



stealing the show

From a meddling mother-in-law to egocentric bridesmaids and competitive siblings, why is it that everyone but the bride is scrambling for the spotlight?

Things couldn't be better. You've finally found the missing piece to life's great romantic puzzle and everything is, frankly, peachy keen. With one glaring exception. Your family and closest friends, the very people who are supposed to be helping you through this momentous event, are doing just the opposite.

'The problem with being a supporting actor is that often you want the lead role but, in terms of a wedding, the bride has already landed that,' says counselor and psychotherapist Marie Rowland (talking-matters.com). And as if the pressure of a wedding itself isn't enough, it seems the bride acts almost as a mirror, reflecting the unfulfilled desires of those closest to her. 'This is a time when genuine happiness for the bride, whether she is a best friend, sister or cousin, intermingles with unexpected emotions such as envy and dejection. Weddings inadvertently turn the spotlight on your own situation,' explains Marie.

Rather paradoxically, your impending nuptials

can become all about others and where they find themselves in life – for the bride, it can be a surprisingly lonely time. 'As part of the bride's support network, our perceived failures and longing for acceptance and love are magnified. The bride becomes more than a mere woman and can represent all that her nearest aspire to,' says Marie in what sounds like a sure-fire recipe for friendship failure.

BOILING POINT

From sibling rivalry to jealous friends or parents with something to prove, weddings are an ideal breeding ground for simmering tensions to come to the fore, exposing fractures in ostensibly healthy relationships. 'Weddings are stressful and, as the big day approaches, brides and their supporters feel the weight of expectation which is both fatiguing as well as nerve-wracking. As a result our personal trigger mechanisms are exposed and we don't have our usual defences

and self-censoring devices to fall back on,' says Marie. So perhaps before you blurt out the first thing that comes to mind when your bridesmaid complains about her dress or your mother wants to add yet more of her friends to your ever-expanding guest list, spare a thought for the way you would normally behave – take your wedding 'hat' off so to speak. 'All it may take is one random comment to set off an emotional tirade. The fallout can have devastating repercussions – what should be a happy time can turn into a family breakdown,' explains Marie.

BRIDESMAID BLUES

For recent bride Cecily-Anna Bradley, what was a fabulous friendship soon disintegrated post-engagement. After spending the engagement period creating problems, Cecily's bridesmaid Sarah turned her spotlight-stealing antics up a notch on the big day. 'It started from the moment we woke up and got progressively worse – it

PLANNING

would be comical if it wasn't so depressing. First up Sarah spent the morning wailing about how she hadn't brought the right coloured underwear with her; so much so that I ended up giving her a lovely new pair that I had bought for my honeymoon,' says Cecily who contended with all manner of unreasonable behaviour throughout the day. 'When the make-up artist arrived Sarah jumped straight in the chair after me without even thinking of my mum and sister. She monopolised so much of the make-up artist's time that their make-up was rushed. She then insisted she was dressed straight after me. There's a photo in my album of Sarah being helped into her dress by my mum and sister, both in their nighties, without a scrap of make-up on or their hair done. It pretty much sums up my day,' recalls Cecily.

Rather than being a dutiful and supportive bridesmaid, Cecily feels Sarah made the whole day about her. Further capers include the moment she insisted on walking up the aisle before Cecily's sister, citing her small stature as an excuse. 'Sarah's head literally eclipsed my sister out of all the ceremony photos. This also meant that Sarah was standing closer to me than any of my family throughout proceedings. It was atrocious,' recalls Cecily.

Sarah's bad behaviour culminated in one last-ditch attempt at grabbing the spotlight at the reception. 'She wasn't getting quite as much attention as she would have liked throughout the day so while everyone was dancing she decided to pull out her party trick which involved spinning on the floor and busting out some breakdancing moves. Everyone clapped of course,' says Cecily.

Marie offers up an explanation; 'The best friend may feel as if she is losing an ally and she might need to make it known that she still has a stake in the bride's life. These mix of emotions can play out in irrational behaviour and demands causing the bride to, in fact, support her supporters.'

'Mostly I feel sick that someone I had been such a good friend to for over a decade had treated my day like it was her own. I was also disgusted to recall how she had put herself before everybody – not just me but my mum and sister. She didn't deserve to stand next to me as I said my vows and looking back, she barely deserved to be there at all. It took me a while to deal with what was ultimately a betrayal of friendship. I realised she didn't care about me at all – just herself,' says Cecily.

THE SMOTHER-IN-LAW

It has become a cliché but for many brides, the most difficult person to deal with is their future mother-in-law. Unfortunately some mothers seem fixated on exploiting the final moments of their reign and sometimes to devastating effect.

For Tutti Bennett, her mother-in-law decided a last minute snip was just what her son needed on the morning of the big day. 'She insisted on cutting my husband's hair. He has a signature, luxurious afro and one of the most fabulous

things about him was mercilessly hacked until he resembled a shadow of his former self!' says Tutti. Whether it was a final attempt at asserting control or she felt left out of festivities, there was no doubt something deeper was at play. 'Brides often have difficulties with prospective mother-in-laws because in some small way these mothers are grieving the loss of their son. Parents, especially mothers, seek acknowledgement – they want their contribution to be valued,' explains Marie.

But despite your best efforts, it's not always possible to maintain harmonious relations. 'I didn't know my mother-in-law well at the time. We lived in different states and I was determined to be a textbook, perfect daughter-in-law. My mother always encouraged me to be friends but sadly, it wasn't meant to be,' adds Tutti.

And while it's imperative that the mother of the groom is included, it's important for the bride's mother to feel involved too. 'On the big day, the mother of the bride takes a diminished role in a way. It's usually the father who walks the bride down the aisle and backs it up with a speech later on, while mum waits in the wings. They need reassurance that they are a vital, if not indispensable part of the big day,' says Marie.

ONCE BITTEN

For most brides, it's a difficult pill to swallow when loved ones show so little support on what is arguably one of the most important days of your life. 'I chose to turn a blind eye on my wedding day because I didn't want anything to colour my completely joyous mood. It was when the wedding-haze lifted that I saw with crystal-clear clarity how completely awful she had been. It was like a big, terrible punch in the guts,' recalls Cecily.

But Marie cautions against suddenly ending a friendship. 'It can be said that in times of need we find out who our true friends are but it's also during this time that we can place pressure on others to perform. If there are any unresolved issues regarding certain individuals, weddings offer an opportunity to expose them,' says Marie.

But for some, there's no getting past what can feel like the ultimate betrayal. 'If having Sarah steal the limelight was the price I had to pay to realise what a toxic friend she was, then I say it was a bargain,' says Cecily who has no regrets about ending the decade-long friendship.

That said, it's a good idea to put measures in place that reduce the likelihood of a post-nuptial falling out. 'Many brides turn to people removed from their wedding for support. These "outsiders" don't have a stake in the day and can offer impartiality. They can also give gentle advice if the bride is turning into bridezilla,' says Marie who explains that the onus is also on the bride to keep her behaviour in check. 'Besides having a neutral bystander for support, brides need to keep their lives in perspective. This is a big day but it is one in a lifetime of marriage. Make sure to keep up with all the other things in your life – work, exercise and your friendships,' adds Marie.

“ **CELEBRANTTALES**
Wedding celebrant Sarah Cummings
(engagecelebrants.com.au) dishes the dirt on
some of her more 'memorable' wedding
experiences. And you think you've got it bad!

- I officiated over a wedding where the mother of the groom turned up to the wedding in a very revealing outfit. Everyone's eyes were on her scandalous choice of dress and she completely upstaged her soon to be daughter-in-law!
- I had a groom that turned up to the ceremony an hour and half after the bride. He then proceeded to tell his bride and the wedding guests that they were all there for him, rather than them as a couple. Ouch.
- I married a couple from overseas who specifically chose to get married in Australia because they had an overbearing aunt who wanted to control every part of the day. Due to her health she wasn't able to fly so marrying here meant they could do it how they wished. She was so offended she stopped speaking to them!

WAR OF WORDS

Marie shares her top tips for saying what you mean without causing offence.

- When expressing your point, swap the accusatory word 'you' (as in 'you don't listen to me') for the word 'I' (as in 'I feel upset when I'm not heard'). This way the recipient won't feel attacked or get defensive and should be more open to listening with empathy.
- When you feel your blood boiling and words about to erupt, check yourself. Simply say that you are too angry to talk right now and walk away. This is hard to do when all you want to do is hurl vitriol for some short-term respite but it has no long-term gain.
- Write down how you feel. Sometimes when we have so much to say, the message gets lost in a veil of emotion. Writing how we feel allows the anger to dissipate but it also allows you to collect your thoughts so you can relate your feelings in a clear and articulate way.
- Recognise your triggers so that you can anticipate anger or an emotional fallout.
- Find a neutral spot like a café where you can talk off your differences. If it's too hard, find a neutral third party – a friend or professional can help take the sting out of the words.