Kristina Huneault on Remembering Daisy McCann (28 May 2022)

To think about Daisy at 204 Pentilly Lane is -- to me also -- to recall a Camelot. The table, I confirmed this with Robert today, was round and everything. I’ve been asked if I would share my recollections, but before I do so I’ll leave you a minute to conjure up your own. To remember a favourite time you spent with Daisy. [pause]

I see her seated in the living room with a mimosa in her hand, while I perch next the split leaf philodendron that ranged between the sofa and the hearth. Some of you, perhaps, will be thinking of the 12th night parties that marked the end of the Christmas holidays. Joe fixing drinks on the top of the dryer, and Daisy with silver platter in hand: juicy water-chestnuts wrapped in bacon.

On the particular day I’m thinking of, however, it is not winter. Instead, the weather is warm, the door to the screen-porch is open, Mozart is playing on the stereo, and a stern old man in a green-blue smoking gown gazes down on me from the wall. Daisy welcomed me so often that I no longer remember the exact circumstances of the exchange I want to tell you about. It may have been brunch. If so, there was fresh squeezed orange juice, and buttered croissants hot from the toaster oven -- which lived by the table for that special purpose. Or it may have been dinner, with the cheesecake that ushered my culinary tastes into adulthood (and which now brings me renown among my own son’s friends). Either way, there would have been Daisy’s special blend of black tea with Apricot mixed in. I make a point of the tea because now, in her absence, it (like many things) seems so poignantly symbolic; to take something as quotidian as Orange Pekoe tea and find a way to make it special … *that* was classic Daisy. She was an incomparably gracious host. On the train this morning, I was trying to pinpoint what she did that was so magic. My mother tells me that at the age of 13 Daisy was given the task of cooking dinner for her parents and her sister; there’s certainly no question that her cuisine was outstanding. But this, of course, was secondary. What really mattered was the particular quality of respect for others that emanated from her. When my son was 4 or 5 she treated our family to brunch at Beach Grove and introduced him to the concept of a buffet table. “I like Daisy,” he later reported “she knows how to talk to kids.”

The knowledge of how to treat people was central to Daisy’s wisdom, and her regard for the personal dignity of those who came within her orbit was exemplary. On the summer day that I am thinking of, she was 57 years old and I was 15. I was chattering blithely away -- I don’t recall what about -- but I must have made reference to the notion of an “age gap” – because I’ve never forgotten her response: in her experience, she said, there were no age gaps, only personality gaps.

To me, Daisy’s personality was a combination of magnet and heat lamp. Perhaps more than anyone I know, she had *savoir vivre*. She knew what made a good life and she shared it with me, and with others, so freely. A trip to Chicago to see paintings. A gift of furniture … of stories … of meaningful talk. When I was 15, the good life was embodied for me in her navy-blue satin pyjamas. Now in my 50s, a professional woman with one son (much like her) what strikes me is how calm she was – how unhurried. The last time I saw her, propped up with pillows in a Muskoka chair on Georgian Bay, I asked her if she had found it stressful back then: achieving so much professionally, commuting long distances, and then coming home to make supper every night, while taking such an active interest in her child and in the world of politics and history and current affairs. Not really, she said simply. I enjoyed it.

In later life, after Robert and I had both left Windsor, her friendship with my mother blossomed. With their husbands gone, the two women saw each other almost daily: going to plays, exercise classes, the symphony. Daisy introduced my mother to Wagner. And while I have always felt that their friendship *was* perhaps tinged with a slight personality gap – it blossomed nonetheless. Even the time that they spent together was a gift to their children, who felt we did not need to worry about them while they had each other. Sometimes, I thought of our intertwined lives like a novel: the kind where you think you’re reading one story – the youthful romance of a boy and a girl – and suddenly you find that all that had only been a prelude to a much more profound and mature reflection on resilience and loss, fortitude, and the passion for life that continues in spite of its travails.

All of us here have our memories of Daisy and they are all equally precious to mine. The amethyst ring. The lacquered nails. The music and the champagne. The slow thoughtful speech. The intelligent conversation. The warmth and generosity of mind and spirit. You were right, Daisy, there are no age gaps … only personality gaps. We gravitated to you: to your intellect, your graciousness, your independence, and groundedness. You are distant from us now as never before. And the gap left by the absence of your person is one that will never be filled. When so much has been given to us, there is much to be taken away. Robert, I am so truly sorry for your loss.