



Doris

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I've never met a Doris before. Apparently the name's height of popularity was 1928. I've heard of Doris Day, the famous American movie star, Doris Lessing, the British novelist, and Doris Hart, the American tennis player. And I surely know of Doris Roberts, the American actress who in her later years played the persnickety mom in the popular TV show *Everyone Loves Raymond*. All these Doris's lived inspiring and long lives well into their 90s.

But I didn't *know* them.

Since the COVID pandemic landed heavy on the world, I, like many, have been home a lot. Nothing too unusual for me since I spend most of my days slugging away at my keyboard, searching for words on the ceiling, or inspiration from the bottom of an empty bag of plantain chips. And there are those rare occasions, two or three times a day, when I find myself down an Alice in Wonderland adventure on the Internet.

Seven months into this worldwide adjustment, I rarely leave my little condo—house arrest with an undefined crime. Or is mindless Netflix binging, continually rearranging my closets, or wandering aimlessly in circles in my living room trying to find the deeper meaning in all of this transgression—hostile to humanity?

It feels even the air in my home is imprisoned, dense and difficult, for it too has nowhere else to go. Technology assures me that I don't need to leave. Deliveries abounding. I don't need my legs to move, just pound on those keys, make things happen and appear. Stay home. Stay safe. And try to reach for something besides the vacancy I sometimes feel between the first time I notice my breath in the morning and the time the blankets are snug up to my chin as darkness salutes my daily efforts.

Staring out my bedroom window after my morning meditation one day, I gazed at the lake. On the street below me I noticed an older woman with short silky white hair, a white blouse, blue slacks, and sturdy white tennis shoes, sitting on her front porch on a white bench next to a pot of yellow daises. More than six feet away sat a younger woman. They both sipped something from their mugs.

Every day for the next few weeks at the conclusion of my morning meditation, I peered out my window to see the lake and the two women having their morning chat. Why hadn't I ever noticed them before? Assuredly this was a pandemic induced gathering. But still, I'd lived here eight years. I wondered if they could see me, the accidental onlooker, transfixed by this simple social setting.

The next week I once again looked out the window. This time I only saw the

younger woman exiting a neighboring condo. She affixed streamers, signs, and silver balloons all around the entry way of the older woman's front landing and stairwell. I witnessed the kindness she conveyed, finding a way to celebrate what appeared to be a special occasion in such a cheerless time. I leaned closer to my window and saw written in black cursive *Happy Birthday Doris*.

Periodically throughout the day I noticed people coming and going, dropping off flowers, food, plants, and cards for Doris. I wondered how old she was. Seventy-five, or maybe she was even eighty. From my vantage point, it was all too far away to know.

A few days later the balloons had lost their vigor and sagged lifeless against the garage. The birthday sign was crooked and barely adhered to the railing. As the sign swayed in the breeze, I noticed something. It couldn't say *Happy Birthday Doris*, the lettering was too short for that. I grabbed my old pair of binoculars and focused on the sign. It read: *Happy 100th Doris*.

I lowered myself onto a chair and sat in wonder. This woman wasn't just another Doris on her way to longevity, she was there. And from what I had seen, she lived alone. Just like me. But I was not even half her age and she appeared more social than me during this quarantine. I could now see my prison was of my own making.

The next morning I took a break from my writing and sat in a lounge chair on my balcony. I watched the ducks glide along the water and noticed two black swans in flight, skimming the glistening surface with their wings spread wide exposing their white feathers beneath. Doris appeared on her front porch and walked down her stairs. No cane, no walker, just the slightest of hobbles. She walked to the curb and then hauled her trash and recycling cans into her garage. She returned to the curb and wheeled the neighbor's cans next to their garage. Doris went back to the curb for a third time. She closed the lids and wheeled the other neighbor's cans up too. I felt a tingling sensation on my arms and a prickling of something in my eyes.

I grabbed a mask, put on my shoes and headed out my door.

As I said before, I've never known a Doris. Now, it was time for that to change

