

HARRIET SHELLANS (1932-2000)

Harriet Shellans had a soft voice and a gentle smile, yet I was nevertheless intimidated by her. I think she and I were very similar in a lot of ways, including the fact we were introverts who each married extroverts. Perhaps her rather larger-than-life spouse was one reason she seemed to hold herself at a distance from people. She was well-read and probably knew as much English history as my own mom, and I was impressed that she continued learning throughout her life, taking college courses of all variety to continually expand her mind.

Harriet bore a great deal of unhappiness and grave illness in her lifetime, but she played the hand that was dealt her without sniveling, and she cracked jokes in a dry, unexpected fashion to the end. My feeling is that hers was not a spirit easily defeated.

Not surprisingly, some of Mike's earliest memories surround music, when he recalls his mother playing piano. He remembers specifically show tunes from classics like *My Fair Lady*, *West Side Story*, *South Pacific* and *The Music Man*. She played for her own pleasure and when he got older, Mike and she would sing the songs as she played them. It's only fitting that Harriet played piano accompaniment at Mike's very first trombone recital.

Harriet didn't much like to drive, and she hated left turns. One of the first funny things I can remember her ever telling me was that she could get anywhere she needed to by making only right turns. She avoided the freeway and Grand Avenue - a rather daunting thoroughfare of multiple angles here in town - at all costs.

She "loved peas with everything," Mike says, and she had quite a sweet tooth. She loved toppings and frostings, and iced tea. She wasn't the best chef, Mike admits, and could cook burgers so that "they were burned on the outside and raw on the inside." She loved green corn tamales and corn in general, and I was so pleased when, at the first family Thanksgiving I cooked, she complimented the corn pudding I made. Harriet cooked potatoes well, Mike says, mashing them by hand and dicing onions into them. She also cooked great latkes a few times at Hanukkah. "There was nothing fancy or

pretentious about anything she ever had or did," Mike says, "though she grew up in a moderately affluent family."

Harriet's dad, Stanley, was a quiet and mild-mannered pharmacist turned pharmaceutical salesman, who fancied himself a painter. The works Mike has that his grandfather did show considerable talent, and it seems his paintings were exhibited in at least one gallery show. Harriet's mother, Stella, was a housewife with frustrated musical ambitions who could neither sing nor play violin very well, but fancied herself adept at both. Stella didn't make Harriet's life easy for a number of reasons, and she was also a painful mother-in-law to Herb, once nearly sending him into an apoplectic fit when she insisted that Harpo Marx's instrument was cello. Stanley died quite early (probably to get away from his wife), which left their only child to tend to Stella. She was high maintenance, to say the least.

A very private person, Harriet had no old boyfriends before Herb (at least to Mike's knowledge). She had a couple of cousins she was close to, and a dear friend who was killed from a fall from a horse. That event was so traumatic that Harriet would never go near horses after that. Mike thinks his mom had some self-esteem issues, which might account for her being shy and standoffish.

Of her temperament, Mike says, "Mom was more level-headed than anyone in the family. Dad was up and down emotionally and a live wire, and she was strong and steady." One incident that stands out in Mike's mind happened when Mike was still in grade school. He was shooting baskets at their townhouse's playground, and some older kids came onto the court and took Mike's ball away. When he told them to give it back, the bully holding the ball made like he was going to hit Mike with it. From somewhere behind him, Mike heard Harriet's voice boom out, "Touch that boy and I'll break your arm." Mike says, "She said it with such strength and force that the kids dropped the ball and ran. How she knew at that very moment that I needed her is beyond me."

In later life, Harriet developed a fondness for stuffed animals. A sweet albeit sad memory of Mike's is visiting his mom in the hospital shortly before she died, and her singing "You Are My Sunshine" to one of the

little stuffed critters brought to cheer her up. It was a fuzzy yellow bear, and she rolled it down her chest as she sang to it in a silly voice.

Harriet was always reading something, Mike recalls, and she especially loved Hitchcock mysteries. She was devoted to each family dog they had through the years, and it was usually she who had the dirty work of walking it and keeping it fed and watered. She collected music boxes, especially pianos, and had an extensive collection of mortar and pestle sets.

I think Mike misses his mom not only for her unconditional love, but because he enjoyed talking to her. "She always told me I could do anything," he says. "I told her most things before I told anyone. I could always talk to her, even confiding those things I was afraid to tell Dad." The best advice Mike remembers his mom giving him was actually about his relationship with me, when she told him to be sure he didn't lose himself in our relationship.

Harriet "was accepting and tolerant and easy-going and didn't analyze and question life the way Dad did. What she enjoyed, she really enjoyed." Mike remains impressed by his mom's sheer will and stoicism as her health declined. She used a cane but didn't want much additional help as her feet deteriorated from diabetes. "She wouldn't use a walker, wouldn't use a wheelchair - although she'd use those little carts at the grocery store and chase Dad around. She had a pride and determination I don't have," Mike says. Early in Mike's life, she was quite forceful in one specific instance when she sort of, er, fell into a toilet because either Herb or Mike left the seat up. She gave them such a blistering butt-rip of a lecture that neither one ever did it again. Mike has retained that nugget of wisdom from his mom to this day, and I shall always be grateful to Harriet because of it!

There were a number of expressions Harriet used regularly that Mike quotes from time to time. (She was the first person I ever heard use the very unique expression "make" for elimination. I wasn't sure what the heck she meant when she said, "the dog wouldn't make," but then her meaning became clear). Favorites of Mike's include:

"That's not a hairdo - that's a hair don't!"

"Eat your soup before it clots."

"I'll rock you to sleep with a real rock."

"Another country heard from" - when someone offered an opinion.

"I yield for no man" - whenever she came to a Yield sign
(after making all right turns, of course).

Mike says his mother "could figure people out pretty quick. She remembered slights and offenses and tended to hold them against the offenders until they redeemed themselves." He adds, "She was more than she seemed to be, tougher than she acted, and smarter than she let on."

She was more than she seemed to be . . . I like that phrase of Mike's. It gives Harriet the respect she deserves, while still allowing her the privacy I think she always wanted. It lends her an air of mystery and after all, shouldn't there be some mystery about every woman?