

benchmarks in the lives of American adults. When she thinks of our friends who have adopted, or who've gotten divorced, or who live outside of New York, the list is always used. "Do you realize that 14 people at our wedding also have three kids?"

At first, I found this continuing list obsession strange. But now that I've gotten used to it, I find it kind of ador-

able. If I were as organized as Julie, it would be on my list of the top 100 reasons why I love her.

A.J. Jacobs' book, The Year of Living Biblically, about his attempt to follow all the rules of the Bible, will be published in October. He lives in New York City with his wife and their three well-organized sons.

Southern Weddings

One guest reveals the unspoken rules of these celebrations. **BY JANE BORDEN**

IRUN THE WEDDING circuit like a hamster on a wheel. Save-the-date cards rotate in and out of my mailbox ad infinitum—and I never question that I'll go. It's instinct. In other words, I am Southern. When you grow up in North Carolina, attending ten weddings in one season is simply what you do. And if you're a girl, seven different bridesmaids' gowns are simply what you store under the bed. People don't get married more often there; it's just that the entire town is invited when they do. (Literally. In Tarboro, NC, a bride's family will print the reception's address in the local newspaper in lieu of mailing invitations. Small weddings are suspicious; they imply that the family has something to hide...

like a Yankee groom.) So I go. The problem is that I now live in New York City, which makes for long, expensive trips. But what can I say? A hamster's gotta run.

New Yorkers are easy to spot at a Southern reception; they're the pale bunch huddled in a corner near the bar discussing the town's quaint way of life. Meeting peers who have savings accounts, stay in on Friday nights and even—gasp!—cook their own meals from supplies procured at a grocery store can throw a New Yorker's worldview out of whack. But I find the simplicity seductive, and every time my plane touches back down at LaGuardia Airport, I wonder if I ought to move home.

Perhaps the otherwise slow pace of life is precisely



why Southerners are compelled to nuptial extravagance. If you've never witnessed it, here are the major points of confusion.

- Unlike in other parts of the country, the guest at a Southern wedding cannot give the couple money. After the honeymoon, they'll probably take your present to the store and exchange it for money, but they first need a tangible gift to display at the bride's home. Old ladies will view the loot and name cards will be attached, so your token of love had better be good.

- Also, the 13 girls in matching outfits are not the entertainment; they're the bridesmaids. I have twice been one among 13. And sometimes there are honorary

bridesmaids, too. (Typically, they are the close friends from college who were simply in a different sorority.)

• There's no point in being shy at the buffet: The chicken fingers, deviled eggs and cheese cubes aren't appetizers, they're everything. We don't sit down; that would take time away from shagging (that's dancing to you non-Southerners). And the clinking of fork to glass is not a cue for the bride and groom to kiss, as it is in the North. If you clink, everyone will stop talking and wait for a speech—which will be weird because toasts are done on Friday night during the elaborate pre-wedding-party wedding party, replete with another live band and buffet.

• Guests at Southern weddings don't expect to talk to the couple; as one of 500 guests, the odds are bad. Be content to wave from a distance as they exit with pomp and circumstance. My friend Elizabeth, from Texas, left with her new husband on a riverboat surrounded by fireworks. They sat in the middle of the lake until everyone dispersed and then returned to the dock from which they'd boarded, where a nondescript sedan was waiting.

After the reception, guests usually hit a dive bar, such as the one in Sea Island, GA, where I saw a bridesmaid playing pool in pastel green chiffon. Inevitably, one of the New Yorkers plays "Freebird" on the jukebox as a joke, but the locals don't laugh. Then, just as I'm about to suggest a change of scenery, the bartender screams "Last call!" and I remember that there aren't three different parties scheduled into my Palm Pilot for that night. There isn't a late-night dance club around the corner or a 24-hour hip bistro serving oysters and frites. I realize that there won't be the buzz of people milling about when I walk outside. There will be an interstate—and someone will have to drive on it because you can't just walk in this town. I realize that I am not home. And I'm not really ready to make the South my home again. So thank heaven for the hundreds of audacious Southern weddings that at least let me keep in touch.

Jane Borden is the comedy editor at Time Out New York. She lives in Brooklyn.

Completely Lovestruck

He was 28 years old—and engaged to a woman he'd never even kissed. But he had happily agreed to an arranged marriage. **BY MAJID MOHIUDDIN**

THAT'S IT. YOU'RE ENGAGED." MY FATHER laughed and gripped my shoulder in a gentle hug. "Your mother and I have been waiting for someone like Rasha for a long time. You couldn't be luckier."

Our families had just spent a July afternoon in light, polite conversation in the western suburbs of Chicago. Rasha's family had prepared a sumptuous lunch and had invited her grandaunt and grandmother, and my parents and sister. We took chai and cake after, in the drawing room. Rasha sat across from me in traditional Pakistani dress—a pink *salwar kameez*—gazing shyly at her feet. I squirmed in my sofa seat, choked by my tie. Eyes fell upon me, appraising me, while everyone sipped away.

I stood in her driveway later, shaking my head. What happened to getting down on bended knee? To eating the same spaghetti noodle from each end, à la *Lady and the Tramp*? Then again, this had been my choice. Falling in and out of love is so hard, I wanted to do the first part only once. So I decided on my culture's traditional route, which brings to mind the words *arranged marriage*.

I got out of the dating game before it began: in seventh grade. I grew up in America with the Muslim rules of no premarital sex or dating. There's no holding hands,

let alone kissing. Some Indian teenagers pay lip service to these cultural or religious norms and sneak out behind their parents' backs, but I consciously chose to remain chaste in body and spirit in the search for "true love." From the high-school prom to potential hookups in college, my attitude was "Thanks, but no thanks." I was waiting for something more: the real thing.

It sounds rough, but it wasn't. My search for a wife had started a long time ago, without me. My mother had consulted the "Auntie Network" and sent out an all-points bulletin for the ideal girl. Here's how it works: Parents spread the word to a wide group of friends and family spanning nearly every major city in the United States. Prospective candidates are pretty well screened by the recommendations of other family members who have watched these kids grow up in their communities. Based on a tip, interested families may meet up in a home or at a mutual wedding and give the kids an opportunity to talk. A guy and girl may go out for a casual cup of coffee. The rules are relaxing a bit, but the meet-up is never an all-out date (such as dinner and a movie), but more a chance to talk while in a safe, public space (like a walk in Central Park or at a lecture series). E-mail addresses and phone numbers may be exchanged.