

Sybil Grace (Mollins) Ahearne

Sybil Grace (Mollins) Ahearne—lover of small and beautiful things, poetry, the call of the loon, dry white wine, ice skating, books, hot dogs and toasted marshmallows around a bonfire, Liz Taylor-style sunglasses, sunsets, a perfectly balanced ledger, long car trips, boisterous family Christmases, yoga, black coffee, and jazz, jazz, jazz—died at her home in Sidney, BC, on Feb. 9, at the age of 97.

Happiness had a way of blooming wherever Sybil went. She was a woman of deep faith and radiated warmth and kindness. To her last days, she had a uniquely positive spirit and felt amazing things were just ahead. Even on a blue day, she put on her earrings and set out to make the best of things.

Sybil entered the world on April 7, 1928, in Port Williams, NS, the second of four children born to Grace and Harry Mollins. She carried the names of her paternal grandmother Sybil Alberta Duncan, and her mother Vera Grace Nickerson, both of New Brunswick.

Her earliest years were spent in Nova Scotia while her father earned his BA and BD degrees at Acadia University, before becoming pastor of the Baptist church in Windsor, NS.

Her family moved to Ontario in 1933 where Harry served at Ottawa's Fourth Avenue Baptist Church, before moving to Brantford, to lead Park Baptist Church. There, when Sybil was 11, he gave his first sermon on Sunday, September 3, 1939—the day Britain declared war on Germany.

In the later war years, when Sybil was a leggy teenager in Brantford, she fantasized about entertaining the troops in Europe—Betty Grable-style—singing and dancing to the whoops and cheers of huge crowds! She revealed this to family at her 96th birthday dinner. She was always full of surprises.

She told stories of happy childhood winters skating with siblings Beulah, Carl and Walter on backyard rinks. In the summertime, if they didn't travel back to the Maritimes, her family often rented a lakeside cottage for a few weeks. At Long Point Beach, a massive sand spit that pokes into Lake Erie, the kids loved to collect dry wood and bulrushes during the day. Then, after dark, they dug a pit in the sand, made a big bonfire, and their parents dipped the rushes in gasoline (!), stuck them in the sand, and set them alight with long wooden matches. "The result," she wrote in a journal, "was wonderful!" They feasted on hot dogs and toasted marshmallows and drank pitchers of lemonade. "I can actually feel the joy as I write these memories," she wrote almost eight decades later.

Soon after moving to Toronto with her family in 1945, her father—the new pastor of College St. Baptist Church—died suddenly. Sybil was 17. She finished high school at Moulton College on a scholarship, then worked in the school office while she attended Shaw Business College.

In her early 20s, she fell in love and got engaged, then decided the married life wasn't for her—just yet. She spent the '50s working in various secretarial roles in Toronto. She played tennis and skied Mont-Tremblant in Québec, where an Austrian boyfriend dubbed her "the bomber of Dovercourt Road." She bought herself a red leatherette record player on layaway, then, with almost every pay cheque, she bought a new LP. She traveled with friends to hear jazz greats Sarah Vaughn, Ella Fitzgerald, Duke Ellington and Louis Armstrong play in New Orleans, Montréal and NYC. And she amassed an extensive swizzle-stick collection from dance clubs and cocktail bars all over Toronto. Music was one of the great through lines of her life.

In her early 30s, she crossed the Atlantic on a steamship with a friend, had a shipboard romance, then traveled through Europe on busses and trains, and lived for a while like a

local on the French Riviera with her brother Carl and sister-in-law Joan—all while wearing impossibly high heels and stylish outfits.

Back in Toronto, Sybil worked at the Children's Aid Society and attended the Galasso School of Fashion Design at night. One year, she drew the new season's collection of ladies' nightwear and lingerie for the Eaton's catalogue.

In 1961, she met the slightly roguish Desmond Ahearne in a Toronto social club. A few turns around the dance floor, and she and the Liverpudlian ship's cook—who had recently jumped ship in Canada after 14 years in the British Merchant Navy—were smitten. The birth of Kathleen in 1962 made them a family. Suzanne followed in 1965.

They lived in Toronto, then Mississauga, before moving to a property near Caledon, in rural Ontario. They renovated an old farmhouse and filled it with dogs, cats and ponies—bought randomly at an auction despite warnings (eventually fulfilled) that one was a nasty biter—and a whole lot of love.

The family had a three-year adventure living in Tauranga, New Zealand before moving back to Canada in 1978, where Sybil became accounts manager at Fanfare Books in Stratford, ON.

During the '70s—when she identified herself by the subtly feminist term of “homemaker” instead of the more commonly used “housewife”—she volunteered at the kids' school library, taught a copper tooling class, and was a favourite parent chaperone on field trips. She knitted, sewed, painted, sometimes ironed in her bikini in the back yard, and hosted epic dinner parties featuring fondues, Coquilles Saint-Jacques and Baked Alaska. She took yoga classes, attended life-drawing sessions (to Des' embarrassment), and played piano. All the while, she filled notebooks and sketchbooks with playful poems and drawings about the delights of childhood—and motherhood.

Over the years, she sometimes downplayed the value of this

creative output by referring to them as her “little poems.” But inside, that collection of poems and drawings never lost its place in her own story. It remained a perfect encapsulation of a magical time and place in her creative and personal life. They stayed in shoeboxes and file folders for another 40 years before they surfaced again.

In 1980, the family drove west to Victoria, BC, in a Ford Galaxy station wagon, suitcases strapped to the roof rack, and two carsick cats meowing all 4,500 kms of the way to their new life on Vancouver Island. Sybil worked with Des in their own business for several years, then in other administrative positions. When she retired as manager of Simpson Drapery, Des sold his store and they moved to nearby North Saanich. They loved to hit the road for long car trips and they drove all around BC, as far north as Alaska and south to Florida to visit Des’ sister Lil.

A poster-child for lifelong learning, Sybil took numerous literature and music classes from UVic Continuing Studies and throughout her life, she never stopped opening herself up to new experiences and friendships. When Sybil and Des made a short move to Sidney in 1998, she volunteered for arts and literary festivals, the Shaw Centre for the Salish Sea, and was a longtime volunteer at the Sidney Museum. She laughed and stretched her way through years of yoga classes with a tight group of friends who called themselves “The Fab Four.”

Sybil knitted more than 100 colourful toques and gave them away to friends, family and local charitable organizations. She fostered Kathleen’s dog Sophie for almost five years and the two were inseparable. She learned new technology to communicate, bank and listen to music online, dubbing herself—only slightly tongue-in-cheek—“Techie.” And her dining room never stopped being a hub for family celebrations.

In 2011, Sybil dug out her old sketchbooks and notebooks and secretly worked with a book designer to self-publish a hard-

cover edition of her poems called *Grandma's House and other poems*, illustrated with her own drawings, watercolours and photographs. It was a cherished 'gift of the year' that Christmas for nearly 100 friends and family members. A copy is in the collection of Library and Archives Canada. She was working on a colouring book version of *Grandma's House* when she died. It will be printed posthumously in 2026.

She gave up her driver's license at 95 and sold "Ladybug"—her bright-red Kia Soul—because of failing eyesight due to macular degeneration. With this, she felt a huge loss of freedom. She especially missed her afternoon drives to "Hot Dog Park" (AKA Patricia Bay Park) with a thermos of coffee, a slice of lemon loaf and a book. When, sometime later, she bought herself a walker, she didn't go for a nondescript one; she got a jazzy red model and named it "Ferrari"—a nod to her old car and to her usual mindset of making the best of what you've got (and of the value of accessorizing).

Sybil is predeceased by her father, Harry Mollins (1946) and her mother, Grace Mollins (1993), sister Beulah (2009), brothers Carl (2016) and Walter (2007), and her beloved husband Desmond (2002).

She will be terribly missed by daughters Kathleen Ahearne (and fur-baby Sophie) and Suzanne Ahearne, son-in-law Paul Razzell, and grandsons Liam Razzell and Dylan Razzell, as well as sisters-in-law Joan and Bettie, nieces and other family in Canada, the US and Britain.

Sybil's family want to express their utmost gratitude to Dr. Laura Ritonja, and to the amazing home care nurses, OTs and counsellor at the Peninsula Health Unit who supported her so beautifully in her last six months. Also, thanks to her many friends and neighbours who brought so much happiness to her life.

May memories of our mum, grandma, aunt and friend Sybil be a

blessing and a source of ongoing joy.

Enjoy one of Sybil's poems:

"Springtime"

The snow is melting slowly,
Blades of grass are peeking through,
Spring is just around the corner,
Leaves of green and flowers too.

Thoughts of play in sunny gardens,
Singing birds in every tree,
Oh, the joy that comes with Springtime
Fills my happy heart with glee!

~Sybil Grace Ahearne

Condolences may be offered to the family below.

McCall Gardens

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