



Tamra Wilson's story of

Shirley



The weeks that separate the dry winds of summer from the relentless howl of a prairie winter are few and pass quickly. This is when my mother was born into a world falling headlong into the Great Depression. On October 4, 1930, Shirley became the last of four children born to Rose and Ernest French of Herbert, Saskatchewan. Her mother always called her Shirley Ann and it wasn't until she applied for a passport in 1977 that she realized that she had no middle name after all.

Shirley's father was almost 50 when she was born, having spent much of his adulthood in the Canadian military, most notably having lost a leg in battle at Vimy Ridge during WW I. He finally did settle down and get married at age 39 to Rose Woodage, a homemaker. My grandfather had been a jeweller in more prosperous years but during the depression he became the town's post master, a job less glamorous but respectable still. Perhaps it was being a jeweller's daughter that sparked my mother's life long love of all things gold and silver.

Being the youngest of 4 children, Shirley enjoyed a carefree childhood despite her mother's frustration that she would rather run with the boys than help in the kitchen. One of her favourite pastimes was to pilfer her father's wooden leg while he napped and frolic with it through Herbert, town kids in tow. Although she loved playing with her brothers, it was her eldest sister Gladys whom she adored. Glad was 9 years older, outspoken, and red-haired. When Glad married at age 18 and had a family soon afterward, my mother became a willing and eager caregiver to her beloved nephew Lee, barely a decade younger than herself.

Eking out a living dependent on the whims of nature is not easy and even the hardiest of prairie souls can yearn for change. Eventually, my mother moved with her parents to the more temperate climes of Surrey, BC. Here she finished high school, buried her ailing mother at 52, and then saw her life wide open before her. Never one to shirk adventure, Shirley and a friend carefully saved their money, bought train tickets to Montreal and never looked back.

In Montreal, my mother lived life to the fullest. She worked at Sunlife Insurance and spent her evenings out on the town. With her cat-eye glasses, pencil skirt and sweater set, Shirley cut a stylish pose. She loved parties. When a friend suggested she meet a young fellow on a blind date, Shirley agreed to go. Her sense of adventure paid off; Jim McManus was every bit as handsome and charming as she'd been promised. They married in October, 1957. One day, my father gave her a ceramic elephant as a gift, which started a collection that eventually grew to over 200 elephants. My mother's pictures from this time in Montreal show a smiling, cheerful young woman. These were some of the happiest times for Shirley and she made lifelong friends.

In 1961, my father was offered a job at CP Air in Vancouver so they hopped in their blue VW Beetle and started the long cross country drive. After a brief stint in Surrey, they bought a house in Richmond but parenthood eluded them for several years. My mother suffered a miscarriage. Then another, and another. Shirley, the smiling girl in the photos, suddenly found herself unable to have children. Luckily, there were many babies available for adoption in the 1960s, but the process through the government was arduous. One day, a friend saw an ad in the local newspaper entitled "Baby for Adoption at Birth". A few phone calls and many anxious days later, I was born and handed over to Shirley and Jim. They named me Tamra and Shirley's dream of being a mother had come true. Two years later, Robert, a little toddler with dark curls joined us from a foster home. Their family was complete and Shirley was happy until she found herself pregnant again. Knowing what would come next, she didn't mention the pregnancy to anyone until soon before my sister Tracy was born in March, 1969. She was adorable, with long eyelashes and golden ringlets; a miracle.

Shirley threw herself into domestic life. She organized school carnivals, sports days, raffles, became a Brownie leader and drove for many a field trip. Almost every family in our neighbourhood knew my mother not only from her involvement with the school but from her appearance. She was always quite petite and never left the house without lipstick, purse, and usually a matching outfit. We were never wealthy, but my mother loved fashion and was an expert at finding sale items and mixing and matching. She loved to shop. It must have frustrated her that neither of her daughters inherited her love of spending a whole day window shopping or browsing through stores.

Although cooking was never something my mother embraced nor enjoyed, she could sew and knit. She made countless clothes and costumes for my siblings and me; skating dresses, Hallowe'en costumes, and many knitted hats, scarves, and sweaters. My mother was a wonderful knitter and this was her way of helping to provide for her family. She even made little dolls and stuffed animals for us and would sometimes buy patterns and sew clothes for my sister and me.

Looking back, I realize that we weren't always easy children to raise. My mother loved to laugh but when she was angry, she let us know. Hanging on our kitchen wall was the "spanking board". This was a flat wooden stick about the size of a serving spoon. I don't ever remember my mother using it on any of us but once when we were being particularly bad she hit the kitchen table with such force that it split right down the middle. From that day on, when anyone saw the surviving half of the spanking board hanging on it's hook, my brother would say that she broke it over his head. I don't know if my mother found this amusing or upsetting but she told this story many times over the years and always with a laugh.

Although my father had a good job at the airline, we didn't often take advantage of the flight benefits that we had. Most of our summers were spent camping in our little tent trailer. My mother was an expert at packing up three weeks worth of clothing and supplies for all five of us. For many years we would camp at Mara Lake in the Okanagan with my father's family. When we were teenagers we spent many summers at a ranch in the Caribou. Shirley's favourite nephew Lee and his family lived near by so we would often see them, but for the most part these holidays were all about doing something that we, the children, would enjoy. My mother spent her time doing what she always did; making meals, tidying up, doing laundry, and I wonder if she even felt like she was on a holiday at all. She never complained and took photos that she would proudly show her neighbours when we got home. I wonder how she would have preferred to spend a holiday but no one ever thought to ask so we never knew. We all have very fond memories of these family vacations.

Christmas! No one loved Christmas more than Shirley. My mother's expert shopping skills came in handy for gift giving and she always managed to surprise us. She was very skilled at wrapping presents too, a skill she did manage to pass down to her daughters. We would wait with anticipation each year when my father would bring out the big box full of decorations and then we would all make the house festive. Looking back, many of our decorations were tattered and worn, but to us they were beautiful and full of memories. I think my mother always believed in the spirit of Santa and was as excited as we were every year.

As children do, we grew up and needed less and less mothering. Shirley found herself feeling frustrated and obsolete. The smiling girl in the photos disappeared again. Like many women, my mother had given up her career when she married but now she needed something to do. She bravely marched off to the CP Air Flight kitchen, job application in hand. It took tremendous courage for a woman at age 50 to re-enter the work force and I was very proud of her. Thus began her 10 year career at the airline, mostly on the graveyard shift. I was never sure if my mother liked working or not. I knew she had always wanted

her own money but to hear her talk about her work day, I wondered if she enjoyed it. Either way, she finally had her own income and could save or spend her own money however she pleased. This was very important to her.

Time passed, we children married, and it came time for our parents to retire. They travelled and enjoyed extended holidays throughout the world. Longing for a drier climate, Shirley and Jim sold the family home and moved to Vernon BC. For many years, they would make the drive down to the coast to visit the seven grandchildren that seemed to pop out with remarkable regularity. My mother dusted off her knitting and shopping skills and put them to work on the grandchildren full force. Their minivan was stacked with gifts whenever they came to visit.

As the years went by, my father found himself less and less eager to make the long drive through the high mountain roads to the coast. Shirley, who adored her grandchildren, found herself looking out from her house in Vernon with nothing to do. For all her community involvement during our childhood, my mother never found the same kind of social network in her retirement. She didn't drive once they moved to Vernon and this also contributed to her isolation. But there was something else going on. Something that none of us realized right away. My mother was in the early stages of dementia.

Shirley's beloved sister, Glad, had been diagnosed with dementia several years before, and, unfortunately, this would be my mother's fate also. She hid it well, but often would forget names or her train of thought entirely. My father did his best to help her and made sure they spent several weeks that last summer with extended family and friends while she could still enjoy their company. Even with her failing memory and confusion, my mother loved to visit. Eventually, the dementia progressed to the point where she couldn't live in their home and my father reluctantly agreed to have her admitted to a care facility soon after her 80th birthday.

My mother died the following summer on July 12, 2011, surrounded by her family and an elephant or two. She had wonderful care while in the facility but it broke my heart to see her there. I think the worst part of her dementia is that she never got a chance to say good-bye or to enjoy one last hug from her grandchildren. To the end, though, my mother was proud, generous, and outspoken. It is because she chose me and loved me that I have the life I have today. I thanked her for that as she lay dying and I like to think that she heard me and understood. I remember once, years ago, I referred to what a troublesome teenager I had been. My mother looked surprised and smiled at me and said, "Oh no. You were my wonderful little girl!" It was comforting to know that I did bring some joy to her life in return for all that she did for me.