

My Date with Helen

My wife Helen and I reside at Cadbury Commons in Cambridge. She stays in a unit called “Morningside” where they care for residents with special needs, including Alzheimer’s disease. I live in a comfortable apartment on the third floor.

For the past few months I have disregarded professional advice to allow the Cadbury facility to take good care of Helen and for me to look in only occasionally. This counsel was advanced to “save me” from the stress of dealing with Helen’s condition. I decided that I would try daily visits to see if it interfered with my activities. So far, so good.

So it is that every day I visit Helen. Usually I go in at 4 PM. She is waiting for me in her room. I knock on the door; she says “who’s there?” I reply “your husband”; she says “which one?” and I counter with “your only one”. This kind of banter continues. I enter, and she runs happily to my embrace. Typically, we sit a bit and chat. She then asks a series of questions: “How many years are we married? How did we meet? How many children do we have? Where do you live? Why can’t you take me there? Why can’t you sleep here with me? Where do you work? How do you earn your money? Where were we married?”

I also quiz her; she enjoys that. What’s my name? What is your date of birth? How old are you? How much older than you am I? How old am I? What are the names of our children? She does well on all these queries, so far, probably as a result of the daily drills.

My answers to her questions satisfy her, save for one; “Why can’t you show me where you live?” I am properly warned to forego a truthful response and resort to a

“fiblest” to evade the truth. I tell her I live on Sherman Street in Cambridge (the truth), a few blocks away (a fiblest).

During my daily visit with Helen, we also go for a stroll about the facility and encounter residents in the general population. Helen is cordial, sometimes jocular, in these excursions. We return to her room and we sit and go over old times. In her remembered version she tells me that we have had a wonderful life together. She remembers how well we always got along with each other, and we never had any bad moments. She tells me how lucky she is to have such a good husband and to be in such a wonderful place. I am not inclined to change her thoughts and remembrances, and am slowly beginning to adopt her version.

She will point to a drawing she created entitled “You Are My Sunshine” which is our clue to sing the song. She never was into singing before her illness, but now finds it joyous and comforting. And so we are developing a small repertoire.

She is served dinner at five PM, and it is time for me to leave. Early on, at the beginning of our residency at Cadbury, she would be at the brink of tears at my leave-taking. This has changed over time. After I assure her I will come tomorrow at 4 PM, she repeats “4 o’clock” and almost urges me to go. On my way out the door I blow kisses to her and all her sister residents at the dinner tables and Helen proudly beams at the popularity of HER husband.

Here, now, is the answer to most of what Helen is asking, as I recount it to her every day:

We met on a streetcar on Kingsbridge Road, coming home from work in June, 1946. I had previously seen, but not met, Helen at Camp Unity in Wingdale, New York,

along with Marie Florio, Helen's best friend then, and all the rest of Marie's life. Helen and I got off the streetcar at Sedgwick Avenue, where we both happened to live, she with her parents and I with my mother a block further on. Walking as we were, it was quite normal to strike up a conversation. Helen and I quickly realized we were made for each other and an ardent courtship ensued. She still often shows me a three page handwritten love letter on Benjamin Franklin Hotel stationery in Philadelphia where I was on an audit engagement in July, 1946.

When I presented Helen to my mother for the first time, she thought she was not Jewish because she had blond hair and blue eyes. Her concerns vanished when my mother Anna met with Helen's mother Rebecca and had a good conversation in Yiddish. Conversely, Helen's mother had told her never to marry a Galitzianer (one whose people came from Galicia, in central Europe), but she quickly relented when I truly praised her cooking at my first dinner with her family. After that, Becky always loved me until the day she died.

Helen and I were married on Friday, December 13, 1946. Why on a Friday? To minimize the time lost from work. Why in December? In order to avoid the year end audit and tax season, of course! Helen's father took sick on the wedding day and we had to forego the planned ceremony at the synagogue. The wedding ceremony was performed in Helen's family's living room, crowded with family and friends. Rabbi Miller came to Helen's home and our marriage was solemnized. Helen was presented with the ketubah [marriage contract]. Helen and I left the crowd as early as possible for our upstate honeymoon. We phoned her home after we arrived at our Resort and they were all still whooping it up.

Helen's best friend Marie Florio was the daughter of a Mob Boss on the docks of Hoboken, New Jersey. Her sainted mother, Teresa, who resented her husband's associations, always told Marie to marry a Jewish doctor. Marie was a hot ticket and could always be counted on to pull it off. Not long after Helen and I were wed, she got her man and married her dentist, handsome Dr. Rudy Scheim, who also became our dentist. When we vacated our Manhattan apartment on Riverside Drive after our son Fred was born, we passed it on to the Scheims [apartments were still scarce and hard to find]. We were best friends for many decades. Both are now gone and greatly missed. Helen and I reminisce about them on occasion. I am grateful it is, for now, the best of all possible worlds for us.

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