

Single Bridezillas

A new breed of would-be bride is on the rise. They're designing wedding invitations, looking at rings, and dreaming about their big day—now all they need is a groom

By Theresa O'Rourke

KAT RICHTER, 26, a single writer and teaching artist in Philadelphia, has, like many women, dreamed about her wedding day since she was a teenager. "At 16, I started clipping wedding dresses from magazines to store in a scrapbook. But when I inherited my grandmother's wedding dress a few years ago, things started snowballing," she says. "I decided that I would need another dress for the reception and found one on sale, so I bought it—but then I needed shoes to match." She and her mother, a florist, have pored over floral arrangements and centerpieces for ideas, and Kat, who knows the Bach song that will play during the wedding procession, even has a honeymoon location in mind.

Likewise, Laurie, a 30-year-old publishing associate in New York, wants her wedding to be perfect. She has stalked Facebook friends' wedding photos for gown ideas, carefully debated traditional cake versus doughnut towers, and endlessly tweaked her band's set list for the big day. But Laurie isn't a bride, either. She sheepishly admits to being "150 percent single."

And Ruth, a 38-year-old Barnard graduate turned lawyer, is actively planning her wedding despite the fact that she's single. "When I was 32, I



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bought two ring settings: one for a large diamond and a backup setting for a smaller diamond," she says. "I've also purchased a vintage wedding gown, after seeing it in the window of a Madison Avenue consignment shop, because I knew I wouldn't find anything as unique. My dream is to have a wedding as magical as—don't laugh—the one in *Twilight: Breaking Dawn*. Having seen so many of my friends get married, I feel pressured to get engaged, and it

makes me fantasize about the kind of wedding I want someday."

Kat, Laurie, and Ruth might sound like anomalies, especially in light of new research that suggests young adults have grown increasingly apathetic about marriage. According to the U.S. Census, just 45 percent of people ages 25 to 34 are now married—a record low, and a 10 percent drop in less than a decade. And while just over 2 million people married in 2009, >>



» that's a 4 percent slide from the year before. Pew Research conducted a study on how the economy has affected personal growth, and found that out of 1,028 people, nearly a quarter of those ages 24 to 35 were postponing marriage due to tough financial times.

But waiting and wanting aren't mutually exclusive states. A growing number of fiancé-free women are actively in the "beta version" of bridedom, planning and debugging every detail for possible glitches. Their test audiences: a thick-as-thieves community on wedding sites, blogs, and online forums.

The online community has recently pushed matrimania to a new level, creating an anonymous forum safely removed from the *WTF?* glare of skittish boyfriends. "Wedding planning is ultimately about wishful thinking, hoping, and organizing," says Helen Fisher, Ph.D., anthropologist at Rutgers University and author of *Why Him? Why Her?* "Now women can get caught up—and ultimately obsessed—with the fantasy, without being found out."

Elizabeth, a 27-year-old psychologist

in Philadelphia, just broke up with her boyfriend of three years and admits to designing her wedding invitations and engagement ring online—but never checking out of her virtual cart—when the two were together. "I dreamed about the details of the wedding because it was a way for me to feel control in a situation in which I unfortunately felt I had very little. In other aspects of my life, I have complete autonomy—I'm used to going for what I want. There was a deep sense of doubt about my validity as a woman if I couldn't 'get him' to marry me. So the planning was a comforting fantasy."

While popular bridal destinations like *theknot.com* target brides, they now draw just as many bride wannabes. Of all its "special topics" message boards, *theknot.com*'s Not Engaged Yet (a board for single women and those in relationships to vent about the frustrations of not being engaged) is second in traffic and comments only to Wedding Woes. These sites also provide fertile ground for those hungry for emotional support. "Seeing so many women in my shoes makes me feel less weird about planning," says Sarah Bush, 26, a Los Angeles-based marketing coordinator who religiously frequents the Not Engaged Yet board on almost a daily basis. Bush has three different wedding themes mapped out—beach, ranch, or plantation—and takes comfort in reading other women's stories. "It helps when I want to ask my boyfriend for the umpteenth time, 'When are we getting married?'" she says.

Fair enough. But why the psychological need to bum-rush it to the altar at all? We know that about 40 percent of marriages fail and that there's no longer such a necessity for women to marry. Sex, babies, financial security—it all used to be tethered to marriage. Now? Not so much, says Bella DePaulo, Ph.D., social scientist and author of *Singled Out*. "You can pick up the check at work and the sperm at the bank," she says. "So what's the wedding industry going to do? They have to sell women on the psychology of it, convince them that the only way to have a complete

DATING/diary

The Fame Game

Dawn, 35, fitness instructor, New York City

THURSDAY 2 p.m., home: My friend Heidi, who works in PR, calls. "I just had lunch with a contact named Drew, and I want to set you guys up." I'm newly single and still feeling gun-shy about dating, so I ask for details. "He's tall, athletic, and charming—but there is one caveat." I hold my breath, waiting to hear that he lives with his mom or has six toes. "He has a really famous ex, and you look exactly like her." A little weird, but I give Heidi the OK to pass on my number.

2:10 p.m.: Googling the Famous Ex. Wow, I could be her twin sister. Well, who cares? They broke up, and I'm much more down to earth than she is—if you believe what you read in the news.

7 p.m.: My cell buzzes on my nightstand from an unknown number. Feeling optimistic, I pick up, and it's Drew. We have easy banter and make plans to meet for Mexican this week.

SATURDAY 8:05 p.m., restaurant: I arrive at Rosa Mexicano in a miniskirt and tight cowl-neck sweater to find Drew waiting at the bar. He stands to greet me, and I'm surprised to discover that although he towers over the Ex in photographs, he's surprisingly slight in real life.

12:30 a.m., Drew's apartment: After many tequila shots and much guacamole, Drew suggests going back to his place. Feeling euphoric, I hightail it with him to his downtown apartment. While kissing on his couch, I can't help but think that Drew's lips have also kissed the Famous Ex. I wonder who's the better kisser.

and happy life is to get married."

It must be working, says Manisha Thakor, financial expert and coauthor of *Get Financially Naked*. Though women are now a greater percentage of the overall workforce and earning bachelor degrees at faster rates than men, "there is still a subtle but steady drumbeat of expectation that women will be defined by their relationships and not their work," Thakor says. Of the dozens of women interviewed for this article, the majority had booming careers and postgrad degrees, and one even owned a home at the age of 22. Despite all that, women are still taught to believe that a wedding is "the most