

The barbecue wedding

So you want an unusual wedding. You've got it - you'll make the whole thing a surprise. You'll turn your parents' back-yard barbecue into a marriage ceremony, complete with minister. PATTI RYAN has some advice: Stop right there

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Let's say you've decided to get married. But you're a modern woman without a princess complex, and not really sold on the tradition of something old and something new, unless perhaps you want to count that borrowed blue dress. A part of your soul, simmering blackly beneath the white glow of your wedding night satin camisole, whispers seductively that marriage is an outdated notion, the easy way out, an oppressive institution against which a large part of your spirit rebels.

Fun people are not married. Married people are not fun. This maxim was a cornerstone of your emotional sanity while single. It is your pet paranoia still, and difficult to relinquish. Yet for reasons you can't explain even to yourself, you feel you must get married.

So you decide that if you must do it, at least you will be unusual about it; you will go down fighting. Not for you the million-dollar ball gown, the frail china, the buttons and bows, the dreaded macarena. And if you die trying, on your gravestone someone will write, "Nobody danced the bunny hop at her wedding."

No. You decide you will throw a back-yard barbecue instead, ostensibly to celebrate some other occasion, and surprise the guests by springing a ceremony on them. You interview a minister who tells you about a couple he married this way. "It was Christmas Eve," he says. "They had the whole family over at the house, the tree was lit up, there was snow falling. I rang the doorbell, introduced myself, and we had a little ceremony. It was beautiful."

You want to hire this minister immediately.

Do not proceed any further. There is a reason why people get married according to the age-old customs and traditions you scorn. The reason is: It is much, much easier that way.

My husband and I hired this minister for our surprise wedding a few summers ago. We plotted and planned, tangling ourselves in webs of prevarication, tripping over the lies that piled up on our tongues. "Where are you going?" our mothers asked as we ran off to buy decorations, discuss menus and edit vows. "Nowhere," we fibbed, and fled, slamming doors in their puzzled faces.

Along the way, we invited 150 people to the back-yard barbecue, telling them it was a going-away party. This was perfectly believable to most of our friends and family, who knew we were about to head off on a year-long backpacking trip together.

And then, we panicked. We polled people our parents' age, asking them a hypothetical question: What would they think if their own children were to spring this kind of surprise on them? Over and over, a theme began to emerge: Horror. Anger. Outrage. Revenge. It was nasty.

We spent a long, anxious night debating the pros and cons, and finally -- just days before the planned date of the surprise wedding -- we caved.

It was a warm August night, and we had assembled our parents for dinner. After dessert, my boyfriend and I bravely stood up together. "Eject," I thought. "Eject, eject!" Too late.

"We have an announcement to make," my boyfriend said bravely. "We're getting married."

There were tears of joy, congratulatory hugs, abundant good will and merriment all round. My future in-laws broke out champagne and poured it into beautiful flutes reserved for special occasions.

"When?" my boyfriend's mother finally asked.

"August 23rd," I said.

"August of next year?" she asked, eyes shining with tears of joy.

"No," I said. "This August."

Her shining eyes began to protrude from her head.

"In two weeks?" she screamed. "At my house?"

Her eyes bugged out, round and horrified. I thought her head might pop right off, like the dandelion tops we used to send flying as children. She fell into her chair, muttering and crying and cursing to herself in French, and had to be comforted by my mother.

The next day, she called off her scheduled holiday in Alberta, losing \$500 on a non-refundable airline ticket, so that she could orchestrate the big event. Thus began the Wedding Summit: two weeks of intensive, hostile haggling over food, alcohol, music, flowers, dresses, guests and rain provisions.

We said: Barbecued hot dogs with pasta salad, if it rains they'll come into the house, we're making our own tapes, there will absolutely not be an opportunity to dance the hokey pokey.

Our parents said: We're having it catered, we've rented a tent, we're hiring a bartender, you two are insane.

"That's it!" My exasperated boyfriend finally broke off negotiations three days before the date. "We're calling the whole damn thing off!" He stormed from the kitchen table and went off in the direction of the river. His mother stomped off to her bedroom and slammed the door shut, leaving my prospective father-in-law and me staring apprehensively at each other. The only one not in tears was the dog.

The next day, things were on again, but so was the fight. For my wedding dress, I had chosen a sundress that belonged to my sister, a floor-length, flowery, strappy number. It fitted and flattered me, it suited my personality. It was festive, it was free.

"You can't possibly wear that," my mother said flatly. "It's used. It's old. It's never even been washed. You want to be informal, fine. But at least get your own dress."

"You can't possibly wear that," my boyfriend's mother said decisively. "It will never do. It will look terrible beside Mark's tuxedo. You will have to get something more formal. Absolutement."

With five days to go, I capitulated and bought another dress. Ivory, mermaid-shaped, slender and classic -- not bad for \$69 on sale. With two days to go, it occurred to me I would need flowers. I ordered orange and red roses for my hair, orchids for the grandmothers, a boutonnière for Mark.

I forgot to get myself a bouquet.

With one day to go, I realized I had no decent shoes. I drove out to the nearest mall and snared a pair of taupe sandals in an end-of-season sale.

On the morning of the wedding, I got my hair done by a stylist I had never met. I asked for a French twist, and presented her with the orange flowers.

After 15 minutes of struggling with my limp, shoulder-length hair, she paused for a moment and looked at me in the mirror. "So, who's getting married?" she asked.

"Me," I admitted, thinking guiltily that perhaps I should have mentioned this earlier.

She clutched bunches of my recalcitrant hair in her fists and shook them at me in the mirror, aghast. "You should grow your hair first," she growled at me. "Then get married."

With an hour to go, I realized I owned no bra or underwear that wouldn't show rudely underneath my new dress. I solved that problem by not wearing any.

The ceremony took place outdoors in a provincial park in Quebec's Gatineau hills. The weather was misty, the flowers lush, the setting perfect. I had asked my sister to read an excerpt on marriage from *The Prophet* by Kahlil Gibran.

"And now Shannon will read to us a poem by Kahlil Girard," the minister boomed.

"Gibran," I corrected him crisply, mid-ceremony. My voice rang out in the misty stillness. My husband-in-progress cast a withering glance in my direction.

The party that night was a huge success (thanks largely to the persistent efforts of our parents, I am just now ready to admit), and we left at midnight for a hotel downtown. By 2 in the morning, I was asleep; at 4 o'clock, I woke up thirsty, stumbled through the darkness to the bathroom and accidentally drank my new husband's contact lenses, which he had stored in a glass of water. He had been in too much of a hurry while packing to remember the actual cases.

Nearly blind without his lenses, he almost got hit by a bus on our way out for brunch the next morning. At the restaurant, I had to read the menu to him and describe what various members of the restaurant staff were doing at the buffet table. "Omelette," I said of the man pouring eggs and vegetables into a skillet. "Waffles. Sausages."

Our night of bliss was followed by unpleasant phone calls. "Guess what," we shouted happily into the phone to people on the other side of the country. "We got married!" We were greeted with stunned silence. Hurt feelings. More shock. One good friend actually burst into tears. Entire families -- not to mention our own -- were threatening to disown us.

Three days later we left on our honeymoon. We spent a year travelling Asia and Africa on a shoestring budget. This was often stressful. We still think about the food poisoning in India, the typhoid fever in Nepal, the AK-47-wielding campground security guards in Tanzania, the time we were stranded in a Mozambique border town overnight with no food, no running water and nowhere to sleep but the cockroach-ridden, rattletrap bus.

And then we think: Thank God we are already married, because we couldn't do it again. The stress of that would probably just wreck our relationship.

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