

S A R A

Even a perfect child may benefit from a weekend of

AT THE

instruction in the social graces — especially when the

R I T Z


classroom is one of Boston's most elegant hotels.

MY DAUGHTER

Sara is perfect in every way, of course, but life can be trying for even the best-intentioned eight-year-old. How is she supposed to answer adults' dumb questions like "How do you like school?" or to thank a great-aunt for a birthday present that is really, really gross? Elementary school isn't much help with such vexing social dilemmas. And — I'll be honest — her parents have experienced something of a communication gap on this topic. So we turned to an expert for guidance and enrolled Sara in Miss Judith Re's Weekend of Social Savvy at Boston's Ritz-Carlton Hotel for "Instruction in the Social

by **JOHN SEDGWICK**

- *photographs by* JAY PARIS



*The doorman's
big hat came as a
surprise to Sara.*

THE RITZ-CARLTON



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Graces” in the words of its flower-festooned brochure.

As a child of the sixties, I will admit to some mixed feelings about the whole idea of instruction in absolutely correct behavior, but Sara herself betrayed no such anxieties. She’d read *Eloise at the Plaza*, and she knew that a weekend at the Ritz offered some pretty exciting possibilities. “I can’t believe they let the kids stay in their own room without grown-ups,” she told me as we drove to the hotel, “and with a TV with remote control.”

As soon as we arrived, we were whisked to the second-floor tearoom where Miss Judith bent low to greet Sara enthusiastically at her level. An elegant and festive 35-year-old, Miss Judith might have been hostessing a White House social, she was so perfectly attired in her cream-colored Chanel suit with lots of tasteful jewelry. She sat Sara down at a big table with the other children for some muffins and croissants. There were ten youngsters altogether, all of them so neatly coiffed

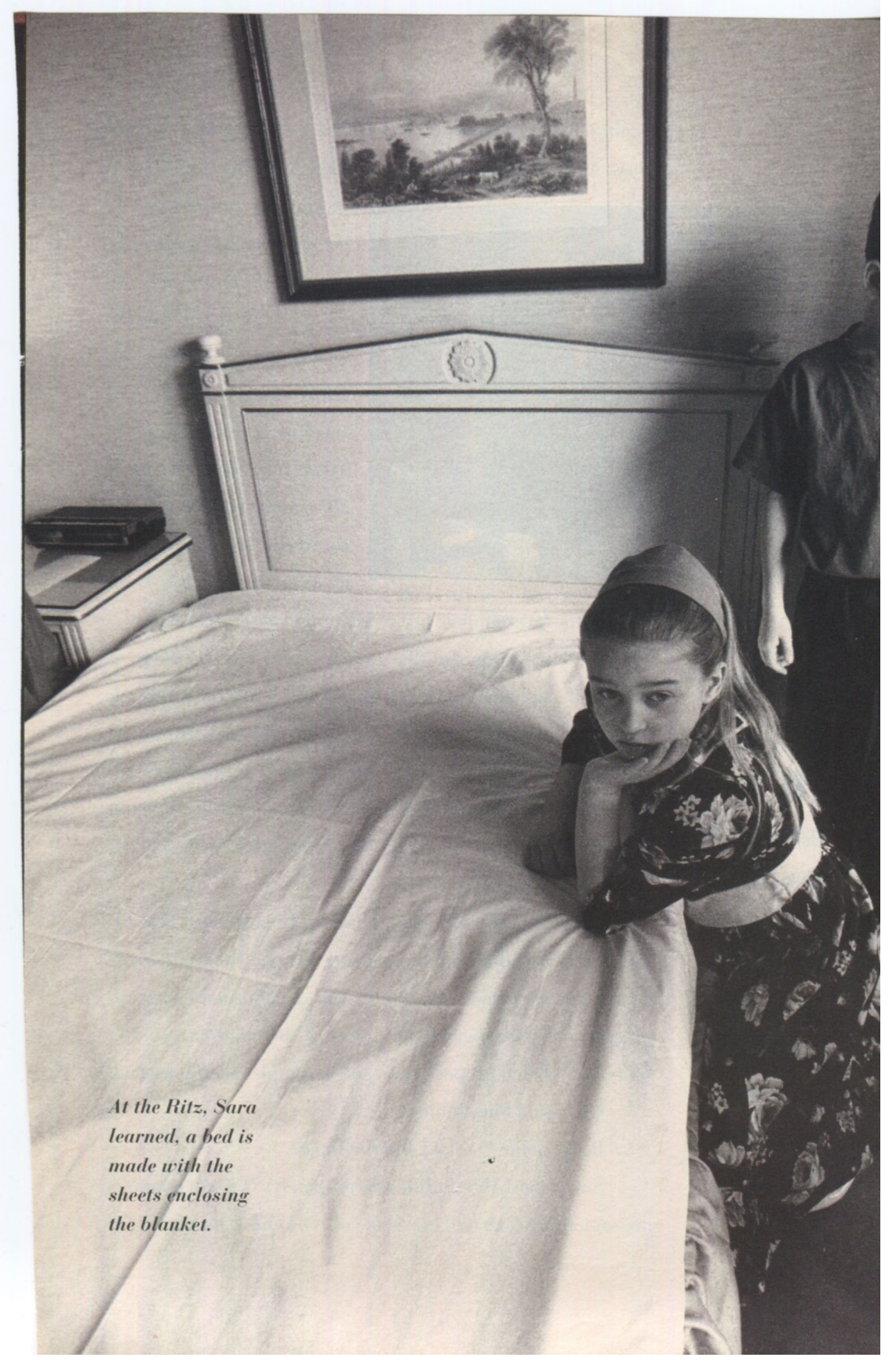
and well-dressed they might have come from a catalog offering Model Children and all of them frozen solid by the spectacle of so many oil paintings, floral displays, and liveried waiters in their midst.

Most of the children



Miss Judith Re: She wasn't “old and mean and carrying a whip.”

were much older than Sara, about 11 or 12, and I noticed her casting a few sidelong glances around the table to see how the Big Kids behaved, only to find them sneaking similar looks back at her. There were just two boys, a number that would pose some dif-



*At the Ritz, Sara
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sheets enclosing
the blanket.*



ficulties for the dancing later, but that is about normal for the class. And boys will be boys, even at the Ritz. Miss Judith later

recalled one uproarious all-boys session that was nearly concluded prematurely after one of them loudly “passed gas” during the table-setting segment, and everyone flew into hysterics. These boys were considerably more controlled. Even so, while the girls traipsed about in darling little white



The presence of liveried waiters was disconcerting.

THEY learned how to write a check, to make a bed in the Ritz manner with sheets encasing the blanket, to take a telephone message, and to sip tea.

pumps, the boys clunked around in untied basketball shoes.

By adult standards, Miss Judith came on a bit strong at first, as if she had a black belt in etiquette. But the kids took to her immediately — relieved, no doubt, that she wasn’t the Hostess from Hell some had feared. “I thought you were going to be old and mean and carry a whip,” one boy, William, confided to her later. Sara liked Miss Judith from the first. “She was cheery,” she said.

Addressing the children as “ladies and gentlemen,” Miss Judith quickly established the etiquette basics. “What are manners — anyone know?” Miss Judith asked, taking her usual full-of-questions pedagogical tack. Most of the children couldn’t quite say. “Being proper?” one girl in dimples finally replied.

“OK,” said Miss Judith.

“Being polite?” asked a girl in bangs.

“Sure,” said Miss Judith encouragingly. “I think manners are something each and every one of *(continued on page 117)*

SARA AT THE RITZ

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you has inside of you. It's the way you conduct yourself with others."

Afterward, the kids had a chance to try out their manners, as Miss Judith presented a Ritz bag containing a Ritz T-shirt and apron. Each of the children mumbled a dutiful "Thank you" as each received the gift. Ten times, Miss Judith cheerfully replied, "You're welcome."

Then, like the mother duck in *Make Way for Ducklings*, Miss Judith led her brood on a tour of the Ritz. They swept through the gift shop, the flower store, the pastry pantry, and the meat locker, where they watched, astonished, as the meat chef stripped the skin off a Dover sole with his bare hands. They popped into a conference room to feel what it was like to sit in those black calf-skin power chairs, their little feet barely touching the floor, and finally back to the

Newbury Room, named for the Back Bay street it faces, which would be their etiquette classroom for their stay.

Miss Judith did not train to be the Miss Jean Brodie of etiquette. It just sort of happened. "I learned my manners from my parents in Portugal," she says. "I guess it's my European background." She refined her graces at a boarding school called Williston in Northampton, Massachusetts, before going on to Smith College. She began the Judith Re Academie when she saw how much children's table manners were suffering in what she terms "the age of the microwave." In 1986 she began the Weekend of Social Savvy at Boston's Ritz and has since branched out to programs at other top-flight hotels in Seattle, San Francisco, Cleveland, and New York City. "The only difference is the small talk." In that department, young New Yorkers stand out. "Most kids, when you ask them something, they say, 'Well, um, I don't know,' but in New York, all kids have firm opinions about everything."

"I used my knives and forks properly, I think."

by SARA SEDGWICK

I DIDN'T REALLY KNOW WHAT to expect when I went to my weekend at the Ritz. I'd never done anything like it before. Well, I'd stayed in a hotel before, but never with anybody else besides my parents and my little sister, Josie.

The Ritz was really big and really fancy. I was surprised to see the doorman with his big hat. I didn't expect it to be *that* fancy. Miss Judith seemed very jolly, and the other kids were kind of quiet. I guess they were surprised by the way she greeted us and sat us down.

Everything went by so fast! I liked the workout room at the top of the hotel where we tried this thing that was like rowing a boat and some other stuff. Teatime was incredible. I didn't think they'd have tea like that, with

those things that go over the pot, the tea cozies, and the drainers. And there was so much food for dinner, I couldn't eat it all. I used my knives and forks properly, I think. At least, Miss Judith didn't say anything to me.

I liked dancing with the big boy, William. I liked doing the swing the best. It was a lot better than the two-step, which was sort of boring since you just did two steps.

The sleeping part was fun because we had our own TV and we had a hair dryer. It was in the top drawer of the bureau, right under the TV. That surprised me. I thought maybe some of the kids might steal it. But nobody in my room would.

It was sort of sad to say good-bye the next morning. We'd had a good time. Maybe I can do it again sometime.

SARA AT THE RITZ

(continued)

IN THE NEWBURY ROOM, THE CHILDREN learned how to arrange flowers (Sara's came out a little lopsided), make swans out of pastry, set a formal table (with the dessert spoon above the dinner plate and the knife blades all pointing to the left), and dine by using their index or "power fingers" to guide their knives and forks. They learned to transfer their forks to their right hands to ingest their food in the proper American way and to indicate they are finished by placing their cutlery in the "final position" at 4:30 or 5:00 on their plates. They learned how to write a check, to make a bed in the Ritz manner with sheets encasing the blanket, to take a telephone message, and to sip tea ("like a bird," said Miss Judith, pursing her lips).

Most important of all, they learned the art of small talk, which Miss Judith compared to volleyball or tennis. "The point of the game," she said, "is to keep the game going." She practiced with everyone in the Newbury Room, and then put them all to the test over afternoon tea. To my surprise, Sara proved remarkably adept at maintaining a conversation with the 12-year-old to her left. Sara chatted away about her little sister and later, with a giggle, confided she had once spilled soup all over herself. "It was really awfully hot," I overheard her say. Elsewhere around the table, however, conversations wilted. "Do you like swans?" one boy asked.

After a dinner of beef tenderloin with béarnaise sauce washed down with Shirley Temples, the children topped off their night with some ballroom dancing back in the Newbury Room. Miss Judith took each boy to demonstrate the two-step and some swing dancing, then rotated the girls in. She had warned me that this can be rather awkward, since this is often the first time the two genders have ever intentionally touched. "Sometimes you see a boy touching nothing but the girl's aura," she explained, placing her hand three inches from her hip.

It did something to my heart to see Sara, in her beautiful red velvet dress, at her first

dance. And it did something to her feet to have little Jeremy, the seven-and-a-half-year-old, tread all over them. But when she was whisked into the older William's arms for the swing dance, Sara was a little lady once more. Dancing to a big-band version of "Puttin' on the Ritz," the two hopped quite nimbly across the improvised parquet, and Sara seemed a little sorry when the music stopped.

At bedtime, Miss Judith always gives the children her hotel telephone number so they can call during the night if they have a problem. A few have. One boy called to tell her that he hurt all over his chest. Miss Judith diagnosed the malady as acute need for attention and solemnly sprayed his forehead with her moisturizer. A more puzzling case was the girl who called to complain that she was radioactive. It appeared that she had taken a Polaroid photo of herself wearing her retainer, and the shot came out with her face nearly all white. Miss Judith recommended a second photo, which cleared up her condition. Tonight all was peaceful. The children were allowed to watch TV from ten to eleven. In Sara's room the three roommates shared the remote control. They watched "something about a goblin" until lights-out.

When the weekend was over the next morning, Miss Judith gave each of her newly savvy charges a hug and whispered a few words to each in parting. She told Sara that she had "beautiful thoughts" and that it made her open up like a blossoming flower to hear them. I certainly blossomed to hear that, but Sara merely smiled shyly.

In the days since, I have noticed that a few things have stuck with Sara. She uses her power fingers to cut her meat, and she has even let slip a "thank you," unbidden. She may now be able to answer those annoying questions about school in the manner that Miss Judith has recommended, by responding with a few specifics about, say, her art class or her favorite subject. And to write a thank-you note for a yucky gift by mentioning a few things she sincerely likes about it. But that is a lot to ask. For now, I am quite content with memories of my eight-year-old daughter puttin' on the Ritz. And Sara is thrilled to have had a night with a TV in her very own room. □□



By weekend's end, Sara and the other kids were sipping tea "like birds."