

THE MISSING MRS.

Marianne Hales Harding

Every afternoon when I pick my children up from school the teacher who acts as a crossing guard calls out, “Hello, Mrs. Harding!” I return his large, friendly smile and call back, “Hello, Mr. —!” Occasionally the encounter is elongated by a sentence or two about how brilliant my child is or how much she enjoys his English class. On the whole, it is a pleasant exchange. But my name is not Mrs. Harding. It never has been. Not even when I was married.

In school settings I am almost always “Mrs. Harding.” It’s the default name for mothers: Mrs. Whatever-Your-Kids’-Last-Name-Is. I don’t bother correcting the kids because they never remember. Come to think of it, that’s why I don’t bother correcting the adults, either.

My name wasn’t an issue until I got married. The expectation in my largely conservative community was that I would take my new husband’s name, but it felt odd to completely rebrand myself. I was unsettled, but that wasn’t a strong enough reason to deviate from the norm, so I cast about for arguments that would poll well with my huge (and opinionated) extended family. I landed on the idea that I was known professionally as Marianne Hales and therefore it wouldn’t be reasonable to lose my name completely. “Are you that well known?” my brother-in-law retorted. He had a point. I was twenty-five years old, just out of grad school, and could find pretty much all of my adoring fans on my wedding guest list. The idea that twenty-five years of personhood was sufficient reason to retain my unique identifier was not entertained. Marriage is the start of a new life and the creation of a new family, so it’s only right to have a new (unified) name, I was

told. But it was a new life for my husband too, and his new life didn't involve nearly as much paperwork.

Not that I would actually say that to my mother or aunts. The fact that I was giving this any thought at all had created mild alarm within the family. We have no shortage of opinionated women in my family, but there's opinionated within the Church and opinionated on the way out of the Church and sometimes the distinction is very fine indeed. It's fueled by the ongoing tension between autonomy and obedience—we are taught to question and think and then are questioned when we think. The Mormon origin story is a boy who, in following his own heart, bucked the major religious traditions of his time, faced persecution and public outcry because of it, and stayed true to his own thoughts and feelings to the end. If Joseph Smith had been as meek as Mormon women are sometimes asked to be, there would be no LDS Church.

This wasn't the first time I had lived in that paradox, but, as a fairly newish adult, it weighed on me. I spent several months deciding how far I wanted to stray from the traditional, finding where the line between conscience and conformity lay for me, personally.

I finally settled on using a double last name with no hyphen (thank you, Hillary Rodham Clinton—the most famous double last-namer I was aware of at the time, though even she didn't use it exclusively). Hyphenated last names felt dated at that point and I loved the look of my new name: Marianne Hales Harding. My last name finally balanced my lengthy first name, visually, and it rolled off the tongue. Well, it rolled off *my* tongue. No one else knew quite how to handle it. At the doctor's office they sometimes filed me under Hales, sometimes under Harding. I got junk mail addressing me with the first name of "Hales." And at church? Sister Harding, of course. At the temple, thoughtless temple workers actually crossed out half of my last name thinking, I assume, that I had a very unusual first name and hadn't realized they were only asking for my last. Because my atypical name felt slightly seditious, I never corrected anyone who got it wrong. I introduced myself

properly but didn't get argumentative when people heard only what they expected to hear. (That would be rude.) Once a friend noticed me signing a check and said, "Wow you use both names all the time, huh?" Yes, I replied, because that's my name. Marianne Harding is not the person I chose to be.

Marianne Harding was who I was on the records of the Church, though. No one ever asked what my name would be when I got married, and I didn't take the time to change it from the default until many years afterward. It was one thing to stray from the traditional, but quite another thing to have to battle for it at every turn. I was up for the former but not so much for the latter.

It was as a newlywed in Seattle that I learned to speak up when it came to my name choice. Lori Mortensen, our Relief Society president, felt strongly that people should be addressed by the name he or she chose. She had the self-assurance I lacked to gently and respectfully correct the bishop (and others) over and over again until I was known generally as "Sister Hales Harding." I credit her for providing the validation I needed to fully embrace my name choice. She was one of the first faithful women who didn't bat an eye at my name, who accepted it without question. She was the one who made me feel like I had the right to determine how I present myself and that it wasn't minor heresy to deviate from the default. She validated, too, my feeling that a name is not a frivolous thing. It isn't silly to care deeply about how you are known.

The question was flipped on its head ten years after I was married when, once again, I had to choose my name. This time I had fewer years invested in the name, but the stakes were higher. Everyone assumes when you get divorced that you will revert to your maiden name but, once again, that felt odd to me. *I* hadn't left the family; my husband had. Why should I have a completely different last name from my young children? Why should I wade through the endless sea of paperwork? At thirty-five, I was entrenched in the world as Marianne Hales Harding in ways that

I never was as twenty-five-year-old Marianne Hales. The logistics were overwhelming. Beyond that, though, it felt like losing my name would be to lose the last ten years of my life, to erase my marriage. This was something my husband wanted to do, but I never did. You can't erase promises made, covenants uttered, lives lived. You can't erase the person I chose to be. That is how I found myself navigating the world as a single person with a distinctly "married" name.

This is stranger within the Church than in the larger community. In the years since my marriage there has been some movement toward regularizing non-traditional married name choices, but with most Church members it seems like a begrudging acceptance. Pushing that even further leads to befuddled looks or exasperation. When I told one of my priesthood leaders that I wasn't going back to my maiden name after the divorce, you could almost see the little man in his head shouting, "I do not GET you, lady!" I suppose it is progress, though, that the response is more "whatever" than hellfire these days.

Now I'm mostly known only by my first name because my full name is a long story (as you know only too well at this point) but also because, over seven years post-divorce, I haven't fully embraced my name choice. It feels slightly seditious. And perhaps it is. I refuse to refashion myself based on my marital status—something my husband never had to do (*no* husband ever had to do, actually). Through it all he remained Mr. Michael Harding. There was no question. He was never faced with the choice between devaluing precision in language (the presumptive "Mrs." that was no longer in any way true for me) and revealing the deep wound of divorce to any random stranger who managed to mangle my name. I didn't send out a Christmas letter for two years because it hurt so much to inform people about what had happened, but society's way of handling names asked me to bring up the subject on a daily basis with people I hardly knew. It's no wonder "Mrs. Harding" was born. It's no wonder she persists.

But she also persists because, as a culture, we continue to identify women in large part by whether or not we are married, despite the fact that this quality does not impact most of our interactions. It's as if the proper thing to say when volunteering in a first-grade classroom is "Before you do this math worksheet, you should know that I am no longer in a committed romantic relationship."

The stigma of being a single woman is still so pervasive that when a single teacher at a recent school meeting was mistakenly called "Mrs." by the vice principal, she was razzed as having "gotten a promotion" by fellow teachers afterward (a joke that every sister in a singles ward has endured at one point or another). At best this is a lighthearted example of inattention to gender issues. At worst this is an instance where we tacitly allow a supervisor and coworkers to, essentially, talk about an employee's sex life in public.

Carelessness with language like this isn't the same as malicious sexual harassment, but it *is* a sort of harassment, on par with all of the obnoxiousness women regularly shrug off because we live in a world where a man's sex life is nobody's business and a woman's is everybody's.

Very few people mean ill by this, so it feels mean to call out individuals for the pervasive linguistic issues they have inherited. No one here invented this system of tracking, punishing, and rewarding women based on their marital status. But if it is ever going to change, it will be when *individuals* opt out of the system, when enough people refuse to classify women based on sex, when women are not defined by which male they are currently connected to. This is the sort of thing that only happens on an individual basis. This is the sort of knowledge that only sinks in when it is consistently highlighted in real life situations, like the persistent, gentle reminders of my Relief Society president.

As those of you who know me as "Mrs. Harding" may have guessed, I'm not very good at that. I hesitate for fear of being branded as an angry, argumentative person. I hesitate because I don't want to return kindness

with awkwardness. I hesitate because not every person shares my belief that language is powerful and shapes our thoughts and actions. But that *is* my belief, and I am a hypocrite if I do not stand up for it, even when it is awkward. So maybe I ought to start reminding people of what my actual name is. Even the well-meaning crossing guard.