

Break your own rules

I WILL NEVER MARRY SOMEONE WHO DOESN'T FIT MY CHECKLIST

"I swore I would never date—much less marry—a man who was shorter than me," says five-foot-eight-and-a-half Jennifer Toth, a 31-year-old grad student in Weehawken, New Jersey. "The idea drilled into my head by my friends and my mom was: The guy has to be taller than the girl." Jennifer dated a series of lanky men in college, but when it came to intelligence and personality, none of them measured up to her platonic friend Joseph, who at five feet three inches barely grazed her shoulders. "Joseph was compassionate and funny and had beautiful brown eyes," Jennifer says. "But I couldn't quiet the voice in my head saying, 'What will people think?'"

After six months of friendship, Jennifer and Joseph began a cautious romance. Even as their relationship grew, Jennifer admits that it took at least two years for her to completely banish her misgivings about their height difference. "Eventually I realized that Joseph was everything I had ever wanted, just in a smaller package." So in the fall of 2001, towering over him in heels and poufy hair, Jennifer married Joseph. "Standing at the altar, I thought, This is the greatest thing I've ever done. I knew his height no longer mattered."

Lesson Learned: Don't try to please everyone else. Some *nevers* grow from a deep place within your soul, but others are implanted early on by outside forces, like the media, your friends and, yes, your mother—and those are the most negotiable. So how do you clear out the clutter and focus on what's right for you? "Ask yourself, 'If I lived on another planet where no one else would ever see me, would I want to marry this man or take this job or live this life?'" suggests Dana Lightman, Ph.D., a psychotherapist in Philadelphia and author of *POWER Optimism* (Power Optimism, 2004). "If the answer is yes, then you should take that path and focus on what makes you happy."

I WILL NEVER TAKE A JOB WHERE I HAVE TO WEAR A SUIT

When Kim McWaters was in high school, she imagined her future would involve spangles, tutus and Broadway lights, not a briefcase and sensible heels. "The corporate world seemed regimented and boring," says the 42-year-old mother of three in Glendale, Arizona. "I wanted to do something I was passionate about." Kim was talented enough to win a musical-theater scholarship, but a pregnancy threw a hitch into her plans. She stayed home to have the baby and enrolled part time in the local college.

To make extra money, Kim took a job answering phones at Universal Technical Institute, an automotive school. But then a funny thing happened. Kim found that she loved talking to the people who called the school. "I started thinking, I could actually like this," she recalls. She stayed at the company, moving to sales and marketing, where she put her theatrical chops to good use creating commercials and videos for the school. Twenty years later, she is the president and CEO of the company.

Kim says the fact that she made the right decision became clear one day when she was talking to an old theater friend who was starring in a Broadway show. "I asked him what it was like, and he said, 'It's just a job.' I have never once thought of my career as being just a job. It makes me think that this is my true calling."

Lesson Learned: Take a good look at the big picture. When you're in the process of switching destinies, you may experience moments of doubt, but if the choice truly makes sense for you, then those feelings will be short-lived. "Imagine yourself 10 years in the future," suggests Neuharth. "By then, the discomfort of going back on your *never* will have faded, so picture what all the long-run benefits are. Focusing on the positives will help your adjustment."

Best of all, once you knock down that first *never*, you'll see new opportunities everywhere you look. "When you step out of your traditional role, you open yourself up to completely new adventures in life," says Lightman. •