

Travel Tales

The Wedding Cake and the Full Catastrophe

By

Lew Toulmin

The smartest thing I ever did was marry my wife Susan. We met on an airplane traveling from Atlanta to Washington, D.C., after visiting our respective parents in Mobile and Daytona. It was fate. Susan was supposed to be on a flight ahead of mine. But her flight was canceled and she ended up sitting in my row, with an empty seat between. I eyed her. She eyed me. I brought out a book—*Even Cowgirls Get the Blues*—to show that I could read. She smiled. But we were both too shy to say anything. The flight was short, and the time remaining was getting shorter.

What happened next is in dispute. Susan claims that she accidentally knocked over her purse. I contend she deliberately turned over her purse, dumping money, including a number of actual quarters (big money in those days), on the floor to attract my attention. Whatever happened, it worked. We started talking. I got her phone number.

Then she passed all the difficult tests I devised. I waited three weeks before calling her. On our first date, she did not object to my car, an ancient Plymouth Valiant (hey, my old employer, the United Farm Workers, said it was the most reliable car made in the U.S.A.). She did not even object to the bright orange shag carpet that tastefully decorated the car floor and dash. She went out on our first date in a blizzard to a Japanese double feature, including the classic *Throne of Blood*. I realized that this was the girl for me. I proposed to her on a beach in Martinique in the moonlight and have been blissful ever since.

But the way of true love does not always run smooth. Our wedding did have its problems. Think of a wedding as an exercise in project management—there is a contract, a project manager, a goal to be achieved, subcontractors, a venue organizer, supplies, inputs, outputs, etc. As Zorba the Greek would say, “the full catastrophe.”

Our major problems involved two subcontractors: the minister and the wedding cake vendor. The minister was supposed to show up forty-five minutes early, hold our hands, and soothe our nerves. In fact, he was twenty minutes late, during which time we were shaking with anxiety. It turned out he has been delayed by a parade through the middle of Alexandria, Virginia, where we were getting married.

The wedding cake vendor had been wonderful when we approached him weeks before the wedding. He showed us numerous elaborate cakes, including some which looked like a fleet of individual flying saucers descending from the sky to attack the guests. He flitted around the cake office, oohing and aahing, saying how “mahvelous” everything would be. But Susan was very firm. She wanted a simple, conservative three-layer cake, with no little plastic figures on top. Just some vanilla icing and some flowers made of icing around the bottom of each layer and on the top, thank you very much. The cakemeister reluctantly agreed.

The great day came. So did the cake. It arrived fifteen minutes before the start of the wedding. A lanky, greasy guy with a ponytail pulled up in a van and brought it in. “Sign here,” he said. We opened the box and looked at the cake. And we looked down, and saw—cake. Just cake. The top of the cake had NO ICING. NO FLOWERS made of icing. No nothing. There was icing and flowers on the sides, but absolutely nothing except bare cake on top. We hollered at the delivery guy, “What the #\$\$%#\$\$% is this?” He replied with the classic: “Hey, man, I’m just the delivery guy. You gotta call the office. Which is closed. It opens Monday.”

Susan was almost in tears. “Don’t worry,” I said. “I’ll take care of it.” And I did what any good project manager in a crisis does—I delegated. I called over my Best Man, Glen Wright, and explained the situation. “Fix it, please,” I begged.

Luckily our Best Man was resourceful. He looked around for materials to hand. Since we were getting married at the Robert E. Lee Boyhood Home, and it was late spring, there were beautiful rose bushes all around. He rushed over to the best roses, yanked out his trusty Swiss Army knife, and prepared to do surgery. But the old battleaxe who ran the Home saw what he was about to do. She came screaming up, and grabbed him by the arm. “Don’t you touch Bobby Lee’s roses!” she shrieked. He said he wouldn’t bother the roses, and started looking around for other flowers. But she followed him around like a bull terrier, and wouldn’t let him touch anything.

Finally in desperation, he went over to the dried flower arrangements that we had ordered for the wedding. He grabbed a big double handful of dried flowers, stems and all, and jammed them down into the top of the wedding cake. And you know, it worked. No one noticed. If you look closely at the wedding photos, it does look a little peculiar to see all those dried flowers sticking out. But only we know the secret. Our Best Man was the Best--after my wife, of course.

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Lew Toulmin lives in Silver Spring with his wife Susan Little Toulmin, formerly of the Library of Congress. Susan recently broke the 100 country barrier, by traveling to over 100 countries and sovereign territories.

Picture: Lew and Susan’s wedding photo—note the dried flowers in the cake. Credit: Lew Toulmin

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