

The Pearl

by Dian Seidel

Viv pulled on her swimsuit, slipped on her kaftan, and checked her beach bag. Goggles, cap, towel, and phone. Before heading out the door, she glanced in the mirror to adjust her straw hat and oversized sunglasses. Viv saw what she had been seeing for years—broad forehead, square jaw, face both bronzed and damaged by the sun. And she saw the pearl studs in her ears. She touched them, knowing today would be the last day she would wear them.

Viv smiled as she reminded herself that her look—her simple black one-piece, the sunglasses, the pearls—had a certain style. At least that was her granddaughter Dory’s pronouncement last July when she was with Viv at the Jersey shore, as she had been every one of her seventeen Julys. This afternoon Dory would be back again, filling Viv’s little condo with her chatter, her laughter, and her opinions.

“Your look is, like, vintage elegance,” Dory had said last summer. “*La simplicité est la clé de l’élégance*,” she quoted from a biography of Coco Chanel she had read for her high school French class. Charmed, Viv was only mildly tempted to ask whether Dory had considered Simone de Beauvoir as a more worthy book report subject. Viv just laughed, but she sensed that Dory knew what she was thinking. Dory tilted her freckled face, fluttered her eyelashes, and added, “*Très chic*.”

“Vintage I get,” Viv said. She had been wearing the fraying straw hat for years, and the pearls had been a high school graduation gift from Viv’s own grandmother. “Simplicity I get. But elegance? That’s a bit of a stretch, don’t you think?”

The swimsuit, Viv told Dory, was purely practical, made of fabric that was fade-resistant and sag-proof. “Your Grandma, alas, is neither.” Now it was Dory’s turn to laugh, which made Viv’s heart sing.

Viv had explained the rest of what Dory called her look in hopes of passing along a pearl or two of wisdom. The hat and sunglasses were better—late—than—never attempts to protect her skin. Dory shouldn’t make the mistakes Viv had made when she was a teenager. Viv held out her arms, right palm up and left palm down, for Dory’s examination. The contrast between the smooth inner arm and the blotchy outer arm was all the instruction Viv needed to give.

But Viv did share Dory’s opinion about the earrings. The pearls were simple yet elegant. In recent years Viv had worn them day and night, partly as a remembrance but mainly so she never had to wonder where she left them. Now it was time for a change. Today Viv would give them to Dory to mark Dory’s own graduation.

But first, a swim. It was already quarter to ten and she was expecting Dory for lunch. Viv would have preferred to encounter the ocean at sunrise when there was rarely another soul on the beach, but she was keeping her promise.

Last summer Dory was a newly-minted pool lifeguard at a suburban Pittsburgh YMCA. She didn’t think much of the regulation red swimsuit, but she took her responsibilities seriously. And she held the Jersey Shore beach patrol, whose responsibilities were “like, literally” oceans larger than her own, in high esteem. The only word Dory could find for these toned, tanned teens and twenty-somethings was awesome. When Dory had begged Viv to give up her early morning

swims and wait for the guards to come on duty at ten, Viv had to agree.

Today, Viv arrived just as the guards were climbing atop their stand. Jordan, Frankie and Kelsey. Viv could never remember which was which, but she never neglected to say good morning to the threesome.

“Well, off I go,” she told them. She pulled on her cap, fitted her goggles, and faced the water.

Viv entered quickly, though not as quickly as her younger self, who would have galloped through the surf and dived into the breaking waves. These days, a more cautious crossing of the shallows and a full-body dunk in hip-high water was the best way to absorb the shock of the ocean.

Some mornings, rough surf or a rip current warning from the guards meant the dunk was all that Viv would get. But today, the sea beyond the surf was smooth. Lake Atlantic. Viv could swim, her legs fluttering gently, the slight chill of the water soothing the slight ache in her knees.

The ocean’s power to transform never failed to amaze her. Buoyancy somehow shaved decades away. Viv’s seventy-three-year-old body felt lighter, lithier and stronger. With steady, even strokes, she swam parallel to the shore until she reached the next beach patrol stand, two blocks away. Treading water, she tapped her head with her fist to signal to this other threesome of guards that she was fine, though in truth, and through her sand-scuffed goggles, she couldn’t see if they were at their station. After a minute or so of rest, Viv swam back.

Even in the best conditions, the return to shore through the surf and the swash was the riskiest part of the swim. A wave could come up behind you, take you for a tumble, and throw you to ground. Viv always prepared with a bit of recovery,

floating on her back just beyond the breakers with the sun on her face. Her swim to shore was usually a cautious sidestroke so she could keep watch on the oncoming waves.

But today the waves were arriving so regularly, curling so cleanly, breaking so perfectly that Viv could not resist the temptation to bodysurf. She knew there was a chance she might lose control. It had happened before, but she had always been lucky. Well, at least those awesome guards were there.

She didn't have to wait long. As the swell came up behind her, Viv took a few strong strokes toward shore. When the wave caught her, and she caught it, the thrill was visceral. Viv's outstretched body became one with the water, both streamlining together toward the beach in a suspension of time and gravity. Viv felt utterly alive, simultaneously completely in her body and thoroughly transcending it. When she reached the shallows and managed to stand, she closed her eyes and inhaled a deep breath of gratitude. How many more rides like that were in her future? Any?

Back at her condo, Viv showered, slathered her thirsty skin with almond oil, and dressed. Loose off-white top and tan pants, as usual. Viv's closet, like the rest of her condo, and truth be told like the entirety of her life, was uncluttered. The fewer decisions to make, the less stuff to keep track of, the better. Then she set to work on lunch.

Viv cut up a honeydew and tasted the first chunk to make sure it wasn't a soapy-tasting dud. She shucked four ears of corn, marveled at the even ivory rows that shined like baby teeth, and put a pot of water on the stove. She sliced and fanned two softball-sized tomatoes and sprinkled salt on top. With a jar of mayo and a bag of crusty Italian rolls, she had assembled all of Dory's favorites. And Viv's own, too. As soon as Dory

arrived, the two hugged, sat at Viv's little kitchen table, and tucked in with relish.

After a few big bites, tomato juice dripping down her chin, Dory had questions. How was Viv feeling? Swimming much? How about the ocean this summer? Dory wanted details—water temperature, seaweed, jellyfish, this year's beach patrol? Assured that all was well in her grandmother's world, and informed of Team JFK at the guard stand, Dory got to work on her corn, progressing neatly, row by row, as she had done since childhood.

"The corn's been so sweet this year. We'll get more tomorrow," Viv said. Dory looked up and smiled, then she furrowed her brow. "Grandma," she asked, "where's your earring?"

Viv touched her right earlobe. That pearl was in place, but the left was missing. Had it been there this morning? Yes, she remembered her reflection in the mirror.

"Let me look around a bit," she said. "You eat."

Viv searched her bedroom and bathroom and then the rest of the small condo, but the pearl was nowhere. She returned to the bedroom to check her sheets. Once, years ago, she had found one of the pearls on her pillow when she stripped the bed. Today, no such luck.

She remembered the surf, how she had trusted the wave. How she had accepted its risk. She knew that the earring was just a pearl, that the sea had made it, and that the sea had a right to reclaim it. She sat down on the bed and put her head in her hands. Her silent tears tasted of the sea.

Dian Seidel's essays have appeared in *Passager*, *Anak Sastra*, *Lucky Jefferson*, *Pen in Hand*, *Halfway Down the Stairs*, *Bethesda Magazine*, and *The New York Times*. She is the author of *Kindergarten at 60: A Memoir of Teaching in Thailand* (2023, Apprentice House Press).

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