

COLUMBINE'S WOUNDED: Their horror and healing

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Injured students Richard Castaldo, Nicole Nowlen, Mark Kintgen and Patrick Ireland (front)

REAL-LIFE RUNAWAY BRIDES

It's not just a hit movie. Here are true tales of ordinary women who bought the dress, booked the band, got close to the altar and then said, 'I'm outta here!'



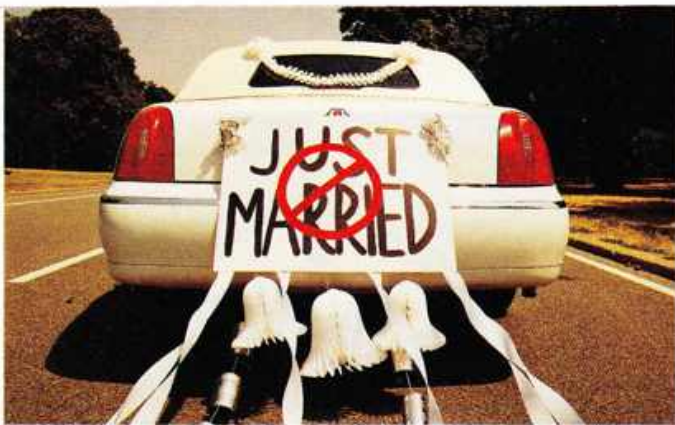
**Julia Roberts
and Richard Gere
of *Runaway Bride***

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ALLISON LEACH

Brides who bolt before the big day are "more common than people think," says Marcy Blum, who coauthored *Weddings for Dummies*.

I Don't

So what if the guests have RSVP'd? Who cares if the gown looks faaab-ulous? For some brides, calling the whole thing off was the hardest—but best—decision they ever made

Second thoughts are as common as china patterns for most brides-to-be. But even when cold feet turn itchy, finding the nerve to back down is, for most, something out of a movie—*It Happened One Night* with Claudette Colbert, say, or *The Philadelphia Story* with Katharine Hepburn. Or this summer's \$100 million runaway hit *Runaway Bride*, in which Julia Roberts's small-town heartbreaker Maggie Carpenter strands no fewer than four wannabe husbands at the altar. If Roberts's own nuptial near-misses are any guide, she must have empathized with her *Runaway* character: In 1991 she jilted Kiefer Sutherland just three days before their planned \$500,000 ceremony.

In the movies, of course, the bolting bride usually is played for laughs. But for real women, what does it take, and how does it feel—not only at the moment of truth, but years later? To find out, PEOPLE tracked down six real-life runaways. As the women on the following pages can attest, happy endings aren't confined to the silver screen.



JAMES MCCOON

Julie Pearlman has kept the invitations and headpieces from both her planned weddings.

She canceled the wedding but not the wedding party

As far as Cristy Burk could tell, the 60 guests at her 1979 wedding reception seemed blissfully unbothered that the groom was missing. "Everybody was there *except* him," she says. Then again, he hadn't been invited. Three hours shy of the ceremony, Burk dumped her dyspeptic beau. Now, two decades later, she still marvels at her courage that day

and at how "relieved and at peace" she felt afterward.

Cristy was just 16 and a high school sophomore in the tiny town of Cotulla, Texas, when she began dating Keith (not his real name), an oil-field worker then in his early 20s. "He not only had a terrible temper," says her mother, Mary, "he'd cut Cristy down every chance he'd get."

Over the next five years, there were frequent make-ups and breakups. Then, on the eve of their wedding, Cristy, then 21, told Keith that she had invited several of his relatives to the rehearsal dinner at her grandmother's house. "He totally blew up, because there were some members of his family he didn't like," she recalls. The next morning, after he failed to show up for the rehearsal and the dinner, Cristy tracked him down and asked if they were still getting married. "I guess I'll go through with it," he mumbled. Furious, she threw her engagement ring on the bed, announced that "the wedding's off," and walked out. When told the news, Cristy's mother says she was "thrilled to death." Cristy and her father, William, then tacked a note on the church door telling guests to come to their house instead. "We'd already bought the food and punch," says Cristy. "So we took the plastic bride and groom off the cake, brought the flowers from the church and had a nice party."

Her ex gone for good, Cristy, a dental hygienist, moved to Dallas to start over. Deeply religious, she was at church one Sunday when she met Gary Stephenson, then 22, an irrigation specialist. When he asked her to marry him on Valentine's Day in 1980, she turned him down. ("I had just called off a wedding!") But she quickly reconsidered. "Gary," she says, "has a big heart and a lot of compassion."

Married April 1, 1980, in the same gown she bought for her first wedding, Cristy's runaway-bride saga has become a favorite with the four children—three boys and a girl—she has had with Gary, especially her 15-year-old daughter Sunni. "She was pretty brave to do that," Sunni says. "Mom is very strong-willed."



"She sticks to what she believes," says Sunni (playing wedding dress-up at home) of her mom.

"I knew canceling the wedding was the right thing," says Stephenson (in plaid, at the nonreception at her parents' home).



Just a month after nixing their nuptials, Schrage and Hughes (in Manhattan in April 1990) were once again living together.



A publicist says nope to a prenup

It was late morning on March 16, 1990, and Deborah Hughes was watching florists and caterers bustle around the Southampton, N.Y., estate she shared with her fiancé, former Studio 54 co-owner Ian Schrage. Hughes knew she should begin dressing for their 1 p.m. wedding, but she was still steaming over what she calls “a telephone-book-sized” prenuptial agreement that the millionaire had sprung on her the week before. “You’re expected to walk down the aisle and say ‘I do,’” she says, “when what you really feel like doing is hitting him over the head!”

Hughes didn’t wallop Schrage that day—or marry him either. Instead, a few minutes before the ceremony, she called the whole thing off. Her decision, says Hughes (then a publicist for designer Carolina Herrera, whose husband had introduced the couple), “had nothing to do with money. It had to do with control. It was like having a divorce before you got married.”

Schrage’s brother Bernard broke the news to the 80 guests, including Calvin Klein and billionaire Ron Perelman. But while Schrage secluded himself in his bedroom, Hughes—her Herrera gown still on its hanger—put on a little black dress and played hostess. “When the door opened and I walked through it,” she recalls, “you would have thought a ghost entered the room. There were gasps.”

Some pals gasped again when the couple resumed dating two weeks later. They never again discussed that day, says Hughes: “It was a very dangerous subject.” They broke up for good in 1992. These days, Hughes, 42, who is single and lives in a one-bedroom apartment in Manhattan, runs her own public relations firm. As for her scrapped nuptials, “It just wasn’t meant to be,” she says philosophically. “I don’t regret it, and I’m sure Ian doesn’t either.”

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“Never look back,” says Hughes (with friends Scott Sevier, left, and David Goldsmith).