

When 1991 rolled around, I decided it was time to propose to Elaine. We had been dating for several years in college and while I was in graduate school, and waiting to get married until I finished my PhD seemed like it would be forever in the future. The situation wasn't helped by Elaine working in Lexington, Kentucky at a television station while I worked on my Master's Degree in Bloomington, Indiana. Sure, we were only about 180 miles apart, but work and studies meant the distance didn't really matter. We weren't seeing enough of each other.

The situation was made worse when I decided to spend the summer back in the Chicago suburbs, working to make enough money to continue with grad school. Elaine and I realized that a trip I had planned to Lexington in July would be the first time we had seen each other in several months and I decided I would propose on that trip, having spoken to her parents about it on an earlier visit.

However, a change in Elaine's work schedule meant that she would be able to come up for a weekend visit in June. I knew that she was expecting the proposal to occur in July and I figured that the sudden visit to Chicago would add a nice element of surprise to my proposal.

I picked her up at O'Hare and after getting her luggage stowed at my parents' house, we headed out to a movie. Mistake.

I mentioned I was in graduate school. I was studying Medieval history, specifically Medieval English history. That meant that going to see a film set during that period was likely to cause me to focus on the anachronism, a problem exacerbated by the horrific pace at which those anachronisms were flung in my direction by the film *Robin Hood: Prince of Thieves*. Knowing that I was planning to propose that evening and not wanting to damage the mood, I stifled my complaints and sat through the execrable film (about the only good thing about it, naturally enough, was Alan Rickman). Every fiber of my being, however, wanted to complain about...but this isn't a movie review.¹ Amazingly, the movie selection was not the worst choice I had made for the evening.

Following the movie, it was time to change for an evening in Chicago. Our dinner was slated for the 95th Floor, a restaurant perched, as the name would suggest, on the 95th floor of the John Hancock Center. When I made the reservation, I had mentioned that I was planning on proposing that evening and they made sure we had a seat next to the window overlooking Lake Michigan. As we ate, we could watch the planes coming in for a landing at Meigs Field, several storeys below us. Elaine notes that it was the only time in her life when she was at a restaurant where her menu did not contain prices. As we ate, Elaine commented that we had the best view of Chicago and I explained that she was incorrect. There were at least two other views that were better. The second best view of the city was from the top of the Sears Tower. The problem with both that view and the one we were enjoying while we ate, however, was that from one you couldn't see the Hancock Building and from the other you couldn't see the Sears Tower. I promised to show her the best view of Chicago before the end of the evening.

¹ During the Fall semester, I had students prove they had seen the film by answering questions on tests based on what they had seen in the movie rather than what they had read in the book or heard in class, assuming, of course, that they had read the book or shown up to class.

Following dinner, we headed back north to Victory Garden Theatre to see an original comedy entitled *Glass Houses*, by Jeff Helgeson. Earlier, I mentioned that *Robin Hood: Prince of Thieves* wasn't the worst selection I made for the evening...Yup, it was *Glass Houses*. I sat through the first act of the comedy, which turned out to be about a dysfunctional marriage. Helgeson's website describes the play as "an ironic/satiric [sic] transparency of contemporary American values, illusions, and behavior." I tend to think that reviewer Diana Spinrad got it right when she said, "The premise is banal enough, but Helgeson adds to the inanity with pointless exposition." As the play broke for intermission, I found myself wondering if perhaps I should take the play as an omen, or at least postpone my proposal until my visit to Lexington the following month. Thinking about how much I had spent on dinner and the play, on a graduate student's budget, I decided I could only afford to get engaged once and it would be that night. We considered leaving during intermission, but figured the play really couldn't get much worse. Elaine, meanwhile pointed out that as far as she could tell, the only comedy in the play was that Helgeson named his two main characters Barbie and Ken.

We suffered through the second act, brought closer together by the adversity of the play.² When it was over, we walked back to the car and I told Elaine I would make good on my promise to show her the best view of the city of Chicago. This meant a drive back south, past the Hancock Center and out by the lake. We found parking behind the Adler Planetarium, which sits on the end of a man-made peninsula and walked to the front of the building. I carefully positioned Elaine so her back was to the Planetarium and she could see the lights of Chicago stretching out from Hyde Park at the south to Edgewater in the North, the mountain of lights reflecting the Loop straight ahead. After letting Elaine soak up the twinkling constellation of Chicago for a few moments, I stood in front of her (she says I knelt, so I get kneeling points), pulled the ring from my pocket and proposed to her. I found myself on the receiving end of a fantastic hug and, after a few moments, she remembered to give me an answer. We stood watching the lights of the city for a little while longer and were pulled from our reverie by the friendly Chicago Police Department driving through around the Planetarium and announcing, "The park is closed, please leave the park."

We drove up Lake Shore Drive, one of the most scenic drives within Chicago³ and through the Rogers Park neighborhood, passing within a couple of blocks of the building in which Elaine's parents lived when she was born. At Hollywood, Lake Shore Drive ended and we took Sheridan Road, which winds through a mixture of old wealth houses and university housing, giving views of the vast expanse of the Lake off to the right, before we arrived at my sister's house, where she had champagne chilling for us in the hope that Elaine gave the correct answer.

A year later⁴, we were married, and twenty years after we saw *Glass Houses*, the play proved to be anything but an omen. We've successfully avoided Barbie and Ken's fate, "satiric" or otherwise and are living out a life with our two kids, and, at times, even a little bit of romance.

² Seriously, you can do a google search and come up with bunches of negative reviews.

³ And subject of the Alliotto, Jeremiah, and Haynes song "Lake Shore Drive."

⁴ The actual wedding was 51 weeks after I proposed because Elaine refused to have an engagement lasting longer than one year.