



# THE SON OF MISS SHARON

BY MARK LANDON SMITH

**M**y family had a secret ... a secret never spoken of, never acknowledged ... a secret that remained literally buried in our attic, uncovered the summer of my 15<sup>th</sup> year. Once the discovery was made, our family was never the same.

I am blessed with exceptional parents. I cannot imagine parents loving their child more, nor a child loving his parents more than I. They've always encouraged taking chances, following your heart, not living life thinking "could've, should've, would've," better to try and fail than not try at all. They also insisted on honesty, full disclosure, so I thought I knew everything there was to know about my parents. But, no, I did not.

In the crowded, musty attic of our ranch-style home sat the ultimate "grandmother's trunk," made of metal and wood, gold colored, covered with tiny rivets with a vast selection of treasures inside.

Nanaw, my father's mother, kept a trunk of remembrances. She let me, as a child, decorate her trailer for Christmas to my heart's content; she dipped Rooster Snuff and kept the souvenir dinner glass it came in, and Nanaw kept our family history alive within this trunk, which contained souvenirs from foreign shores sent from my uncle who served in World War II; pictures of my father standing in front of the Statue of Liberty in his service uniform in New York, 1958; and miscellany report cards, letters, a pair of dolls purchased in Turkey, a pocketbook purchased in Africa, a menu from my father's high school Halloween program in which sliced potatoes were called "pirate's coins." I loved this trunk, and it was from within its

deep recesses that the family secret was revealed.

I made the discovery, as most are made, by accident. One day in my rummaging, I came across a hitherto hidden cubby, the top of which was covered with a colorful graphic of a cherub. As I brushed my hand across its top, it moved. There it was, still in the original packaging, five-finger puppets and on the package itself, a red and yellow logo, which read "Romper Room."

"Romper Room" was a female-hosted educational television show for children; its popularity peaked during the 1960s and '70s. During the half-hour broadcast, children were taught the importance of good hygiene and being helpful, kind and courteous; then everyone, exhausted, would break for a snack. I had vague memories of watching "Romper Room" as a child. I recalled a mirror, Romper Stompers, kids marching in a circle singing about how good they were going to be that day.

As I gazed at the finger puppets, I assumed they were a present my parents had forgotten to give either my brother or me. If so, I wanted what was due to me. I showed my find to my mother.

"Where on earth did you find this?" she asked, taking the package from me.

"In the attic," I answered. "Do you know where it came from?"

My mother grew mysteriously quiet, paused, then smiled and replied, "Yes. I do." She then took out an old family photo album — one I had somehow missed — filled with black-and-white pictures, one a newspaper picture of my mother, circa 1966, sporting a

Jackie Kennedy-style Dior suit. In one hand was a Doo-Bee, in the other a Magic Mirror.

"What's this?" I asked.

"That's me when I was on 'Romper Room,'" she said, casually.

"Huh?" I thought. It took a few minutes for the significance of her statement to sink in. The woman who made me mow the lawn, who made Easter Egg basket cupcakes for my third-grade class, who dressed as a fortune teller for my elementary school fall carnival — and who, when I went to see her in her fortune teller's tent and recognized her, later denied it was she — who was none too pleased when I came home with a D in math on my fourth-grade report card, who taught me how to count to 10 in Spanish ... this woman, my mother, had been Miss Sharon on television's "Romper Room."

Even after I had made this discovery, I failed to fully appreciate its importance. It wasn't until years later, when I would casually mention the fact, that I began to realize the impact "Romper Room" and Miss Sharon had on an entire generation of children. People were stunned with the news, and I began to appreciate how the children of famous people feel. I could now understand and relate to Suri Cruise, Liza Minnelli and the children of David and Victoria Beckham. To many, my mother might as well be Madonna or Cher.

We all have moments in our childhood that make strong, indelible impressions. "Romper Room" was one such "moment" for a generation. Twenty-five years after "Romper Room," Miss Sharon and I were at a craft fair looking at clothing, and we wanted to try



Paula Morell and Jill Conner Browne

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something on, but there weren't any dressing rooms, just bathrooms at the opposite end of the building. When one of clerks refused to let us use the bathrooms, fearing we'd steal the merchandise, the other clerk recognized my mother and said, "No. It's OK. That's Miss Sharon."

Fast forward several years later. I work with the comedy improv group Phunbags, as emcee, a director and team player. During the crowd warm-up, I sometimes mention my mother was Miss Sharon, which never fails to elicit audible gasps and applause.

After one performance, a man introduced himself and asked, "Was your mother really Miss Sharon on 'Romper Room?'"

I responded, "She certainly was."

"That's amazing," he said, in obvious awe. "I loved that show as a child. I'd watch it every day hoping she'd say my name in the Magic Mirror, but she never did."

I stepped away and called my mother, giving her the gentleman's name. I tapped him on the shoulder and gave him the phone. "Miss Sharon wants to talk to you," I said.

He was visibly shaking as he took the phone. "Hello?" he said timidly. I heard my mother say: "Romper Stomper Bomper Boo, tell me, tell me, tell me do. Magic Mirror tell me today, have all my friends had fun at play?" and she said his name. Tears welled up in this gentleman's hardened face, and he was barely able to say "thank you" as he hung up the phone, hands still shaking. Through his now steady flow of tears he whispered, "Miss Sharon said my name."

I left him alone, choked with emotion, his shoulders shaking. Later in the evening, still weeping, I overheard him on his phone telling someone, "You won't believe what happened tonight ..."



Mark Landon Smith

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As a playwright, he has had nine scripts published; his work is produced throughout the world and includes two foreign translations, an Off-Broadway production and a film adaptation. He is also a contributing author of the humor book *Dear Elvis: Graffiti From Graceland*. ■

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