

Pearl

The Little Light that Shines

From “The String of Pearl™.” Series

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Written By

Deborah Wilson Smart

with P. J. Richardson

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Dedicated to the young storytellers
who not only turn their dreams into stories,
but also, work their dreams into their reality.

Dedicated to those who showed me
how to work through the pain and
disappointments by turning to Jesus
and allow His light to shine through me.

*“Let your light so shine before men,
that they may see your good works,
and glorify your Father which is in heaven”*
Matthew 5:16

From The Society of Pearls

June 16, 2014

Sister Deborah Smart,

Your book, Your life, Your name, as sacred "as Gold" as sacred as God's love and blessings...simply "PEARL" inspired me, caused me to weep, laugh and above all realize that through all of life's ups and downs, through Faith, Peace, Kindness, Joy, Patience, and most of all "Love" and everlasting "Hope" and memories! We can learn to endure and hold on to God's unchanging hand...

The words and occurrences in your book expressed encouragement."

I am privileged that you are a friend of mine...

Blessings to you & your future,

Diane Green-Foster

PART ONE
PEARL

Chapter 1
The Author Emerges

Pearline Jennifer Richardson, better known as P.J., listened to the words of the song, “Send the Rain.” The green mountains of Vermont reminded her so much of the quiet countryside of Fort Washington, Pennsylvania in the 1950s and 1960s. There are very few buildings of any kind. The tall trees must have been here for hundreds of years.

P.J. was here for a writer’s retreat. She had been writing for almost 50 years but never published. She started writing about imagined romances and daring civil rights adventures as a teen. One of the popular women’s magazines rejected her first and only submission when she was eighteen. Her rejection letter said her story was enjoyable but unrealistic. Their recommendation was to get more experience. Over the next 50 years, she took their advice. Now she is writing her life story in a series of books entitled “The String of Pearls.”

At sixty, P.J. realized she lived during a time of massive change. She decided it was time to put pen to paper so to speak and write about her experiences. She was born in 1950. Two diverse family households affected her life. She lived the first three years in a boarding home nurtured by a foster grandmother. She joined her parents and her siblings in 1953 when her parents purchased their home in Germantown. She witnessed society’s transformation

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from segregation to integration. She is ready to tell the story of her unusual upbringing filled with adventures and misadventures. She wants to write how integration, civil rights and black power changed her life and those around her. She went from the label “Colored” to “Negro” to “Black” to “African-American.”

P.J. looks over her manuscript. She began her story, not in 1950 with her birth, but in 1960, the year she lost the most influential person in her life, her foster grandmother, Mrs. Rebecca Johnson. She pours a cup of tea and begins to re-read her manuscript.



The day after I was born, the Korean War began. Later, I would tell people, the Koreans started the war because of me. It made me feel special. My dad was in the army, at the time, and he remained stationed in Germany throughout the war. Dad and Mom were 22 when they had me. The day I was born Dad’s cousin, Marty, drove her to the hospital. The entire family: Mom, my two older brothers, my dad’s parents, Marilyn and Benjamin Williams, and Dad’s siblings, Sonny, George and Lucille, all shared a two-story, three-bedroom house in Penllyn, Pennsylvania. It is a tiny Negro community about 20 miles outside of Philadelphia.

When Mom went back to work, my parents made the best decision they could make at the time. They sent me to live with Mrs. Rebecca Johnson. I grew to know her as Grandmom. I was to stay with her until my parents could afford to move into a house of their own.

Rebecca Johnson was my mother’s foster-aunt. My mother grew up in foster homes, and her last family was

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Henry and Eva Garrett. Grandmom was Uncle Henry's sister. My dad picked me up every Friday night on his way home from work and returned me on his morning commute. My parents finally purchased a home in Germantown, in 1953, and I joined them permanently. Germantown was a newly integrated neighborhood in Philadelphia, 25 miles southeast of Penllyn and 20 miles southeast of Fort Washington.

Fort Washington was an industrial community where this one section had homes mostly rented by Negroes. Grandmom Rebecca's boarding house was the only single, three-story house on Fort Washington Avenue surrounded by woods and empty land. She and her late husband Charles purchased their home with money he made in his landscaping business, and she made taking in laundry.

After moving to Germantown, I still visited her over school holidays and summer breaks. In 1960, I was turning ten, moving from elementary school to junior high. George Washington's birthday fell on a Monday, which may not be unusual for today, but back then, the President's birthdays were celebrated on the day in which the date fell. My mom and dad still had to work. My mom arranged for Dad to drop me off at Grandmom Rebecca's house for the weekend. My older brothers Robert, 13 and Butch, 12, would stay with Dad's parents. My younger brother, Ricky, 7 and my sister Leslie, 5 would stay with our next-door neighbor Mrs. Burke. That was how they handled daycare in those days.

Mom had our bags packed and ready to go when Dad arrived home. "Joan, are the kids ready?" He asked as he walked into the living room, and headed upstairs to use

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the bathroom. It had been a long drive. He had just driven about 30 miles on two-lane highways. He was a Laboratory Assistant at a pharmaceutical company, located northwest of Philadelphia. When he drove to and from work, he drove past the roads to Grandmom Rebbeca's house in Fort Washington and the roads leading to my grandparent's house in Penllyn.

"Pearl, come on girl bring your things," Mom called. "Robert go upstairs and get your brother."

"Which brother?" Robert asked as he stopped on his way out of the door.

"Don't be smart. Go upstairs and get Ricky," She said with her hands on her hips. She watched him back peddle and run upstairs. Mom, at 31, looked like a teenager herself. She had light caramel color skin with beautiful brown eyes and dark brown hair that almost looked black. When she was angry, her face got red, and her eyes looked dangerous. She was quick to hit you if you were within arms' reach.

"Ricky come on, let's go," Robert yelled as he reached the top of the stairs. Ricky had been born with RH-negative blood type and given a blood transfusion. Mom said something went wrong during the process; he lost oxygen and diagnosed with cerebral palsy.

Unlike many with the same condition, Ricky was able to walk without crutches and was not wheelchair bound. He wore high top brown shoes with iron plates in the soles to help him with his balance. Coming down the stairs was a challenge for him. The house rule was someone had to be there to help him. Otherwise, you heard thump, thump, thump, which meant he was coming down fast on his backside, one step at a time. Ricky also wore

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a hearing aid and thick glasses. Everyone looked out for him, and no one dared make fun of him.

All seven of us squeezed into my dad's 1955 lime-green and white, four-door Chevrolet. I remember the first time he brought the car home. It was a Friday night. Dad drove home from work and packed us all so we could shop for groceries at my grandfather's store. My grandfather was a grocer, butcher and barber for the Negro families for over 20 years until the supermarkets and superstores began to pop up. One of these stores, "The Super Marketplace" in Norristown was the newest and largest in the area. Times were changing in the 60s. It also was a new experience to shop alongside white people. These changes had unexpected effects. I heard my dad and his friends talking about how people thought integration was a good thing, but some believed people like my grandfather would lose their businesses because of it.

I always felt proud to see "Williams' Grocery Store" on the window of the store. It was a small brick building that stood on the side street behind my grandparent's home. Dad always parked the car along the side fence, never directly in front of the store. He said he did it to save space for the "real" customers. We were not real customers. We were just family. We all got out of the car and went our separate ways. I ran to the house and gave Nana a hug and kiss, and then headed back out to the store to see Pop-Pop and Uncle Sonny, who worked behind the meat counter.

"Hello," I yelled as I ran to my grandfather and hugged him around his waist. My arms could not fit all the way around him, because of his big belly. He was handsome

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and the same height as my dad. His skin was light like mine; my dad's skin was milk chocolate like Nana's. He wore his hair short and it looked like a fluffy cloud around the edges. His glasses always sat at the end of his nose.

He moved back behind the counter to put food in a bag for a neighbor, Mrs. Washington. "Hi Mrs. Washington," I said knowing that I was expected to speak to older people before they spoke to me. A mother and daughter walked in the front door and came up to the counter. "Hello, Mrs. Davies," I said.

My grandfather said good-bye to Mrs. Washington and walked to the back of the store with Mrs. Davies. He let me wait on her daughter. Her name was Judy. She wanted my favorite chewy candy. They came in strawberry, banana, and chocolate. She asked for a pack of banana.

Mom walked up to the front counter and said, "Pearl, you better go to the house and eat your dinner. I'm going to finish shopping."

I said goodbye to Judy and her mother and ran out the back door, along the backyard and up the stairs to the pantry. The pantry was where Nana did her laundry and cooking. It had its own stove and refrigerator even though there were a stove and refrigerator in the kitchen. She had two sets because a lot of people lived in the house and she did a lot of cooking.

The pantry had two doors. The door straight ahead would take me to the dining room and the door on my right would take me to the kitchen. Children rarely ate in the dining room; I took the door on my right. Once we finished our dinner, and Mom finished food shopping, it was time to go home.

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“Everyone kiss Nana goodbye and let’s get going,” Dad said. He walked out the door, and I followed close behind. He opened the back door for me. I am not sure how it happened. It happened so fast. My dad shut the door on my hand. I screamed and started crying.

He quickly swung the door open, grabbed me and carried me back into the house. “Call Dr. Hawkins,” Dad yelled as he laid me down on the couch. Dr. Hawkins lived down the street and was always on call for families in this small community. Nana left the room and came back with something in her hand and gave it to him.

“Pearl what happened?” Mom asked as she grabbed my hand.

“I shut the door on her hand. I thought she was in...” He gently took my hand from Mom’s and put a dishcloth with ice on it. “I’m sorry String Bean; you know I didn’t mean it.”

“Now we’re going to be late getting home, and I have to get up early to go to work,” My mother said and left the room as the front door opened and in walked Dr. Hawkins.

“Well, well, what have we here?” He was a tall, fat man with a mixed gray beard that my mother called salt and pepper. When I was younger, he scared me. He gently lifted my hand and pressed it. “Well, it’s beginning to swell, but there are no broken bones. Walt, just keep doing what you’re doing until you get home and then soak it in some ice water. She’ll be fine.”

He looked at my dad and then my mom, who had come back in the room, to make sure they both understood. Dr. Hawkins passed my mother on his way out. Mom said, “Thank you Doc.” She walked over and helped

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my dad put my coat back on.

“Okay, everyone in the car. We’re heading home,” Dad announced as he lifted me up in his arms and carried me out to the car. Butch opened the door, and Dad put me in the back seat without hurting me. He made sure I settled in before closing the door.

Dad got behind the wheel and then called, “Okay, headcount.” Even though he could see, we were all there that was Dad’s way of getting us ready for the long ride home. One by one, we counted off from the oldest to the youngest.



That happened when I was eight. At nine, I closed the door by myself. We finished our headcount and the car pulled off for our long journey to Fort Washington. Sitting behind my dad, I looked out the window. Robert and Butch had their baseball cards and played some made up game only they could understand. Ricky sat in the middle of the front seat between my dad and Mom, and Leslie sat on Mom’s lap.

We arrived in Fort Washington, and my dad took my suitcase in and hugged me at the door. Grandmom waved at everyone in the car as he drove off. She asked Aunt Clara to give me something to eat. Everyone else had eaten, so I ate alone as Aunt Clara cleaned up the kitchen. Grandmom finished her chores in the dining room and walked in the kitchen. She poured her tea and sat next to me. I always thought it was funny she drank her tea the same way she drank her coffee. She poured it in her saucer and sipped.

“Pearl, you’re looking mighty pretty young lady. I

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think you've grown two inches since Christmas," she said. I loved Grandmom's smile. Her whole face told me I was special to her.

I told them all about school, and that I would be in the Spring Festival, as a cookie in Hansel and Gretel. After eating, I took a bath and went to bed. I could not wait until the morning so I could go outside and explore. As I sunk deeper into the pillow, I thought, this was where I was the happiest. I loved it here more than my home, in Germantown.

As a baby, I slept in a dresser drawer lined with a pink blanket. I heard this story over and over again, at family gatherings. It was a favorite story at funerals, and they always referred to me as "the baby" Rebecca took in.

Tonight I slept in the twin bed next to Grandmom. The dresser drawer held Grandmom's linens and other things. I felt grown up sleeping in bed by myself.