



Weddings - A Custom of Our People

By Libby Garland

Weddings are weird, aren't they? Lately, I've been learning a lot about weddings because many of my friends have been having them. Somehow I managed to get to my mid-twenties before realizing that weddings are an enormous deal: there is no ritual that plays a bigger role in our cultural imagination these days, or for which there is an industry so vast; no ritual in which we invest so much, materially and emotionally.

I am comforted by the fact that my friends who are planning their own weddings find weddings weird, too. At the wedding I went to in September, I spent some downtime between the weekend's many events chatting with my co-maid-of-honor, who had recently gotten engaged. "We went to the caterer," she told me, "and the caterer was like, 'So, is it going to be a Jewish wedding?'" She has a very Jewish last name, and the caterer seemed surprised and doubtful when the couple said no. "Well," he said, "well. . . will there be a lot of Jews at the wedding? There are? Because then, you know," he said, sounding more sure of himself now, "the important thing is to have good hors d'oeuvres, and lots of them. Jews," he said definitively, "like hors d'oeuvres."

We laughed, but on reflection I thought maybe the caterer had something there. I mean, from his point of view, Jews at the wedding meant the wedding was Jewish, and a Jewish wedding called for little mushrooms passed around on trays, and perhaps some sushi-rabbi, chupah, or no. Well, why not? It reminded me of a Jewish friend's tongue-in-cheek answer to my question about the meaning of some observance or other we witnessed at a Simchat Torah celebration. "I have no idea what it means," she said, joining a circle of dancers, "but it's the Custom of Our People!" Yes, indeed, and so are smashed light bulbs, and floral centerpieces, and eleven bridesmaids wearing white, and Williams-Sonoma registries you can get to via the couple's wedding homepage. And hors d'oeuvres. The caterer was making the same observation as my dancing friend, just from the other way around.

The caterer's point about hors d'oeuvres also made me realize that I find weddings weird because all of them, even secular ones filled with secular people, feel religious. It's as if weddings have absorbed all the leftover energy of jettisoned religious observances. Weddings are the high holidays of American culture, the occasions when even the non-believers enter into the Temple of Tradition. They put on the ritual garments, the tuxes and white dresses and bridesmaids' outfits. They speak the liturgy, they eat the festive food. They toast the toasts and dance the dances.

There are, of course, variations-not every wedding band plays "Love Shack"-but weddings have an iconic status that transcends the individual event. Like the crowds thronging ancient Greek stadiums to watch masked actors play Oedipus or Medea far below (I realize these examples may reveal what my high school teachers used to call an Attitude Problem), wedding guests come knowing the contours of the script. Groom, bride, till death do you part, I do, kiss, cake, honeymoon, happily every after. This is the power of ritual, of tradition; this is its pull for those producing and staging their own weddings and wanting to mark the occasion with great meaning, I've decided, as I've listened to friends I never thought the "wedding type" talk about rings and rehearsal dinners. Weddings are bigger than the individual performance; they link the bride and groom to a solemn collective of all the brides and grooms all the guests ever were themselves or ever saw at other weddings, in photos, in movies or poised in plastic miniature in bakery windows.

But although I knew the Wedding Script in its broad contours, too-I mean, I've seen the same movies everyone else has-I was totally bewildered, when I first started going to weddings (and their satellite events, like showers and engagement parties), by all the detailed intricacies of costume and etiquette that seemed to belong to Wedding Tradition. If this was tradition, how come I'd never heard of any of it? And how come everyone else had? How did they know about clinking glasses to get the couple to kiss, about The First Dance, about standing up when The Bride walks in?

Weddings, I realized, weren't only religious ritual (secular or not), they were a dazzling medley of cultural code: bar mitzvah, beauty pageant, legal ceremony, family reunion, prom, graduation, and coronation all rolled together. It was exhausting. How on earth had people learned all that stuff? People learn that stuff, of course, from going to weddings and showers and engagement parties. Even I know some of the rules now-the bride and groom come visit every table at the reception; you have until a year after the ceremony to send a gift.

Of course, no one knows from the get-go how to produce an authentically traditional wedding, as I realized when I went surfing on the Web to try to address my tradition deficit. Most wedders require a crash course to learn what meaningful traditions mean, which makes the wedding industry a perfect match for the information age. From somewhere on the awe-inspiring metasite "top100weddingsites.com," I found my way to a bulletin board where panicked writer-inners who weren't having a Jewish wedding, but planned to "do the breaking the glass thing" (I wondered what their hors d'oeuvres situation was) wanted to know "the specifics." Fellow wedding planners responded quickly with tips on orchestrating the smashing and explaining its meaning to guests. And at "weddinggazette.com" I learned that "originally the wedding cake was not eaten, but thrown at the bride!" It was "early Roman bakers" who switched over to the "eat it" thing. Ah, the Customs of our People! Who knew?

The other thing that becomes obvious after one nanosecond of perusing the Web or the wedding periodicals at your local newsstand is that the wedding industry is not geared toward people planning weddings, it's geared toward brides planning weddings. Brides are the Platonic ideal of female consumerism. I was particularly struck by the first entry on a Web page devoted to the essentials of "Bridal Beauty." Under the heading "Selecting a headpiece," I read: "A sea of headpieces surrounds you. Styles ranging from Comb-Ins to Tiaras to Headbands and everything in between. Where do you even begin to start?" It seemed rather poignant, and more than a little sinister, this image of being in over your head in headpieces, of drowning in bridal accessories.

I ended up on this page via a link titled "beauty," which I clicked on because at the last wedding I'd attended I noticed the Bride was never just the Bride, she was always the Beautiful Bride. Why was everyone talking compulsively about how beautiful the bride was? I wondered aloud with friends over a post-wedding brunch of bagels and lox. I mean, sure, she looked lovely, but why was Beautiful the only adjective people could come up with? The words just go together, shrugged the friend to my left, reaching for the juice. Because beauty is her bridal capital, my more Marxist-minded friend across the table commented wryly. For the particular bride in question, whip-smart, accomplished, independent and an astute cultural critic (she joked that she'd never felt more like she was in drag than when she was in her Vera Wang dress), bridal beauty may have been only a sort of play currency, but my surfing travels through Web wedding-land reminded me that, in fact, many women in the world trade on it for real.

Evidence of this stared me in the face when, on realizing that weddings were really all about brides, I decided to punch "brides" into the search engine google.com. Utterly absent from the upbeat pages of flashy wedding mags and Web sites, but accorded equal billing by the weird democracy of search engines, mail-order brides are the other side of the wedding industry coin. For every site marketing bridal commodities-to women-it seems there is one frankly marketing brides as commodities-to men. Would-be brides from Russia or Asia, their pictures posted with names and vital statistics, offer their beauty in the international bridal marketplace. "Latinas-intro.com" tells its shoppers that "Latin women . . . win the Miss Universe title more than any ethnic group in the world." On bulletin boards, men debate about whether Filipinas make better wives than Russians, and swap advice on avoiding trouble with the INS.

This, too, is wedding tradition, and one well served by the blossoming of the Internet age. Now, I don't mean to suggest that all weddings, or all marriages, are really thin masks for the exploitation of women-a big scam that turns women into consumers or commodities. And I don't mean to suggest that all wedding traditions are bankrupt or inauthentic-traditions are never something we simply inherit, we always learn them and change them-but rather to make a point about the powerful social fiction of marriage. To say marriage is social fiction is not to say it doesn't have social reality-on the contrary, like the fictions of The Stock

Market or Racial Differences, it is enormously powerful in real life. As any mail-order bride or unacknowledged domestic partner knows, it is a fiction at the heart of our construction of citizenship and legal privilege. And of our construction of much else: weddings are enactments of stories about how to be men and women, about relationships, about family, about sexuality, about the founding of households, about the waxing and waning of generations, about love. Weddings are not just powerful fictions because lots of people have weddings; lots of people have weddings because the stories weddings enact are powerful, because these are stories around which people shape their celebrations and their lives.

I'm not concluding that we need to get rid of weddings. Weddings are weird, but they are the Custom of Our People, and we all need stories to live and celebrate by. I'd just like to push for more acknowledgment of Wedding Weirdness. I want people to admit that marriage is only one of many possible narratives we could tell about households and families and love, only one of the many possible stories we could stage with dancing and singing and, of course, with lots of hors d'oeuvres.

