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BACK TO THE BRIDAL FUTURE

Written by Emily Hourican

Imagine you could go back in time, just once, to try and fix some detail of your past. Maybe give yourself a kindly word of warning and thereby save plenty of heartache? Where would you go? The school disco where you snogged your best friend's boyfriend? The family argument where you told your parents "I hate you and I didn't ask to be born"? Or would you flit down time to a moment before your wedding day, take your pre-bridal self aside and discreetly say "I wouldn't bother spending a grand on the photographer if I were you. He's going to be incredibly annoying, and Uncle Jack will take much nicer pictures anyway"?

Of all the regrets tumbling in from the last few years – the reckless over-spending, vulgar boasting and general awful Because-I'm-Worth-It carry-on – it is wedding extravaganzas that seem to make people most irritable. And indeed, maybe nothing did show up the ridiculousness of it all quite as much as that flock of white turtledoves you had released to mark the finale of the ceremony; and yes, the fact that most of them refused to fly, just pecked around on the ground, or at best fluttered to the top of the church porch, can probably be seen as a metaphor for the economy in general, if not your marriage in particular.

So, in a spirit of helpfulness, to try and prevent some of the many small-but-irritating mistakes brides make, we have asked around among the seasoned married, for their major regrets, the things they would do differently or not at all, if they ever went through it again, as a kind of cautionary tale for those embarking on the adventure.

Apart from one fed-up recent bride, who said with remarkable candour "my very first waking thought the following morning was 'what a waste of money that was'", almost everyone else we spoke to began by saying "I wouldn't change a thing..." before adding, "well, except maybe..." at which point the flood gates usually opened and a long list of Never-Agains came pouring out. We like to think we offered a dose of therapy, as well as an opportunity to rant.

In sorting through the gripes, a couple of clear problem areas quickly emerged. First amongst them, using friends in professional roles. "I asked a flaky friend to do the flowers for tables and my bouquet. They were a disaster – my bouquet was dead by the time I got down the aisle," recalled one woman tartly. Another, who asked a friend trying to get into event

management to help her plan the entire day, just shudders when I bring it up. “We’re still not speaking,” she responds. Nuff said. Another, who asked a friend of her husband-to-be to take photos, was equally cross. “He didn’t bother finding out who any of my family were, so there are barely any photos of my side. And it took him over a year to deliver the prints, which he did in a paper envelope. I had to go out and buy an album to stick them into.”

Actually, photos in general seem to be a sore point – from those who feel they over-paid (“a grand, for some snaps that I never look at!”), to the ones who thought they looked horrible in all the pictures – but not nearly as contentious as the wedding video. “Would not get hard copy photo album, would not get tacky video,” was one succinct response. I couldn’t find one person who liked their wedding video, with criticisms ranging from “too long,” “can’t hear anything”, “everyone looked ugly and drunk” to “I’m never going to show that to me children. It looks like off-cuts from *My Big Fat Gypsy Wedding!*”

Wedding ‘favours’ seem to get just as short shrift as the video. “Utterly pointless” was the general reaction. “Ended up trodden all over the dance floor,” said one bride; “the hotel were furious because they found bits of silver sugar-icing tramped throughout the hotel.” Where the couple had put real work into sourcing something personal and slightly unique, the favours seemed to fare much better. For example, the sister of the groom at one wedding made gorgeous fresh-water pearl bracelets for each female guest, with a tiny silver heart to commemorate the day. The work she put in – plus the innate prettiness of the gift – meant that these were all carefully stashed away in bags and not left to trail. I’ve also heard of an Italian wedding where the ‘favours’ were a few slices of truffle for each guest. Now that’s clearly worth keeping!

The Best Man seems to have more power to ruin a wedding than any other single attendant, except perhaps the mother-of-the-bride. Obviously the choice isn’t really yours – the best man is traditionally an old friend or relative of the groom, but if you have serious reservations about ‘Mick, a great guy, best prop forward the school ever had...’ on the grounds that you’ve never heard him utter a sentence that wasn’t filthy, and often incoherent, its worth trying to gently steer your to-be in a different direction. After all, there will be children, old people and even work colleagues present. And what’s hilarious in the pub post-watershed doesn’t necessarily translate to a gracious dining room circa 5pm in front of a mixed crowd.

Yes, we have heard some harrowing stories in our time. There was the best man who basically called the bride a slut (“All of you know Sarah,” he began. “Yes, I think its fair to say all the men here know Sarah anyway...” Cue sharp, collective intake of breath...). And the one who

revealed that the bride and groom slept together on the first night they met, before wondering loudly why the groom bothered marrying her at all. That of course is the sublime; for most, the best man's misdemeanours are simply ridiculous. "His speech was sooo boring," one woman recalled, of her husband's childhood friend. "I could see people fidgeting and sniggering as he went on and on. I was so embarrassed." Or, another friend who responded tartly, "I'd make sure he went on some kind of 'Best Man Course', to make sure he knew exactly what was expected of him beyond making the speech. He did nothing for us, even went back to the reception before we did and we had to get a lift from the church from someone in a Ford Fiesta."

But don't think the mother-of-the-bride – or indeed her sisters – are getting away scott free. They too often need to be kept at some kind of arm's length, judging by the tales we heard. So many women confessed to having been rail-roaded into doing things they didn't want, because their mother (and/ or sisters) were adamant. From being forced to invite people they didn't want – and often haven't seen since – to being made to choose a dress they didn't like because it accorded more closely with the family's idea of 'a real wedding dress'. We've heard of readings being replaced, of speech-order being disrupted ("you can't ask your father to go first, he'll hate that. You go first, give him time to have a few drinks"), even of one mother who would-then-wouldn't read a poem after the ceremony until the very last minute. She did read the poem in the end, but the bride found the uncertainty irritating. And then there's the mother who truly believes that this is her Big Day and that everything revolves around her. She is a menace, and the sooner you delegate someone, anyone – your sister, her sister, your father – to rein her in and sit on her if necessary, the more likely you are to enjoy your own Big Day.

On a more prosaic level – try and avoid nasty billing surprises as you check out of your dream hotel in the days after the wedding. "If you have your wedding in a fancy hotel, accommodation can be so expensive if you are putting up bridesmaids, best man and so on," reminisced one friend. "It really hit home the next morning when we had to pay for all the hidden extra costs. It was a bit of a shock." Try and work out exactly what you'll be paying in advance – ie, who's allowed put what on room service, for example, and who's authorised, other than you and your husband, to charge items to your account – so that the final amount doesn't cause you to pass out.

Flowers are another area of some regret. "Too many, too expensive," said one woman. "The florist convinced me to go for red and white roses, which cost a fortune. Daisies would have been just as nice. And I really didn't need as many bouquets as she said." As is transport. "In

retrospect, a Silver Cloud Rolls Royce to bring me a couple of hundred yards, was a waste,” said a friend. “I was at a wedding recently where the bride travelled in the husband’s uncle’s old Fiat Bambino. It was cute. And cheap.”

One ex-bride regrets not bringing a decent pen to sign the registry (she had to use a broken biro), another that she didn’t get a really good recording of the singing, and lost the original sheet music of the amazing Gregorian chant arrangement of their song. Nearly everyone has regrets around the guest list – people they invited that they shouldn’t have bothered, others they didn’t and subsequently feel guilty about. For another, its not paying for the bridesmaid’s dress that stands out, marring her memories of the day. “I googled the etiquette and read somewhere that bridesmaids were supposed to pay for their own dresses. I took this as gospel and in a very embarrassing, round-about conversation I asked my bridesmaid if she’d mind. Of course she said not at all, but to this day I still cringe when I think of it.” (note to us all – never, never trust the internet. Too much of what passes for etiquette is American, which can be very different to our own standards of behaviour).

And finally, something none of us can control – the potentially explosive combination of alcohol and families. Family rows at weddings are the stuff of legend, as are indiscretions and general faux pas. We’ve heard everything from illicit liaisons, to public home-truth-telling, to a drunk friend ‘outing’ a gay uncle of the bride to his 85-year-old mother. However, beyond suggesting you serve Ribena only, and sit disruptive relatives far from each other, there’s not a whole lot you can do about that. In this case, you’re better off sweating the small stuff!

Things I Wish I’d Known

Top ten rules for an easy-going, pared-back Big Day

1. Don’t hire friends to do a professionals’ job. Your BF may be a whiz at organising the annual girls’ lunch, but your Big Day requires the experience, and contacts, of a pro.
2. Cut the right corners. Don’t try and save money on the big things – food and wine – because you get what you pay for. Instead, consider the peripherals. Instead of hot-house flowers, pick something simple and cheap; ditch the wedding favours; if you’re not travelling long distances, consider a decent family car, or even walk, instead of hiring vintage motors.
3. The Best Man is a potential loose cannon. The time to think about his suitability is BEFORE you get married, not while he’s telling a string of filthy jokes instead of a speech and making your mother cry.

4. Ah, your mother... basically, either she's with you or against you. If the latter, find her a minder, someone who will act as go-between and restraint.
5. Photos. If you want a couple of weighty tomes recording everything from you brushing your teeth in the morning through to slamming the door of the bridal suite late that night, get a pro. But if you feel you'd be happy with a handful of snaps to remind you who was there, consider asking a friend who's good at photography to do it as a wedding present, then you just have to pay for printing.
6. The guest list is worth spending extra time on. Do you really need all those people, or are you inviting some just to keep the peace? And is the peace really worth keeping at €80-odd euro a head? Could you siphon some of them off to a party down the line and keep the actual wedding small?
7. Do the dirty work first. The last thing you want is to be paying for a load of hidden extras. Arrange the price with your venue, and ensure they stick as closely to that as possible. The time to discuss whether or not the best man can charge six bottles of Champagne to his room, is before, not the morning after when you've got a hangover.
8. The dress is Your choice. If you want to get married in Estonian native costume, or a Topshop shift dress, go for it. Do Not buy a big meringue just because your mother thinks its more traditional. Ditto veils, white satin shoes, silly little white bags and all the other stuff that you will never be able to use again. It'll cost you a fortune, and cause you to grind your teeth every time you open the wardrobe and see them taking up space, in all their useless glory.
9. Know yourself. If you are they type of person who will be aggravated by a scratchy biro, make provision for this, bring a fancy fountain pen. Alternatively, if all you can see is the big picture, feel free to ignore the small stuff and focus entirely on the Big Three: Food, Drink, Venue.
10. And if the one thing you'd like change is your husband, I'm sorry, we can't help...

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