

# Shirley, I Am Serious

Shirley  
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BY SHIRLEY GRACE, MA

Recently I met a woman named Stanley, which I'll admit is worse than my name. "My parents wanted a boy," she explained. Apparently, they suffered from extreme, myopic denial. "Why didn't you meet them halfway and tell them you were a lesbian?" asked our mutual friend Mary Lee as we all descended the Dupont Metro escalator. "Hmm, I never thought of that. It seems sort of mean," answered long-suffering Stanley, who goes by Cissy.

So yes, that's worse, and maybe Stanley/Cissy is more forgiving or resilient than I am. But we both know that whatever the motivation, we all get stuck with the names our parents thought were perfect for us.

Hi, my name is...um...Shirley. Two harmless little syllables. But put them together and direct them at me, and I nearly duck with embarrassment. My mother's shocked insistence that "Shirley is a lovely name" because she "had a friend named Shirley" never made it my own. And believe me, society blackballed my given name began before I could even spell it.

"Romper Room" delivered the first slap of rejection at age four. Remember Magic Mirror? That woman would somehow peer through this mystical looking glass and *actually* see the kids watching the show. Kids like me, a

fascinated chump. In my mind, only Jesus could outdo Magic Mirror. My moment in the mirror would come, I just knew it. And didn't I deserve a reward for my faithfulness? Was that asking too much? Apparently, yes. It was 1967, not 1937, and names like Kenny and Kathy — which just so

from the cool crowd. I couldn't spell, but I heard the pattern. I wasn't part of it. "Ke-Ka-Car-SHIRLEY!" How would you like to be sneezed at whenever your mom wanted you to set the table?

As a teenager, I sought out other paths of self-identity, like zodiac signs, the Chinese calendar, and

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happen to be my siblings' names — were in vogue. "Shirley" tapped out when Shirley Temple combed out her curls, never to make a comeback. So. Guess who always got passed by? I was 30 years too late to ever find redemption through network TV. Furious, disillusioned, I turned my back on "Romper Room" forevermore.

The birth of my sister Carrie a year later widened my separation

baby name books. Anything to combat how out-of-sync I felt. I liked being a "Gemini Rabbit." It fully licensed my hyperactive mood swings. And "Shirley" — a "shire meadow, or lea" — does invoke some poetic imagery, but I was horrified to discover it also used to be a boy's name.

Speaking of boys, my brother was delighted when our German aunt automatically replaced the

"ir" diphthong in my name with one that better fit her Aryan mouth structure — more like "ear." Four decades later, he still calls me long-distance just to bleat out, "Hi, SHEEEEEEEEEERLEY!"

Why does "Shirley" harbor a potential for the ridiculous, rather than the glamorous? The entertainment industry routinely disses my name. In 1965, the Beatles released "Michelle, Ma Belle," a simple little love song that lucky young Michelles get sung into their ears by their boyfriends. That same year, Shirley Ellis also released the smash hit, "The Name Game" — you know: "Shirley, Shirley, Bo-Birley, banana-fana, fo-firley..." So similar, and yet, so...not. Pretty much zero croon potential there. And even if a boy did try to in a silly, romantic moment — which could work, done right — I'd have to be very careful about reciprocating, especially if his name was Rich, or worse, Chuck. Both songs have stood the test of time: "Michelle, Ma Belle" appears on romantic CD compilations, while "Shirley, Shirley, Bo-Birley" remains a perennial hit on *Barney and Friends*.

Actor Leslie Nielsen subjected my name to cruel and unusual pun-nishment with his "Surely you're not serious / Stop calling me Shirley" rejoinder in the spoof *Airplane*. And why are movie characters named Shirley nearly always cast as somebody's ugly cousin or a spinster librarian? I guess I don't blame them completely. Even I can't imagine a voluptuous sex kitten huskily whispering, "Hey, baby, let Shirley show you a good time." It just doesn't quite work.

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Ship Lolly-Popularity, but that's about as hip as my name ever got. History boasts a few other noteworthy Shirleys, including a lawyer, a couple writers, some actresses, and even one bandit — the infamous Belle Starr's given name was indeed Shirley (that was cool). But all were born before 1935. Alas, the world has not pro-

hip. Imagine: a 90-year-old grandma named Kimi. Who'll sound ridiculous then?

So, am I who I am regardless of my name, or because of it? I've always been an outspoken, high-strung non-conformist. I'm too pragmatic (and short) to really see myself as a glamour girl, even

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duced a single Shirley of public note since then. The pressure's on for me.

I'll admit that the dearth of late-boomer Shirleys does give me almost exclusive rights to my name; if I hear "Shirley," I know it's probably me-me-me. My sibs competed annually with three or four other same-names in their classroom. And, the older I get the better the name fits, unlike the hippity-hopscotch girlie names of my friends. I'm getting downright

with a slinky name like Desirée. But would life have been different — cooler — for me if I'd been named a more mainstream Laura or Mary or Susan? Would I have dared to enter the ranks of cheerleaders as an Amber or Kayla? Felt more athletic confidence if I'd sported a coordinated name like Gina? Do I really want a run-of-the-mill, non-descript, trendy, forgettable name, and risk sacrificing all the individuality my name implies? *Really?*

You bet, or my name's not Shirley.