



Some were married at the cottage. For others, it had only been a dream. Now, it was time to have the party

Brides' day revisited

By Andrea Curtis

I planned to arrive at my cottage wedding in a green cedar-strip canoe. My dad and I would paddle up to the bare pink rock that stretches out from our Georgian Bay island like a crooked finger. We'd step out and greet my boyfriend, Nick, and the small clutch of close friends and family gathered there.

I was to be nearly nine months pregnant—with (I imagined) one of those perfect basketball-shaped bellies—fresh and “glowing” in a simple sheath the colour of the sky. Nick and I thought of the wedding, at one of our favourite places on Earth, as a celebration of both our love for each other and the wee baby inside.

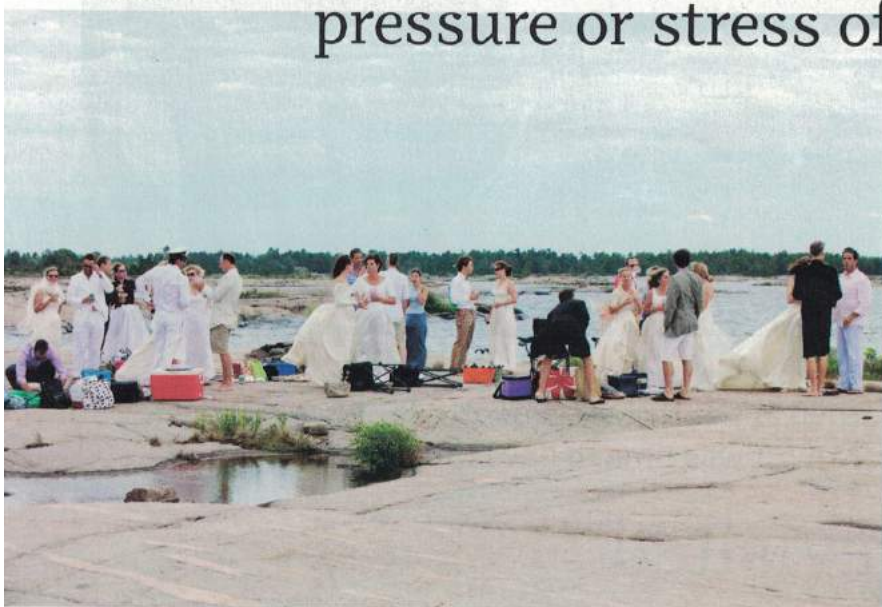
But the wee baby had other plans. Two-and-a-half weeks before the scheduled July 10th ceremony, our son was born in Toronto by emergency C-section. He weighed only 3½ pounds and needed all the considerable resources of the neonatal intensive care unit to keep him breathing. The island wedding would have to wait.

That terrifying time was 12 years ago. The newborn is now a strapping young basketball player with a gift for mathematics and a little brother in tow. Nick and I ended up getting married in my parents' garden—closer to the hospital where our boy lived for the first month of his life—and despite it all, the day was beautiful and poignant



The father of one of the brides ferries a group (including the author, in blue) out to the island setting for the party. The scene was a style smorgasbord, with gowns of every sort and grooms in suits, shorts, even jeans. And then: taking the plunge, again.

A cottage wedding party with none of the pressure or stress of the real thing



and a lot of fun. But when I heard last spring that some of my cottage friends were planning a wedding-dress party—complete with grooms, champagne, and hors d'oeuvres on a glorious, treeless island near the open in Georgian Bay—I jumped at the chance for a do-over.

The brainchild of Becca Worple, a professional photographer and lifelong Pointe au Baril cottager, the party was conceived after she attended a photography workshop where she heard about a trend known as “trash the dress” or “rock the frock.” After her wedding ceremony, a bride will hire a photographer to capture her, say, swimming in the ocean, riding a motorcycle, even rolling around in the dirt in a junkyard wearing her gown.

Becca says she found the thought of destroying an expensive, carefully chosen, much-loved dress “frankly insane,” but once she started talking about it with cottage friends Willa Griffin and Gigi Worts, the idea began to take on a unique Georgian Bay vibe.

None of them was interested in trashing her dress, but all three loved the idea of getting decked out in their gowns and having a cocktail picnic out on the



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rocks—a wedding party with none of the pressure or stress of the real thing.

Gigi, in fact, was the only one of the three who'd dared to be married at the cottage, tying the knot in 1995 at her long-time family place on Clovelly Island. Cottage weddings are notoriously complicated affairs (Where will the guests stay? Will the septic system/composting toilets/outhouses hold? Will the weather?), but at boat-access-only, mostly off-the-grid Pointe au Baril, there are some obvious added challenges. Still, if the overwhelming response to the invitations sent out for the wedding-dress party is any indication, the cottage wedding is a dream that hasn't entirely died for many islanders.

The mid-July evening was warm and slightly windy as boat after boat loaded with women pulled up to the Wortses' island for a pre-party "bride"-only photo shoot. Each time someone else stepped out onto the dock, a cry of delight would rise up from the women already gathered nearby. There were white and gold and cream-coloured gowns, long silky trains and pouffy sleeves, rows of tiny impossible buttons, veils whipping in the wind, décolletage galore. But in keeping with the setting, the 25 brides wore no makeup, many had their hair pulled back into loose swimmer's ponytails, and bare, tanned feet poked out the bottom of their dresses.

Gigi and her two sisters were still pulling together her crown of wildflowers as we milled around waiting for the stragglers. One woman giggled as she lifted up her shawl to reveal electrical tape holding together her dress designed for a pre-baby body, then others started showing off the fishing line, pins, and ribbon keeping their own gowns together. Maybe it was the contrast between the sumptuous dresses and the rough Canadian Shield, or just the fun of seeing familiar faces in unfamiliar getups, but no one could stop laughing.

When the final boatload arrived, Becca—wearing a wedding dress herself and hauling huge cameras on both shoulders—directed the group to a foot-bridge for photos. We all lined up along the railing, waving at passing boaters as

she scooped up her huge skirt to clamber over boulders to get the right shot.

Finally, we were ready for our grand entrance. With the grooms waiting on a nearby vacant island, a good-natured Jim Worts (Gigi's dad)—in navy blazer, blue-striped sailor shirt, and captain's hat—squired groups of us out to meet them in his sleek 25-foot mahogany launch.

The evening was a blur of high spirits and champagne as seagulls hovered over the simple potluck appetizers spread out on the bare rock. The men, instructed to "dress to impress," came in outfits ranging from Hawaiian shirts to tuxedo jackets and shorts, from a white linen suit to a hand-me-down coral pink blazer.

"We're all happy wives tonight," said Becca, laughing, as she circulated around the group, snapping photo after photo. And, indeed, nobody seemed to care when a train caught on a rock or dragged through a stagnant pond. I spotted a trio of brides nipping off for a pee, each one in turn holding another's long train up like a peacock behind her for privacy. Everyone was giddy with the fun of a dress-up party.

At first, I was self-conscious as the only woman wearing colour in a parade of largely traditional white or off-white gowns, but then an old friend turned up in a lovely, simple skirt and top the exact colour of my own. She'd been married the same summer as Nick and I, and we laughed remembering how determined we had been to be different, to defy expectations.

The more I talked to the other brides, the more I realized our blue dresses weren't the only ones with stories to tell. There was the long, heavily beaded gown worn by three women in the same family; the dress one woman hated but that her mother insisted she wear anyway; the mysterious stain on the front of a beautiful gold number, despite its having been expensively dry-cleaned and sealed in a vapour-free bag for more than a decade.

For many of the women, their dresses were heavy with significance. "I love it as much as the day I wore it, when I was twenty-four," said Willa. "Putting it on again makes all the memories come flooding back." Others described the dress as an old friend, even a ghost—a strange and unfamiliar vision from another time. For others still, the dress

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was just a dress. "Your wedding dress symbolizes a moment," Becca told me later. "A great moment, but now, when you put it on, you realize your life is so much broader and richer. You are so much more than that dress."

Indeed, for the women gathered out on that rock, putting on their wedding gowns again made them think about where they've travelled, what they've done, the babies, the illnesses, the jobs, and friends, the love they shared and the places it's taken them.

My own dress might not be what I would choose to wear if I were to get married today, but it reminded me of a time when I was working hard to carve my way in the world, a time when I still believed that perfect planning was the only thing between me and, well, perfection.

But most of all, putting on that dress again made me realize I don't need a do-over. Our wedding wasn't what I'd planned; we didn't have the canoe entrance or the rocky setting I imagined, but I married a man I still adore, and have two busy, happy boys. I get to celebrate that every day.

As the sun began to disappear into the horizon—the place where the world turns, as our son used to tell us—the sky turned indigo and it looked as if the heavens were about to open up on the wedding-dress party. Hoping for a final group shot before the storm, Becca posed everyone on the rock and crossed her fingers, waiting for a flicker of the magic light of dusk. As if on cue, the sun shot through the purpley-blue cloud, illuminating us all with gold. Then a rainbow appeared, as a huge, white moon rose in the east.

Inspired by the light show, several of the brides, still in full regalia, grasped each other's hands, walked to the water's edge, and leapt into the bay. They gasped and sputtered a bit, their big skirts pulling them underwater, but then they emerged, triumphant and happy on the smooth pink rock. 🐡

Andrea Curtis, a lifelong Pointe au Baril cottager, is the author of the forthcoming kids' book What's for Lunch? How Schoolchildren Eat Around the World.