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ALL HAIL THE QUEEN

Shari, a party gal with a penchant for Shriners and a knack for hosting bawdy bacchanals, still casts a long shadow over her neighborhood

stay because Proposition 13, passed in the late 1970s, limited property tax increases to 2 percent a year for California residents until a property is sold. If I'd been in their shoes, I might have bristled at fresh-faced upstarts moving in and ruining the charm of the street. Yet our neighbors welcomed us with enthusiasm. And since I'd always felt like a senior citizen trapped in a young person's body, it was as if I'd finally found my mecca.

Our new home, built circa 1923, still had original hardwood floors, crown molding, and a few unusual renovations added by a previous owner—a woman named Shari with a storied past.

The bulk of my intel about Shari came from Tina, our nonagenarian next-door neighbor. A petite redhead with an impressive collection of leopard-print housecoats, Tina regaled me with stories about Shari's obsession with Christmas, her marriages to two Shriners (husbands number two and number three), and the epic wingdings she threw in our house.

I finally caught a glimpse of Shari in a photo from the '80s tacked to Tina's fridge. An attractive woman with a blond bouffant, red lipstick, and amber Jackie O sunglasses, she posed for the camera wearing Santa Claus earrings and a shirt depicting a holiday scene with hanging stockings, a rocking horse, and teddy bears. Her dynamic smile showed off a nice set of teeth, and her hands, covered in oven mitts, clutched a baking dish, suggesting the photo had been taken midsoiree. As a fellow Christmas nut, I loved that I was carrying on her tradition of decking the halls in December, though unlike Shari, I didn't have a collection of St. Nick falderal on display year-round.

Shari's third hubby, a Shriner named Boyd, aka "the gold digger," burned through the money she had inherited from deceased husband

number two, a supermarket-shelving mogul named Frank, whose parents were the original owners of the house. "Frank was a kick in the head," Tina said, "but drinking was his downfall." She explained that Shari met Boyd at a Shriners event and they hit it off. "He didn't tell her that he was going blind and had to be hooked up to one of those things for his kidney before they got married."

"Dialysis?"

"Yeah. Shari got him a machine and put it in their bedroom. It cost a fortune and made a racket. I don't know how she slept," Tina said. She sipped coffee from a cat mug, her long nails wrapped around the handle. "Frank bought her a Cadillac every year. After he died, she bought herself a car, and Boyd insisted on driving it even though he

Meet Silver Lake's Original Hipster

BEFORE THEME BARS AND YOUNG CREATIVES TOOK OVER THE EASTSIDE, SHARI AND HER HARD-PARTYING SHRINER PALS RULED SUPREME

IN 2011, AFTER years of cohabitation in a rental and saving our pennies, my husband, Jared, and I bought a Spanish duplex in the Silver Lake hills. Hailed as *the* Best Hipster Neighborhood in the country, by *Forbes*, Silver Lake earned its cred thanks to the organic farmers' markets, chic boutiques, and modern homes designed by Richard Neutra and John Lautner. We expected to live next door to a 20-something bearded dude who brewed his own beer. It turned out the average age on our block was around 70.

Many of the white-haired denizens moved to the area long before the advent of matcha bars, selfie-friendly painted staircases, and a 365 by Whole Foods Market concept store. They were able to

couldn't see straight. One time I was in the back seat, and Shari kept saying, 'There's a car on your left.' He never got in a crash because Shari gave good driving instructions."

As far as I've gathered, the Shriners are a fraternity of older fellows who wear fezzes, drive tiny cars in parades, and drink to excess. Originally set up as the "fun" spin-off to the more serious Freemasons, the Shriners debuted in 1870 when Freemason/well-known actor on tour William J. Florence attended a party thrown by an Arab diplomat in Marseille. Legend has it that the fete ended with a ceremony inducting guests into a secret society. Florence had such a ball that he took the idea back to his stateside brethren in New York. Membership didn't take off right away, but by 1938, word traveled and *Life* magazine published a piece, lauding the Shriners as "number one in wealth, prestige, and show" for secret lodges. These days the organization

has nearly 500,000 members and, beyond their affinity for getting hammered, they give a lot of money to children's hospitals.

Shari proudly climbed up the ranks of the Daughters of the Nile, the female counterpart to the Shriners. Unlike the boys' club, which required only that male members be "of good character," women who wanted to join the Daughters of the Nile had to be related by birth or marriage to a Shriner, Master Mason, or Daughter of the Nile. That patriarchal nonsense didn't bother Shari, who so excelled at her "daughterly" duties of hosting events, entertaining Shriners, and making dolls to raise funds for children's hospitals that she scored the title of Supreme Queen—the highest honor bestowed by the organization.

"They put on a big inauguration party for her at the Shrine Auditorium. Shari trotted out in a red dress and a gold crown,

"They put on a big inauguration party for her at the Shrine Auditorium. Shari trotted out in a red dress and a gold crown, riding a camel!"

riding a camel!" Tina cackled.

"She rode the camel sidesaddle?" It was the only way I could visualize the moment without it being obscene.

Tina nodded. "She had a great sense of humor. You knew she was having fun with it."

By the time we bought our duplex—20 years after Shari moved out of the city—remnants of her reign were still in evidence. For starters, a stained-glass window with an intricate rose design covered most of one shower wall. We learned that the rose symbolized the Daughters of the Nile. I asked Tina why a narrow shelf—too thin for books and way too lengthy for a set of keys—lined all the walls in the living room and dining room in one of the duplex's apartments. She said that Shari, in all her Holly Golightly glory, kept a bar and a pool table in that apartment and installed the shelf so guests would have a place to set their drinks. Another neighbor filled in the scene by describing an oil painting over that bar depicting Shari in a saloon, serving cocktails to a bunch of cowboys. And, finally, there was a bonus room, accessible only via our balcony, that turned out to be the place where Shari had once kept a hot tub for bubbly get-togethers.

When I asked Tina what Shari might be up to these days, she didn't know. Shari lived in "the desert" now, and it had been some time since Tina had heard from her.

Then one evening Jared and I took our corgi-beagle mix, Noodle, for a walk. The sun had set over Hollywood rooftops, sweet hints of night-blooming jasmine hung in the air, and the spike atop Capitol Records pierced the pastel-streaked sky. Palm trees and pines swayed in the slight evening breeze. Our street was empty save for an older, follicly challenged gentleman seated in a lawn chair next to Tina's fig tree. Noodle stopped to sniff some ivy like a sommelier determining intricate floral notes. That's when this bald and very tan stranger in shorts and a T-shirt eyed Jared up and down and said, "You look strong."

Jared is six foot two, but far from ripped. I'd say he's in pretty good shape for a guy who eats a tub of Trader Joe's Chocolately Coated Chocolate Chip Dunkers each week, but on our street he's an Adonis. At least 30 years younger than most of our neighbors, he's the go-to brawn, frequently enlisted to help carry groceries, furniture, and aging bodies. When our octogenarian neighbor Lar-



THREE'S COMPANY

Writer Hilary Hattenbach (center), with her "hunky" husband, Jared, and Tina, the neighborhood historian

"Do you think you could lift a 100-pound woman off the floor?" The stranger chuckled, and his sun-spotted forehead bunched with creases.

My stomach dropped. "Is Tina OK?"

"Oh, she's fine. It's my mom, Shari. She drank a bottle of wine and passed out. I've had two strokes and a heart attack. I've got a bad back, and the doctor said I

can't pick her up anymore."

I felt for the guy, but at the same time, if Junior knew his mom tended to overindulge, why would he stand by while she got blotto? Wait, hold the phone, did he just say "Shari"?

"The Supreme Queen of the Daughters of the Nile Shari? The one who owned our house?" I pointed at our place.

"That's her," he said. "We popped by to

ry had pneumonia and refused to spend money on an ambulance, Jared hauled him down a flight of stairs and put him in the car. On more than one occasion, Jared lifted Tina when she neglected to use her walker and fell over.

Pegged as a strongman by the mysterious bald guy, Jared brushed aside his floppy bangs and flashed a sheepish grin. "Um, thanks," Jared said, clearly flattered.

say hello to Tina. I opened some wine for them and went to McDonald's. When I got back, my mom had downed the bottle and was out cold."

I gave Jared the side eye.

"If you can lift her off the floor," Junior continued, "I'll pull my car around. You can toss her in the front seat, and we can go home."

"I'm sure we can lift her!" I blurted. "One hundred pounds is nothing for two people." We got this, I thought.

Just inside the foyer, Tina stood behind her walker in a silky, leopard-print number and big, black plastic shades—the type doctors hand out after a cataract-removal procedure. I had no idea why she'd chosen to wear protective eyewear. With the blinds shut, nary a ray of sun penetrated the hallway, and she hadn't had surgery, but she might have been trying to shield her eyes from the tragic sight of her 80-year-old friend laid out on the floor.

Tina's portly calico cat, Cali, rarely seen by visitors, sat sphinxlike in an Eames chair about a foot away, her gaze fixed on Shari as if something interesting had finally happened in Dullsville. Perhaps Cali had reached the same conclusion as I had—the Supreme Queen had seen better days. A far cry from the rosy-cheeked, vibrant holiday hostess captured in the photo on Tina's fridge, Shari, now pale-faced and stretched out on the cork floor with her arms at her side and eyes closed, looked as though she'd been pricked with a pin and drained of all life-affirming color. Dressed in a patterned sweater and black slacks, she brought to mind my grandmother the last time I saw her alive on a trip to New York. Like the Supreme Queen, Grandma had once been a party girl who drank to excess. She'd been depressed during that visit, following the death of her sister, and complained about getting old. She hated that her beauty had faded, and her energy had flagged. I'd always romanticized the idea of growing older, believing the best was yet to come, but Grandma's morning cup of vodka in New York—and seeing the Supreme Queen dead-drunk on the floor—showcased the sad reality that not everyone copes well with the trials of seniorhood.

As the four of us, plus Noodle, crowded into Tina's entryway, among stacks of old newspapers and cat figurines, our eyes ze-

roed in on the Supreme Queen.

"How did she end up in front of the door?" Jared asked.

"I dragged her by her legs from the dining room table over to the door to make it easier for someone to lift her out," Junior replied.

How thoughtful.

Swooping in like a paramedic, Jared knelt next to her. "Are you OK?" he asked.

Shari came to long enough to mutter, "Yah," and tried to sit up, but her lids fluttered closed, then she collapsed back to a horizontal position.

Tina stood nearby silently supervising the scene. Meanwhile Noodle busied himself by wolfing down the cat's kibble and licking God only knows what off the floor. Since Shari wasn't going anywhere, we decided to take the dog home and get Jared a snack as he would need energy to lift 100 pounds. On the way out, Jared said to Junior, "Do you think your mom wants that stained-glass window from the shower with a rose on it? It's sitting in our storage room."

"I'm sure she would. How much do you want for it?" he asked.

"No charge," Jared said, concealing the fact that it was about to end up curbside for bulky-item trash pickup.

Junior followed us into our house, traipsing through the living room in his flip-flops and stopped short in the dining room. "That's where we used to stash the guns," Junior said, pointing to a window valance.

"The guns?" I repeated.

"Yeah, we had a collection." He yanked out a drawer from the built-in armoire to show me another artillery hiding place.

"Why did you need so many guns?" Jared asked.

"For kicks."

Jared and I exchanged wide-eyed glances of concern.

"This used to be a porch, right?" Jared motioned toward the odd tiled floor just beyond the dining room. Positioned next to the kitchen, the room may have been a breakfast nook at some point but now just existed to confound us and cause occasional arguments about how best to make use of it.

"Yeah. I think so," Junior squinted.

"The stained glass is in the back," said Jared, who then led Junior into the second

Junior followed us into the house and stopped short in the dining room. That's where [Shari] used to stash the guns," he said.



LIFE OF THE PARTY

Supreme Queen of the Shriners Shari (top and bottom, center) liked to unwind in her hidden Jacuzzi

bedroom, out through the sliding glass door to the balcony and into the hidden former Jacuzzi room. The old stained-glass window rested against the wall, next to the vacuum cleaner and used shipping boxes.

"She's going to love this," Junior said as he picked up the large piece of glass. "You sure you don't want anything for it?"

"Please," I said. "We're just happy it's being reunited with its rightful owner."

"I'll put this in the trunk and pull the car around so you don't have to carry Mom too far," Junior said before hauling the window down the street—a move I considered risky what with his bad back and doctor's warnings.

Jared and I returned to Tina's and positioned ourselves on either side of Shari, a skinny woman with long, spindly legs. I figured lifting her wouldn't be too hard. We shoved our hands under her hips and I counted out loud, "One, two, three, *gru-uhh*." The Supreme Queen did not budge. It brought to mind that line from *The Big Sleep*—"Dead men are heavier than broken hearts"—well, the same goes for smashed 80-year-old women. I quickly learned that it's really difficult to lift a person when she can't sit up to give you any leverage.

Shari's hip bone dug into my palm as I tried with all my might to heave her off the ground. Jared managed to get some air on his side, but she proved too weighty for me, and her body started listing. I pictured

Shari tumbling to the floor and shattering all her bones. "I'm dropping her!" I shouted as my grip slipped from her cotton pants.

Even as her body slipped downward, the Supreme Queen maintained a peaceful catatonic state, eyes closed like a geriatric Sleeping Beauty.

Somehow Jared saved her from the fall and cradled her in a fireman's lift with an arm under her knees and the other supporting her back. Her head rested against his bicep, and her lips turned up into a tiny smile, as if this was the way a regal woman of her stature expected to be transported. Jared carted her out the door with the ease of a pro wrestler. I have to admit, it was pretty hot.

Junior came peeling around the corner in a cool '70s white Corvette with a sunroof and bucket seats. He reached over from the driver's seat and flung open the passenger door. My poor husband struggled to lower Shari into a sitting position. Her limp body slid down in the seat. I reached in and fastened the safety belt across her lap.

Her head of gray curls wobbled on her neck. She woke up briefly and mumbled, "I really appreciate everything you've done," then nodded off again.

Junior offered us some cash, but we refused. Jared slammed the door, and the little white Corvette zipped down the hill.

I find it funny and bittersweet that 50 years ago our house was alive with wild billiard bashes, jumping Jacuzzi parties, and a Supreme Queen coronation. Back then the sound of sirens meant some square had called the fuzz to shut down the barn burner. These days if we hear a siren nearby, we nervously stare out the window and hope that one of our elderly neighbors isn't sleeping the Big Sleep.

In Los Angeles life takes on a surreal quality unlike anywhere else in the world. It is a city of dreams, genuine human struggle, and failure—one day you are riding high on the back of a camel, and the next you are lying dead-drunk on the floor, waiting for a kind soul to lift your body and spirits.

I heard from Tina that the Supreme Queen passed away shortly after our run-in. Saddened by the news, I wished I'd had a chance to meet her when she was conscious. I would have loved to hear her stories first-hand, although I still feel her presence around the house when I set keys on her drink ledge, receive her mail, or pull the vacuum out of the hot-tub party room. And sometimes a kitchen light flickers or, late at night, before we go to sleep, Noodle stares at a spot on the ceiling like someone or something is up there that we can't see.

"Who's there, Noodle? Is it Shari?" I ask. ■