



YOU MAY KISS... YOUR FRIENDS GOODBYE

'Tis the season, ladies. Does an onslaught of WEDDINGS mean the end of an era? TEXT: KATE DALEY

What do you think of this one?" my friend asked innocently, holding up a bright-blue frock with a white bow. "Um, it's wearable" was all I could muster in reply. My friend and I were on our third bridesmaid-dress shopping trip for her upcoming nuptials, and I had already tried on countless hideously tailored dresses—complete with all the stereotypes (spaghetti straps, bows and too many ruffles)—all bound to show sweat stains, wrinkle upon contact and be wholly unwearable beyond the ceremonial obligation. But the potential fashion folly and subsequent photographic memorabilia weren't what was causing my underlying anxiety. It was the feeling that a great chasm was opening up between me and my friends, and I was being left to drown in the taffeta.

Four of my close friends got engaged within a month last fall. By the fourth announcement, my nerves were on edge every time the phone rang. One friend even gave me a semi-insulting preamble. "I know it's sort of awkward for you that we're all getting married at once," she said, "but try not to freak out." She also clarified moments later that there would be "no single guys at the wedding" as if to let me know I shouldn't bother getting my hopes up that a handsome groomsman would be at my disposal. Regardless of the delivery, there was excitement on both ends of the line. I had an immediate flashback to the 2011 hit movie *Bridesmaids* and the scene where the main character, Annie (Kristen Wiig), reacts awkwardly to her best friend's engagement: "Oh, my God. Oh, my God. I just got hot.... My pits are sweating.... I'm hot.... Oh, my God! Aah! What is happening?" complete with an uncomfortably long spell of laughter. ▷

Don't get me wrong: I really don't hate weddings. I love shopping, cakes and flowers, and I even get a sick pleasure out of watching *Say Yes to the Dress* (mostly because the gown selections are mind-boggling, but still). I'm happy to peruse Pinterest for hours to help with suggestions for the right centrepieces, chignons and wedding favours. Someday, I hope to have the type of 34-year (and counting) marriage that my parents have. But there is an unmistakable sensation that, at 29—despite several long-term relationships—I have landed on the wrong end of the marriage spectrum.

Until recently, my calendar was chock full of ladies' nights out, weekend brunches and meaningful conversations with women who have been my pillars of support and I theirs. But in the past few months, as several more friends boarded the nuptial train, my life has morphed into a jumbled mess of bachelorettes, showers and the actual weddings themselves, leaving me with only three available weekends until October that aren't crammed with wedding-related outings. It's a vortex of time, energy and emotion—and if one more person compares me to Katherine Heigl's character in *27 Dresses*, I just might scream.

In desperate need of sympathetic advice from someone who has been there (and has the dresses to prove it), I call up an expert. "It's really overwhelming," says Siri Agrell, author of *Bad Bridesmaid: Bachelorette Brawls and*

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Taffeta Tantrums—Tales from the Front Lines. When Agrell was in her late 20s, her two best friends got engaged. She found herself overwhelmed (and unenthusiased) by the wedding process and pitched an article on the experience to the *National Post*, where she was working at the time. "One of the brides thought the story was really funny and one of them really, really did not," she says. Agrell was kicked out of the angry bride's wedding party—her dress went to the bride's cousin, who stood in her place. The article prompted an outpouring from frustrated ladies in similar situations who wanted to commiserate, and Agrell was so taken that she decided to share their stories in a book. "There's definitely a phase toward

your late 20s where the wedding insanity feels really acute, where everyone is divided into the camp of people who are spoken for and people who aren't," says Agrell. "One thing that has been misconstrued a lot is that the single friend is jealous because she's still single. There are so many things wrapped up in it: You're annoyed because you're going to lose 12 months of your life to this, and you are maybe a bit jealous, and you're a bit sad.... There's that feeling that it is the end of this part of your life."

I'm terrified of getting lost among a new crop of "smug marrieds" who host couples dinners to swap townhouse woes and pregnancy tales while my so-called hilarious stories about the latest guy I met on the weekend are seen as sad or pathetic. The insensitive comments have already begun rolling in. One engaged friend recently told me in all seriousness that she thinks women in their late 20s really "missed the boat on meeting someone." Not all my friends are that bad. Many of my closest friends seem happy to listen to my boy woes and try their best to give advice. Still, I can feel the divide growing as they become more entrenched in their new families and more detached from singledom.

"This life stage can be very, very difficult, particularly if most of one's friends are married and the individual is not," explains Dr. Peggy Koopman, a Vancouver-based psychologist. "There's either a tendency to feel 'What's wrong with me?' or pressure to get into a relationship.

There's a feeling of being abandoned. We know that it's not logical and we really do wish the best for this person, but now something has been taken away from you that's important to you, and you might wonder 'How am I going to fill that void?'" While women are often brought up to believe that their major life relationship will be with a male partner, the most lasting friendships beyond those of marriage seem to be women's female friendships, says Koopman. "These friendships validate a woman's feelings in ways they can't with a male partner. They are extremely important to the female psyche."

According to Eric Klinenberg, a sociologist and author of *Going Solo: The Extraordinary Rise and Surprising Appeal of Living Alone*, it can take real work for single and married women to maintain friendships with one another, but it can be done. "It takes patience and understanding on both sides. Married women want their single friends to understand all the demands on their time and that if they don't have the same amount of time to hang out, it's not because their relationship doesn't matter. And single women want their married friends to remain available and engaged." ▷

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And there is more good news: Sociologist and author Kay Trimmerger believes that both single and married women who build strong friendship networks in their 20s and 30s will be better equipped to maintain and recreate friendships as they age. “A young person who has enjoyed a rich communal life will be less afraid to remain single, and if she does couple, she will be less likely to retreat to an isolated nuclear family and cut off her single friends,” she writes in *The New Single Woman*.

Koopman does reassure me that most friendships do come back once, to put it frankly, the honeymoon is over. Still, I ask her how a single girl is supposed to stay sane—and avoid any friendship meltdowns—during all the wedding hoopla. Koopman recommends setting your own limitations. “Don’t get sucked into doing anything that you will regret or resent the friend for later,” she says. “And just let the wedding furor roll off your back. You don’t really care what colour the dress will be or about the hotel you’ll be staying in. None of these things is really important. What’s important is the friendship. Look at what this friendship has provided you with and see how you can continue to satisfy those essentials, even though you probably won’t be meeting up three nights a week anymore.”

And what if it feels like your personal bridezilla is still dragging you to hell and back? Koopman suggests riding it out. “This is a narcissistic time in the other person’s life. She gets to be queen for a day and the rest of us have to put up with it. She may not realize that while her life is going

ahead, the other person is also going through changes to do with that life.”

The ultimate bad bridesmaid herself agrees. “The only way to get through it is to honestly just smile and nod and drink,” says Agrell, laughing. Now in her mid-30s, she has two children with her common-law partner, David. “It’s hard to criticize weddings and then have a crazy wedding yourself,” she says. “We joke that we’re going to wait until we’re 40 and then really take it out on our friends.” Agrell is still friends with the bride who didn’t kick her out of her wedding, but she is no longer close with the angry bride. “A wedding is one day in the course of your friendship. You look back and think ‘We got dressed up and got wasted and danced. Why all the drama?’ You come out of it on the other side, and if you’re meant to be friends with her, you’ll stay friends with her.”

So I intend to do just that (the drinking and nodding, that is) until the day I have my own series of Kardashian-style fetes, complete with giant heart-shaped cookies and Labrador puppies as favours, all organized by my besties, of course. For now, I plan on participating in as much of my friends’ wedding-related mania as possible—while holding fast to Koopman’s advice not to let myself get pushed too far. As for the long-term fate of my friendships? Whether I see my married girlfriends once a week or once a month, I’m starting to see our friendships a bit like a marriage: There may be ups and downs, but hopefully there won’t be any friendship divorces in my future. □