
A tribute to Mary Cook's good friend Joyce

Mary Cook

Lifestyle - We were both about five years old. It was the first time I had seen Joyce Francis, both of us brand new pupils at the Northcote Public School.

People often ask if my little friend Joyce really existed ... or did I just create her to flesh out my Depression memories. She did indeed exist! And I remember that first day at school, so very many years ago when a friendship was forged that would last for many decades down the road.

What I remember so well, as the little girl sat directly across from me in one of those little desks with the drawer under the seat, and the ink well implanted in the right hand corner, was her beautiful complexion.

She had skin as fair as a lily, with a faint blush to her cheeks, and I noticed back then with envy, there wasn't a freckle anywhere in sight.

Not like my face, which my brother Emerson often likened to a turkey egg. And there was Joyce with skin like a freshly ripened peach.

Although we became fast friends, our lives were as different as night was from day. First of all, Joyce lived in a brick house ... ours was log.

There was a flush toilet, with real toilet paper. Ours was behind a cluster of cedar trees, with an Eaton's catalogue on a spike.

But when Joyce came to our farm to play, she used the outdoor privy just as if there was no difference between it and her modern facility at home. That's the kind of friend Joyce was.

Joyce had her very own bedroom, as did her brother Allan. I remember now, so many decades later, flowered wallpaper somewhere ... perhaps it was in the hall upstairs, or in Joyce's bedroom, but in my mind's eye, I see pink ... still one of my favourite colours.

Joyce had a little wood pencil box ... I think now, the only one at the Northcote Public School, but perhaps there were others, but I remember hers in particular. My pencils and eraser were in a little homemade drawstring bag.

You opened Joyce's pencil box with your thumb-nail, and it swivelled open, and there inside were her pencils and art gum, as neat as you please. And one Friday, Joyce let me take her wood pencil box home for the weekend, which I took to the Lutheran Church on Sunday. That's the kind of friend Joyce was.

Joyce wore store-bought underwear ... mine were flourbags. Joyce wore little white socks with lace around the cuffs. She wore hand-knit sweaters.

In spite of all this, what I considered grandeur, Joyce and I were best friends. It mattered not to her that I came from a big rambunctious family, whom were poor as church mice, and most of my clothes were hand-me-downs, or 'made-overs'. That's the kind of friend Joyce was.

Joyce's father drove a modern car. Until we got our old Model T in a trade, we had to rely on Queenie, the buggy in the summer, and the cutter in the winter.

And often I was taken into Renfrew in that

spanking new car, driven by Joyce's father, and we would stop at Briscoe's General Store for an ice cream cone, on Joyce's suggestion. She knew for me, ice cream cones were a very infrequent treat. That's the kind of friend Joyce was.

Joyce never lost her love of life. She married, had two children Frank and Janice, and was then widowed.

Derek Smith, who shared Joyce's love of art, came into her life and they shared a dozen wonderful happy years together.

When her memory started to fade, she depended more and more on her family.

Finally, she made her home with her daughter, Janice, who often compared her Mother's failing memory to that of a very young child. Yes, Joyce, although suffering from dementia, became child-like.

She loved to be read to, she smiled readily, she showed gratitude. And then, this gentle soul, this dear friend of mine for many decades, slipped away in her daughter's arms on Saturday night, July 26 in Toronto.

Those of us who had Joyce in our lives for decades will cherish those memories that set her apart from others.

She will continue to live on in my stories, and those of us who have had the privilege of calling her a friend will meet in the little Northcote United Church to say our final goodbye on Saturday, Aug. 23 at 10:30 a.m., and then we will gather in the one room school house next door to share memories of my little friend Joyce Francis Fricker.