

BEHIND EVERY ENGAGEMENT RING is an even more engaging story, sometimes sentimental, sometimes comical and sometimes quite surprising. Who said that men aren't as

romantic as women? The four gentlemen we interviewed each planned, panicked and made popping the question as noteworthy an event as possible.

Otherwise Engaged

Popping the question isn't always easy – but buying the right ring is even harder.

BY BETH BERNSTEIN

I LOVE PARIS

I had known that Rita wanted an Ascher-cut diamond in a very simple platinum setting. So first there was the month of comparing and learning about diamonds, which changed from confusing to downright frightening. What if I made the wrong choice? Wisely, I enlisted the help of a friend in the jewelry business. She took me to one of her favorite jewelers and finally we found the perfect diamond and setting.

Rita knew I'd eventually pop the question, but she didn't know when it was going to happen. I kept the ring for three weeks until I accompanied her on a business trip to Paris. We were to meet in a dark little restaurant on the Left Bank, but I got there first and proceeded to order wine, and immediately consume it. There were jangling nerves to calm. I knew she would say yes, but I had one chance to create a special moment and it had to be perfect! The bottle of wine was half empty by the time she arrived 20 minutes later.

She was tired from working and wasn't exactly in a receptive mood. I'd brought flowers but she was unimpressed. I told her she was beautiful and she swatted the compliment away, telling me I was drunk. We finished our main course (well, she finished hers, and pointed out that I hadn't eaten mine), at which point a little voice inside me was saying "Do it now!"

Then, she suddenly and unknowingly changed everything, suggesting that we go out and see the terrace. Terrace? I didn't even know there was a terrace!

There was not only a terrace, but also a perfect view of the Eiffel Tower against the night sky. I knew this was the right place. In one short moment I went into action, kneeled down, pulled the ring from my pocket, and asked her to marry me.

Instead of saying yes, she asked only "Are you serious?" And then she asked it another eight times, while I stayed on my knee and slipped the ring on her finger. She seemed to be in shock. In fact, when we went back inside, I reminded her that she still hadn't said yes. She finally said yes, but still hadn't looked at the ring. When she did, she said it was the most beautiful she'd ever seen.

—Toure, MTV VJ and author of the short story collection, *The Portable Promised Land*.

BLESSING IN DISGUISE

I was told that Jennifer's two brothers-in-law had asked her parents' permission to marry their daughters before proposing, and that I'd be ill-advised to bypass that step. So I left Manhattan, trekked out to Connecticut and asked her parents for their blessing. Once I had it, I figured I could cross it off the "things to do list" and then officially propose to Jennifer sometime in the next decade.



Meanwhile, her mother figured I was racing back to Manhattan to ask for her daughter's hand immediately. And when I didn't, I was suddenly under great and unexpected pressure from her mother to propose. I started the ring-shopping process, but I broke into a cold sweat any time I got close to the vast selections of diamonds. Finally, I had to confess to Jennifer why I was such a basket case. Fortunately, she asked her mother to calm down.

With what seemed like the weight of the world lifted from my shoulders, I was fine. I was able to buy a ring on my own. And I surprised Jennifer with it on Valentine's Day a few weeks later. She came to my apartment, where I had laid a path of rose petals leading to the engagement ring. I fell to one knee and proposed. She was completely shocked.

Later, I found out that her brothers-in-law had never asked her parents' permission. Not only could I have avoided the anxiety, but her brothers-in-law were really ticked off at me because it made them look bad by comparison.

—Dan Remmes, playwright, *Night Out, Three Tables*.

BETTER LATE THAN NEVER

After five years of being in a relationship with Suzanne, I had gotten the ultimatum. In all honesty, I'd gotten it by the second year, and then the third. By the fifth, though, it had more weight; it went something like "either you decide to commit or I'm outta here." So we broke up. I was going through my medical residency and didn't feel I was ready yet to get married.

After a couple of months, I began dating other women. By the seventh month, I realized what I'd lost, and that I was deeply in love with Suzanne. In retrospect, I also realized I probably needed to grow up. Unfortunately, Suzanne was dating someone new and didn't welcome me back with open arms. Mostly, she screened my calls and hung up on me.

After about a month, she finally began to soften, and we got together again. I was ready to go out and buy the ring, but I had no idea how to purchase a diamond or what to look for. I could read an MRI, but I couldn't figure out how to look through a jeweler's loupe. Finally, a friend recommended a jewelry store and I went

there. As soon as I walked in, my head began to spin, my heart raced and my legs began to tingle. I felt like I was going to pass out. The diagnosis: major panic reaction to the four C's.

I finally decided on a simple D flawless brilliant cut in what they told me was a classic Tiffany-style setting. I figured I couldn't possibly go wrong with this. And then for the next two weeks, all I kept thinking was that "I could have gone wrong.."

I had a conference to go to in New Orleans and asked Suzanne to accompany me. We ate a lot, laughed a lot, but I still hadn't proposed. I finally got the bright idea of putting the ring into an oyster. As soon as she found it, I got down on one knee and proposed. She looked at the ring, said it was perfect and that she loved it. I asked "What about me?" She just smirked and then she said yes around five times. We've been married for two years. I couldn't imagine life without her.

—Jason Reiss, neurologist

MOTHER KNOWS BEST

Ever since I took Val to meet my mother, she would casually mention that she was holding a stone for me from my great grandmother's ring. Then every time she'd come to Manhattan, she'd say "Is there something you'd like me to take out of the vault?" Val and I would joke about it. And I'd tell my mom that should I propose, she'd be the first to know.

Then one Saturday a couple months later, I finally proposed to Val — without a ring. Since the next day was Mother's Day, Val suggested that we both wait 24 hours before telling anyone. It seems that her mother was also asking if I was going to propose "anytime soon." The way I broke the news to my mother was "Mom, it's time to go to the vault.."

Val wasn't sure how she wanted it mounted. So we shopped around, looking at settings everywhere from Harry Winston to England's finest jewelry shops. We finally went to a jeweler that Val's family had long worked with. By Labor Day, Val had the ring on her finger. Now, both of our mothers are busy asking different questions — about the wedding. Eloping is starting to look good.

—Hal Rothstein, lawyer

A Brief History of the Engagement Ring

Throughout history, men gave rings to women with the intention of marriage. The so-called "betrothal rings" — made of iron in the shape of a plain hoop — were first given by the Romans around the 4th century. It is also believed that the Romans started the tradition of wearing the ring on the fourth finger of the left hand, since from this finger ran a vein, "vena amoris" (vein of love), that was thought to lead directly to the heart.

Many sources mention that the earliest recorded betrothal ring set with a diamond was in 1477; it was given by Archduke Maximilian of Hamburg to Mary of Burgundy. Resisting fire and steel, the diamond represented endurance and stood for lifelong partnership and commitment.

However, the diamond's popularity as the wedding stone of choice quickly faded. Sapphires, rubies and other gemstones adorned betrothal rings from the 15th century on. Sentimental versions of these rings used gemstones to spell out the first letter of "Dearest" or "Regard".

Other popular options that soon emerged included the Fede ring, which featured a motif of two clasped hands, and the Claddagh ring, with hands holding a crowned heart. The Gimmel ring, another notable choice, was composed of two or three separate hoops linked together to one shank so that the hoops could be fitted together as one. The bezel on this ring was also split so that when jointed, it formed one ornament and could also be separated for the marriage ceremony.

During the early 19th century, rose-cut diamond cluster rings began their reign of popularity, and by century's end diamond rings were the engagement ring of choice.— B.B.