

Breaking News from TheGlobe and Mail

## **A day to remember**

### **It better be. Getting hitched today is as ruinous as it is joyous: The wedding industry makes sure of that**

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Sandra Mauro's a smart young woman, a pretty brunette in her early 30s with, okay, a fondness for pink in her wardrobe. The day I met her she was sitting in a coffee shop in Toronto's Danforth district. On the table in front of her sat an apple-green binder, as thick and heavy as a phone book, containing the pictures, instructions and contracts that represented her upcoming wedding. "All the information," she explained, "that I'm going to need leading up to the big day."

I knew that as a marketing consultant with Rogers Communications among her clients, Sandra had a knack for business. It also became pretty clear that she possessed a sharp wit and a control freak's perfectionism, which is why she was carrying some four kilos of binder around. But there was something else going on with Sandra. On the subject of her approaching nuptials—to her boyfriend of six years, David Hamilton, a 38-year-old partner in the advertising firm Grip Ltd.—she got a little dreamy. She'd tear up now and then. And most striking of all, when she looked at the early budget for her wedding, \$42,000, she wasn't appalled.

Now, I'm a guy who, eight years ago, married a woman who was happy to say her vows in a barn, who considered it right to serve homemade pumpkin pie instead of wedding cake, and to wear a dress that cost just \$150. So maybe I'm less prepared than others to see how a smart businesswoman like Sandra can think it reasonable to spend the equivalent of a decent down payment on a house to prettify a single day.

Yet Sandra is the norm. According to the 2003 book *Cinderella Dreams: The Allure of the Lavish Wedding*, you can blame that fact on many generations of cultural conditioning. Ever since the spectacular 1840 wedding of Queen Victoria and Prince Albert became the talk of the Western world, getting married and spending big have been hitched. The notion of the "perfect" wedding became so entwined with the idea of "perfect love" that, for many brides, one ipso facto meant the other. If the idea dwindled for a time during the cultural revolution of the 1960s and '70s, it flamed up hotter than

ever with the wedding that joined Prince Charles to the perfect princess, Lady Diana. Today, say the authors, "the lavish wedding allows participants to experience unabashed magic in their lives, and to spend freely to achieve that magic, without a guilt hangover the next morning."

Apparently this is what Sandra was doing, going for unabashed magic, just the same as the other 150,000 brides who will walk down the aisle in Canada this year—most of them in June, July and August—and happily spend an average of \$25,883 on their wedding day.

Perhaps I'm cynical, but it seems to me there's potential for a dark side to this fantasy. When you look at the scenario—150,000 couples ready to spend a total of \$3.8 billion every year on something not much more tangible than a fairy tale—it sounds like a situation ripe for wolves in the woods.

Even Sandra, who was so primed for fantasy that six years ago in France she bought a bottle of Cristal champagne and sealed it for her wedding day, looked askance at the bridal marketplace. "It's almost like the construction business," she said one month before her wedding. "There's so much demand that they can completely price gouge. It's like, 'You need me more than I need you, honey. I got more brides than I know what to do with.'"

Talk like this makes a one-time groom look back on his \$6,000 wedding not just with fondness, but relief. But it's not as if I know anything about the wedding industry, so who am I to judge? The only way to get a true sense of who these people are, and whether they start licking their lips when they see a bride coming, is to go out and meet them.

## **I. THE BRIDAL SHOW**

If your first impression of the wedding industry is a bridal show, it's not going to be a good one. Surviving the gauntlet of brochure wavers at Canada's Bridal Show or the Total Wedding Show, two of Toronto's biggest, felt to me like wading through the strip-show touters who line the boulevards of Las Vegas. This is hucksterville, proof that the wedding "industry" is in reality a vast network of hustling small businesses leaping at their opportunity to cash in. You've figured out a way to preserve a bunch of flowers indefinitely? You raise butterflies in your basement and package them in envelopes? There are brides who will pay you for your services. No wonder Brian D. Lawrence, an author and owner of *Sell The Bride* Publications, calls the business you can get from brides nothing less than "a winning lottery ticket."

Even the bridal shows themselves are, for the most part, mom-and-pop operations. Sure, the National Bridal Show at Exhibition Place is run, ultimately, by the same people who own the *Toronto Star* and *Harlequin* books, but it's an anomaly. More typical is Lorie Sansone, a middle-aged woman who runs Canada's Bridal Show from the storage room of her bridal shoe shop in the suburb of Woodbridge.

Truth to tell, the exhibitors don't like the shows much. Maybe it's because they feel they're on the wrong end of a gouge. "Anything for a buck, in my opinion," is how a DJ business owner describes the experience. At Toronto's major shows, as many as 400 exhibitors spend Thursdays fitting out their 10-foot-square booths and grumbling about the expense. A typical booth runs about \$1,700 for three days, but after adding the cost of creating and staffing the booth, and printing up brochures to hand out, the total can hit \$3,000. All so they can try and shake the hands of up to 4,000 brides over three days and, in a few seconds, make the case that they're the photographer/florist/banquet hall that will make their dreams come true. "I just felt overwhelmed with people stuffing things into my giant bag," one recent bride told me. "By the time you get home, you can't remember who's who."

Sandra is one bride the shows missed—"I didn't know about them," she told me—even though fate set her up perfectly. Wedding shows clamber over each other to hit the scene early in January because Christmas is the peak time of year for engagements. "It's because the guys are too cheap to give another present," said Donald Swinburne, publisher of *Today's Bride* magazine. "They give an engagement ring." And indeed, Dave proposed to Sandra on Christmas, 2005, just like he was supposed to.

Maybe the problem is that Sandra didn't fit the profile of the typical attendee. The major shows are marketed mainly to the sort of bride who, as one wedding planner said with lip figuratively curled, "is interested in flat rates and packages." Not to mention real human-hair extensions, humongous white limos, and pole-dancing as a way to get in wedding shape.

## II. THE PLANNER

If this was the wedding industry, the prospects for magic in Sandra's day seemed slim. But I realized that Sandra was safer than I feared, because she's not a risk taker. She has friends and a sister who've been married before, and rather than experiment on the biggest day of her life, she was going with what worked. The florist, the cake maker, the hairdresser—all had been patronized previously by friends or family. Even Sandra's theme colour—apple green—was road-tested at the wedding of her best friend, Tina. And where Sandra didn't have personal contacts to go by, she was treating the process as she would her work, by sticking to the three-quotes rule.

But the bride without Sandra's network or savvy—who has she to turn to? Well, in Toronto, the answer is: only about 300 women who call themselves wedding planners.

Not that all of them are equally skilled. I spoke to two planning companies at the top of the pyramid: Cynthia Martyn Events and Bliss Events, owned by Tara O'Grady. Planners at this level get asked to appear on shows like *Rich Bride Poor Bride*, and from way up there at the pointy peak, it looks awfully unsavoury down below. Sitting on a couch at Bliss Events, Tara O'Grady's two lieutenants, the exuberant Jodie Katz and the elegant Diana Shin, served me tea, perfect banana bread and the straight goods:

"A lot of people are posing as planners," said Katz.

"A lot of people," said Shin, "think just because they're organized that they can be planners."

"Yeah!" said Katz.

"There's a lot of people who aren't qualified," said Shin, "who are giving planners—" Over to Katz...

"a bad rap!"

Organizations such as the Wedding Planner Institute of Canada offer crash courses in wedding planning, so that after two days of schooling (and \$750), students can launch themselves—"certified"—into the job of saving brides time, stress and money. Among high-end wedding planners, the mention of this group causes a palpable shudder. Cynthia Martyn, an even-tempered former TD Canada Trust trader, wonders how someone can pick up in 22 hours what took her months to learn in the event management certificate program at Ryerson University. It's enough to make her long for some sort of regulatory body. "There's a lot of shady characters in weddings," she admits. "It can be a dirty business."

By some estimates, a couple will spend 250 hours planning their wedding, and from the heft of Sandra's binder, that seems about right. A good, experienced planner with a phalanx of vendors in her address book can reduce the time to a quarter of that. The trouble, if you're a bride paying for unbiased advice, is that many planners take kickbacks from vendors, and as Brian D. Lawrence of Sell The Bride admits, "You will naturally tend to work with those who give you the best commission."

So I asked the planners—how are your kickbacks?

"We never have that agreement with anyone," said Shin, rather deftly, I thought.

"Sometimes you'll get a 10% referral," said Katz, more frankly. One photography company Bliss works with, for example, offers a 10% finder's fee for clients sent its way. "I would say we refer them no more or no less."

Martyn draws a somewhat different boundary. "I don't take kickbacks from my wedding vendors at all," she told me. But when she's block-booking hotel rooms, she will sometimes take a 10% commission.

The fact is, for the top wedding planners, there's already good money coming in—at a rate of \$90 an hour from brides who need just a little help (though always more help than they're billed for, says Katz) and otherwise in great meaty chunks. For her full service, which might stretch 40 hours of work over the course of a year, Martyn charges a flat rate of \$3,000 to \$4,000, regardless of the wedding budget. When Bliss provides its "Proposal to Kiss" service, designed for brides who are too busy, frantic or wealthy to pick up a telephone themselves, it charges 15% of the total budget. When the budget climbs to \$300,000 and beyond (as it would, for example, if Diana Krall were hired to entertain at her typical \$250,000 fee), then wedding planning feels like a very sound career decision.

Since Sandra, as a risk-averse perfectionist, had organized every last millimetre of her wedding, she felt she had no need of a planner's planning. However, she hired Martyn for her \$900 "Day Of" package, which included several preliminary meetings. "She's going to be there to deal with all the various suppliers, all the moving pieces," explained Sandra. "I just want to enjoy the day."

### III. THE GOWN

Sandra, it was apparent, did not like the way her butt looked.

She had told me that she wanted to be a "sexy bride," not princessy at all. Unfortunately, as she stood in the fitting room of Becker's Bridal & Formal on Danforth Avenue, dressed in the store-brand gown she had made for her because it looked like "something Marilyn Monroe might have worn," she was not looking as sexy as she'd hoped. She said to the seamstress with an air of warning, "My butt looked better in the sample dress."

The number of wedding gown choices arrayed before a bride is truly bewildering. Style isn't the only decision: There are price point and source and fabric options, too. Sandra's store-brand dress (\$1,650, plus \$250 for alterations and \$112 for the veil), made of silk dupioni, put her in the lower mid-range of the price continuum. That amount is well above that of the untold number of Internet-bought dresses that tumble through Canada Customs, sometimes in the wrong colour and sometimes in damaged boxes, on their way to their soon-to-be-panicked buyers, and it's also higher than the Chinese-made dresses that make up roughly 70% of Becker's inventory. But \$1,650 falls far below the sort of high-end designer dresses sold, for example, at the Dina Alonzi Bridal boutique on Bloor Street.

Alonzi, handsome and expensively suited, makes sure to tell customers that the prices for dresses in her newly remodelled showroom, with its glimmering marble floor, begin at \$3,000. "There's a lot of brides that want to come in for the experience," she said, "because at the lower end, the service and the experience is not the same." Against these women, the \$3,000 starting-price notice is meant to act like a stiff metal gate. Those who manage to slip in "for the experience" are led toward last year's sample dresses.

For some brides, of course, price is of little concern, and these women may choose from Alonzi's full array of eight couture names, including Toronto's own Rivini and Monique Lhuillier, the choice of many Hollywood brides. Typically these customers will pay upward of \$6,500, a stratum that's actually fallen from the days when \$8,000 or \$9,000 gowns were not unusual in Alonzi's store, days when the Internet was not informing brides so readily of comparative bargains.

You won't find a wedding gown made with silk dupioni like Sandra's in Alonzi's store. Silk taffetas, yes, and silk satins, silk chiffons, silk organzas and silk crepes. But not silk dupioni. In fact, my mention of this fabric causes Alonzi to shake her head gravely. "It's an inexpensive fabric," she sniffed. Loosely weaved, it's full of "slubs," the imperfections

that certain other stores will sell as interesting texture. "It just brings the cost of the dresses down. And by the time the end of the night comes, it's just a rag."

Again, I worried about Sandra and her magic. After her second fitting she'd turned to me, the first man who had seen her in her wedding dress. "Okay, seriously," she'd said with a kind of searing focus. "Do you like it?" I'd told her it looked beautiful, and it did. But now what hope did she have of magic if she were going to wind up in tatters?

No matter what level of gown store the bride chooses, the process is roughly the same. The bride tries on samples from among the hundreds hanging on the racks around her. Every one, I'm told, represents a design selected during the bridal markets that run twice a year in New York, London, Milan, Barcelona and, for certain designers, Las Vegas. Designer styles are exclusive to a store within its region, and they're acquired for the typical wholesale rate (40% to 55% off retail).

Over an hour-long appointment, a store employee pins sample dresses tight on the bride to give an impression of fit (lesser stores use large metal clamps), and the bride tries on style after style until the moment she cries. Tears mean she has found The Dress. Then the store takes a deposit and sends in a "reorder" for the appropriate size; half a year later, thereabouts, the dress arrives, and over several weeks it is made to fit.

In many ways, Sandra's store, Becker's Bridal, represents the old way of doing things. It sells dresses designed and manufactured by other companies, but it also has two sewing rooms out of sight. Back there, Lucinda the sample maker toils at a dress form, taking four days to turn each design drawn up by Barbra Allin, the store's part-owner, into reality. Nearby, the sewers, who are mostly Asian, work for \$14 an hour, each finishing one store-brand dress about every 13 hours.

Having seen the little guy, I wanted to look at a big bridal machine, a mass-market gown manufacturer. In North America, these are a dying breed, but luckily one of the few left happens to be in Toronto. In a grungy industrial park at Lawrence and Keele, Paloma Blanca churns out gowns for Canadian and foreign clients, and tries to hold its own against the influx of Asian-made dresses that has been growing over the past decade.

Established in Toronto's Spadina garment district in the 1930s by Manny Bernstein, whose brother Harry still putters around the newer building, Paloma Blanca uses all of the modern tools available to hold its silk dresses to a \$1,500-to-\$2,400 price point. It also has a polyester line, Mikaella, serving the market another notch below. It uses a fashion-forecasting service to stay on top of trends, and a sales staff that advises the marketing side against using terms like "ivory" to describe a dress colour, since that word has become associated too closely with dresses made in China.

In its design room, Paloma Blanca uses computers to speed the early development process and to help translate the designs into patterns. In the huge cutting room, where as many as a thousand dresses wait on racks for shipment to stores across the world (four of them bound for Becker's Bridal), fabric is laid up to 30 layers thick on long cutting tables.

I ask the chief cutter, Eric, whether his hands get sore cutting all that fabric. He squints at me, as if confused by the question. And then I'm led toward the laser-guided robot blade.

"Everything is done by computer file," explains Caron Phinney, the company's marketing director. Well, that is a kind of magic, I suppose.

#### **IV. THE VENUE**

The venue, together with the meal served in it, forms the plumpest part of any wedding budget—in the case of Sandra and Dave, more than half. With so much money at stake, it's easy to see why the wedding industry eventually consumes every large, empty, halfway-appealing space in a city. At least on Saturdays.

You have to wonder, then, why the people who build cavernous urban premises don't take this inevitability into account. The Royal Ontario Museum, for instance, relies on renting out its large rooms to stay open (social events such as weddings comprise 25% of this income). Yet no one managed to shake sense into Daniel Libeskind, the architect of the ROM's vast "crystal" addition, to get him to make it usable for wedding receptions. The soon-to-open Michael Lee-Chin Crystal is one of the most sought-after wedding venues in the city—brides have been postponing their weddings in order to be married inside it. But guests will never sit down to dinner there. Why? Because Libeskind designed it with a sloped floor.

While the ROM blushes over that, it can at least still host dinners in its huge Currelly Gallery. But the lack of a handy kitchen next to the hadrosaur bones means the ROM can't rake in money by feeding wedding receptions on its own. So it adds a "landmark fee" to the caterer's bill.

If you're looking for wolves in the bridal woods, here's one of the places you'll find them. The landmark fee, which almost every historical (and kitchenless) property in Toronto imposes on a client, gives the venue an automatic 15% cut of whatever the caterer charges. To become a "preferred caterer" at the ROM, or similar venues, you'll be adding that slot to your bride's invoice. "If you're paying a venue rental fee, I don't feel that you should be paying a landmark," said Cynthia Martyn. "But everybody does it."

Lack of kitchens, landmark fees, tipsy floors: None of these issues crops up at an all-in-one venue. Suburban banquet halls, those windowless reception boxes, seem to grow more numerous every year—"The market's flooded," says one venue manager—and this is happening, not surprisingly, as the receptions themselves expand. Attendance at wedding receptions in Toronto's South Asian community can approach 1,000, and some hall owners are reconfiguring to accommodate them.

A year in advance of their wedding, Sandra and Dave searched for a venue. "Some places, it was very factory-like," said Sandra. "Some people weren't so interested, and other people, you felt like they really cared." They loved the Carlu, a restored art-deco venue in downtown Toronto, but found it much too expensive, so they settled on the



Eglinton Grand, a gorgeous old movie theatre, with its own art-deco aesthetic, that was converted into an event space three years ago.

Unlike most venues, which, true to the wedding industry norm, are mom-and-pop operations, the Eglinton Grand is part of the Dynamic Hospitality & Entertainment Group. Similar to the Liberty Entertainment Group, its nearest competitor, Dynamic has a diverse stable of holdings, including the Pavilion Royale (a Mississauga banquet hall), the Atlantis Pavilions at Ontario Place, a couple of nightclubs and two Yuk Yuk's locations. But it considers the Eglinton "the jewel in our crown."

For 175 guests on April 14 (a date that took advantage of the Eglinton's \$15-per-person discount for rentals from Dec. 23 to April 30), Sandra and Dave's bill for food, drinks and the ballroom would be \$17,325 before taxes, including food costs of \$67 per person. But that's just the start.

Dynamic's a slick operation; it knows how to milk the Eglinton's assets. The ballroom is so grand they've installed heavy motorized curtains to block it from the view of mezzanine cocktail parties. Just before dinner begins, the curtains open to gasps. That sounded good to Sandra, who was keen to have what she called "different moments of drama" in her big day. The problem was, anyone walking through to the ceremony room could see the ballroom in all its glory, and that would spoil the surprise. So the Eglinton offered to install extra draping to block the view from that path, too (Sandra said yes to extra secrecy: pipe-and-drape installed in the ballroom and ceremony rooms—\$750).

Pin-spot lighting on the tables enhances the theatricality of the room, and it's yours at \$35 a table (Sandra said yes to extra drama: 26 tables—\$910).

It's nice to run a slide show on the big movie screen (Sure, said Sandra: \$350).

You'll need a sound-and-light technician (Yessir: \$550).

Get married in our handy ceremony room? (You bet: \$750).

Coat check? (Natch: \$200).

A personal message on the marquee and a nice shot of your cake on the big screen from our Live Eye camera (normally \$350, but for Sandra, gratis).

All told, the miscellaneous charges, including 15 vendor meals for musicians, photographers and the like, came to \$4,606.62. That brought the grand total for the venue, including gratuities and taxes, to \$27,914.

## **V. THE CAKE**

"That's what our wedding cake will look like," said Sandra, staring intensely at a page in her binder. It was an image torn from Martha Stewart Weddings of a bold, square, three-tiered cake in, naturally, apple green. In order to realize this, the sweetest part of her vision (cost: \$900), Sandra had contracted Penny Kellum of Sugarcake, a cake maker in Fergus. She went to Kellum because she knew her cakes were "stunningly beautiful." And because when Sandra visited Dufflet Pastries, a far more famous Toronto dessert



maker, she got the clear impression that "they couldn't give a rat's ass about my wedding."

It used to be that the design of a wedding cake or the personality of its maker were the least of a bride's worries; the cake was just one more thing a banquet hall provided. But that was before fondant.

The innovation of this smooth, rollable, mouldable icing has changed everything in the wedding cake business. Its sealing properties have hurried the shift from impregnable fruitcake to fresh cake. And its ability to take on shapes and accept intricate sugary decoration has turned ambitious cake makers into cake designers, and some of these into stars.

I found one of the brightest of these stars, Bonnie Gordon, in a green cube of a house in the Eglinton and Avenue Road section of the city. In her basement kitchen-studio, Gordon set me straight on wedding cakes. "The wedding cake is now as important as the wedding gown," she declared. "It's no longer cake, it's edible art."

Her astonishing creations—tiered flower gardens, stacked and tasselled silk pillows, surreal whimsies worthy of Salvador Dali, every visible component made of sugar—have been featured repeatedly in wedding magazines. "I've made wedding cakes for \$12,000," said Gordon. She admitted, "There's a certain celebrity status" to being a wedding cake designer. "People in my position have a following."

Considered in the abstract—well, even in the concrete—a cake costing \$6,000 or \$12,000 seems absurd. But Gordon's creations often take weeks of research and fastidious drudgery, not to mention true artistic skill. Any other piece of art so well conceived and executed could easily be worth that amount; it's being edible, disposable, that renders their five-figure sums preposterous.

Which is not to deny the stress these works place on the artist. Gordon, having burned herself out, no longer makes cakes on a regular basis; she teaches others, instead. Luckily, there's quite a market for that service, too. "Everyone wants to be a cake designer," she said. "Everyone wants to be Bonnie Gordon."

Some apparently want Gordon's success so much they're willing to filch what she regards as her intellectual property. She showed me the websites of two former employees, each of them promoting one of her designs as their own. Gordon made the situation clear: Sure they did a lot of the work; they were employees, it's a group effort. "You think Vera Wang sews those dresses herself?" But like software made at Apple Inc., she said, the concept belongs to the company.

But look, she insisted, it isn't just a problem with these two ex-employees. There's a lot of copying in this industry. "Brides will see cakes in magazines," she said, "and they'll take them to bakers and say, 'Can you make this cake for me?'" I was ready to jump to Sandra's defence—how else can a risk-wary bride be certain of cakey magic?—but

Gordon carried on. She visited the showroom of one wedding cake company in Woodbridge, she told me, where it seemed to her the owner had copied her concept of icing balls separating the tiers. "The balls were squished," she said with a satisfied air, "because he couldn't quite figure out how I did it."

(Her secret, by the way, was Styrofoam.)

I did find squished balls on display at Irresistible Cakes on Steeles Avenue, where magic seemed in fairly short supply. Each summer, during wedding season, the owner, Maurizio Filice, and his crew turn out 30 to 50 wedding cakes a week. That makes them No. 1 in volume in the city, said Filice, good for roughly \$3 million in revenue a year. To meet the demand, they need two massive rotisserie ovens, a sheeter that rolls out the fondant and an assembly-line mentality. Wednesday is baking. Thursday is cutting, filling and masking (applying a thin coating of icing that helps the fondant to stick). Friday it's decoration, using sugar flowers made in bulk during the off-season and a somewhat approximate hand with the design. Saturday—"Nobody bakes fresher than we do," said Filice—it's on its way to the bride.

## **VI. THE SHOCK**

For a couple of weeks, Sandra's fiancé Dave had been shooting a commercial in New Zealand. A week before the wedding he returned, and he and Sandra totalled their wedding bills to date: everything from the venue fee to the \$440 for jewellery for Sandra's mom and sister, to the money paid out for what seemed to be dozens of little details, such as the green-tinted acrylic crystals Sandra had bought for \$110 to spread over each of the tables to catch the light from the pin-spots above. And they found out it's not always true what they say, about spending on a wedding without guilt.

"It took our breath away," said Sandra. "We owe the venue about \$21,000 by tomorrow. And then there's another \$10,000 on top of that for paying all our vendors, like photography, flowers, bands, all that stuff."

Those amounts were in addition to the deposits they had paid out months before, bringing the total not to the budget they'd set, but to the secret amount Dave had been keeping in the back of his mind. "When you get on the train, it's all happening really fast," Sandra admitted. "I guess you don't think about the cumulative effect."

But, I said to her, it's all about creating memories, right?

Sandra agreed. "I guess the question is, what memories are you going to hang on to?" She chuckled ruefully. "I don't know if I'm going to hang on to the acrylic crystals that are on every single table, you know what I mean?"

As they added up the columns of numbers, it got kind of tense around the Mauro/Hamilton residence. At one point, looking to the future, Dave told Sandra, "We owe our children an enormous apology."

## VII. THE BIG DAY

By the 14th of April, all the details were arranged and most of the bills paid; the last few instalments would be taken care of by wedding planner Cynthia Martyn, who had envelopes for vendors. It was time for the bought-and-paid-for magic to kick in.

At 10:10 a.m. Sandra arrived, looking as if she hadn't gotten much sleep, at the hair salon Afif, where she had already had three hair trials that added \$210 to the \$206 billed for the cut, colour and styling of her bridal updo. As her mother and sister took turns in the chair, Sandra showed off the silk hair ribbon glittering with two parallel rows of maybe 200 tiny Swarovski crystals that, over the previous five nights, she had painstakingly glued to the fabric using tweezers. "I have never seen a bride so organized," said Vickie, her stylist. "Most brides..." she let flying arms around her head say the rest.

While she waited, Sandra sat down and pulled out a pad. "I gotta finish writing my speech." While she wrote what she would say to her mother and grandmother at the reception nine hours away, she misted up a little.

By noon, she was back at her hotel room, where her finished wedding gown hung at the window. Five minutes later came Dino Dilio, makeup artist to the stars, to do the faces of the three Mauro women (\$280). Sandra greeted him wide-eyed. "I had a nightmare last night. You had an emergency call from Kim Cattrall and had to fly to L.A." Dino assured her he was happier with her, although no doubt the music—AC/DC from the bedside radio—was a far cry from the three-piece chamber ensemble that once played as he did the makeup for a wealthy bride and her group.

At 1 p.m., the photographer Andreas Avdoulos, young and stylish with shaved head and designer glasses, knocked on the door. Among the top wedding photographers in the city, Avdoulos was booked for 10 hours of documentary coverage, and on Sandra's list of invoices his bill (\$5,088) came in second only to the Eglinton Grand.

But that's no surprise. Photography is the sector of the wedding industry most prone to cost inflation, for the twinned reasons that wedding photos are a couple's most important heirloom—the tangible proof the bridal fantasy came true—and photographers know how to play that card. "Typically," one shooter told me, "a wedding photographer will offer a lower shoot fee up front, to snag them. Then, everything else costs money." Albums, framed prints, online galleries, it all adds up. Avdoulos charges for those things, too; he's just more up front about it. For the day, he brought along three supplemental shooters, which cost him roughly \$2,000 of his fee. But he wasn't worried. "I'll make it up later in print sales and album sales," he confided.

Life is good these days for Avdoulos and others in his league. The number of wedding photographers seems to be growing, as everyone wants an easy piece of the bridal vein of gold. (Bruce MacNeil, the portrait photographer Avdoulos hired, grumbled that "90% of wedding photographers are guys that got a camera for Christmas.") Avdoulos doesn't pick

up a camera at a wedding for less than \$4,000, and when asked if he's making more than \$200,000 a year, he just shrugged and grinned.

The money, and the fact that Avdoulos is booked up as much as 18 months in advance, helps ease the sting of being considered "one of those schmucks" by the ad agencies he used to shoot for. "They don't talk to me any more," he admitted. "They don't give me work any more, because I do weddings." But never mind: "I'm making way more now."

Around 2 o'clock at the Eglinton Grand, roughly three hours before the ceremony, Cynthia Martyn and her assistant Meena unpacked 10 banker's boxes containing the \$460 worth of apple-green accents that Sandra had compiled. In the kitchen, six cooks prepared the antipasto course for the dinner to come and set the finished plates in tall racks for easy grabbing by servers later. As for the main course of chicken, beef and shrimp for 175 guests and 15 vendors—that had been par-cooked and plated the day before. Now those plates sat in even larger racks that, at the operations manager's signal, would be rolled into state-of-the-art combi ovens to get "re-thermed" and then rolled out eight minutes later in a rush of heat and steam.

Two hours before the wedding, a couple of women arrived from Da Vinci Flower Shop, a small florist chosen by Sandra because her decor vision was simple—white tulips and centrepieces of tall glass cylinders filled with green apples—and the price they proposed (\$2,600) was cheaper than the rest. Her restraint here seemed both admirable and wise, because I'd learned that the cost for decor, including flowers, will often be inflated by design fees and "supervising" fees (i.e. "Yes, that goes there") to the point that it can take up to 15% of the budget, which in this case would have amounted to more than \$6,000. Score one for Sandra's business sense.

While the Da Vinci women tied ribbons around the apple cylinders, Martyn checked the contents of her bridal "crash cart": some 50 items, including a butane lighter for candles, white chalk to cover up wedding gown scuffs, Tide to Go for serious stains, Tylenol, fishing line, a utility knife, cotton swabs, extra candles, some safety pins. "I can't tell you how many times I've had to pin up a bride's bustle," Martyn said.

A little more than an hour before the ceremony, the officiant arrived. "I used to be an accountant," said Reverend Gord Kushner. "This is my fun job" (\$400). Like Avdoulos, Kushner is so busy these days he has to turn away business: "There's a ripple effect due to the boomers."

By 4 p.m., Penny Kellum of Sugarcakes had delivered the wedding cake, which was displayed on a table in the middle of the dance floor with a spotlight and a video camera zeroed in. This was per the agreement Sandra had worked out during a meeting with Eglinton Grand management. "You spend so much money on this damn cake," Sandra said at the time, "I think it deserves some attention." The cake, with its elegant gum-paste tulips, looked exquisite under the lights. The only worry was whether there was enough cake for everyone.

At 4:10, nearly an hour before the ceremony, guests began to arrive, and because they couldn't be allowed to see the ballroom yet, or the ceremony room, which was still being finished, they had to be kept in the lobby area. "We've got a lot of people here way early," fretted Dave, "which is terrifying me." Martyn, on the other hand, just shook her head. This always happens, she said. "It's a thorn in our side."

With half an hour to go, the Eglinton's sound-and-light guys learned for the first time that a band, Ascension Groove (\$3,044), would be performing before and after dinner. In the mezzanine, where the post-ceremony cocktails and Sandra's signature drink, a sour-apple martini, would be served (\$58.30, the cost of two bottles of sour-apple liqueur), a bartender used a portable steamer to iron the white skirts around two long tables. On these, Cynthia laid out the guest favours Sandra had chosen: about a hundred copies of the children's book *The Velveteen Rabbit* (\$670), from which she'd selected a reading for the ceremony. Alas, these tables were placed exactly where Avdoulos and MacNeil had planned to shoot the couple's "wow shot" later. "Cynthia!" Avdoulos exclaimed when he spotted them. "Are these gonna be here?"

With 20 minutes to go, the apple cylinders were still not fully set up in the ballroom.

With five minutes to go, the sound-and-light guys did not yet have the CDs or DVD they were supposed to have.

At 5:01, with the guests long ago seated in the ceremony room, Sandra arrived in a rented silver Rolls-Royce (\$318). A few minutes later, Dave was sequestered in a tiny room with the couple's two dogs, Mixer and Toby, which, to some degree of angst on the part of the Eglinton Grand, the couple wanted included in the ceremony (\$100 for special green collars). Sandra, tulips in hand, was then stationed on the steps leading up to the ceremony room. After an extended wait, with her parents apparently gone missing, Sandra swore.

Cynthia Martyn took the matter in hand and located the parents in the

washroom. "Okay," muttered Sandra when her parents appeared behind her. "Go upstairs!"

About 10 minutes behind schedule, the ceremony began. "This looks like a BlackBerry crowd," said Rev. Kushner. By 5:34, the ceremony was over. The dogs behaved remarkably well (\$150 for dog sitters). And Sandra cried the whole way.

Over the next six hours, the memories and magic accrued for Sandra and Dave, some paid for, some free of charge. The couple posed for an elaborate portrait session on the Eglinton sidewalk, irritating Russell Oliver of Oliver Jewellery, whose path to his car was blocked; during dinner, roughly 750 plates, in four courses, were served; a count by the chef confirmed there was not enough cake, and the cake slices were made smaller; the MC forgot his lines and got increasingly sauced, as Martyn shook her head; Claudio the accordionist (\$700) went to the bathroom at the wrong moment and missed his cue; three

people at the head table got headaches, and Martyn provided Tylenol from her crash cart; a piece of photography equipment went missing, putting the "wow" shot in jeopardy; every vendor worked with what seemed to be genuine concern for the welfare of Sandra's fantasy, even the sound-and-light guy, who refused to set the lights as high as the photographers wanted for fear it would spoil the mood; one of the photographers, taking his job very seriously, threatened to wring the sound-and-light guy's neck.

Sandra's silk dupioni gown did not end up a rag, and at 11:30 p.m., having spent about \$51,300, all told, she looked up at me with glistening eyes. "It's exactly as I envisioned," she said.

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