



Weddings through the lens

A LETTER TO THE BRIDE AND GROOM (AND EVERYONE ELSE) AT THE WEDDING, WRITTEN WITH LOVE FROM THE PERSON BEHIND THE CAMERA.

I often wonder where my wedding images end up. After the big expensive day, after two or more children, after a divorce, after the death of a spouse, an affair, after everything... what happens to them? Photographs and videos are all that remain of the promise we make, and this is exactly the reason that makes me realise what a privilege it is to be a wedding photographer.

It's a strange thing we do. We're in the middle of such an intimate occasion without really knowing you.

We also have the best viewpoint; we can see everything, from the tears at the altar to the expression of the mother-in-law and the notes of the pastor. We can see what the bride is wearing under her very expensive

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dress, and we capture the proud look of a father. Yet no one sees us. And that's a good thing, because that's how we get our images.

I have been shooting weddings pretty much most of my professional life, and so it is with a certain amount of experience that I can tell you what it's like from our point of view. You may not want to read some of it, but nonetheless, here goes.

It usually starts with a phone call about price. It astounds me how few couples ask me for my portfolio first. This makes us photographers feel a little like a commodity, where you can trade us for a couple of thousand rand without having seen a single image. And yet, when the whole perfect day is over, the photos are

what remain. We're often cheaper than the wedding dress you wear for just one day, and we're certainly less expensive than the flowers or food. Of course, there are some photographers who are far too expensive and then there are those who are far too cheap (I would avoid them both).

Mostly, the price we charge seems to be more important to you than our personality, but it's our personality that really counts. After all, we're entrusted to create, recreate – or even manufacture – the (myth of a) life to come; we're expected to make the rain disappear, to cement the relationships between mother and new wife and to produce the ultimate (and exceptional) family photograph at a time when the emotions of the family are as high, and possibly as strained, as they are ever going to be. We are left to manage and dismantle all the chaos.

And yet your first meeting with us usually takes place three days before the wedding, when no one is really listening anyway. Everyone is too worried about the weather or the sister-in-law no one likes who has decided she will come after all.

Do I sound cynical? I am not, but there is truth in what I am saying. Actually, I love shooting weddings, though I don't do them very often these days (Saturday afternoons are precious family time and they're really not worth the money). A commercial or fashion shoot of similar time span (we are talking 8–10 hours here) would pull in double the revenue. But it's a chance to experiment, to observe, and to feel part of the world of love and flowers again. And I do get sucked into that when it feels real. And yet, so often weddings are more about the colour of the flowers than the colour of love. When I got married 10 years ago I remember that I had to keep pulling myself back to what was actually going on – my commitment, my husband-to-be, our friends and, most of all, our love. I was old enough to know the danger of being sidetracked by whether or not the table setting matched the

curtains. I can only imagine what it must be like for a 23-year-old with a controlling mother-in-law over-managing the wedding day because her own marriage has disintegrated.

Few guests will remember what you served them for dessert, or the title of your first song. But I bet that everyone will remember your sincerity when you looked at your husband during that first dance, or what the best man said in his speech, or how your father found it so difficult to talk about his little girl. Real people remember real things, and those things usually cost nothing.

It's odd being invisible at such a momentous occasion. It gives you a chance to really feel what each wedding is about. Being a photographer requires a certain amount of intuition anyway, and it's always on high alert during a wedding. Over the years, my intuition has become so finely tuned that I can pretty much tell if the couple is going to make it or not.

We hear conversations, we feel nuances, we pick up telling glances, and guests or family members usually tell us the most amazing snippets of information. There is always a 'truth table', usually at the back of the hall. These are the guests who have known the groom for the longest (but were not chosen to be the best man). They have seen the girlfriends come and go, and they're a wealth of knowledge. They're always the first to get drunk and the last to leave.

I have heard some astounding conversations at that wonderful truth table. (I tend to end the evening with them). And they love to predict: 'I give it three years, two kids and it's over', or 'This is the one – lucky bastard.' It's amazing how accurate they are.

They're also usually the ones who make sure that we photographers have got a drink and have had something to eat. We can end up at the bottom

of the food chain – munching on soggy sandwiches while the guests are wading through mounds of lobster. Or we're seated next to the guest nobody else wants to sit with (often the most interesting person in the room). Then, in the middle of our cold meal, we are expected to jump up with manufactured enthusiasm to catch a 'moment' that, at the time and level of sobriety, seems award-winning to the guest, but we know won't see the light of the darkroom.

And then there is the not-so-great stuff. Like when I found the beautiful, beautiful bride kissing the best man in the little room behind the kitchen. Oh, and when I walked in on the shiny new bridal couple doing a quick line of cocaine in the back before facing the guests. (Both couples got divorced before the year was out, and I still have the reprints for one couple.)

I think of it as a Shakespearean drama (or tragedy). As the evening rolls out, because we're still sober, we see the truth of it all: who is not talking to whom, who is falling in love with whom, who still loves the groom but has not made it to the altar with him, who has slept with the groom (or bride). We see the broken relationships and the sadness of some of the existing marriages – nothing like a good wedding to bring out those.

And there's always a black sheep. They come out of the woodwork and act as unofficial spokes-people for the family. I love them because they, like us, have generally seen numerous family weddings – and they're also invisible, or at least meant to be.

And then there are the good weddings. They're all about the real things: relationships, risk, commitment, and expectation. It's about choosing (maybe not always) the right person. And then it's about real love – and who could resist that? ❀

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