



## Till 5 p.m. Do Us Part

'Office spouse' relationships can bring love, lust – and lots of headaches.

Tina Louise Chadwick on the workplace near-trysts.

**R**emember the brilliant scene in the movie *Fatal Attraction*? The stressed, high-powered man (Michael Douglas) walks into yet another meeting and finds himself face-to-face with a smart, sexy woman (Glenn Close) staring at him – a little too intently. She is introduced as part of his team, or a client or something. Forget that: He's still stuck way back on the "sexy" part.

Cut to offices everywhere to find similar situations: Co-workers are put together for projects that require long hours, tremendous focus and sustained energy. Mix in sexual attraction and the environment becomes something electric.

Welcome to what we might call the "office spouse" phenomenon. Oh, we're not talking about full-blown affairs or sexual escapades that trigger water-cooler gossip after company parties (or worse, in the case of *Fatal Attraction*). Those are boringly black-and-white.

Instead, we're talking about the gray: Office spouses are colleagues who must spend most of their workday together so that

*Because of the sensitive nature of this story, some of the names and details have been changed.*

they seem "married." Their relationships are often filled with the same kind of electrical charge that marriages sometimes lose. They are intimate in an intellectual way and beyond, with a spiritual connection that can bring to mind Jimmy Carter's famous line in *Playboy* during the 1976 presidential campaign: "I've committed adultery in my heart."

Industries such as advertising, consulting, sales and others that require teams of people, long hours and travel are hotbeds for this type of intimacy. "It's like being sent to Vietnam," says B.A. Albert, founder of advertising agency Match Inc. in Atlanta. "The more stressful the industry, the closer you get to the people you work with. You get caught up in a project where the pace is fast, the stakes are high and the emotion runs deep." Although she says she has never indulged in an "office husband" relationship, she has both witnessed and picked up the pieces from many over the years.

Says Dr. Robert Simmermon, a private practice psychologist and co-founder of Haystack Consulting, also in Atlanta: "In the workplace, professional boundaries are already in place, granting people the freedom to be more 'themselves,' which is highly

attractive and allows friendships to develop and deepen."

But there's an obvious dark side. As the personal relationships of office spouses blossom, at-home relationships can deteriorate. By the time the workday is over, the participants transition from the seductive office environment – with its intense highs and lows – to the relative monotony of home. When asked about the day by their real spouse/partner, they toss off a monosyllabic "fine" with all the zeal of a 16-year-old relating to his parents. This reinforces the bond of the work relationships and creates a gap in the personal one.

Take the case of Pansey Jefferson, an Orlando, Fla., hotshot in marketing for a major fast-food chain. Married with two daughters, the 28-year-old was young to be a full marketing manager, so she took the charge very seriously. "I was just hitting my stride, doing well and getting rewarded for it."

When her husband began to chafe at how much time she devoted to work, she turned to her boss, Ted, for advice about career and life. Their frequent conversations covered a range of topics as Pansey started to feel that Ted – 10 years older and also married with children – understood and listened to her more than her husband did. "My husband wanted to put me in a box as the same girl he met at college, and I was growing up," she recalls. "I think he was threatened because he wasn't sure where he wanted to take his life and I was very happy with where I was taking mine."

The tensions heightened when she learned Ted was being transferred in six months. "I was really, really upset about it. It took me totally off-guard how emotional I was at the thought of him leaving."

As his transfer approached, Ted took Pansey to dinner, just the two of them. Pansey didn't expect to show up at the most romantic restaurant in the city with a rose waiting on her plate. She told Ted she was uncomfortable with the situation, but Ted reassured her it was a friend-only, goodbye dinner. That night, her husband exploded when she told him about the place. Pansey told her husband that Ted listened and understood her more. "He asked me if I'd slept with Ted and I said, 'No.' Then he asked me if I thought about it and I couldn't answer."

One evening shortly after, Pansey's husband was out of town, so she agreed to let Ted pick her up to attend a work dinner party. "We didn't cross any physical lines but we had very inappropriate banter." On the ride home, Ted spilled his pent-up feelings about Pansey. "He told me I was his inspiration and that I was so important to him. He just went on and on about how smart and wonderful I was. Part of me wanted to leap on him and say, 'Me too,' but the other half was scared and confused." She cut Ted off as he got her home, scurried into her house, back to her two daughters and her life there.

To this day, more than a year after the transfer, Ted is a taboo subject in her house.

Interestingly, Simmermon says, "That kind of sexual energy can really enliven a company."

And it can be a perfect match for the players who find them-

selves instantly connected. Mike Orell, marketing manager for Internap, an Atlanta-based network-services company, had a two-year exclusive relationship with a co-worker in his prior job as a vice president of an internal communications conglomerate. He recalls it as his favorite relationship because he never had to explain his moods or why he was stressed, since his partner knew from being on hand as his day unfolded. But almost immediately after being hired away from the company, Orell and his partner both agreed to part ways.

But the downside can be significant. "What happens," Simmermon notes, "is that people can lose sight of the difference between what's real and what's created from the intimacy and proximity in today's work environments. People easily get caught in the fantasy phase of relationship discovery that can become extended in the workplace."

Office spouse relationships also can warp career and business decision-making. Lori Togo, a marketing entrepreneur in San Francisco, had an eight-year business relationship where, together, she and her partner owned a successful advertising agency in Italy. As Togo grew in her career, she noticed she fit into her business partner's life the same way the other women in

his life did. All were very strong women and he liked the challenge of those types of relationships. While their relationship remained purely

professional, they both dated outside work and Togo ended up marrying during the partnership.

"I think men and women create a higher comfort level and dependency than same-sex business partners." She even said to her business partner once, "The only person who knows you better than me is your mother." He agreed.

After Togo decided to move back to the U.S. with her new husband, she decided to sell her part of the agency to her business partner. During her exit negotiations, she made decisions based on the depth of her personal relationship with her partner; he made financially beneficial ones, ignoring the personal factor. It is only in retrospect that she sees this dynamic. "If you had asked me, I would have said it was a business relationship, but reliving it just now, I realize it was personal for me, too."

Within a year, her business partner visited her in California while he was on vacation with his girlfriend. As he talked about the profits he was reaping from the agency, she realized she had put their relationship first when making business decisions and he hadn't. She decided that night that she could no longer maintain the friendship.

While most people do not indulge the feelings of attraction toward co-workers, Simmermon insists the sexual dynamic has to be addressed at some point. "Handling this kind of energy with integrity and fidelity can actually strengthen a company through adding very positive energy." □

Tina Louise Chadwick, an advertising vice president, writes poetry, short stories and magazine articles in her "spare time." She balances her work life with Ultimate Frisbee, reading and many, many pets.

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