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Joyce's Journal

A monthly dispatch from Joyce A. Miller, Writer



IT'S HARD TO MISS SOMETHING THAT WAS NEVER THERE

A GLIMPSE OF WHAT'S INCLUDED:

A short story about Pearl

I hate to start this newsletter this way, but I want to share both the good and the bad with you. Two of my brothers have passed away since the beginning of the year. The amount of sadness I feel is directly related to the roles they played in my life. I was much closer to my older brother Donald than I was to my younger brother Ken. Donald's wife Michele was one of my best friends, so I saw the two of them more often. I didn't share memories of good times with my younger brother Ken. I think it's okay to feel the grief of losing Donald and to hardly feel anything at all for Ken. These feelings coexist in me and I'm at peace with that.

It is a reminder, though, that life is short. Donald was 68. Ken was 63. How old are your parents or other elders in your life? How often do you see them each year? In another artist's newsletter that I follow, she reminded me that time moves fast. The average life expectancy now in the US is 76 years. Her father is 74 years old, and she sees him twice a year. I can do the math. Quite possibly she'll only see her father 4 more times. If your mother is still around, maybe you should visit her on Mother's Day! It's one more day to add to the yearly tally!

On a lighter note, I had a book sale and signing in April at Bingo Beer Co. It was part of a collaborative event with Jackie McCool who compiled the Beer Dogs book; and Annie Tobey who wrote 100 Things to Do in Richmond Before You Die. We didn't sell many books, but we had a good time sitting on the patio drinking beer on a beautiful spring day.

As a bonus for May's newsletter, and since Mother's Day is in this month, I'm including a story I wrote about Joe Harris, the Moon's wife Pearl. Pearl never had any children and I've imagined a scenario where she miscarried. I wondered if it was difficult for Pearl to work out exactly what she was feeling for her lost child. Maybe she felt grief, but maybe she felt more removed. Like the ambivalence I have about two brothers.

I live in the Church Hill section of Richmond, VA with my husband and my retired racing greyhound. Before I started writing, I worked for 30 years at a nuclear physics research laboratory.

Do what you came here for!



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Pearl

Pearl carefully pulled the needle and thread through the cotton fabric top, batting and backing, making intricate diamond patterns. They weren't baseball diamonds per se, but she wanted her husband to think of them that way. She was sewing a quilt for him with baseball patterns on the top and a plain green backing side to remind him of the field. She did this as a way to feel closer to him while he was away playing games in far off cities. The repetitive task of the sewing resulted in a meditative quality and made the time away from him pass more quickly.

At times, Pearl didn't even think about the quilting as she was doing it. She just let her hands and fingers do the work, almost like praying.

Joe was off playing a few games in Boston against the Red Sox. Pearl was at home in their apartment in Franklin, an hour's drive north of Pittsburgh. Joe would be taking the train home in a few weeks with his teammates. He would return in time for his birthday at the beginning of May. She wanted to surprise him with the quilt.

She looked up at the clock and realized it was already the afternoon. She needed to take Joe's dog Jeff out for his afternoon walk. Jeff was a black and white English pointer, a hunting dog that always needed something to do. His markings had the shape of a heart on his right side. He was Joe's hunting companion during the off-season. But during the season when Joe was away at games, he was Pearl's responsibility. Jeff stood at the front door to the apartment and whined while his tail wagged.

"Good afternoon, Mrs. Harris," her next-door neighbor said from her porch as she stepped out onto the street.

"Good afternoon, Mrs. Brown."

"How is our boy Jeff this afternoon?" Mrs. Brown asked.

"He's fine. He's been ready for his walk for some time, but I lost track of time," Pearl said.

Mrs. Brown stepped down from her porch to scratch Jeff behind the ears. Jeff did a little dance and wriggled his whole body.

"Who's a good boy?" Mrs. Brown said. Jeff looked up at her with his golden-brown eyes. She tossed him a little treat which he caught in his mouth.

"You're a good boy!" Mrs. Brown said as Pearl and Jeff set off down the sidewalk.

After their walk and dinner, Jeff settled quietly on the floor in the living room and Pearl returned to the quilt.

Pearl thought about her quilting journey. She began quilting when she had her first miscarriage. There was comfort in the repetitive tasks and at the end she had something beautiful to show for it. A piece of artwork that she had created.

Her first quilt had been a sampler. Each quilt block was different. She made one of the blocks in pastel colors as a symbol of the child she lost. As her passion for quilting increased, she began making quilts for family and friends as gifts. She thought about each person every step of the way as she quilted. There was a lot of love in her quilts.

When Pearl and Jeff went out for the walk on the following day, Mrs. Brown had a basket of asparagus she had picked from her garden.

“Take some of this asparagus. It’s too much for me to eat on my own,” Mrs. Brown said as she handed Pearl a bunch.

“Thank you. They’re lovely. What a great sign of spring,” Pearl said.

That evening, Pearl thought she might run to the butcher to get a few lamb chops to go with the asparagus for her dinner.

She put the needle back into her pin cushion and draped the baseball quilt over the back of the couch. As it was late in the day, she hoped the butcher still had a few chops left. She hurriedly grabbed her purse from the hall table and went out the door.

When Pearl returned, only a short time later, the quilt was in little pieces all over the floor. The batting was spread in little puffs across the living room like a cotton field in summer. Jeff still had a piece of the quilt with one of the baseball shapes hanging from his mouth, looking highly entertained and as if he was playing with the actual ball, not a piece of her husband’s birthday gift. Jeff’s tail wagged furiously.

“Oh, Jeff,” Pearl said as she sank into the couch cushion, empty-handed because the butcher had been closed after all. “Maybe you miss him as much as I do but is this your way of showing it?”

Jeff rolled over on his back and squirmed into the remnants of cloth like he was rolling in the grass on a summer day. As if he was trying to pick up Joe’s elusive scent but coming up empty. How could she be angry with him? Pearl smiled through her tears as she slowly began to pick up the pieces. Jeff play bowed and ran off into the other room with one of the bigger pieces still in his mouth.

“No worries. I’ll just make another one. It will be easier the second time around,” Pearl called out loud to Jeff in the other room. She wasn’t sure whether she was comforting him or herself. But she would have to be more careful the next time she ran out on an errand.