

WEST TEXAS

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The Story of What's Not Done

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A yellowing newspaper clipping big as my high school diploma hung opposite the toilet. I wondered why the owners of our rented cottage had framed it. Why on the wall opposite the toilet and washing machine?

The shower stood close enough to mottle the page. Were you supposed to read before you sat on the toilet? After? Halfway through the announcements of engagements, weddings, and wills, the name of the owner's "eldest daughter" and her fiancé appeared. No red or gold pen outlines the notice, as it might if my mother had been in charge. No arrows. No shiny stars. No exclamation points.

Toward the bottom, after a string of Miss (never Ms., and this in 2003) so-in-sos, the daughters of Mr. and Mrs. Etc., marrying Mr. Whosises, I found an unexpectedly contained firestorm: The marriage between Miss Josephine Somebody and Grenadier Judson Whomever will now not take place.

Jane Austen's descendants could base a Netflix series on that. If I'd lived in the world of our hosts, I asked myself, what sort of person would I have been? I went to school with girls whose families, derived from the original Four Hundred, owned houses in East Hampton, employed uniformed maids. I have a vague acquaintance with basic rules of such families, like the one restricting your appearance in the newspaper to the occasions of your birth, your engagement, your marriage, and your death. Not one of those girls had ever seen her mother squeal, "Your brother's been arrested for the wrong kind of cigarettes!" scandalizing her small-town guests by vaulting from the dinner table to rescue him, still reeking of marijuana, from the 26th Precinct police station. No, those girls didn't do scandal. Scandal was "not done." I envied this rule for a very long time.

I remember other, unspoken rules. In first grade, I invited a

classmate to my birthday party. Her mother, who lived on Park Avenue in the seventies, phoned my mother and said, “we don’t go to that part of town.” That part of town, the Upper West Side of Manhattan, Riverside Drive and 113th street, is currently prime real estate, but back in the sixties it was *déclassé*—because residents belonged to the middle class. My piano-teacher father from a small Southern town, my grandmother’s failure to be admitted to The Cosmopolitan Club, didn’t rate. Nobody in our family got listed in The Social Register.

My classmate’s mother offered regrets when she turned down the invitation to my seventh birthday party. She was a lady-who-lunched, who never left Park Avenue except to shop on Fifth, who went to “the country,” for the weekend, or flew to Europe. I felt shamed by the rejection, which told me once and for all that I wasn’t one of them.

My parents had no clue what was “done” or “not done,” and though I strained to “belong” and figure out rules that seemed cruelly obscure, I never got past the notions that if we bought Wonder Bread or I named my doll “a nice, normal name,” as I thought, like “Susy,” or wore Peter-Pan collar blouses instead of weird V-necks, then we’d pass muster. Entirely out of my depth, I never went to social dancing school or knew what “debutante” meant until I was in college. There, I got invited to a fraternity’s freshman party, as I discovered, because “your last name doesn’t end in a vowel.” The fraternity catered, it turned out, exclusively to young men descended from Dutch reformers, Boston Brahmins, and Southern planters—although a few Catholics and Jews seem to have been admitted, on the grounds that they passed as Protestant. Money, or membership in the tribe of Kennedys, rendered these boys eligible for marriage among the elite.

The announcement of a marriage not taking place, the names of the guilty parties proclaimed in print, seems tantamount to public shaming. Why was such information hanging on the bathroom wall? Why hadn’t the hosts snipped

out that part? Possibly for the same reasons they'd left their daughter's engagement visible, but hard to find. One doesn't call attention to these things. If one must display them, and one breaks the rules when one does, then one does so discreetly. You'd never talk about taking a dump or throwing sweaty clothes in the washing machine, so it's marginally acceptable to place a marriage announcement up on the wall of the room where unmentionables are deposited—also a spot ideal for informing on a marriage that will “now not take place.”

I thought of my parents, whose marriage should never have taken place. For them, such an announcement would have been a godsend. I never really knew what my father thought of marrying my mother—I suspect he had gotten desperate, and considered my mother socially superior. She came from money, if not class.

My mother actually told me: “Well, I wanted babies. He was a man.” I sometimes imagine the whole thing getting called off—my father shouting “Hallalujah! I'm free,” careering off to a favorite bar with three male friends, all of whom buy him double scotches, slap him on the back, and say, “close shave, buddy.”

My mother I see buying a ticket on the Queen Elizabeth for a standard stateroom below decks. She'd be pale and teary, but she'd have pluck and her canvases and her paints. While lost in the rendering of a stirring scene somewhere in the Lake District, oil paint decorating her hair, a wild gleam in her eye, she'd meet a shepherd or a farmer who didn't mind her silly ways, marry, and live happily ever after. My father would have been better off as a player, squiring girl after girl after girl out for the evening, before returning to his true love, practicing the piano.

If their marriage should never have taken place, I'm the rogue daughter springing from the need to observe their mistake. I'm the one who enjoys framing thoughts on the wall of my mind. I'm yellowing with age myself, graduating to the time when I don't give a damn what anyone thinks. I'm putting up my thoughts where the shower won't splash them, and where, I

hope, they'll have better companionship than the toilet and the washing machine.

I'm surprised to find myself grateful I didn't grow up in the world of that girl whose mother wouldn't let her come to my birthday party. If I had, I might never have learned to tell my story—stuck in that elite world where talking about family matters is “not done.”

Poor old Miss Josephine Somebody and Grenadier Judson Whomever, the ones whose reasons for cancelling their marriage we never get to know—I wonder if either would have wanted, or been able, to tell the story of their failed romance? And I—had I come from their ilk, I might not have had a story to tell, since bad behavior, apart from getting drunk or letting your mother mastermind your wedding, is “not done.” Storytelling is just “not done.”

No, I'm not one of them. Bullhorn in hand, I'd blare from the rooftop news of the marriage that didn't take place. I'd scan that tiny print announcement, magnify it, add marginalia in bright colors, mount the work on a scaffold. To the tune of the Radetsky March, I'd Da Vinci the work of art down the street, billboard it, marry it to public consciousness.

Vitruvian man, move over. Proportion is to story as detail is to life. Big, bigger, biggest.