

relationships

HAPPILY EVER AFTER

For a middle-aged single man, attending weddings solo is no piece of cake

by Scott Gerace | Saturday, April 07, 2018



It arrived deceptively addressed in swirls of calligraphy and sprinkled with saccharine roses: the dreaded wedding invitation. As I clung to singlehood in middle age, it served as a piercing reminder of love's elusive grasp.

I had broken up with my boyfriend of 18 months earlier, so I'd now attend solo under a strained smile. More disconcerting in middle age was the possibility that a "happily ever after" might not materialize.

"Maybe you'll have a new guy in your life by then?" the bride's sister and my good friend from high school, Amy, consoled me via text, adding a winking emoji. I threw my phone down in disgust.

A sad cloud hovered over me for weeks, although the wedding itself cheered me up. Entering the gothic-style room with pews and a small altar felt like stepping into the final frame of a Disney cartoon. Both brides wore white and waltzed down the aisle flashing bright smiles.

We listened to a powerful excerpt from the Supreme Court's majority decision affirming the constitutionality of same-sex marriage. What seemed like legal text meant to nullify state laws soared above the room as a testament to the promise that no one be condemned to a life of loneliness.

At the reception, I sat next to a married gay couple.

"Are you single, Scott?" one of the men asked.

"Yes. I'm the old maid," I quipped.

"You're not. I have a few guys who would enjoy meeting a guy like you."

"Oh ... maybe." I was uncertain who his "few guys" were and what they looked like.

"Well, you let me know," he said, smiling.

Soon after, they cut the rainbow-centered wedding cake. I stood off to the side most of the evening, rubbing my belly after destroying the evidence: the two pieces of cake set at my table for me and the phantom lover who didn't exist.

Several months later, I received a text: "We want you to marry us!"

My former co-worker Gina recently had shown off her engagement ring. At 32, she'd found "the one," after fretting it wouldn't happen to a young woman who'd survived cancer and struggled with worries of future infertility.

"Are you sure?" I responded. We were friends, but certainly there must be someone wiser about romance and marital bliss than a single man cuddled on the couch with his third martini. I also debated how their two traditional Korean families would react to a gay man presiding over their children's forever moment.

"Yes, we want you," she assured me.

The heavy burden of holding two people's hearts in my hands interrupted my sleep, not to mention the prospect of being dateless again. I remained steadfast—if there weren't someone special in my life, I refused to invite a placeholder.

Once I'd accepted my fate as the officiant, I became a minister of the Universal Life Church, courtesy of a few clicks on my keyboard, ready to spread love dust everywhere.

"We'll hold an extra place, in case you want to include someone," said Gina, when I met her for brunch.

"Nope, it'll be just one," I said, as I ordered a martini.

"Wow, a martini at 11 AM," said Gina.

"I'm marrying two kids in their 30s, and I'm bitter. So, no judgment."

"Bring a friend," she said with a frown.

Attempts to turn dates into plus ones failed over the remaining few months, and while friends offered to sub as my platonic partner, I refused to cave. Soon Gina, her fiancé and 100 members of their extended Korean family regrouped at wedding central—a generic Hyatt nestled in upstate New York.

I tossed and turned during the night, imagining outlandish screw-ups and comic mishaps. Everyone at the rehearsal dinner wanted to know how long I'd been marrying people.

"This is my first one," I said over and over.

On the wedding day, I hung back on the edges of the celebratory greetings, studying my service script and keeping a watchful eye on Gina's hard-to-read father. He expressed displeasure that no real prayer was being said during the event and threatened to intervene.

"I'm sure it'll be fine," said her brother-in-law, trying to reassure me.

"Well, if he stands up while I'm talking, be ready to tackle him," I said.

I never got a clear view of the brother-in-law as I took my place under the pergola along with the groomsmen and the couple's dog, Blue, who seemed as anxious and as lost as I was to find himself a member of the wedding. Big Daddy was right down front and remained surprisingly silent.

Aside from the dog's soft whimpers and my brief struggles with a microphone, I delivered a decent performance.

"A solid B+, man," said one of the bridesmaid's boyfriends.

"Stop it. Scott, you were wonderful," she interjected, pushing him along.

I got the job done despite my fears that flying solo gave me little merit in the manners of love. No expert yet, but a B+ meant I was on my way.

At table 12, an assortment of the couple's former co-workers and I mingled, while I shooed away waiters who tried to fill the empty plate next to me.

"There's no one sitting here," I yelled numerous times over the blaring hip-hop songs chosen by people 15 years younger than me. I gave up trying by the time the cake slices arrived for my imaginary partner and me.

Despite my best efforts to lay low, the joy of the occasion pulled me with it and the graciousness of strangers and new friends.

Begrudgingly, I joined my tablemates, all couples, on the dance floor. Who could resist the thumping rhythms of House of Pain's "Jump Around," made even more hilarious when grinding with the newlyweds, unable to stop thanking me for playing a role on their special day.

When the DJ called for everyone to join hands and rush the bride and groom, I started to back away, but Gina's family reached out to grasp my empty hand and drew me into their inner circle.

"It was lovely. Good job," said Gina's sister, as we collided in the mash-up circling the couple.

Even the grumpy dad broke his silence to whisper "thank you" to me before he disappeared in the revelry.

I'd wasted so much time worrying that I was alone. In the end, I couldn't deny the honor that helping two young souls join together in harmony translated into incredible affection for me as a human being.

What I loved even more, suddenly, were weddings. Not so much all the pomp and circumstance or the big party. I relished how less lonely I felt at the cross-section of another couple's happily-ever-after moment and the unknown course of my own love story. There was still more waiting for me, but for the time being, I was happy with two pieces of wedding cake.