

Chapter 1 **My Mothers of Pearl**

Aspire to Inspire before You Expire

Grandmother McElveen had two suitcases packed: one for a possible hospital stay and the other for her funeral. “Eleanor, bury me with my pearls,” she said one day to my mother.

“Oh, Mother!” exclaimed my mother. Then Grandmother McElveen glanced at Tootsie, my second momma, who worked for my family for almost fifty years. “Eleanor doesn’t want to listen, Tootsie. Please make sure I’m buried with my pearls.”

My mother told me that story during one of her many stays at Roper Hospital in Charleston, South Carolina. *Please make sure I’m buried with my pearls.* The sentence looped through my mind all night. *What a great title for a book.*

“Jane, I want you to remember how I want to be buried.” I didn’t want to discuss the topic. But my mother continued, “For my music, I want my favorite song, ‘Please Release Me,’ by Engelbert Humperdinck.” Momma always made me laugh; it was one of her pearls.

The beginning of the formation of pearls—and in the South we do love those gems—is the nacre, the inner shell of an oyster (which also forms the outer layer of a pearl). Nacre is the mother-of-pearl. Its iridescent beauty is considered a treasure. It’s crucial to the formation of the pearl. Mother-of-pearl is strong and resilient.

Just like Momma and Tootsie.

Friends called them all kinds of names: Maude and Florida, smoke and fire, Bert and Ernie, or Lucy and Ethel. Momma and Tootsie were an amazing team. I've seen them beat wayward lizards to death with brooms, leap on the kitchen table when they spotted a mouse, and put out fires with aprons. I've seen Tootsie drop to her knees laughing after my mother said something funny, and I've seen them embrace in tears.

Momma, Tootsie, and I were a superglue trio until I started first grade. I thought my heart was going to explode when I sat in that cage-like wooden school desk. All I could think of was how much fun I was missing. No more watching "I love Lucy" with Tootsie at 10 a.m. No more running around the house as Momma and Tootsie tried to brush my honey-colored ringlets that Momma called knots. No more flour fights with Tootsie when she made her delicious biscuits. And no more clothesline tents; the family's bed linens would just be white sheets hanging lifeless on a wire.

Once Tootsie gave me a good tongue-lashing after I'd fallen off of a ladder and torn a ligament in my foot. "Girl, I done told you not to git yo'self up on no ladder! Dat is man's work," exclaimed Tootsie in her Gullah brogue.

Then Momma grabbed the phone, "How many times have I told you that your uterus will fall out on the floor if you climb a ladder?"

No kidding. If Tootsie and Momma were shopping in Wal-Mart and saw a woman on a ladder, they'd always whisper, "She gonna be sorry. Her uterus is going to fall out on the floor."

Can't you just hear the Wal-Mart folks on the loud speaker? "We need some help. We have a uterus on aisle four . . ."

These are the women, my mother-of-pearls, who shaped me into the woman I am today. They made me laugh. Many times they made me snort in a non-Southern Belle fashion. They also held me when I cried. They encouraged me. They're the backbone of my character, a constant reminder of the importance of surrounding yourself with the right people. They also popped me on the bottom when I did wrong. They taught me to live well, to love others, and to do the right thing regardless of how you felt. Their lessons stuck with me just like a scoop of Tootsie's steaming hot grits.

Mother-of-pearl is a metaphor for something rare, fine, admirable, and valuable. We should all aspire to share the legacy of our deeds as we develop our talents. Just like a mother passes down her pearls to her daughter so should we proudly and courageously leave the next generation valuable lessons.

Who are the people you look to, lean on, and learn from? Find the mother-of-pearl in your life and pray for that protective shell. Seek out someone who provides safety and beauty at the same time. Seek someone who will tell you the truth in love, a person you trust and respect. Find that person or persons who have journeyed through life well and have accumulated a beautiful, eclectic strand of valuable pearls. Then model that person.

Jane Jenkins Herlong

Life Lessons, Singing, Laugh-Out-Loud Presentations



Jane Jenkins Herlong was a tomboy raised on a Lowcountry, South Carolina tomato farm where she worked the fields as a young girl. She was told that she was dyslexic and would never attend college. She was told that she was no “beauty queen.”

The funny thing is, Jane has proven all of these labels wrong. **She’s living proof that success is achieved with a sense of self and a sense of humor.**

Jane traveled from those tomato fields all the way to the runway of the Miss America Pageant, where she represented South Carolina and was named Miss Congeniality by the Miss America production staff.

Discover more about Jane and her upcoming book, *Bury Me With My Pearls*, at JaneHerlong.com.