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On the Good Ship Lollipop

by Elaine Silverstein

“And for these two cuties...Shirley Temples.” The smiling Chinese waiter placed tall Tom Collins glasses decorated with frilly pink paper umbrellas before the two little girls. Charles and I had bribed our granddaughters to forego their preferred pasta with the promise of forbidden nectar at the Chinese restaurant. Their glasses were filled with ginger ale tinted a pale pink by the coveted, red maraschino cherries dropped into the bottom. A plastic straw, bent at an angle, poked out of each glass. Sophie and Hannah beamed up at the waiter, even remembering to say thank you, before attacking the treat.

“Tell me,” I asked the girls, “do you know who Shirley Temple is?”

My granddaughters stared at me blankly.

“She was a very famous movie star,” I explained.

“Is she a real person?” Sophie, who was six, asked. “Or is she a cartoon character?” My granddaughters lived in a world where cartoon characters seemed real and real people behaved like cartoons. It got confusing because the likenesses of both were interchangeably available on lunch boxes and backpacks.

“She was a very real person,” I assured her. “When she was just your age, she was super-famous. Every mother wanted her daughter to be a Shirley Temple look-alike.”

“Like Britney Spears?” Hannah, who had recently turned four and was a great fan of Britney Spears (especially admiring of, and eager to emulate, her wardrobe), asked.

“Oh, she was much more famous than Britney Spears,” I told them. “She had big dimples.” I used my index finger to drill a hole in my cheek, demonstrating a dimple. “And, she had curly, curly hair. Shirley’s mother used to brag that she had exactly 54 curls. Can you imagine?”

“How many curls do I have?” asked Hannah,

whose dark hair was a tangle of long almost unmanageable curls.

“Maybe you should count them,” her grandfather suggested without considering the consequences.

Sophie took a handful of Hannah’s hair and began to count curls. Hannah wiggled away from her sister, knocking into her glass.

“Maybe this isn’t a good time to be doing that,” I said, reaching across the table to catch the glass just in time to prevent a meltdown. “Anyway,” I continued, “her hair was blond, more like Sophie’s.”

The girls nodded and went back to their drinks. Clearly, my bit of movie history was only moderately interesting.

“I’ll try to find one of her movies for you,” I said. “You’ll see for yourself.” I spoke with the profound confidence of the uninformed. Despite the authority with which I had introduced the subject to my granddaughters, I had very little expertise in the films of Shirley Temple. I was more of a Margaret O’Brien person. Shirley had already reached puberty and tapped off, stage left, before I was old enough to go to the movies.

Several weeks later, Charles and I found ourselves walking past a small video store on Lexington Avenue, near Hunter College.

“I’ll bet we can find Shirley Temple movies in there.” Charles cupped his hands around his eyes and peered into the grimy window filled with old Humphrey Bogart posters curling at the edges. It looked like the kind of store that would stock old movies. In fact, it looked like the kind of store that had only old movies. We pressed a buzzer to be admitted.

“Sorry,” the gray-haired man behind the counter apologized. “I have to keep it locked. Better safe than sorry.”

Charles nodded sympathetically. “The world



just isn't like it used to be."

"You can say that again," the man, apparently the proprietor, agreed. "Even little old ladies try to rip me off."

I prowled around the shop while Charles and the proprietor clucked over the state of the world. "Do you have any Shirley Temple movies?" I finally interrupted, unable to find what I was looking for on the disorganized shelves. If there were a logic to the display, I couldn't figure it out.

"Sure." The man shuffled out from behind the counter and headed for a row of dusty shelves in a corner. "I got 'em. But, you might prefer these...." He showed me a set of three films packaged together in a yellowed cellophane wrapper: *Heidi* starring Shirley Temple, *National Velvet* with Elizabeth Taylor, and *The Wizard of Oz* starring Judy Garland.

"No. It's only Shirley Temple I'm after. Thanks."

"Well, here then." He pulled out a handful of videos in their slipcases, brushing them on the side of his pants to rub off the dust. "Just what you want: *Bright Eyes*, *Little Miss Marker*, *Heidi*, *Stand Up and Cheer*." I studied the blurbs on the back to help me make a decision. I finally selected *Bright Eyes* because the sleeve said that it was the movie in which Shirley Temple first sang "Good Ship Lollipop," and I also took *Little Miss Marker* because it was an adaptation of a Damon Runyon story.

I could hardly wait for an opportunity to share these treasures with the girls, something new and wonderful. After all, Shirley Temple was legendary. She transcended time. A drink was named after her.

"I've got a treat," I said to Sophie and Hannah the next time I was on babysitting duty.

"Remember I told you about Shirley Temple? Well, I have one of her movies." I pulled the video out of the bag to show them. We three admired the picture of the captivating, curly-haired child.

"She's so cute," Hannah said.

"Everyone in America thought so," I agreed.

The girls hurried through dinner and baths,

anxious to watch the movie. I plugged *Bright Eyes* into the player. The three of us snuggled up together under an old quilt to watch the movie.

The music swelled. The title rolled, and there she was, right in the first frame. A colorized, six-year-old Shirley Temple walking all alone alongside a highway, dressed in jaunty leather aviator's jacket and cap, her thumb stuck in the air.

"What's she doing?" Hannah asked.

"She's hitchhiking," I explained.

"What's hitchhiking?" Sophie wanted to know. We do not permit these girls to ride their bicycles around the block, nor do they cross streets without an adult holding their hand.

"Well," I said, "it's sort of asking a stranger for a ride. Something that was all right to do in the olden days, but not anymore."

"Oh," Hannah said. "We're not allowed to talk to strangers."

"Right," I agreed.

A truck stopped alongside the child. "Hello Shirley," the driver of the truck said. "Going to the airfield? Climb in. I'll give you a ride."

"Anyway," I said, "see, she knows the driver, so he isn't a stranger." This was not a comfortable conversation. "Would you like me to make some popcorn?" I asked, changing the focus. Maybe I should have previewed this movie.

We learned that Shirley had come to the airfield to visit her godfather, a pilot who hung out there with the rest of the flyboys. He was her dead father's (gone to heaven after a big crack-up) best friend. Shirley was crazy about flying and loved to hang out at the airfield too. She knew all the fellas. And they knew her.

By and by, we met Shirley's mother. She worked as a maid for a very mean couple. They had an exceptionally bratty daughter who heartlessly savaged her dolls. We watched as that mean little girl beat her doll, tore off its head, and threw it away.

Shirley discovered the discarded dolly. She kindly rescued it from the trash bin. She tenderly cradled it in her arms promising to make it well. The doll episode was witnessed by the rich, wheel-



chair-bound uncle of the mean couple. He approved of the smiley Shirley whom he called, you guessed it, "Bright Eyes." He clearly abhorred his noisy, nasty, young niece.

Meanwhile, it was Christmas. As a special treat, the godfather had arranged for Shirley to have a party at the airstrip in an airplane that would just taxi around the field. Shirley's mom would be along later. Even on Christmas day, she had dusting to do.

At the airstrip, Shirley dressed in a very short, ruffled dress with lots of chubby thighs showing, sang "On The Good Ship Lollipop" to the delight of the singing flyboy fellas who passed her from hand to hand like a sack of flour while she sparkled and sang.

Back at home, Mom, out of her maid's uniform, carrying a special cake with an airplane on top that had an inscription reading "Happy Landings, Shirley," got ready to leave the house to join the party.

"Is it her birthday?" Hannah asked.

"I'm not sure," I answered. "I think it is a special party, but not her birthday."

"Oh, then why does she have a cake with her name on it?"

"I don't know." Details were not the strong suit of the movie.

But soon we would all know why there was a cake. As Mom rushed out, she forgot to look both ways and was mowed down by a passing car. Splat. There she was, sprawled out in the street. We were permitted to see her legs stretched out. Next, there was a close-up of the ruined cake. Poor Mom!

Back at the airfield, the sad news of the mother's demise was passed on to the godfather.

It was up to him to tell the child that her mother was dead. He arranged to take Shirley up in the airplane. After all, it was her heart's desire. What a great way to soften the blow. The airplane would practically be in heaven where Mom and Dad now reside. While the two of them were flying around, he took her on his knee. Flying the big plane with a single hand on the steering wheel, he put his other



arm around Shirley, hoisting her to his lap. Then he spoke seriously to the little girl. "Shirley," he said, "your mother missed your father a lot and wanted to join him in heaven."

"Did she have a bad crack-up, too?" Shirley asked with a charming pout.

"Maybe we want to watch something else?" I asked my granddaughters.

"No, we like this," they protested.

I was flummoxed. What's with the Hayes office? What kind of movie was this? I thought this was a movie made in a simpler, kinder time. Surely, no one ever thought this was a movie suitable for children (or rational adults, for that matter). The father died in a crack-up. The mother was hit by a car and died instantly. The little girl was clutched and handled by a bunch of grown men. Then there was the rather disturbing fact that she spent an inordinate amount of time on her godfather's lap.

In the last reel, all was finally made right. Shirley got a nice new home with her godfather

and his reclaimed girlfriend (whom he will, of course, marry). They would all live happily ever after. The rich old man in the wheelchair would also live with them, as he preferred spending his money on this nice, newly created family than on his own undeserving flesh and blood.

Let us hope that the new family, with all their money, will provide little Shirley with a chauffeur so she doesn't hitchhike anymore.

When the credits went up, we headed for bed and *Goodnight Moon* or some other sweet, safe storybook.

"Will you bring us another movie next week?" Hannah begged.

"Please," her sister added.

"Okay," I reluctantly agreed, unsure whether the girls' parents would approve.

Maybe instead of *Little Miss Marker*, I should just show up with *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*.

