



# 17 WEDDINGS

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For Sheila  
(and the best wedding ever)

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WEDDINGS

Bernard Kirby

I ALWAYS THOUGHT IT WAS COOL TO BE INVITED TO A WEDDING.

As a kid, weddings were all about *dessert*. The all-you-can-eat buffets of cheesecakes and profiteroles and chocolate cream pies that made even the most boring nuptials enjoyable. I gorged on wedding treats even more once we discovered that my little brother had Celiac disease. At least I'd had ten years to develop a taste for proper dessert—six before Bruno came along, and another four before we learned that gluten was turning his small intestine into a warzone. After that, mom promptly replaced at least half the Kirby menu with two new food groups—pasty slop and particle board.

In my teen years, weddings were about dessert and *girls*. Weddings were the only occasions when I could get a girl to dance with me, notwithstanding my brief glimpse of popularity in grade nine, when my unrequited crush, Tamara Turnbull, invited me to her house party. Ignoring the fact that Tamara had always treated me as something between a pet and a pest, I accepted the invitation and trusted her intentions. After all, Tamara was *pretty*, and pretty always gets in the way of proper judgment.

I had a blast at Tamara's party, demonstrating some over-the-top dance moves that I'd learned at weddings—like a Russian crab dance and some seriously-70's disco steps—which got the

whole crowd of popular kids chanting, “Bernie! Bernie!” It was all fun and games until Tamara’s twin brother, Teddy, announced that the only reason she’d invited me was to win a bet with him. Teddy—star point guard for the Pearson Junior Pumas and lead singer of Rigid Cookie, his ridiculous excuse for a Limp Bizkit cover band—was my arch-nemesis. I should have known that he would use the party to remind me—and everyone else in attendance—that Tamara was way out of my league.

When Teddy called out his sister’s intentions, Tamara’s face turned redder than a candy apple—and I must have turned as pale as Marilyn Monroe’s dress in *The Seven Year Itch*. After a humiliating exit from my moment of fabricated popularity, my reputation for crowd-pleasing antics stuck ... so I embraced it and became the class clown everyone expected me to be. I was never sure whether people were laughing *at* me or *with* me, but once I got a taste of attention, I stopped caring where it came from.

Anyway, back to weddings ... once I hit nineteen, *alcohol* greatly enhanced my enjoyment of marital festivities. In the decade since then, I’ve learned to appreciate weddings as invitations into people’s inner circles—which are much easier to penetrate when you’re drunk.

During one of my earliest drunken wedding episodes, at my second-cousin Jerry’s nuptials in Saskatoon, I invented a party game called *Where’s Uncle Bob?* It turns out that just about everyone has an Uncle Bob, or a Great-Uncle Bob, or an *almost* Uncle Bob—someone named Rob or Robert or Bobby or Roberto, or failing any actual Bob-like name, someone who just *seems* like an Uncle Bob. Nobody who has imbibed at least three drinks can resist a game of *Where’s Uncle Bob?* Which is why—and how—I met Stephanie Hansen.

When I met my cousin Fiona's maid of honour on March 14, 2009, Stephanie stood above me in every way. A Thompson Valley farm girl with Scandinavian roots, Steph was tall, beautiful, fit, and capable of drinking me under the table. Two years older than me, she already had a college diploma, a career in business administration, and a basement suite of her own. Her perfectly-proportioned five-foot-seven body—a full inch and a half taller than mine—was accentuated by a teal bridesmaid dress that turned her into a princess. As she jigged and jived and two-stepped across the tiny dance floor at the Granville Island Hotel to celebrate her friend's special day, I half expected a fairy godmother to show up and whisk her away in a pumpkin-carriage.

I am forever in debt to Fiona for inviting Stephanie and me to be in the same place at the same time. And I am infinitely appreciative of Fiona's aunt, Roberta—the only person at Fiona's wedding whose name, face or demeanour (in her case all three) resembled a *Bob*—for allowing me to meet the mischievous woman hiding inside of Stephanie Hansen's flawless physique.

In hindsight, I understand the forces that brought Stephanie and me together. As we shared a bottle of wine and countless cans of Kokanee, it became clear that we had a lot in common: a passion for dancing like lunatics; an appreciation for the social networking game, Peace Warrior; a diabolical sense of humour, which culminated in some very politically incorrect observations about Aunt Bob; and the clincher for me—a shared history of watching Canadian football.

When Stephanie suggested that we step outside for some fresh air—to continue a talk about football, of all things—I couldn't believe my luck. Finding a CFL fan in Vancouver is rare enough. Finding a CFL fan in Vancouver who is a *girl* is like winning

coffee for a year from your *RRR* Roll Up the Rim to Win cup at Tim Hortons. Finding a CFL fan in Vancouver who is an unbelievably attractive girl is like winning Lotto 6/49—with the Extra.

I was surprised when Stephanie pecked me on the cheek after some other partygoers spilled out onto the patio and interrupted our discussion—but it kinda made sense. Apart from some questionable humour and a few loud beer belches—all of which seemed to amuse my new female friend—I'm pretty sure I acted like a gentleman.

By the time Stephanie's chariot arrived—a yellow taxi that would carry her away with two other bridesmaids to some princess-only after-party—I was starting to believe that we had potential for a real connection. When she wrote her phone number on a cocktail napkin and blew me a kiss before hopping into the cab—leaving me to wind down the wedding with a handful of fellow piss-tanks—I knew that I'd made a half-decent first impression.

What I never quite understood was why Stephanie stuck around. Maybe I never truly believed that she did. It was no small miracle that she returned the phone message I left two days after Fiona's wedding. According to my best friend at the time, Jonathan Donaldson, I was committing a grade-A faux pas by calling a woman within three days of first contact. Truth be told, I would have called Stephanie the morning after the wedding if my head hadn't felt like a cracked-open watermelon.

When I mustered the courage to call Stephanie, I was disappointed to reach her voice mail—and relieved that I didn't have to get my words right on the first try. I erased at least half a dozen botched messages before leaving a borderline-acceptable request for her to call me back. Not only did she return my call moments

later—she waited patiently while I jumbled my attempt to ask her out for hot chocolate. And when I finally completed the question, she actually agreed to meet me at The Big Bean on Kingsway.

After our first date—when I discovered that: (a) Steph was even *more* attractive than I'd remembered; and (b) I could make a pretty girl laugh *without* the assistance of alcohol—Stephanie started calling me. She invited me for second, third, fourth and fifth hot chocolate dates at The Big Bean—all within two weeks of our first outing. Then, on our fifth date, she suggested with a sultry voice that we go back to *her* place. I froze, too stunned to answer. I knew that *my* house was no place for a fifth hot chocolate date to end—not with my parents, teenage brother and toy poodle there to chaperone us. But the thought of going to Stephanie's place, where she lived alone—where she slept and showered—roused feelings that were almost too intense to bear.

I must have nodded my head, because next thing I knew we were riding in her brand-new Ford F150 to *her* place—a basement suite on West 26th Avenue, at the epicentre of Vancouver's stratospherically-overpriced housing market. The moment we burst through the door, she grabbed me by my t-shirt, guided me to her couch, and set a standard for physical pleasure that far exceeded anything I had ever achieved on my own. That was the day I learned what it meant to be alive.

I hadn't expected Stephanie to return my first phone call—or to invite me on four more hot chocolate dates. I certainly didn't expect her to invite me back to *her* place and cause me to lose my virginity three times on the same day. And I was utterly amazed when, after not quite a full year of dating, Stephanie looked up from the little cardboard box where I'd asked the waitress to plant an engagement ring under a chocolate pizza—the regular ending

to our weekly Friday night Boston Pizza date—and said *yes*. There were even tears in her eyes. Before long, I was a blubbering mess.

On July 24th, 2010, four-and-a-half months after she agreed to be my *fiancée*, Stephanie Hansen walked down the aisle of St. Patrick's Catholic Church beside her father, Earl, to become my *wife*. Stephanie was wearing the most stunning wedding dress in the entire universe—a short, white number that showed off her shoulders and her amazing calves. She looked like a cross between Audrey Hepburn and Rita Hayworth, only prettier.

Earl, whose full name is Earl John Wayne Hansen, is a giant, scary Viking-rancher from Kamloops. He told Stephanie that if she insisted on getting married to *me*, and if she wanted *him* to pay for it, then we would at least get married in a Catholic church. I knew that Steph had some doubts about God and Jesus being the same almighty being, but she didn't let that stand in the way of a Catholic wedding—or admit her religious misgivings to Father John, our frail, balding priest who looked like he'd time-travelled from the eleventh century. Father John doted over Stephanie like she was a perfect Catholic girl, but he seemed entirely unimpressed with my lack of knowledge about the Holy Trinity. He only agreed to marry us so long as we planned to raise our kids Catholic. We didn't want kids anyway—a fact that we were smart enough to conceal from both father Earl and Father John.

At the front of the church, Stephanie's dad gave her a big hug, whispered something in her ear, and looked at me like he was nauseous. I never warmed up to Earl, and he never warmed up to me, but I kinda felt bad for him on our wedding day. I think he might have had food poisoning or something, because he didn't look quite right all day.

Standing at the altar, Stephanie turned to her woozy-looking

father and said, “It’s okay, Dad. I want to do this. I love him.” As I stared into my fiancée’s amazingly blue eyes, my emotions got the better of me and I started blubbering like I had at Boston Pizza.

When Stephanie and I said our vows in the company of *our* inner circle—with a bar full of Kokanee and a gluten party of desserty goodness waiting for us to wrap up the religious mumbo-jumbo—I felt almost holy. At twenty-four years old, I finally felt like a real man.

When Stephanie said *I do*—when she agreed to make *her* place *our* place—I could tell that I was in for an amazing life full of Peace Warrior, pizza, Canadian football, and mind-blowing sex.

Or so I thought.

For most of my life, weddings were happy places for me—raucous celebrations, bursting with dessert and girls and alcohol and dancing—and I cherished every opportunity to witness the union of two kindred souls.

But that all changed when I received the wedding invitation from Hell.