

COUPLING

Proposing on February 29

An old Irish custom gives women “permission” to propose on February 29. Sixteen years ago I did just that.

By **Kathy Tully** | FEBRUARY 26, 2012

At a recent dinner party, the hosts introduced their twentysomething nephew and his fiancée, newly engaged before Christmas. Immediately, we married ladies grilled the fiancée: “How’d you meet?” “Let’s see the ring!” “How’d he propose?”

“Let’s tell all of our stories!” another friend suggested, pointing to each of us, married anywhere from 10 to 20 years. My husband rolled his eyes. He knew what was coming.



KIM ROSEN

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“So, Kathy, how’d you and Joe meet?”

“She can’t tell it in less time than it takes to sing ‘Alice’s Restaurant,’ ” my husband quipped. Everyone laughed. Succinctness isn’t my strong suit. But after almost 16 years married, I’ve fine-tuned a retort to beat Arlo Guthrie’s famously long song.

“Yes, I can. At . . . a . . . BBQ,” I said. People laughed. Then the next question. “How’d he propose?” We shot each other a look. “He didn’t propose. I did!” I blurted out our story. How we were both “old” – I was 34, he was 43, neither ever married – when we met. And how, after dating and waiting 2½ years, I popped the question to him on leap day 1996. Leap day, February 29, according to an Irish myth from the Middle Ages, is the one day every four years that women are “allowed” to propose to men.

My plan, I told them, was to propose as I’d hoped he would to me – quietly, over dinner, at the restaurant where we had our first date. But writer friends suggested I grab a byline, too. So I wrote my proposal, weaving in a story about the history of leap day, and mailed it to the op-ed editor at the *Boston Herald*, who agreed to publish it.

That was when my stomach tightened. Would Joe, a private man, be OK with my popping the question in such a public way? Fear melted away, though, as I thought of all the reasons Joe was the perfect man for me. All my dating life, I’d been looking for someone who’d treat me like an equal, and Joe had showed me that he truly believed in a woman’s capability, and mine, no matter the situation. He taught me to chop wood . . . another time, to bake pies (with homemade crust).

I didn’t “need” a man, but I wanted this man in my life. Forever. The belief that we were meant to be together gave me courage to propose. It wasn’t the ultimatum I knew many women delivered, but an action that reflected the equality in our relationship.

My dream of a 50-50 relationship might have brought us together, but four leap years later, it’s the unbalanced times that reveal just how deep our love has grown. When I lost my job, our relationship was 30 (me)/70 (him). When my father died shortly after, my end of the seesaw sunk still farther: - 10/110. Six months later, when his younger brother died unexpectedly, I crawled out of my own dark hole of grief and started typing – a eulogy, written from his and his sibling’s perspectives, for him to read at the funeral Mass.

Every leap day, I think about my proposal, and how our life and love have evolved. I have to admit, I never realized what a perfect man Joe was to propose to until recently, when I recounted our engagement story to a friend’s husband.

“What? I would never let a woman do that to me!” he huffed. Until that moment, the idea that a man might not want – or *allow* – a woman to propose to him was unimaginable to me. I couldn’t be married to such a man, let alone raise daughters with him. In his response 16 years ago, Joe had been unemasculated, but his answer was absolutely not what I’d anticipated. I expected “Yes.” “No.” Even “Maybe.” Instead, he pointed to the newspaper’s date, February 24. “You’re early,” he said. “You have to propose to me again.”

Five days later, on February 29, I met his challenge. Privately, in person. That September 29, we married. Joe, who’s much better at organizing things than I am, planned the whole wedding.

With leap day approaching this week, presenting an opportunity for single, waiting women everywhere, I ask myself, would I, knowing what I know now, do it the same way, all over again?

My answer is yes.

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