



PUT A RING ON IT

BEFORE GETTING MARRIED, **SARA STILLMAN BERGER** EXPERIENCED THE ROLLER-COASTER RIDE OF ANTICIPATION AND HOPE FOR THE PROPOSAL THAT MIGHT BE, OTHERWISE KNOWN AS “PRE-ENGAGEMENT STRESS SYNDROME”

How did I become this person? Standing on our unmade bed, all 100 pounds of me pitched forward like a wild cat, fists clenched, knees bent, ready to pounce. “You’re ruining my dream wedding!” I roared. My boyfriend looked up at me, small and startled. “We aren’t even engaged yet,” he said.

That, of course, was the problem. The best bands and venues book up quickly, my mom liked to remind me over daily text messages and phone calls. “If he doesn’t propose soon, you’ll end up with an accordion player at the Days Inn,” she’d say. Or less passively, in case I had a hard time interpreting her “mother tongue”: Time was running out!

Despite the maniacal outburst regarding the demise of my “perfect day,” I’m not the type who grew up fantasizing about her wedding. As a little girl, I never pictured my dream party; it was always about my dream man—and at 27, I had already found him. Brandon and I met on a blind date, when the most I was hoping for was a good meal. But over oysters and truffle pizza, I found that he was sexy, creative, smart, and hilarious, with smoky green eyes, and a few dates later I discovered an endearing tendency to cuddle a little too tightly.

But here I was, flopped down on our shared bed, boneless and in tears. Who was this person who had become so obsessed with getting engaged that she actually felt a “ghost ache” in her ring finger? Neurotic as I was (a sore throat meant strep, a sore neck

meant meningitis), I didn't need to page my brother, the MD, at the hospital; this I was able to self-diagnose: Pre-Engagement Stress Syndrome (PESS).

My steep decline into the slightly unhinged started off innocently enough. Things between Brandon and I were going so well that about a year after our first date, we moved in together. But with the excitement of sharing closet space came my expectation of one day sharing the aisle. So, on a crisp October evening, I felt relieved when he asked me my thoughts on our future. I told him that if we were not engaged by the end of the coming summer (nine months away), I'd start to wonder what was going on. "Fair enough," he casually replied.

In my opinion, our mutual deadline gave him plenty of time to ask my father for my hand, buy the diamond ring, and come up with a romantic proposal. And it gave me a whole year after the proposal to plan a wedding the following summer. Everything would be perfect.

But everything wasn't perfect. From that October day onward, I was sure he'd propose earlier. In March, we looked at rings. But when he didn't ask me in April, the anniversary of when he first told me he loved me, and he didn't do it in May when we drove upstate to explore an old lighthouse, and he didn't pull my dad aside on a Father's Day trip home to Michigan to ask for permission to marry his daughter, I felt the veil of impatience cover me. It wasn't the veil I had in mind.

It's not in any medical textbooks, but I assure you PESS is real; it takes over every thought. There wasn't a moment that I didn't expect him to drop to one knee. On walks with Norman, our golden-retriever puppy, Brandon would reach into his pocket and both the dog's ears and mine would perk with expectation. But all he ever pulled out was a training treat. He'd suggest going to the beach for the weekend, and I'd giddily agree, hugging him close enough to pat him down. "Let's pack in case we decide to stay overnight," he'd say, and I'd throw in my favorite dress, fingering the bag deep down to see if there was a small box tucked away.

By August, my malady was nearing its peak, thanks in part to my mother. She had spoken to our temple and frantically called to tell me that only a few dates next summer remained. If I didn't book soon, I risked saying "I do" the following year.

I urgently emailed his parents with "Don't Think I'm Crazy" in the subject line to get their feedback on the next year's few available dates. They got back to me right away: "You know how much we love Brandon, and you must know that we have begun to love you with the same vigor, so never feel that asking us anything is crazy." With my ringless left hand, I picked up the phone, called the temple, and, unbeknownst to Brandon, reserved a date without actually being engaged—the only remaining Saturday available that worked for both families and both rabbis.

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But securing a date did not settle my stress; instead, my condition spiraled out of control. Brandon insisted that it wasn't right to start planning the details before he proposed. *So just propose already!* I'd shamelessly beg. Desperate, I told him that if the ring was the holdup, he could just give it to me later. After all, he had agreed to my timeline, his parents were in on the plan, and Brandon's rabbi had even left him a voicemail!

Labor Day (the official end of summer) came and went. We embarked on an Alaskan cruise with Brandon's family, and the only ring I got was from his parents—a gigantic fake diamond on a band large enough to fit around my wrist. At home, I placed the obnoxiously large ring on Brandon's nightstand as a not-so-subtle reminder. Brandon jokingly used the ring to practice proposing on Norman, asking for his left paw and slipping the solitaire around his furry wrist.

That's when I found myself standing on our bed, screaming, then collapsing, with the realization of the madness that was taking over my life. I had replaced my dream man with an engagement nightmare. It was time to wake up.

By October, Brandon hadn't proposed,

but he was still romantic to a fault—hiding love notes in the medicine cabinet and surprising me with concert tickets and homemade dinners. The Friday before Columbus Day weekend, I came home during my lunch break to walk Norman and discovered a packed suitcase and a note reading, "Meet me at the train station." Part of me wondered if it was just Brandon being his sweet, spontaneous self. All of me hoped it wasn't.

After a train ride to Boston and a rental-car drive, we passed a sign: Welcome to Cape Cod. My heart thrummed in my chest as we entered our room at the Whalewalk Inn & Spa and sank into the love seat. He handed me a thick manila envelope, and I pulled out a document: "If you are reading this story, I must have done something right," it began.

On the first page, he explained how he had gotten a call from our mutual friend Hillary. "I have the perfect girl for you," she had said. He was vacationing on Cape Cod at the time, and he saved my number, promising her he'd call me soon. As I read this, I learned that it was exactly two years from the day Brandon had found out about me—and apparently the date he'd always known he'd propose, even when he agreed to my end-of-summer timeline. I turned the pages to discover photos of the East Village corner where we had our first kiss, the torn edge of paper where he first wrote "I Love You," printouts of witty email banter. Brandon had painstakingly saved and lovingly narrated 50 pages of memories, starting with the moment we met. It must have taken him months to put it together.

With shaking fingers, I reached the end. "Insert card here," it stated. I looked up, and nestled into the dozen red roses he had waiting in the room was a note that read, "Forever." When he got down on one knee, my eyes were so blurry with tears that I couldn't even see the ring. Not that

I'd ever doubted he had one. **B**



Sara Stillman Berger is a writer living in Chicago. After nine years of marriage and two children, Brandon still insists that October is the end of summer.