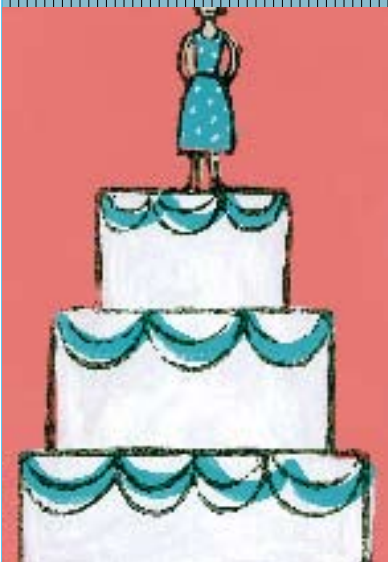


# ✕ Memoir



## For better or for worse

**CYNTHIA BROUSE'S DECISION TO HOSTESS HER OWN UNWEDDING WASN'T ABOUT A DESIRE FOR FANCY CHINA OR MATCHING LUGGAGE — IT WAS ABOUT HONOURING HER STATUS AS A SINGLE WOMAN**

I was never a fan of *Sex and the City*. The TV series and movie portrayed a world that seemed as remote from mine as an asteroid orbiting Jupiter. I don't think I wanted to admit that *SATC* actually hit a bit too close to home. In the one episode I did watch, the profound sadness that underlay Carrie Bradshaw and company's shenanigans depressed me, as I slunk toward 50 without a Mr. Big (or Medium or even Small) anywhere in sight.

But when I hatched my plan to fete myself with an "unwedding" party, everyone assumed I had picked up the idea from the *SATC* episode in which Carrie "registers" at a high-end shoe store in order to make a statement to the friends on whom she has spent hundreds of dollars for engagement, wedding, shower and baby gifts, but who show no respect for her single lifestyle. I rented the DVD and, I admit, cheered out loud at Carrie's declaration that we singles should not have to put up with being seen as immature, defective human beings whose accomplishments aren't even worthy of a paper-plate hat covered in tacky bows, let alone a set of china or a \$150-a-plate dinner.

During my thirties, when I bemoaned this married-versus-single inequity in a class I was teaching, a young woman put up her hand and declared, "Miss, you're just jealous!" Umm...d'ya think? But I wasn't jealous simply because I had to buy my own microwave oven and matching luggage, and, oh yeah, ante up for a home down payment while cheerfully subsidizing my friends and relatives as they made serial trips to the altar and the

maternity ward. (In fact, they'd be quick to tell you I don't quite match Carrie's largesse in the gift department.)

I wasn't jealous simply because I didn't have sex on tap or a shoulder to cry on or someone with whom to roam the aisles at Home Depot on a Saturday. I wasn't even sure marriage would guarantee I got any of those things, anyway.

What I was really jealous of was my married friends' and relatives' certain knowledge that they were "normal," that they had a privileged place in society that deserved to be honoured, celebrated and financially supported while I did not. As a single person, I sometimes feel like one of those nuts or bolts or cotter pins left over after you put together an Ikea shelving unit, or maybe like an appendix or a set of tonsils — something that hangs around but serves no real purpose and sometimes gets in the way.

Where is the soup tureen for building a reasonably successful career? What tax advantage comes with being a faithful aunt, devoted friend or helpful neighbour? Who bought a bridesmaid's dress when I got my BA at 42? Where, in the words of Carrie Bradshaw, is the Hallmark card that says, "Congratulations, you didn't marry the wrong guy"?

Last year, when I was about to turn 50, I realized that what I really wanted was a wedding dance. I wanted one of my married friends, who had always said, "Oh, don't worry, I'll dance at your wedding one day!" to do just that. I wanted to make the statement that, as an unmarried person, I am not incomplete or unfinished, and, furthermore, I am worth celebrating.

Still, I felt nervous and embarrassed after I'd sent everyone I know invitations that blared: "The Wedding Dance She Never Had!" I fudged things a little by associating the party with my 50th year and by billing it as a charity event. Unlike Carrie Bradshaw, I couldn't fit even my arthritic big toe into a pair of Manolo Blahniks; with no desire to start a gift registry, I decided to collect money at the door to help buy a blanket warmer for a local hospice, where a single friend had recently died of breast cancer.

Perhaps it was not surprising, then, that a few people just didn't get the unwedding bit. Why would they? It was a tad unorthodox. And maybe the point I was trying to make — that the lack of a groom shouldn't prevent me from having all the other trappings, including the deference and felicitations traditionally accorded to a bride — was offensive to those for whom the exclusivity of membership in the married club depends on keeping out those who don't follow traditional paths. Would I simply confirm some people's suspicions that unmarrieds are selfish and hedonistic — even though, as Bella DePaulo points out in her book, *Singled Out: How Singles Are Stereotyped, Stigmatized, and Ignored, and Still Live Happily Ever After*, "In the race to ever more staggering displays of self-celebration, weddings beat birthday parties hands down"?

But most people absolutely got it — friends and relatives who immediately reassured me that I merited such a celebration, that they would be there no matter what,

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and asked how they could contribute. The penny dropped for my mother a couple of weeks before the party when I got a bit cross with her for asking if my father had to wear a suit. Suddenly she realized I was handing her the opportunity to play mother of the bride again, and she got into the spirit admirably. We had a couple of girlie conversations about centrepieces and flowers, which filled a hole in my heart that I'd never acknowledged was there.

**THE MINUTE I WALKED** into the legion hall auditorium in my east-end Toronto neighbourhood — complete with mirror ball, cheap bar, Union Jack and pictures of

the Queen — I knew it was the perfect venue for my faux nuptial bash, exactly the sort of place in which I would have held a wedding dance had I married at 20 in my hometown. But to reflect the middle-aged me, ensconced in my house in the city's Little India district, I eschewed the white gown and purchased a sparkly South Asian *lengha* in black, red and silver, with a matching bridal bouquet.

On the big day, the bustle and fuss at my house, where some of my closest friends stayed over, felt as wedding day-like as I'd imagined it would. We went to the hair salon, and I treated myself to a manicure, pedicure and eyebrow threading, and bought a jazzy, new red bra.

That night, about 100 people watched me cut a groomless wedding cake and glide over the dance floor with my dad to a waltz by Toronto singer Kathryn Rose called "I Married Myself." ("I married myself/It was the best thing I ever did/'cause nobody else was gonna come through/We walked down the aisle/Nobody gave me away/'cause I'm here to stay/...a little more in love every day" — a handy sentiment, since I was the only one who'd see the red bra unless I dried it on my clothesline.)

A few of my female pals got kitted out in old bridesmaid's dresses, and, with my 10-year-old niece playing flower girl, I tossed my bouquet from the stage. I had feared that everyone would run for the corners, but I needn't have worried. My second cousin nearly broke an ankle skidding across the floor to grab it, declaring that she wanted to be the next unmarried 50-year-old (her turn came a few months later).

The first segment of the evening was a concert: I sang a solo about women who are seen as too smart for their own good; various friends and relatives played piano and guitar, and performed such songs as "Non, je ne regrette rien"; and a troupe of belly dancers shimmied to a number called "You Know He Never Loved You," tossing away white veils and wedding bouquets with mock vengeance. After a long-time friend offered the toast to the unbride, we danced our asses off to tunes I got to pick all by myself. I got a great kick out of watching some teens muddle through their first clammy-handed slow dances. Quite a few guests told me later it was more fun than any real wedding they'd attended.

Despite the potentially campy take on the institution of marriage, in no way was I trying to disparage it; I invited all the couples — including my 51-years-married parents and an aunt and uncle who'd been married for 61 — to dance to an old tune I had always dreamed of having played at my wedding, "True Love" by the McGuire Sisters. As it happened, among the pairs on the dance floor that night were several gay couples, including a male cousin and his spouse, who told me that my unwedding party marked the first occasion in their

22-year partnership that they had danced together in public. Providing a safe and accepting place for them to do that was the highlight of the night for me.

I sat out the couples' dance, and ended up hugging and crying with a friend in her seventies whose husband had died just a few weeks before. Although she had enjoyed a wonderful marriage to a great guy, I did not, to my surprise, feel envious of her or any of the couples on the dance floor. Five years ago, I think an unwedding party would have seemed to me the height of self-pity — and some of my guests may have been motivated by pity to attend. Yet that night I felt contented with my lot, and was thrilled to be surrounded and honoured by people from every phase and corner of my life, several of whom flew in from great distances, paid for hotel rooms, dressed up for the occasion and even brought their kids.

I don't feel that sense of contentment every day; I go through phases during which I struggle under a crushing load of loneliness, fear and the certainty that I'm a failure. Sadly, I know plenty of married people who go through similar phases. In the end, life is what it is — why not celebrate when we can? On what turned out to be the most important night of my life, I was simply pointing out that human beings deserve to be honoured in all their

varied circumstances, and that single people have a significant role to play within families and communities.

When a teenage friend who attended later wrote me to say that my party had shown her she didn't need to snag any old boyfriend just for the sake of having one, I knew I'd done the right thing. Surely if singlehood weren't perceived as a fate worse than death, if singles weren't excluded and infantilized and pitied, fewer people would feel compelled by terror to become involved in unsuitable matches, and everyone would be a lot happier.

As I later described my unwedding to a young former co-worker who'd recently moved and couldn't attend, he said, "Damn, I wish I'd been there." And then he ventured that he had kind of proved my point. "I've travelled back to Toronto several times this past summer for various friends' weddings," he admitted sheepishly. "But I didn't make the effort to go to yours." I reassured him — I'm not a long-time pal of his from school, it wasn't a real wedding, anyway — but I loved that he got it.

In the future, when my niece and nephews grow up and leave their parents' homes, I'd like to throw "showers" for them, whether they're leaving to get married, to go away to school or simply to live independently. There's more than one way to become an adult. **M**