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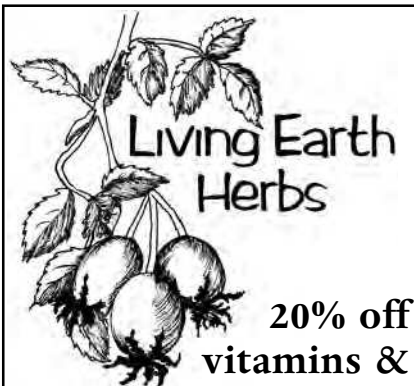
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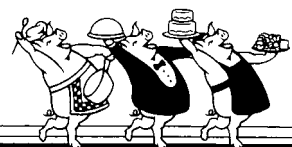
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Weddings 2006

Rules of Engagement

Practicing acceptance with the family to be.

BY DAVE CONSTANTIN

We were there on display: the soon-to-be-married. My fiancée and I sat huddled together at the table while her brother bought us shots and her parents presented an assembly line of neighborhood well-wishers. We were in a restaurant owned by a family friend in the small town in Michigan where she had grown up. At the next table, the neighborhood chatted loudly. Most of them knew my future wife not as "Jen" or "Jennifer," but as "Jenny." Having watched her grow up, their interest in her engagement had a paternal quality. I wanted to make a good impression, but I was in no mood to perform. I had been in Michigan for a week already and the stress of being accepted into the family was beginning to take its toll.

The neighborhood ladies, who all spoke with perfect *Fargo* accents, were displaying their plumage in the form of colorful Christmas sweaters. Evidently, the higher the assortment of colors and/or embroidered cats, the higher the prestige. But these were wholly authentic, un-sarcastic people, the kind I thought only existed in black and white. In their presence, I felt my east-coast cynicism glaring like the blood on Lady Macbeth's hands. I had to think I was just being paranoid.

Roger, the restaurant owner's son, was regaling our table with colorful stories of the days when he and Jen's brother played hockey together. His girlfriend sat quietly beside him, looking unsteady in her chair. She held an empty wineglass with both hands, anchoring herself to one spot. She had been squinting suspiciously across the table at Jen and me for some time. Suddenly, interrupting Roger, she decided it was her turn to speak. We all listened.

She had plenty of loud things to say about common law marriage, and how she and Roger were practically engaged anyway. She joked about getting a ring on her finger and her hands on Roger's credit cards. Roger didn't laugh. She told us we shouldn't wait to have kids. She asked me how old I thought she looked. Trying to be generous, I said 29. This upset her. Roger patted her back and

smiled nervously. "Now, now," he said, "don't steal the spotlight, this is about them," and nodded in our direction. Someone signaled for the waiter.

Jen's father offered to get the next round. I ordered a Guinness, forgetting that he's a staunchly practical man who has no interest in frivolous spending. He ordered an MGD which, although touted as the "champagne of beers," really is more like the "acceptable boxed wine of beers." Guinness would be caviar by comparison, unnecessary and pretentious in his eyes. I realized the infraction too late. As I self-consciously sipped at the inky fluid, Jen's mother watched me in a sort of stunned silence, as if I were handling some rare, exotic bird. "Is that beer?" she asked in all sincerity. Her father eyeballed the glass, and smiled. I offered him a taste, but he declined. "I hope you enjoy it," he said politely. I didn't. I couldn't gauge how much more of me he was willing to put up with on this trip.

Jen's father, who says things like, "the secularists have won," when he doesn't see enough religious programming on television, will watch us get married on the balcony of a ski resort, and isn't likely to hear Jesus Christ mentioned unless someone drops something on their foot. We had already declined his suggestions for a catholic minister, snubbing a long list of favorite family pastors. We opted instead for somebody with a PhD in theology, whose name appeared after a Google search of the words "Unitarian" and "Michigan." Religious vagueness seemed an acceptable compromise, but certain things were non-negotiable.

Jen's parents had accepted our non-traditional demands graciously, defying the rigid, black and white mental box I had imagined them occupying. I thought about that as we sat in the restaurant that night listening to advice, congratulations, and occasionally, dire warnings from the people who helped form Jen into the person I want to marry. I decided to loosen up and join in the celebration. When the waiter came back, I felt like ordering champagne. I ordered an MGD instead. ■

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