

Love and luck and Joe and Vivian



If it hadn't been for a huge, industrial-strength bolt of luck in the middle of Manhattan in 1943, I wouldn't be writing these words today. I wouldn't exist, you see, because the luck had to do with my mother and father.

Mom and Dad had met at a summer camp in upstate New York in 1924, when they were teenagers. Joe was smitten from the first moment they met, at a rehearsal for a camp show. He was a counselor at the age of 16, a year older than my mother. He had skipped two years of school and was a rising sophomore at Dartmouth. Vivian was a tall leggy blonde, adept at capturing the hearts of counselors and fellow campers alike. She was bubbly and outgoing, while my dad was intense and introverted. She liked to dance and socialize. He liked to discuss plays and read books. She was two inches taller than he was. This was not an obvious match.

Still, my father persisted. He invited Mom to Winter Carnival and other college weekends. He introduced her to his parents, who thought she was pretty and "definitely had a way with men." She in turn introduced him to her mother, who proclaimed him a "nice young man with a good future."

My mom didn't think much about the future back then. She lived for the moment, as frenetically as possible. She was smart (she had also skipped a year of school) but her family didn't have the money to send her, a girl, to college. So she was looking for fun and dancing partners, preferably living in Manhattan as she was, and preferably taller than she was.

Joe didn't qualify. He wanted to marry her but he had college to finish in New Hampshire, and then three years of law school in Boston. His parents were NOT supportive, nor was his brother. His sister was neutral. Besides, he couldn't do anything about his height or his clumsiness on the dance floor.

So after a few years of dating, they drifted apart. That is to say, Vivian broke up with Joe. Her mother had died and, in a moment of weakness, she married a guy whose mother she really liked. Dad went to Harvard Law School and briefly thrived in the hothouse competition of that environment.

Soon things went wrong for both of them. Dad realized that making Law Review at Harvard was an empty achievement; all he wanted was to marry my mother and she had married someone else. So he dropped out of law school and got a job as a social worker in New Jersey. To please his disappointed parents, he went to a local law school at night, and graduated at the top of his class. Working all day and attending classes at night was a way to keep busy and to think less about my mother.

Meanwhile, Vivian realized that she loved her mother-in-law but not her husband, so she got a divorce. She had to earn a living so she began working as a secretary in New York. She was a demon typist and good at her job but she had no interest in a career. Work hard, play hard, was her motto. No reflection, no regrets.

Throughout the 1930s, the years of the Great Depression, they moved in separate circles. Near the end of the decade, Mom met a dashing lawyer at a nightclub in New York (tall! charismatic! a good dancer!) and married him. When he enlisted in the army and was sent to Tulsa, Oklahoma, she followed him, and my older sister was born there. Then Vivian discovered that looks and charisma are not incompatible with drunkenness, womanizing, and domestic violence. Shocked and fearful, but unwilling to divorce a second time, she returned to Manhattan with her daughter. By now World War II was raging, and she found a job as an ambulance driver.

Meanwhile, Joe had been working his way up the chain of responsibility in New Jersey's welfare division when war was declared. He enlisted but was too old to serve in action. He became the star of a play produced by the army to raise money and morale. He toured with it around the East Coast en route to a Broadway opening in June 1943.

In April of that year, my father's sister stopped by the Stage Door Canteen, a hangout for soldiers, stage actors, and folks involved in the war effort. She had a date there with a soldier (whom she later married). She saw a tall, stunning woman wearing an ambulance driver's uniform who looked familiar, and suddenly my aunt realized who she was—the girl for whom her brother had been pining for 20 years.

Then Mom recognized her too, and they had an emotional reunion. “Was Joe married?” my mother wanted to know. “No. What about you?” “Married but living apart.”

My aunt had an inspiration. “Would you like to see Joe again? I can arrange it. He will be coming to New York next month because of the play. Why don't you come by when he is visiting me? We'll set up a date, and let's keep it a surprise. I won't tell him that you will be there.”

Mom agreed at once. She loved clever surprises.

That's what happened. Joe came to visit his sister, she greeted him, then said mischievously, “Joe, there is someone else here waiting to see you.” On cue, Vivian came out from behind a door.

My father, who never lacked for words, was stunned, speechless. But not for long. He had a lot of convincing to do and he needed all the words at his command. Luck had brought Mom back into his life and he was not going to let her slip away again. He persuaded her not to return to her husband but to get a divorce instead, and marry him. He persuaded his reluctant parents to accept a divorcee with a small child as his wife. He opened his heart to my sister and loved her as his own daughter. He abandoned the idea of going off to pursue a career in Hollywood when the war was over.

They married in 1946 and were almost inseparable for the next 53 years. In the final period of their lives, Dad's age and Mom's Alzheimer's made it impossible for him to care for her at home. With great reluctance, he placed her in a specialized facility for Alzheimer's patients. At that point she couldn't remember how to dress, eat, or turn on lights. She didn't recognize her children, didn't know she had grandchildren. But every day, when Dad would come to visit, she would hold out her arms and her eyes would sparkle. “Joe, there you are. My prince of love.”

Their luck didn't stop at the Stage Door Canteen. Luck suffused with love has a life of its own; it followed my parents every day of their long—and largely happy—lives together. Hollywood couldn't have scripted it any better.

###

