

WHAT IS THE TRUTH (Part Two) SYLVIA

I am 83 years old, and when I was 24, Sylvia and I married. December 22, 1951 was the happiest day of my life (up to that time). I married the woman I loved, and looked forward to spending our life together. Did Sylvia feel the same way? I wanted to believe so.

Sylvia and I knew each other from 1946 when my friend Phil introduced us on the trolley going to City College. I still remember that moment. She was very pretty, and wore a low cut green blouse. Over the next four years, we saw each other occasionally, but I never asked her out. I always felt that Sylvia was Phil's friend. However, when Phil started going out with Martha, and especially when Phil married Martha in February 1951, it became clear that their relationship, as both described it, was platonic.

After my mother died, in March, and I completed my work in Cleveland in April, I called Sylvia one evening, and went to see her. She lived three blocks away; I lived at 783 Fox Street, and she lived at 642 Fox Street. Again, I remember that moment. She came to the door with a towel around her head like a turban, having just washed her hair. She looked even prettier. She greeted me with a kiss, and we had a lovely evening talking about everything. For several months we went out. I asked her to marry me. She was hesitant. I told her I loved her. Did she love me? I thought she did. Was there anyone else? No. By the late fall—September, October—Sylvia said yes. We set the date, and made preparations for a small wedding. I was ecstatic. I looked forward to our living happily ever after.

Our first years were busy ones. School, work, friends. We were in love, or so I thought. Then the army, the birth of Carol, our move to Brooklyn, and the first signs of tension that I became aware of. The birth of Lewis and Martha; Sylvia joined an amateur theatrical group, and certainly unknown to me, but suspected a few years later, became involved with one of the other actors. Sylvia found a therapist, we moved to Washington, there were additional signs of tension, and increasing arguments. I assumed this is the way life was with most couples. You have disagreements and then you resolve them, and continue living and loving.

But in the fall of 1971, almost 20 years after we married, Sylvia said that she wanted to end the marriage. She did not love me. She did not want to live with me. We talked, sometimes long into the night. I told her I still loved her. I suggested couples therapy. She rejected the idea. She told me that she never loved me. That was 40 years ago, and as I write those words, it still hurts.

We separated, I moved out, we got a divorce; we kept in touch and consulted each other about the children. As painful as the divorce was for me, we remained cordial. But it is still hard for me to believe that the two of us shared our life together for 20 years—the joy and sadness, the excitement and the routine—and that Sylvia did this with someone she did not love. I can ask her, but will I be told the truth?

Fran believes that Sylvia has spoken critically about me to our children, and even to David on one occasion. Fran said that my children have told her of disagreements arising from my anxiety while driving. I know that we had many disagreements about money. There is a great deal of tension when both Fran and Sylvia are in the same vicinity—at both Martha and Carol's

wedding, or at events involving mutual friends. And Sylvia resents being excluded from the ROL gatherings, as I resented becoming a non-person in my old neighborhood.

The most recent incident caught Carol in the middle when I suggested that Fran and I visit them on the Vineyard, returning from three days in Wellfleet. She first hesitated, then said OK. I didn't realize that Sylvia was visiting during this period. She spent the afternoon shopping in Vineyard Haven. Carol, Alan and Elliott picked us up at the ferry, we had lunch, did some sight-seeing, visited the house, and got back on the ferry, without encountering Sylvia.

How do Carol, Lewis and Martha view the relationships between: Sylvia and me; Fran and me; Fran and Sylvia? Continuing along the same lines, how do they view their relationships with Sylvia, with me, with Fran, and with David? I want to believe that they are pleased that Sylvia and I are cordial to each other, and that we both love them. I hope it is not true that Sylvia speaks critically of me. Soon after we separated, I made it clear to the children that the separation was at Sylvia's initiative. Since then I have not said anything critical. In fact, I have been complimentary, view Sylvia as a friend, and have shared some of my writing with her. and asked for her input.

The Smothers Brothers had a routine in which one told the other that Mom liked you better. I am caught up in wondering: do my kids like Sylvia better? Is the fact that I remarried and we have David, a reason for them to feel closer to Sylvia? Or is Sylvia more lovable? What is the truth?

8-26-11

An Addendum:

The day after I wrote the above, I learned that Sylvia had left the Vineyard Saturday, taken the bus to Logan Airport, and was stranded because of Hurricane Irene. Her flight back to Washington had been cancelled. I called Lewis, obtained Sylvia's cell phone number and called her. She said that she would not be able to get out until Monday and didn't know what to do. I told Fran that I will offer to have Sylvia stay with us. She said, do what you want. I extended the invitation, Sylvia thought about it and said yes.

It was awkward at first, but then we relaxed, and Fran even used the occasion to tell Sylvia her feelings about how David is excluded, not treated as a brother by my children. Sylvia, Carol, Lewis and Martha are one unit, and the rest of us are another. Sylvia acknowledged it, but there was no discussion. What was clarified was the fact that when Carol extended the invitation to Fran and me for the day, Sylvia did not plan to visit.

Fran slept late on Sunday and Sylvia and I talked—about the kids, about our lives, about our friends and even about politics. I broached the issue of our separation, but I could not bring myself to ask her about her love for me. I mentioned the tensions, and she volunteered the following: that every time she bought something, I would say I could have gotten it for less. Wow! I know I wouldn't have liked that. I don't do that now, but I do comment about how much Fran buys, and I recently wrote a piece called "Born to Shop" which is a caustic comment on Fran's overbuying. Most of Sunday was spent watching the hurricane and reading.

On Monday, I checked the flights, printed Sylvia's boarding pass and drove her to the airport. I returned, and when Fran got up, it was clear she was angry. Angry because I did not say anything when she was describing the arrangement which excluded David, and she was angry about being put into this situation. The next day, I apologized.

9-22-11