Take the Cake

Valentine’s Day giving you the wedding-bell blues? Share a sparkling cider and sobfest with gal pal Emily Carter.

February 1, 2000 By Emily Carter

It’s been almost two years since my husband and I separated, with much sorrow, little rancor and an incredible sense of loss. This made it that much harder—if only there had been accusations to hurl, lists of betrayals to tick off with a tart tap of an index finger on a legal pad. Neither of us regrets the time we spent together, and we both agree that our wedding day was one of the golden moments of our lives. Ironically, my wedding was the first such official ceremony I attended, but not the last.

In what can only be called a fit of bitchiness, the Creator has seen fit to send a slew of wedding invitations tumbling from my mailbox since my own marriage came to a slow, grinding halt. I have been to gay weddings, straight weddings, Orthodox, Unitarian, recovery-themed weddings and an act of civil disobedience during which a wedding—almost incidentally—took place.

At some of these conjoinings I have offered to lend a hand to the festivities, begging to do the bride’s makeup, bring a pumpkin pie, call the florist, anything but what I was invariably asked to do—make a speech. Apparently, the general consensus is that, outside of my perceived skills as a wordsmith, I am not to be trusted within any of life’s practical spheres. Not that I mind slinging a toast or penning a piece of occasional poetry. What I mind is that on several occasions I have been asked to refrain from mentioning anything to do with AIDS. This request has come from both HIV positive and HIV negative friends, gay and straight couples.

The reason this baffles me is not because I am some determined and honest PWA, but because I would never even consider bringing up HIV issues in a toast unless both parties were AIDS activists, and even then I might prefer to keep the topic off work. It seems to me sometimes that, even at the most festive occasions, people insist on defining me as someone with a shadow at her shoulder, a spectral hollowness darkening her smile. Of course, weddings make one contemplate death—as does a child’s baptism or college graduation or, for that matter, first day at preschool. But the idea that I would be so attached to one part of my identity that I would commit an act of downright narcissism—talk about myself, in other words, instead of the couple in the spotlight—is ludicrous. Not even I am that big a slice of ham.

Sometimes the last thing I want to be is HIV positive. Sometimes I just want to be a woman at a

party, wearing a magenta frock and chirping happily to the person next to me about whether Brad “Peach” Pitt had collagen implants for his latest role as an Italian street hoodlum.

On the other hand, I am HIV positive, and while it’s not a theme to center on during a wedding toast, it might have been nice if some of my own guests had known this was one of the things I was bringing to the party. My husband, in the eight years we lived together, never told his family about my status. He said he didn’t want to worry them (not that they were that close). I didn’t see it as a problem at the time, although I would have liked to invite a few of the health care workers from my clinic to the ceremony—I had developed a warm relationship with a few, especially the head nurse, and wanted to express my gratitude. But how could I explain their presence to my husband’s relatives? And I didn’t want any nervousness about letting the cat out of the bag to mar the festivities. I realize now that it did, anyway.

Perhaps I can never be like the couples I am toasting at the reception or the guests who are my co-revelers. I am separated from them, not only by my status, but by the things that led to my status—the depression and self-loathing, and the drugs I pressed over those wounds like a temporary and ineffective poultice. But I can fake it: I can munch canapés and flirt with the groom’s second cousin and do the macarena like you’ve never seen it done before. And if anyone at the reception is having a completely good time untinged by regret, then I hope they have the good taste not to mention their lobotomy at the dinner table.

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