Dear Alice,

My sister-in-law is scheduled to be married this spring. At the church rehearsal last Saturday, the "groom-to-be" showed up an hour and 40 minutes late, and then did not want to practice. He has been making comments to his friends that he does not want to get married. Do you think he is just getting cold feet, or do you think it's more than that? We are afraid he just won't show up at the church. My sister-in-law seems oblivious to all of this, or else she tries to explain away his remarks. Should we be more forceful in trying to get them to sit down and really talk this out, or just show up at the church and hope for the best?

Signed, Anxious Bridesmaid

Answer

Dear Anxious Bridesmaid

You are in the unique and probably very uncomfortable position of seeing more than a "surface" view of this engagement. On the one hand, you've noticed the groom seems to be reluctant to get married. It may be that you are in the position of knowing this because he is your brother (not fully clear from your question) who you likely care about and perhaps know rather well. On the other hand, it sounds as though you have a pretty close relationship with your sister-in-law and don't want to see her get hurt. So, you have tried to check in with your sister-in-law, but she brushes it off, seemingly un-phased. What to do now?

A good first step may be to get clear on your goals before sitting down with either one or both of them. Obviously, the conversation is about more than your sister-in-law being left at the altar. Are you invested in them staying together? Are you invested in them breaking up? Do you simply want them to get clarity about their commitment to the relationship before getting married? And what do you see as your role in such a conversation? Once you have some clarity about goals, you can sort through some options.

- What would it look like to talk to the groom? This depends largely on your relationship with him? how close you are, how comfortable you both feel having honest conversations about relationships. You could ask him how he is feeling about getting married. Is he hesitating? Is he re-thinking the decision? What is the meaning behind these comments to his friends? Most importantly, this could be an opportunity to let him know what impression he makes on you with is lateness, comments, etc. Would it be helpful for him to know this?
Another option may be to try to have more serious conversation with the bride. One tricky issue with this one is that if the groom is the one having doubts, talking with the bride may not serve much purpose beyond letting her know what you have observed and what your fears are. Perhaps you have already done this? If so, it may be useful to consider what may be behind her dismissiveness. Do you think she is "in denial" or might she have some reason for not taking his reluctance seriously?

A third option may be to consult with others. Do other people who know the couple share your fears that he may be a no-show? Are there other people who may also be in a good position to have a conversation with one or both of them?

Lastly, the option of letting it go may also be on the table. Relationships often look very different to people from the outside than they do to the couple themselves. Perhaps your sister-in-law's nonchalant attitude is based on some "insider" knowledge about her fiancé's apparent ambivalence.

While there is no way to predict what will happen, you are ultimately in the best position to decide what type of intervention (if any) will work best to accomplish your goal, based on your relationships with the soon-to-be bride and groom. Props to you for being such a caring sister-in-law.

Good luck,

Alice!

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