

Ties that Bind

In their earliest years, when they were dating, Ali and Peter spent a lot of time together. They walked in all seasons, even donning facemasks in winter to ensure that the icy air would not get in the way of their plans. They went to wine tastings. They watched old movies late at night.

Liking challenges, they pulled recipes from newspapers and made them together. On Sundays, they bought two editions of the Times so as to compete on the Crossword puzzle. Mimosas in hand – but no Googling allowed – they would try to recall the director of “Mildred Pierce” or a river flowing north to the Baltic, often celebrating breakthroughs with a second – or third – mimosa.

Peter was athletic and rambunctious. Sometimes it seemed to Ali that there wasn’t a sport that he hadn’t played, or played now, or contemplated trying in the future. Bungee jumping was on his “bucket list.” His enthusiasm for sports was irrepressible, and Ali indulged it.

“Come on,” he said, as he coaxed her to a driving range one morning. “You may surprise yourself. People get hooked on golf because they hit one good shot, and then they have to come back.”

“They also frustrate themselves,” said Ali, thinking of office colleagues who allowed entire weeks to be haunted by a bad round on Saturdays. “But I will keep an open mind because what you say is real. Even some klutzes figure out golf.”

She liked it better than she thought. She did hit some good shots, after a little instruction, but maybe it was the instruction that she liked best. She liked Peter standing behind her, his arms guiding hers, showing her how to make them into a “V”, holding the left arm straight and swinging . . . *through!* His muscled legs were right behind hers in their stance, and she could just feel the hair on them, a fuzzed and sensual reminder that golf was only a means to an end, and that the end would have many rewards.

For Peter, too, the lesson was multi-layered. Selfishly, he wanted Ali to learn the game. Convinced that she had all he wanted in a partner – looks, intelligence, charm, yet still a subtle willingness to defer – he wanted to be able to share this passion. He liked, too, this opportunity to steer Ali, almost literally, as he propelled her to success with the different clubs. His dominance was integral, and at the same time

empowering. He was infusing his strength – mental and physical – into her.

After dating for nine months, Ali moved into Peter's apartment. His gregarious ways, his focus on goals and direction, were for her thrilling. Ali was determined in her own way, but quieter, sure of her values and priorities. She wore little of it on her sleeve, preferring to laugh and to try to enhance the lives of her friends. When, two years later, they agreed to marry, the approval was widespread.

"Does it have to be such a big event?" Ali had asked him after perusing a preliminary guest list. "I mean all these people from TriCor – you see them at work, but are they really such close friends that they belong at our wedding?" It was a reasonable question, but below the surface was something more. Ali had an aversion to the contemporary apotheosizing of weddings – the excess in clothes, cake, food and flowers – that added up to a whole lot of money better spent, she believed, on almost anything else. "What about close friends, family and Charlie, and call it a day?" Charlie was Peter's boss at TriCor, and while Peter acknowledged flaws, a failure to manage up was not one of them.

"Well, Charlie for sure, but couldn't we strike a happy medium, and have just a few more?" Peter envisioned a grand occasion. He liked trappings.

"Where do you see this taking place?"

"The Excelsior?"

"The Excelsior! Why would you want to be in a stuffy hotel when Jason and Louise have offered their garden, and a very charming house to boot?"

"So how many people do you think we can fit at Jason and Louise's?"

"Maybe 80, which is just my point."

"With a tent – if they wouldn't mind – we could handle, say, 125, maybe even 150, and still have Buddy Franzen." The Franzen band was, by some people's measure, highly desirable wedding music. The Vera Wang of winds and strings.

It's more than I want, and more than I think necessary, but if the tent is my ticket to Louise's, I'll surrender."

"You are a beautiful person," Peter said, ever graceful in victory. "And a tough negotiator besides!"

Ali was a happy bride, and the wedding reflected it. The weather smiled, the caterer triumphed, and Jason and Louise knocked themselves out to ensure that the setting would be memorable.

“A toast to my most beautiful bride!” Peter said after cutting the cake.

“To my man among men,” Ali said right back, heady with the moment and, perhaps, with the very good champagne they had taken care to select. Her smile, atypically, was all over her face. She seemed flushed – but endearingly so, Peter thought.

With 160 guests all in, Ali was able to include a few of her own colleagues from Garvan DeLancey, the public relations firm where she had worked for six years. As much as she wanted Peter for her mate, she wanted professional recognition for self as well. Ali’s mother, whose formidable capabilities had been funneled into decades of volunteer work, was not, in Ali’s view, sufficiently fulfilled.

Indeed, her enthusiasm for her work had even left her ambivalent about taking much time out for a honeymoon. But Peter thought it important.

“Where do you think we should go?” he had asked.

“Jamaica – maybe I’m a sucker for their ads, but those palm trees look pretty good.”

“We could do that,” Peter said. “But think. This may be a rare excuse to bundle two weeks away from two offices. Maybe we should take advantage and go to Europe. Paris, a bicycle trip in Provence. A barge in the Loire Valley. What think?”

“I think I’ll do what you want, but wherever we go, the focus should be on us, on building the relationship – this connection – that is what we have together. It’s not about the scenery.”

“Got it,” said Peter, relieved that he could, after all, make France and a honeymoon work.

Their disagreement over Ali’s working came two years after the birth of their first child, Peter Junior. Ali hadn’t loved the name, but she had gone along; it was, somehow, so important to Peter.

And despite some misgivings on his part, she had gone back to work. She was delighted to be out of the nursery, awash once more in press releases and product placements. Let some CEO’s gaffe make headlines, and Ali knew just how to do damage control. Her plan to live a life different from her mother’s was paying out.

Now she was pregnant again, and Peter's campaign to have her leave Garvan Delancey heated up one evening at dinnertime.

"We don't need the income," he said. Early on at TriCor, Charlie had fingered him as a comer and accelerated his responsibilities. Other division heads took note and occasionally suggested that he broaden his exposure by coming over to their part of the operation. So far, Peter had demurred, but his competitive instincts would not allow him to say no forever. "I think there's a good chance that my job will change in the next few months," he said, "and I will be traveling more. Our children should have at least one full-time parent." He opened a bottle of wine and gave her a glass.

"I know it's a cliché," she countered, "but I think quality time *is* worth as much, or more, than quantity time." She believed her own words, yet, at the same time, she recognized their flaw. A mother who wanted nothing more than to be a mother – to be there all the time for her children – was by some definition the best. A mother whose loyalties were divided – loving her children, but loving her work as well – could be very good, but not in the same way. She could not be present for so many of the quotidian comings and goings at the core of childhood. You could argue, Ali told herself, that a mother who works is the right example for today. But was she rationalizing her case?

"You know I'll be there for them, that I wouldn't let anything happen. Mothers leave work all the time to go to plays, watch soccer games, help on field trips. You name it. This isn't 1950. We can make this work." Feeling pressured, she swallowed her drink quickly.

"Ali, I have no qualms about your instincts and good intentions. You're right. You can make it . . . 'work' . . . but at what cost? Garvan DeLancey is unpredictable. If something blows up, you have to be there. And even if you could arrange everything to suit some ideal schedule, how much energy can you expect to have left for the kids – and me?"

There was more, but Peter wasn't saying it. At some deeper level, he wanted a stay-at-home wife for his own sense of order. His family was expanding – he hoped it would continue to expand – and civic obligations loomed. In the face of them, he believed, two full-fledged careers wouldn't work. At least, not for him.

"It's the right thing for us," he said definitively. "Just like it's right for others we can name like us."

Ali adored Peter. In his embrace, she felt totally protected. A fixation on Bob Dylan songs reflected a counter-culture sensibility that,

while necessarily sublimated to the goals and protocols of TriCor, softened his edges. Men liked his business insights – and the endless Internet jokes in which he packaged them. Women responded to his perhaps-a-little-obvious, but still genuine, questions about their lives. He had a reputation, Ali knew, for being a good “coach” at TriCor, and she felt herself vulnerable to his coaching now.

Pouring another glass of wine, she said, “I always wanted an identity of my own apart from wife and mother. PR plays to my strengths – verbal skills, a good way with people – but it’s also a great game. How to make some bozo who’s blown it look better. How to make something ordinary seem special because I know how to frame it. If I give up on it now, I’ll never know how far I could have taken it.”

“Maybe ‘giving up’ is too strong. If the children get to their, I don’t know, mid-teens, and you want to go back to work, then we revisit it.”

“But Peter, the momentum lost -- you may not have a good sense of that. I stay now, and I really believe the sky’s the limit. I quit now, and who knows where it would all be in 15 years.”

“Schools and communities need people like you, with brains and energy. It’s not like you’ll be stuck in the kitchen all day. Who better to fight fast foods in the cafeteria? Who better to push a bond levy for the parks? You will not be bored. What you will be is flexible – and you’re not really flexible now – be honest, Ali -- with the demands at Garvan DeLancey.”

Ali was losing, and she knew it. It wasn’t just Peter’s force of personality, although that was critical. She believed that continuing to work was in her best interest – and thus the family’s. And it wasn’t that she thought Peter was right, although his arguments were not without merit. It was her unwillingness to thwart him. That had been her pattern, yet never until now had she been compelled to see it so plainly. So she rationalized. She would quit – but she would surprise him with the intensity that she would pour into her new pursuits. Maybe that would be sufficient.

She said, “I will do this for you.”

Some time later, Ali and Peter decided to have a New Year’s Eve Party, at least in part to celebrate the recent changes in their lives. Their second child, a daughter named Megan – Ali’s choice this time – was an enchanting toddler who had the good grace to laugh charmingly every time Peter said “Me see Megan.”

Peter's new Job at TriCor was in Sales Management, and it seemed to be a natural. Trained in Marketing, he had always loved the semi-cerebral, vaguely huckster-ish exercises of packaging and positioning; sales was more concrete. It was customer relationships and sales meetings and . . . deals. Peter surprised himself by how much he liked it all.

For Ali, the adjustment to staying at home had been rockier. Not only did she miss the game, as she put it, she missed the colleagues with whom she had played it. As she now realized, they had been an essential component of the balance that once defined her life, but was now disturbed. Of course she loved the children. And, as Peter had predicted, involvements pertaining to their needs and activities were not hard to uncover. There was even time to put together this New Year's Eve Party without office interruptions.

"It will be great fun, and your flair will make it memorable," Peter had lobbied. That party was his idea. "Not what people expect. Original. Like you."

"Optimistic, like you," Ali said, not unkindly, but putting herself on record that New Year's Eve was hard to make interesting once you left the eighth grade. "We may pull it off, but it will take some work."

With that she went into creative overdrive, asking each of the 20 guests to dress the way they wished fashion would unfurl in the coming year, writing personalized resolutions to help them find their places at the dinner table and arranging blind taste tests of champagne at three different price points. The food was delicious, the decorations – hats, horns and streamers – lively without going too far. Ali's sense of proportion – in all things – was pitch perfect, and it ensured the success of the evening despite her misgivings.

Later, when she thought about it, she would have changed nothing, with the possible exception of a brief exchange with Charlie, Peter's old boss in Marketing. "Ali," he had said, "This won't surprise you, but we miss Peter a lot in our group. He was a gifted contributor, and while I'm sure you knew that, you deserve to hear it again."

"Charlie, he loved Marketing, and he will always be devoted to you, but the sales challenge has come at a good time. He's growing a lot, and he's eager to see where it might lead."

As much out of curiosity as concern, and ignoring, perhaps, certain professional boundaries, Charlie went on, "But tell me, what has

been the impact on you? More direct reports, the increased travel, haven't they changed life here?" He gestured to the room and beyond.

Ali noted the implicit sympathy. She knew instantly that if she said anything, Charlie would find a way to take it back to Peter. Maybe it was the channel she'd wanted to find, without even knowing she'd been looking. She also wondered, briefly, if too many New Year's Eve libations had loosened her tongue inappropriately. Quickly, she got hold of herself.

"We're working it out," she said. "I'm thrilled that TriCor has given Peter the opportunity."

Not too many months after that, Peter found himself gone for an entire week – never something he wished for. Five days out interrupted his exercise routine, triggered over-eating, and most damaging, broke the rhythms of his family life. He became more of a stranger to little Peter and Megan than he liked, and in subtle, hard-to-put-his-finger-on ways, it estranged him from Ali as well.

This week, however, was more than routine. On Friday evening, at the annual Montessori school dinner, Ali was to be installed as board president. She had not told Peter. She wanted it to be a surprise. Sure he would be pleased, she saw it as vindication, in a way, of his urging her to leave Garvan Delancey. He had been right. She could make a difference – an important difference – in whatever she put her mind to. This Montessori was a strong one, but only because so many parents became involved. Recognizing its value early, Ali had jumped in quickly.

"Peter," she said on the phone Wednesday night, "you are set to leave early enough to be sure to be back here Friday by six?" They had discussed it before, but she wanted reassurance.

"*No te preocupe,*" he replied quickly. In college, he had spent a year in Spain, and sometimes, especially when he wanted to defuse the gravity of a particular exchange, he fell back on Spanish. Not to worry. "I'll be there," he promised.

"Have the meetings gone well?"

"Other than Mercury, yes, very." Mercury Plastics, she knew, was potentially a big contract, but it had long been a customer of TriCor's chief competitor, and Peter was trying to wrest it away.

"Any glimmerings?"

"Possibly in the morning. They said they would call me."

And, as good fortune and tenacity sometimes shape things, they did. Mercury asked for a meeting early Friday morning, leaving Peter to believe that he could take a later flight and still be home on time. He left a voicemail message for Ali apologizing for cutting it closer than he liked, but asking her indulgence in light of Mercury's importance to TriCor. "I'm looking forward to the dinner," he said – effusively, as always, but carefully reassuring as well.

When he missed the plane, because the meeting ran over, he was unhappy. Disappointing Ali was the last thing he had wanted to do, and not even sealing the deal with Mercury made him feel good about it. He fretted. He called her with a thousand apologies. He heard her make the best of it.

"Peter, I'm sorry too, but you did what you had to do. I understand. We'll get through it."

This time, however, even as she heard her own words, she wondered how well she would get through. She would go to the dinner. She would become the president of the board. She would hear the applause and receive the congratulations. But sharing it with Peter would not happen, and for that somehow, she was sorrier than usual. She had always wanted to help him, to be there for him, in an effort to create a stronger "us." Now, suddenly, she wasn't sure it had worked.

When Peter got home that night, just about the time that Ali returned, it was her turn to be effusive. The dinner was wonderful. They had all missed him.

"And can you guess," she said, "who might be the new president of the board?" She said it with pride, but just one stroke too emphatically, he thought, for someone who normally drank carefully. "Shall we have a drink to celebrate?"

Peter thought it not a good idea, but he let it go.