

# Manolo's Drawings

by Jan Groft, *Central PA Magazine*, May 2007

A book of Manolo Blahnik drawings lies open on the tray secured to Mayme's wheelchair. A maroon high-heeled shoe with a pointy toe makes her smile; its straps are fashioned like bamboo shoots, its buckle decorated with four promising buds. I had never heard of Manolo, a high-fashion shoe designer, until a newspaper reporter made a tongue-in-cheek comparison between him and my 12-year-old daughter.

Today I have brought this book to the nursing home with me, a book costing \$34.95 that I willingly paid hoping Mayme might respond. She mentioned once that she used to work in a nearby Ephrata clothing store. I do not know if this is true, or even if I heard correctly; it is difficult for her to fetch words bumping into one another in her brain. When sentences finally reach her lips, they tumble out backward or inside out, as though her thoughts couldn't muster the strength to make the journey, so they arrive unrecognizable, in a shape that will just have to do. Mayme is 88 years old, and she is dying.

The hospice volunteer coordinator told me that Mayme has terminal Alzheimer's. I am Mayme's assigned visitor, the luck of the draw clearly in my favor. Her smile alone is worth the visit — an engaging curve that starts at the ends of her mouth and emanates from her porcelain blue eyes. We have belted out tunes together in the nursing home's sing-alongs. We have shed tears over what her one wish, if granted, would be (a question that afterward embarrassed me to have asked when she welled up, and the answer seemed obvious). We have campaigned together for the removal of the cumbersome tray constraining her in her wheelchair, imperative for safety reasons, we were finally told. "I could understand if it were a big store," Mayme sighed when our requests were denied.

Now I flip the page to a lime green boot with a dagger of a heel. "What do you think of this one?" I ask. The boot is lavished with a spray of peacock feathers. "Pretty wild, huh?"

"I was going to say." Mayme's voice is affirming. She uses the phrase repeatedly — "I was going to say" — as if my every comment were the very thought trying to navigate the pathway of her mind.

The book's oversized pages display shoes in styles from leopard-print to jewel-bedecked. I know nothing about high fashion, as witnessed by my fading black capris and unimaginative pink polo. Mayme sports a long-sleeve flannel dress on this sweltering July afternoon. Still, we are like two fashion critics raising an eyebrow as I offer commentary (bizarre, exotic, outrageous) and read quotes such as one by Alexandra Shulman, "If God had wanted us to wear flat shoes, he wouldn't have invented Manolo Blahnik."

"I was going to say," repeats Mayme.

Finally, as I always do when it's time to leave, I take Mayme's hand. "Is it OK if I come back to see you next week?"

"OK," she says, smiling. Then she wags a slender finger. "But I don't want to buy anything."

Earlier this year, near the end of seventh grade, my 12-year-old asked me to pick up a pair of beach-style flip-flops in the grocery store's dollar section. A teacher was going to demonstrate how to crochet onto the shoes' straps. When Katherine came home with them, the flip-flops were adorned with electric blue chenille entwined with a more feathery "eyelash" yarn. Her father and I oohed and aahed over her creation, and she slipped away to her room, then returned to the kitchen modeling the shoes, now embellished with buttons that she'd sewn onto the yarn. I put down my glass of iced tea and looked from my daughter to the shoes.

"You know," I said. "I think you've got something here."

Within days, a downtown shopkeeper offered to sell Katherine's creations. And suddenly my 12-year-old was in business. An article about Katherine's endeavor, appearing on the front page of our local newspaper's lifestyle section, was later picked up by the Associated Press. Steve Kopfinger, the Lancaster Sunday News writer who interviewed Katherine, wrote:

If you're into fashionable shoes, you know the names: Manolo Blahnik, Kenneth Cole, Jimmy Choo. Add another: Katherine Groft. Like Manolo, Kenneth and Jimmy, she's a footwear entrepreneur. Unlike them, she launched her business at the ripe old age of 12....

The article gave Katherine's footwear business a running start. Phones rang; orders poured in; customers showed up waving the article. A map titled "Where in the world are Katherine's flip-flops?" hung in the shop, the shoes' destinations marked with push pins: Barbados, Germany, Japan, California, Florida, Mexico.

Her endless crocheting stirred memories of my oldest sister, Lena, who left this world shortly after Katherine entered it, but not before she had the chance to sit on my sofa, covered by one of her own hand-crocheted afghans, cuddling my newborn daughter. The picture of the two of them together often flashes through my mind. Like when Katherine gets into the car on a sunny day and sneezes three times, just as my sister had always done. Or when my daughter volunteers to serve breakfast to the homeless, a cause Lena embraced with a generous gift each Thanksgiving. And now, the crocheting. A connection. Like the Manolo book.

It's hard to say why I bought the book. When I saw it in the bookstore, I thought of Katherine, of course. And then of Mayme. If Mayme had, in fact, worked in fashion, perhaps Manolo's creations might provoke a memory. It was an attempt, I guess, to retrieve and somehow preserve a piece of her past. Not in the tidy way Manolo's shoes lace at the ankles, but in the way my newborn daughter captured the essence of my sister's spirit as they briefly met, like in a relay, one finishing the race, the other just beginning.

Only a handful of people attend Mayme's memorial service: her daughter and son, their spouses, a childhood friend, some workers from the nursing home. I learn that Mayme was a college graduate, that she had worked as a secretary, that she was an avid reader. No one mentions a job in a clothing store, and I don't ask.

Afterward, I pull the Manolo book from my shelf, pondering how little we really need to know someone to receive the gift of their spirit. The book falls open to a Sarah Jessica Parker quote: "By now I can run a marathon in a pair of Manolo Blahnik heels. I can race out and hail a cab. I can run up Sixth Avenue at full speed. I've destroyed my feet completely, but I don't really care. What do you need your feet for anyway?"

Mayme smiles; I can feel it. "I was going to say," she nods.

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR:** Jan Groft is the author of the award-winning book *As We Grieve* and a memoir, *Riding the Dog*

Her patient's name has been changed to preserve confidentiality.