



## The Ficus Tree and My Divorce

*We began  
as a mineral. We emerged  
into plant life  
and into animal state, and then into  
being human,  
and always we have forgotten  
our former states, except in early spring, when we  
slightly recall  
being green again.*

—Jelaluddin Rumi, Persian mystic poet,  
thirteenth century

The ficus tree came into our lives unexpectedly. It happened in the sixteenth-floor apartment in which the spider and I made contact and overlapped with the decline of my marriage and our eventual divorce. Spacious, with plenty of double windows overlooking the city, the apartment had a pretty view at night because of the lights. From the

living room, you could look down Broadway and see an electric path of iridescent ribbon that stretched circuitously toward midtown. You also couldn't see the soot.

Being up so high, with no other tall buildings close by, I could see lots of sky, something unusual in Manhattan. I watched the clouds roll by and the weather systems move in and out. I lived closer to the elements here in this apartment than in any other place I had ever dwelled.

Outside the kitchen window, the top of the Cathedral of St. John the Divine loomed nearby. The angel Gabriel flew above blowing his horn, and with his golden weathered patina, resembled a Christmas card you'd buy at the Metropolitan Museum of Art gift shop. When I stared at him, wondering what I was doing living in the city when I longed for green countryside, he gave me heart.

Ensclosed in my sunny urban kitchen, I baked bread and put up pickles and pretended I lived in the country. I arranged all my grains and beans in glass jars on the shelves so I could see them and identify each one by color and shape and not need labels. And houseplants continued to be my substitute for country living.

I grew all the common varieties of indoor plants, the greenhouse tropicals that were in vogue at the time. I was particularly fond of the furry hanging rabbit's foot fern in my study and the false aralia, looking very Chinese pagodalike, in the hall. When I was home alone, I communed with my plants. I didn't think. I didn't worry. I lived totally in the moment, watering and pruning, spraying and washing, repotting and overseeing. I arranged the plants in combinations and displays that showed them off to their

best advantage. In short, I gave them direct and focused attention.

One day, I met my business partner at a potential account in a fancy law office in lower Manhattan. In the middle of the reception area stood a giant *Ficus benjamina* in a custom-built, high-tech chrome container. Stoically greeting everyone who entered, it was discreetly illuminated by spotlights from within a false ceiling. Theoretically, the tree was supposed to thrive. In reality, the poor thing was dying. There was not enough light to keep a philodendron alive, let alone a sun-loving ficus.

Yellow leaves fluttered to the floor as we spoke, lending an autumnal effect to the severity of the office space. Since it wasn't fall and we were indoors, the look lacked charm. No longer appropriate for welcoming new clients, the ficus tree needed to be replaced with something more upbeat.

My partner and I removed the tree from its grave and placed it into our truck. It was then I noticed the ficus was covered with scale. I sat next to it, thinking twice about throwing it away. It had reached seven feet high and five feet wide—and was a major ordeal to move. We had no idea what to do with it. It seemed a shame to dump it, but what was the alternative?

We left it in the truck while we made our rounds, and later my partner said, "If you don't want it, it's history."

So, I went home that night and began to seriously consider taking the tree home. I felt as if I were adopting a child. And a child with a handicap, at that.

I sat in our living room and stared at the space. The tree would fill about a quarter of the room. But, if I placed it in

between the two south windows that faced down Broadway, it would fit in nicely. I imagined the ficus tree sitting there in good health, diverting light as the sun streamed in. In my vision, having the tree would be like living in the country, looking out at the world from inside a wood. Just imagining it made me relax.

Living on the sixteenth floor was noisy. I noticed that I could hear conversations clearly from the street, not to mention the sirens and the horns. Sometimes I couldn't even hear the stereo when the noise level reached particularly high decibels. Perhaps my solution had just presented itself. Maybe a big tree in the room might absorb some of the sound. It worked that way in nature. I'd soothe my raw nerves immersed in a self-made forest while the city traffic screeched below.

I arranged to have the tree brought to the house. It had to be delivered in the service elevator, since it was too big to travel with the passengers. Then it had to be scrunched through two doorways in order to reach the open living room.

Having its branches pressed closely together to avoid breakage must have been hard on the tree. Pressed and pushed, tilted and banged, then almost dropped, I cringed for the ficus as we took it through its paces.

At last we plunked it down in its rightful spot, the one I had envisioned the night before during my planning reveries. Perfect fit, as if it had always been waiting for this place on the planet. The crown of the tree almost touched our eight-foot ceiling. I quickly arranged all my smaller plants around it, creating a skirtlike effect as one would

around a Christmas tree. I pushed together all the ferns and dracaenas, parlor palms and spiders, spathiphyllum and pothos to fashion a bank of green under the umbrella of this imposing tree.

The ficus had arrived safely and survived the journey. Now I was going to have to rejuvenate it. But suddenly I saw it for what it really was. Bare. What looked like a deciduous tree in winter was sitting in the middle of my living room. It wasn't, to the unloving eye, what you'd call beautiful.

I devoted myself to the task of bringing it back. My husband and I had bought a hammock in the Yucatán the year before. I found myself thinking it would be a kick to swing in the hammock under a tree in my own living room. So I decided the time was now to act out my fantasy of living in the country and set to work.

I enlisted the aid of my husband, and we installed giant metal hooks onto the side walls of the apartment. We slung our Mexican hammock across the living room under the ficus tree with no leaves, and I got the sense of water I wanted from the sweet smell of earth wafting from the pot after I soaked the soil, my version of spring rain.

For weeks I tried to get rid of the scale. First, I swabbed it off with cotton and alcohol. Then I made a mixture of soap and water and sprayed the entire tree, wiping the leaves with a sponge. Tiny pieces of brown rubbed off, but not enough to make a difference. Then I tried to pick off the scale with my fingers. That was disgusting. The scale that remained was so persistent, I couldn't budge any of it. Sadly, I sprayed with toxic chemicals. I didn't

know what else to do. Even that didn't work. Finally, I succumbed to the dreaded systemic-in-the-soil routine. (These pesticides are absorbed into the tissues of plants and become poisonous to parasites that feed on them.) I felt awful doing it, and that didn't work either. The scale was firmly entrenched.

From then on, I realized that if the ficus tree wanted to live, it was going to have to do so in spite of the scale. The two needed to achieve an ecological *détente*. They had to coexist. I let go of trying to save the plant and told the tree it was going to have to take responsibility for its own life. I would water it and clean its leaves, spray it once in a while to simulate rain, give it fresh air and generally love it, but the rest it would have to do itself. With this understanding, our symbiotic relationship began.

I spent hours under the ficus tree. It gave me infinite pleasure to stretch out in my hammock and look up into the branches, getting to know every inch. The tree was a stalwart presence in the living room and in my life. It depended on me for basic care, and I depended on it for companionship.

One day, in my travels, I found a tiny, perfectly crafted abandoned bird's nest. I didn't know enough about birds to know what kind of nest it was. Even so, it was just the right thing to put in my tree. I brought it home and started poking around looking for exactly the right spot. Eventually the perfect place made itself known. I nestled it into a secure position on the bough so it wouldn't fall. A good friend donated a tiny red cardinal made out of some natural fiber that looked rustic enough to put into the nest,

and voilà . . . a total ecosystem. Tree, plants, bird, nest, leaves, branches, hammock, and human. The only thing missing was rushing water, and I provided that with my imagination. I stood back to admire my faux forest. It felt as real to me as any place in nature.

This romance continued for a long time: a full year, at least. At some point, the branches began to bud. The tree bloomed with sweet, tender, green shoots that seemed all the more beautiful juxtaposed to the bare branches. So delicate was the color, so vibrant the effect, sometimes I even forgot that I was indoors. It became springtime inside even when it snowed outside.

The ficus came back with a flourish. It grew healthy and strong despite the fact that it still had as much scale on it as the day I had brought it home. Their truce had worked. Everyone got to live. I became the ficus tree's biggest fan.

During the time I poured all this energy into my garden, my husband and I grew further apart. You might ask, with some justice, "Why didn't she pour all this love into him?" Well, all I can say is, I did the best I could at the time. Neither of us seemed to know how to love each other in the ways we needed to be loved. No matter how hard we tried, nothing worked. Even though we both spoke English, we never understood what the other one was saying.

After we separated, I lived alone in that big apartment for about six months. I was so immature at the time, I had no concept of what had happened. It felt as if I had been whirling around helplessly inside a vortex that propelled me into a certain action. There had been a big emotional

explosion and, suddenly, my life was in a shambles. I wanted to retrace my steps but it was too late. I had to learn to live with the consequences of what had occurred.

When I felt ready, I began to look for a smaller and cheaper place to live. Eventually, I found an affordable apartment in an old brownstone on West 90th Street. The one-bedroom wonder had ten-foot ceilings but not much floor space. There was no way the ficus tree would fit.

For a long time, I couldn't even face the possibility of parting company with it. Would you be able to sell, or even give away, your beloved cat or precious dog to a stranger? Finally I stopped denying the inevitable. I had to figure out what to do. I decided to ask my mother if she would take the tree. She had a sunny spot for it in her dining room. Then I could still see the ficus whenever I went over for dinner, like visitation rights or joint custody. Luckily, she agreed to take it as soon as I needed to move.

The ficus would need to go through many difficult transitions to get out of my house, down the elevator, into the truck, across Manhattan, into another delivery entrance, up the elevator, and into my mother's house. When viewed in those terms, I realized how much it would have to endure in order to arrive in one piece and maintain its equilibrium.

The day before I moved, I realized I had been putting off too long facing the ficus tree directly. Boxes were everywhere. The hammock was down and packed. I realized then that I had been mourning the end of my marriage through the tree. The boundary between it and my

husband blurred. The giant hooks on the walls remained as the only sign of our time together.

I took a deep breath and readied myself to let the ficus know what was going to happen the next day and why. This approach had worked with the spider plant, so I decided to give it a try with the tree. I went into the living room and drew close to the ficus. I held a leafy branch in both hands, gently making direct contact with it, as one might "breathe" with a horse. I talked silently with my thoughts.

"You must know what's going on," I communicated. "You live here. You probably know the story even better than I do."

I paused for a moment, wanting to be as authentic as possible. Then I continued, "It's time for you to move tomorrow. I'm sorry I can't keep you with me. It's impossible, even though I really want you to come. My new home is too small. I'm giving you to my mother because she has enough space, and then I'll be able to see you when I visit her. I'd like you to do whatever is necessary so you can be moved in peace and you will survive it without going into shock."

Once I had begun, I realized I had more to say. I found myself adding, "Thank you for the pleasure you gave me during our time together. I loved taking care of you and watching you grow." I remained with the tree for a long time in silence. Then I touched it gently to complete the contact and left. I felt like I was losing my best friend.

Later, some relatives took me out to dinner. When I got home, I was tired and a little apprehensive about the next

day. Everything would change. I walked into the house, through the long foyer and past the living room. I glanced absentmindedly at the tree in the darkened room. I was so sleepy, I just kept walking down the hallway to the bedroom.

I began to undress and sat down on the bed. It was then I saw something unusual out of the corner of my eye. I turned, and there on the night table, perfectly centered and very green, was one leaf from the ficus tree.

At first I thought, this is impossible. It must have blown into the bedroom with the wind. But there was no wind and there were no other leaves. The ficus tree was far away, down the hall, around a corner and across the living room.

Everything hit me at once. I lay on my bed, clutching the ficus leaf in my hands, and I cried until I fell asleep.



### Who Wants to Come? The Etiquette of Picking

I just come and talk to the plants, really—very important to talk to them; they respond, I find.

—Prince Charles

There is an etiquette or code I have come to apply with great care whenever I pick or prune anything. First, I ask, "Who wants to come?" Asking this question engages the plant in an exchange and offers it a choice. In

nature, before I pick a flower or cut a small piece of branch from a shrub or a tree, I ask the same question. Then I pull lightly on the branch to see if it comes easily. If it doesn't, I go on to another and ask the same question.

The ones who want to come break off readily and easily at the slightest touch. As soon as I feel resistance, I know it has not volunteered. When I approach a plant with a pruner, I scan the plant first and feel which of its parts are ready to come. I sense it. To do this well, I allow myself a few moments of stillness and quiet in which to align with the plant. This attitude sets up a more sensitive link with the plant and affords an increased level of intuitive direction before going in and just cutting.

The technique works for flower picking, pruning, fruit picking, vegetable harvesting, and for taking cuttings. It is a compassionate way to deal with plants and an acknowledgment of them offering themselves to you for food or decoration.

In my effort to try to keep my greed under control, asking who wants to come insures I don't pick too much. Sometimes in my haste to cut back a plant or remove dead material, I break off a flower or a good chunk of stem. Saying you are sorry can help keep your focus. It is a good reminder to slow down, pay attention, be present. Nothing alive likes to feel that its own little niche of space in the universe has been invaded. Offering a please or a thank you respects the living presence of the plant.

When you pick flowers, fruits, or vegetables, or groom, prune, transplant, water, or weed your plants, give appreciation. Even after getting up from under the shade of a tree, saying thank you is a way of reminding yourself that

there has been an exchange. Thank your plants whenever you can. This acknowledgment makes you more receptive to those states of grace in which it is made known to you that you have been given a gift from a plant.

Asking "Who wants to come?" when I shop for plants at the nursery works, too. I leave it up to the plants to designate who wants to come and then wait to feel their pull when I look at them. This intuitive approach works for me. At the same time, I use my discrimination.

If the plant looks sickly, droopy, limp, or discolored, it doesn't come home with me. I am not the Mother Teresa of gardening. On the other hand, if a friend gives me a plant in poor condition and I really like it, I will take it home and try to bring it back to health.

If you are buying plants at a nursery, consider the ones that are bouncy, vibrant, appealing, and bushy and that radiate a healthy-looking color. Forget leggy, scrawny, yellow, brown, crispy, splotchy, and down-trodden unless, of course, salvaging plants is your thing, in which case it's okay.

In the past, I have had very good luck taking plants that have been thrown out behind supermarkets and bringing them back to life. Sometimes you can also get a very good price on nursery plants if they are in poor condition. The workplace may also be the place to find plants for free that need to be resuscitated. Otherwise, if you are buying, make sure the new growth on a plant is coming in green. If the new growth is yellow, gray, brown, the plant is not a good bet.

