

*The Joy of the Dogs*

Barbara A. Rouillard

Auntie Shirley, my Uncle David's wife, was a pediatric nurse from her twenties until the late 1990s when she retired. Once she told me that she loved to watch healthy children at play, in parks and playgrounds, at pools and lakes and beaches, even in the streets, just riding their bicycles. She said to me, "I just love to watch them. I see too much sickness." Then she paused, "They're just babies. Even the older kids are just babies."

I would see her sitting in a beach chair wearing sunglasses and some type of elaborately-funny straw hat, with that perennial paperback book in her hands. When we went to the beach, I would watch her put down her book and scan the beach, focusing on children bobbing up-and-down in the surf, focusing on children pounding sand into buckets, who were constructing sandcastles with varying degrees of artistic talent.

I knew. She was trying to not see, just for a little while, what she had chosen as a career to witness.

Auntie Shirley died in 2013. For more than thirty-five years, she had watched children at play. Me, right now, this summer of the 2020 quarantine, in Maine for seventeen days, I watch the dogs.

The cottage that my husband William and I have rented—this is our third year—is directly on the ocean on a stretch of beach called Long Sands Beach. Especially in the early-mornings, late-afternoons, and early-evenings, people bring their dogs to Long Sands Beach. There's also a Short Sands Beach slightly north of here, but mostly surfers use that beach. From where I sit on this porch, a porch constructed of three walls of windows, there is a one hundred and eighty degree view.

I watch the dogs. I watch the dogs run. I can become nearly overwhelmed by what I have named “the pure joy of the dogs.”

I noticed this year that many dog owners have some type of wand that allows a ball to be thrown, actually flung, overhand, great distances down the beach. I watch each dog run, as fast as the wind, to retrieve it. The dog skids to a stop as it nears the ball. No matter what breed, I watch powerful strong, healthy, galloping legs. Last year, from my chair on the porch, I watched a dog run so fast, down the entire length of the beach, I wondered how many miles per hour a dog could run.

I watch the dogs jump in the air, over-and-over again. I watch the dogs wagging their tails in huge circles. I watch the dogs dig holes in the sand for nonexistent items. I watch two front paws digging and digging, sand shooting high in the air behind them, for nothing, for no purpose, but for the pure joy of it. All I see is pure, unadulterated joy.

Yesterday, as William walked miles along the shore, I watched a dog do the run-and-retrieve game with his owner until I noticed, when I, like my aunt, put down my book, and *really* watched, that this dog had a different game and he was playing it all by himself.

After he caught the ball, he would take it into his mouth and go to the water’s edge, just where the surf broke. But, first, he’d toss the ball into the water near to him. As he was stretched out, tail slapping the sand behind him, he would watch his ball with great intent. I swear he knew exactly how far he could push it before he’d lose his ball in the surf. He never threw it too far out.

Now he’s up, he’s running back, his owner throws the ball, he retrieves it, he tosses it into the ocean, and he lies down in the breaking surf, all with pure joy.

The great irony is that I am a cat person. I think cats have a great deal more nuance than dogs. But, before the coronavirus, when I entered a room, no matter how many other people were there, any dogs would run up to me. I would joke that I thought they wanted me “to bat for

the other team.”

I think this winter is going to be difficult. William agrees.

But here, I watch the dogs. Here, in this troubled world, from which I have escaped for seventeen days with my husband, I watch joy, pure joy, every day, right in front of me, which just happens to manifest itself in dogs, healthy, strong, joyful dogs.