



And
the
brides
wore
white

Jen, left, and Lotte on their wedding day

HOLLY FALCONER

Deciding to get married was the easy bit for Lotte Jeffs. After that, she was in uncharted territory: did they both need a ring? Should one of them dress like a groom? And where do you find lesbian hen party tat?

During a family lunch shortly after my girlfriend Jen and I announced our engagement, my mother could barely contain her joy. “Two brides!” she declared, clapping her hands and looking across the table from me to my fiancée and back again with a huge grin on her face. “Two mothers of the brides!” Jen’s mum said with equal glee. Jen and I exchanged a subtle eyebrow raise and downed our wine. Behind our parents’ enthusiasm, we couldn’t help but detect an element of incredulity, albeit happy incredulity, that their daughters were marrying each other.

My mother tells me she didn’t have any openly gay friends until she was in her 30s, and hadn’t even met a lesbian before me. Although she’s smart enough to have never had an issue with my sexuality, for her generation of heterosexuals, same-sex marriage still feels thoroughly progressive. Jen and I might think we’re being normcore by tying the knot (at least five gay couples I know are now married or engaged); but there’s no getting away from the fact that, for most people, a woman marrying another woman is still just a bit, well, unusual. “Here’s to unconventional relationships!” was how Jen’s mum put it in a celebratory toast to our engagement at a party, just when we thought we were doing the most conventional thing in the world.

Sure, equal marriage means that everything about the experience is just as wonderful and just as stressful as it is for our straight friends. But believe me when I say there are some quirks that are very specific to being a woman marrying a woman. Not only are there two brides (and the potential for two bridezillas), but two stressful

searches for wedding outfits and, of course, two mothers of the bride.

Probably the most unique thing about a lesbian wedding is that if you want to start a family and both be parents, without one of you having to adopt, marriage before the point of conception is a legal necessity. We only discovered this when reading the small print on gay rights group Stonewall’s advice for prospective parents: unless you use an insemination clinic licensed by the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Authority (HFEA), you have to be married before you even start trying for a baby, or the donor father will be considered the second parent under UK law. Who knew? Not us, and I’m pretty sure not a lot of other women, either.

We don’t yet know what we might do: known donor, anonymous donor, trip to Turkey to track down that handsome yacht captain we met on holiday. But to cover all our bases, there was only one thing for it: we would be married within the month in a small, intimate ceremony for our closest friends and family, and then do it all again, bigger, in the south of France next summer, as we’d originally intended. It’s frustrating to feel that our life plan is at the mercy of such legislation, but when I think of my lesbian friends around the world who can’t get married or adopt, it’s a small price to pay.

And this is how I found myself, a few weeks before our wedding, with nothing to wear. I’ve always been dismissive of the predefined roles for the bride and groom and their respective families at weddings: it seemed sexist and old-fashioned. But now I’ve realised the point of them is largely practical. Without any rules to draw on, I was left wondering: should we double all the traditional

bride stuff, or should one of us take on the traditional groom stuff? (Maybe me: I have shorter hair and own more flat shoes.)

In the course of my extensive Pinterest research, I’ve seen many a happy scenario where one woman wears a suit and the other a dress, which, sartorially speaking, tends to work well. But Jen and I didn’t want to be that couple. With my more androgynous figure, I’d be in danger of playing the groom to Jenny’s more feminine, blond, curly-haired bride; and although it’s tempting to mirror these roles so we all know what’s expected of us, it doesn’t feel true to our dynamic, which is far more fluid.

We decided we both wanted to wear dresses. The main issue with two wedding dresses is the need to coordinate, to the extent that it’s clear we’re part of the same occasion, but not so matchy-matchy that we look like bridesmaids. And jeez, if you thought one wedding dress was expensive, imagine needing two.

I considered a silk pyjama set (I work for a fashion magazine. Trust me, pyjamas are a thing), a white satin gown, a shift dress with a cape attached. I was into the cape dress, until I showed my mother a picture and she said, “No capes.” In the same way I never pictured myself getting married, my mum gave up any fantasies of her daughter’s special day when I came out, aged 16. So now it’s on, she’s in full, fabulous mother-of-the-bride mode, insisting: “I do think your mother needs to like what you wear for your wedding day, darling.”

Unlike some women, who have had a fantasy wedding day in their head from a very young age, I had never even entertained the idea that getting married would be an option for me. »

Gay marriage was only legalised in 2013. I remember thinking, when gay couples started getting civil partnerships in 2004: why does my commitment to my partner need a different name from my married straight friends? Their “thing” was about love and romance, whereas ours was a very civil transaction, one that felt more likely to be sealed with a handshake than a kiss. It took the government long enough to realise that love equals love; it was only when I truly believed my relationship was considered as valid as everyone else’s that I could begin to consider putting a ring on it.

As the date neared, our mothers were increasingly excited. “I’ll design the invites!” mine said. “I’ll make your earrings!” Jen’s said. “Let’s start a shared wedding inspo Pinterest board!” my mum suggested. “Let’s just leave them to it!” Jen’s said. Both women put much thought into what they would wear, and when news reached my mother that Jen’s had bought a full Issey Miyake outfit, her dress was promptly returned to the shop and the search for something “a bit more special” began.

Meanwhile, Jen and I had the “who walks down the aisle” dilemma to consider. At my friends’ Ben and Iain’s wedding, they were each walked down the aisle by their mothers, while Jenny, another friend, tells me she had no problem being given away when she married her wife, but insisted it was by her mum *and* dad. We decided in the end that, rather than give our dads the honour, or for one of us to have to wait at the front for the other to be delivered to them, we’d just walk down the aisle together. This is quite the done thing at straight weddings, too, nowadays, as the idea of being “given away” becomes increasingly anachronistic.

It’s funny that, as heterosexual weddings get more fluid, all the same-sex weddings I’ve been to have been quite keen to follow convention, albeit with some twists. I wonder if it’s because, now that we’ve been afforded the “privilege” of marriage equality, we feel we owe it to the institution of matrimony to play by the rules. Personally, I’m keen on a pretty traditional format. As a gay person, the whole thing is still such a novelty for me that I don’t feel the need to have an underwater wedding, or jump out of an aeroplane; walking down an aisle and saying “I do” is crazy enough.

That’s not to say I didn’t dabble in a bit of subversive cultural appropriation, courtesy of my best friend Sam, who organised our stag do. It wasn’t a half-hearted “sten” (a joint stag and hen party). Sam planned us a proper, old-fashioned, blokey bash that took us brides-to-be, my cousin/best woman, plus three gay and three straight male friends to greyhound racing in Romford, a Millwall football match where the chant “Your mother’s a queer” rang out from the seats behind us, and then a golf driving range. Oh the banter, the crap beer, the joy of now owning a Millwall



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club scarf with the words “No one likes us! We don’t care!” on it.

And, in the spirit of defying gender binaries, I also got a chance to indulge my more feminine side as my colleagues threw me a work hen breakfast. It was a classy affair, in a posh restaurant, but they did make me wear a pink “hen party” sash and a genius had managed to find “vagina straws” to replace the usual penis paraphernalia. (FYI, there’s a huge gap in the market for lesbian hen party tat.)

Meanwhile, the registrar advised me that some elements of the official order of service could be changed, so I got out my red pen and struck through the last line: “I now pronounce you wife and wife.” It just sounds wrong to me, as if we’re a couple of old spinsters who have decided to be “companions” and live together with lots of cats. “I now pronounce you married” was much better.

Some of my married lesbian friends share my aversion to the word “wife”. Jenny, who got married in London last month, says, “I have to admit I find myself avoiding using it”, whereas Sophie, a friend’s younger sister, tells me, “I love saying, ‘This is my wife’ - it feels solid. I think people understand your relationship more, too, and how committed you are to each other. Straight people can relate to it.”

This is entirely my own personal hang-up, but in lots of everyday scenarios - on the phone to insurance companies, with delivery people, when asking someone to move up on the train so we

can sit together - even the word “girlfriend” sticks in the back of my throat and I end up mumbling something like, “Do you mind if my, um, friend sits there?” For LGBT people, even menial interactions such as this involve having to out yourself, to say, “Hey, I’m different”, and in a split second weigh up your gay pride versus the potential homophobia of the person you’re dealing with. Telling the Ocado driver that “My wife is at home for the delivery” is something I’m still working on.

For the same reason, I was never going to be someone to get down on one knee in the middle of a restaurant to ask Jen to marry me. I’d feel a bit embarrassed, although that’s probably more to do with my personality than any internalised gay shame. Instead, “Shall we get married?” popped out of my mouth one evening without me planning it. We were on holiday in France last June, washing up after dinner with friends. In between piling dirty dishes into the sink and sponging down the table, I asked her. She was wearing a pair of Marigolds; I was covered in tomato sauce stains. “Let’s do it,” she replied, and it just felt right.

We talked a lot about whether we should get engagement rings. With two women, there’s no obvious answer. It was simpler for my gay male friends who felt the tradition was too “feminine”. Among the lesbians I know, either the one who asked the question bought the ring, they got matching ones, or they just didn’t bother. For us, buying two felt excessive and unnecessary (plus we figured there was probably a feminist argument against the concept of engagement rings that we could cite so as not to look like total cheapskates), so we decided to go without.

In the end, our ceremony last month was a happy mess of tradition and our own way of doing things, as most weddings are. Jen and I managed to navigate the conundrums with a healthy dose of humour and compromise. We now have seven months to agonise over everything again in advance of the French leg. The dress dilemma was finally solved three days before the big day, but I can’t take the credit. My mum and Auntie Cheryl had been scouring the dress shops of London on my behalf and found me a white silk sleeveless jumpsuit, neither a dress nor a suit but totally “me”. It was the perfect foil to Jen’s lace dress.

The day itself was a champagne-fuelled blur, and after the ceremony, as we walked hand in hand through London with our parents in tow, people stopped to clap and smile and take photos. Any sense of otherness I thought I might feel had dissipated in the huge swell of love from our friends and family that felt entirely about who we were, not our gender or sexuality. The next morning, my mum sent me two bride emojis - one blond and one brunette, separated by a pink love heart - which I think means she’s very happy. And that, I’m told by all my married friends, gay and straight, is often the most important thing ●