

Sycamores

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We met in May, 1966, improbably, through Operation Match, a very early computer dating program. Based on my answers to a questionnaire, I got a list of girls' names with their phone numbers and addresses. It was improbable, in retrospect, because I found out much later that the answers to the questions were only minimally used to assign matches. I called Ruth and we had a two-hour conversation during which we compared our answers and learned a bit about one another. I asked Ruth to go with me to Second City, the famous Chicago comedy club. This was an expensive date for a college student and my best friend told me I was crazy to spend so much on a blind date. But I liked the person who came across on the phone and was confident that I would like her in person.

My confidence was rewarded when I picked Ruth up a few days later for our date—I found a tall, slim, beautiful 17-year old with dark brown hair and a dazzling, warm smile. She was a rising college junior at the University of Michigan: having been double-promoted twice in grade school, she had entered Michigan at age 16 with enough AP credits to make her a sophomore. She was a superb chemistry major who did scientific Russian translation, knew French, and could read scientific German. I had never met anybody so smart and talented. She even played the violin. Ruth got straight A's and many awards—until she met me; I kept coming to Ann Arbor to visit, distracting her from studying. We got engaged in the summer of 1967 and were married after she graduated in 1968. I had no idea what a fabulous best friend, soulmate, traveling companion, and lover she would be.

We moved to Ithaca for graduate school and set up house in a second floor, two-bedroom apartment. The apartment was a blank canvas that we slowly adapted to our needs. Ruth amazed me with her energy—a top chemistry graduate student, she baked all the bread we ate, cooked gourmet dinners, sewed some of her own clothes, made special birthday and anniversary presents, and still had time and energy to spoil me in countless ways, including

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making daily sack lunches that were the envy of my peers in the informal competition as we compared and rated our lunches every day. We left Ithaca for jobs at the University of Illinois, moving to an apartment in Champaign in 1970.

Ruth and I bought our first house in a faculty ghetto in Urbana in 1972, a young married couple, expecting our first child. Every day, driving to my office I would go down Florida Avenue, approaching Orchard Street, and look with wonder at a pair of sycamore trees. They were magnificent throughout the year: budding with promise in the spring, lush with greenery in the summer, golden orange in the fall, and austere and vaguely frightening in the winter. At germination, more than 200 years ago, they were separated by 20 or 30 feet. Each had its own space to grow and mature. But by the time I saw them they were gigantic and their canopies overlapped to form a huge oval.

The sycamores started out as distinct individuals, but over the years they merged, their branches interleaving in the space between them. Each had its own area of dominance on the sides away from its mate, but where they grew together it was difficult to tell which was which; viewed at a distance they formed a continuous unit. These trees seemed to me to be a metaphor for marriage: two individuals who grew up separately combine to form a unique symbiosis, the whole more than the sum of its parts: a husband and wife each having areas of individual dominance, but with a shared space that was the union of them both. I shopped for the ingredients, Ruth did the cooking, I cleaned up. Ruth gardened, I mowed the lawn and trimmed the bushes. Together we did laundry, earned money, raised children, made major decisions. Our friends saw us as Ruth-and-Ed, an indivisible unit. Neither of us had activities outside our jobs that did not include the other—no men's fishing trips or women's coffee klatches. We hadn't planned it that way, it just evolved as we grew closer and more dependent on each another. We ate three meals a day together on most days, coming home from our offices so we could be together at lunch, or meeting to eat somewhere on campus. We avoided individual travel so we wouldn't have to sleep apart.

Early one spring, as leaves were starting to erupt on trees all over town, I drove by the sycamores and saw that the one to the east was green but the one on the west remained mostly bare. As the weeks went by it became apparent that the western tree had died over the winter; soon the university grounds crew noticed and the dead tree was removed. The result was awful to look at: the remaining tree was terribly asymmetrical, its canopy a semicircle of green to the east with an ugly, flat, bare, brown area to the west where its partner had blocked the sun. This, too, played into my marriage metaphor. The surviving tree was distorted, half-atrophied, just as the surviving spouse of a long marriage is left after the death of their loved one. I thought of that surviving tree as a grieving widow or widower, permanently scarred by the death of its mate.

As the years went by, I continued to drive by the misshapen, lonely tree, season after season, paying scant attention. One summer I noticed with surprise that the surviving tree had developed considerably on its western side. Young branches were growing out of the bare side—they were puny compared to the branches on the eastern side, but they filled the western side with greenery that had long been missing. The semicircle canopy was slowly expanding, no longer flat on one side, but starting to round out, just as the surviving

spouse of a marriage begins slowly to take control of daily living, accommodating to the loss, learning to do what the missing spouse had done.

In 2000 Ruth and I moved to new jobs in Chicago and I could no longer observe the surviving tree; not seeing it almost every day, I soon forgot about it. But in the autumn of 2016 I returned to Urbana on business and had occasion to drive along Florida Avenue. Approaching Orchard Street I saw that surviving sycamore. What a staggering difference after sixteen years: the western canopy had grown so much that it looked almost normal. It was still a bit smaller than the canopy on the eastern side, but I doubt that anyone not knowing the history would have seen its shape as asymmetrical. That sycamore was (almost) a normal looking, mature tree.

Ruth died of brain cancer in April, 2016; we had been married almost 48 years, raised four accomplished daughters, acquired four loving sons-in-law, and been blessed with twelve beautiful grandchildren. In the Talmud Rav Johanan compares the death of a man's wife to the destruction of the Temple; Rav Alexandri says the world is darkened for him. Rav Samuel ben Nahman said all things can be replaced except the wife of one's youth.

Ruth was an extraordinary woman—as a wife, mother, mother-in-law, grandmother, cook, scientist, business manager, and in the many other roles she played. Perhaps I, like the sycamore, can eventually recover from her loss.



The surviving sycamore, viewed from the northwest, October 28, 2016