my office, and on December 24, Sylvia and I left on our honeymoon, taking the bus to a cottage in Mt. Tremper in the Catskills. We had a lovely week, relaxing, sightseeing, and getting to know each other as man and wife. And so began our life together which lasted a little more than 20 years.