

When sibling rivalry threatens your wedding

a sissy fit

BY SHERYL BERK

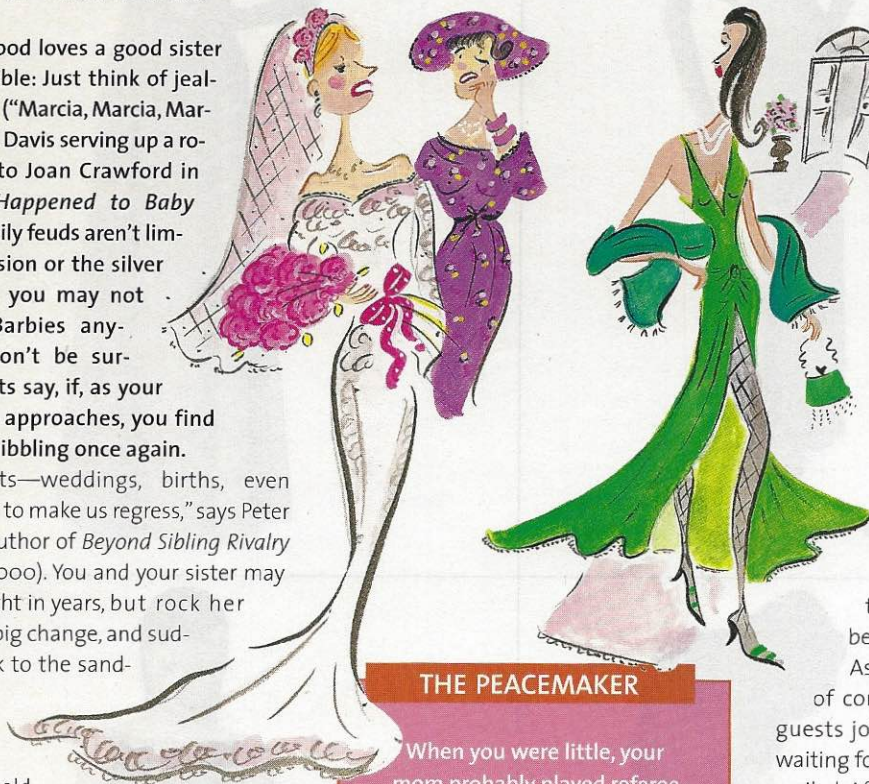
Hollywood loves a good sister squabble: Just think of jealous Jan Brady (“Marcia, Marcia, Marcia!”) or Bette Davis serving up a rodent entrée to Joan Crawford in *What Ever Happened to Baby Jane?* But family feuds aren’t limited to television or the silver screen. Sure, you may not fight over Barbies anymore, but don’t be surprised, experts say, if, as your wedding day approaches, you find yourselves quibbling once again.

“Big events—weddings, births, even deaths—tend to make us regress,” says Peter Goldenthal, author of *Beyond Sibling Rivalry* (Owl Books, 2000). You and your sister may not have fought in years, but rock her world with a big change, and suddenly it’s back to the sandbox. “Who knows you better than your sister?” Goldenthal adds, “and who is more capable of pushing your buttons? All of the emotions you may have felt as a child—jealousy, anger, fear—come bubbling back to the surface, and like it or not, you have to deal with them once again.”

all the world’s her stage

When they were kids, Marci Melnick, 31, of Jericho, New York, and her older sister Jackie, 33, went to drama camp together. “We would sing duets and dance, but somehow Jackie always managed to steal the spotlight.” Fast forward 15 years to Marci’s engagement party, where, once again, Jackie was determined to upstage her sis. “She showed up about an hour late wearing a tight, low-cut dress,” she recalls. “The dinner was at a very conservative country club, and everyone, from the waiters to my future in-laws, stared.”

At the party, Jackie drank too much champagne and put on a show—literally—with the band. “At first, she was just loud and giddy,” Marci recalls. “Then she got up on



THE PEACEMAKER

When you were little, your mom probably played referee between you and your sister. But when it comes to wedding woes, experts say, don’t get a family member involved. “You need someone who has no emotional attachment to the situation to help you talk it through,” says Peter Goldenthal. Sure, your first reaction is probably to run and tattle to Mommy (hey, it worked when you were six, right?), but a counselor—your therapist, rabbi, or priest—even your wedding consultant—may be a better mediator since there are no apron strings attached.

stage to sing. I was mortified.” As her wedding approached, Marci worried that Jackie would make another grand entrance. “I didn’t know what to say,” she remembers. “I didn’t want to give her any ideas. I just couldn’t bear the thought of what she might do

next to embarrass me.”

To reign in a drama queen, try not to pay attention to her theatrics, advises Allen. “What she craves is acknowledgment, so don’t buy into it.” If your sis insists on making a scene, simply shrug it off, she suggests. Guests will be impressed with what a good sport you are, and your sibling will probably back off when she sees she’s not getting a rise out of you. “Remember that your sister’s behavior is not any reflection on you,” Allen says. “And even if you’re tempted to yell or evict her from the premises—don’t. Then you’ll be the one putting on the show.”

As predicted, Jackie acted a little out of control at the reception, insisting guests join her in a conga line. “She was waiting for me to blow up, but instead I just smiled. After awhile, she realized she wasn’t going to get a reaction out of me. Thankfully, that’s all it took to draw the curtain on her performance.”

who’s on first

Emily Dutka, 24, of San Antonio, was shocked when, just weeks before her January wedding, her big sister Cammie’s behavior threatened to spoil it. “She could not have been more impossible,” Emily recalls. “She hated the invitations; she despised the reception site; she refused to wear her hair up like all the other girls in my wedding party. She actually said I was stupid and called me names. I felt like we were back in elementary school!”

The problem, Emily finally figured out, had little to do with her wedding. “In the middle of yelling she blurted out, ‘Who do you think you are? Just because you’re getting married first, you think you know it all?’ Cammie is six years older, and she was always the first to do everything—wear makeup, date, get her driver’s license. (Continued on page 224)

a sissy fit

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But this time I beat her to it, and she was really, really upset."

Competition between older and younger siblings isn't always a bad thing, says Patricia Allen, author of *Getting to 'I Do'* (Avon, 1995). "Maybe because your big sister got straight A's in school it encouraged you to work harder," she explains. "But when that competitive edge turns ugly—one woman wants to hurt or belittle the other because she's feeling insecure—it's time to rethink your relationship and have a serious talk."

Which is exactly what Emily did. "I sat Cammie down and said, 'Look, this isn't a contest to see who gets to the altar first. I need your help and I'm counting on you to be the big sister I've always looked up to.'"

Sometimes the quickest way to diffuse jealousy is to give someone a sense of being needed. "In essence, you're putting her back in the driver's seat by making her feel appreciated and more in control," maintains Goldenthal. Emily asked Cammie to supervise all of her bridesmaids and make sure everyone was picture-perfect for the walk down the aisle.

Emily's approach worked wonders. Cammie calmed down, stopped protesting, and even admitted it was a beautiful wedding. "I think we both learned that it doesn't matter who leads or follows," Emily adds. "Just that we're there for each other."

beat the clock

"When we were growing up, I called my little sister, Kaitlin, the copy cat," recalls Helen Brooks, 31, of Darien, Connecticut. "If I took ballet, she cried until my mom bought her a tutu. She loved to follow in my footsteps, and I loved to tease her about it." But Helen never anticipated that they would one day walk down the aisle just weeks apart—wearing the same wedding gown.

Helen and her boyfriend, Richard, had been living together for five years and were finally taking the big step. "We got engaged in January and set the date for June 27," she explains. A month later, Kaitlin called with some big news of her own: The guy she had been dating for eight months had proposed and she was getting married on June 13. The sisters' rela-

tionship quickly became a showdown over finances, fashion, and guest lists. "Our parents couldn't comfortably pay for two weddings at once, and Katie and Jay didn't have much money saved," Helen says. "She constantly complained that it wasn't fair that we were better off and could afford a nicer reception. My dad felt bad so he gave her more money."

Both sisters were also determined to wear their mother's wedding gown, and each required very different alterations. "Katie is two inches taller and a full size bigger than me," Helen points out. "I was freaking—Mom had promised it to me first—but Katie was adamant." The problems escalated to the point where Helen actually considered postponing her wedding. "I was beside myself," she remembers. "Rich and I had really worked hard planning this and wanted everything to be perfect. Why did Katie have to come along and ruin everything?"

Often the news of a sister or even a girlfriend's impending nuptials causes women to panic, Allen says. "All of a sudden, it's 'Oh my God! I have to get married too. The train is leaving without me.'"

In Kaitlin's case, she and her sister had always been close and shared everything. Perhaps that played a part in her speedy decision to tie the knot. "Kaitlin wasn't necessarily being malicious," Allen adds. "However, the nice thing for her to have done would have been to wait a few months after Helen's wedding. But she was probably acting out of fear and self-doubt. She was used to riding Helen's coattails, but now she was determined to lead the way."

In a case like that, Goldenthal advises, all you can do is carry on with your plans and not be controlled by someone else's selfish motives, unconscious or not. "If they're trying to manipulate you, giving in, or in this case giving up, is the worst thing you can do. You try to make the best of it and wish your sister the same."

In the end, Helen stuck to her original date and rushed the gown to a seamstress after Katie took her turn in it (the hem and seams were basted so they could be easily altered). "I just had to grin and bear it, even when Katie accidentally spilled red wine on the front of the (Continued on page 250)

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dress," she admits. "Despite the fact that she picked the same color scheme—pink and white—and a similar setting—outdoors un-

“Your parents don’t love you any less because you’re not married and your sister is. They may not even be aware that they’re ignoring you.”

der a gazebo—our weddings were very different and very special. And imitation is the sincerest form of flattery, right?”

reversal of fortune

As a child, Nancy Fiorre, 27, of Sherman Oaks, California, was always the golden girl in her family. She won the state spelling bee, was homecoming queen, and graduated from law school third in her class. By comparison, her big sister, Melissa, 30, was “the artsy rebel” who dropped out of college to pursue an acting career. “My parents would always say, ‘Missy, why can’t you be more like your sister?’” recalls Nancy. “In their eyes, I could do no wrong, and it used to kill my big sis when they compared us.”

But things suddenly changed when, a year ago, Melissa announced she was marrying a surgeon she had been dating steadily. “We were all so happy for her—Tim is down-to-earth and a great guy. He wanted to buy a house and have kids. My parents were thrilled.” Every family get-together now focused on wedding planning, and Nancy found herself fighting for her parents’ attention.

“I couldn’t get a word in. No one was interested anymore in my job at the district attorney’s office or my problems with my new roommate. My mom was too busy shopping for gowns with my sister, and my dad actually asked me, ‘So when are you going to settle down like Missy?’ I felt like I was in the Twilight Zone.” Allen believes the first wedding in a family can create a shift in dynamics. “Mom and Dad are so excited they

can practically count the grandchildren,” she says. “And in all of that excitement, it’s hard to focus on anything or anyone else.”

Nancy was used to being the center of attention—and that role was now being played by her sister. “All of a sudden, you’re reliving the time when you were six and wandered away from your parents at the mall,” Goldenthal says. “The feelings are the same—abandonment, betrayal. Those are scary emotions to cope with at any age.” The good news, he points out, is you’re all grown-up now and capable of putting things into perspective. “Your parents don’t love you any less because you’re not married and your sister is,” he insists. “They may not even be aware that they’re ignoring you.”

Nancy took her mom and dad to dinner—just the three of them—and explained her concerns. “My parents reassured me that they hadn’t meant to hurt my feelings,” she said. “I just had to hear that they were still proud of me and that I wasn’t disappointing them. It’s funny—even though I’m an adult, I guess I still need their approval.” After things were resolved, it was much easier for Nancy to let her sister take center stage for once, and she smiled wider than anyone the day Missy became a Mrs.

heaven only knows

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to mirror their genteel, well-balanced personalities. The emphasis is on decorum, so this bride should pick a time of year when the astrological powers-that-be are at their most harmonious. The combined planetary activity of Mercury and Venus in September ushers in a very Zen time for you to saunter down the aisle.

SCORPIO (October 24—November 22) Elusive and often secretive, Scorpios tend to keep their plans to themselves. But if you want people to show up at your wedding, you have to share the date. Late September to mid-October, when Mercury, Venus, and Mars converge in your sign, provides the safest season for you to say “I do.” Their planetary pull affects your often mercurial nature in a positive way, putting you in a rare and wonderful party-hearty mood.

SAGITTARIUS (November 23—December 21) Sagittarians live for food, fashion, and fun. However, their impulsive, outspoken natures can be a bit abrasive. (“Surf and turf? Isn’t that a little eighties?”) To avoid any unnecessary outbursts (and hurt feelings), wed in December, when sedating Saturn transits your sign, tempering your dramatic tendencies.

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