

6-29-94

Spousal Advice

My memory is capricious. Several weeks ago, a story I was listening to reminded me of an event I wanted to write about. My jotted reminder read "Takoma Park snow." That was the notation that attracted my eye when I started to write yesterday. It concerned an anecdote I've told numerous times since 1944, but only as a brief anecdote. When I started to write it as a story, a great many details were elusive, and my first telling was awkward and unsatisfactory. I'm retelling it now tentatively filling in some of the missing details.

The evening began one mild evening in what must have been November or December. At least the season wasn't far enough advanced to cause us to consult the weather forecast. We were living in our second home in the D.C. area, a ground floor apartment in Takoma Park, Maryland. It was probably a Friday or a Saturday, and we were invited to spend an evening with some friends in the District. We started out in high spirits on that fall-like evening, riding the bus and transferring to a streetcar to reach our destination.

There were six or eight of us, all well acquainted and comfortable with each other, even though I can't now name a single one of them. The conversation was lively, the snacks and drinks were good, and when someone suggested that we play pinochle, we all agreed. Because of the number playing, we settled down on the floor; those of us who didn't know the game enjoyed learning. The time passed quickly. We were amazed to find that it was past time for all of us to start home. Our shock was even greater when we stepped outside the apartment building to find a measurable fall of snow. Someone offered us a ride home, but they lived far in the other direction and we refused. Anyway, walking through the snow to our streetcar looked like a great way to end the evening.

Paul and I were not dressed warmly but did have on light jackets. I was wearing loafers and no socks. We didn't have to wait long for our streetcar, which took us, I think, to a turn-around on Wisconsin Avenue, where we quickly transferred to our Takoma Park bus. We enjoyed looking at the softly falling snow as it was changing the landscape on the way to our stop on Flower Avenue. The first two blocks after we left the bus were on level ground and offered no problem. The snow was soft and clinging, not at all slick. But to reach our apartment, we had to go down a hill that was much steeper in the snow than it had ever seemed before. We began slipping enough to start thinking about caution. Paul graciously stepped in front of me and demonstrated how best to walk down a slippery hill.

The climax of his advice came as his feet slipped out from under him and he fell, splat! on his back. If he'd waved his arms, he would have made a good angel. He didn't look hurt, but he did look so funny that I laughed long and probably too enthusiastically. At any rate, he scrambled to his feet and hurried down the rest of the hill into our walk, opened the door quickly, and closed it with a pronounced slam, leaving me standing on the sidewalk. I guess I hurt his feelings!

At any rate, I found that the deepening snow had risen over the tops of my loafers and was freezing my bare feet. I was cold and my hilarity about Paul's mishap no longer seemed wise or even necessary.

I apologized for my immoderate laughter before Paul let me inside, and after my brief time in the snow it was a very sincere apology. The incident was intense but short lived. We were ready the next morning to start out to explore the beautiful white world outside. I guess we learned something about advice and laughter.

I also think the incident foreshadowed Paul's life as a professor. Observe that, following his instruction, I did not fall, so his teaching was quite successful. There is a well-known saying: "Do as I say, not as I do."

