

Day After Day - July-August 1935

Dorothy Day

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Summary: Writes of how people are treated poorly at the Home Relief office. Describes a visit to the garden commune on Staten Island, swims, walks, the inviting smells of plants, and visiting children from Harlem. (DDLW #291).

A day so wet and heavy that one could scarcely breathe. No sun, but the air felt hot as a blanket, hanging close over the city, and people walked around languidly, scarcely able to move with the oppression that was upon them.

Down to the Houston Street Home Relief Bureau with some friends who are on Home Relief and who are registering for work relief, and there marveled at the two policemen and five husky young men hanging around the entrance. Job holders they are, sneering at those who come for help. "A strong-arm squad," a member of the unemployed union told us, "to keep delegations out of the bureau. We were down last week, presenting a petition, and I got a black eye as a result. We come to ask for jobs, and all we get is kicks and curses."

A woman with a baby in her arms, probably not more than a few weeks old, came to ask why her rent had not been paid. She was refused admittance and told to leave her baby at home next time, with her husband, perhaps.

She did not speak English very well, but she made the strong-arm squad understand that "she had no husband."

And where did the baby come from, they jeered as she was forced to leave.

Down to Staten Island in the afternoon to see how the family there were getting along. Bernard and Rudy, two little boys, six and eight, from the Harlem classes, and a former Jewish rabbi, homeless because of his conversion, are our latest guests there.

There was time for a swim before supper and the water was oily calm, with the sky hanging so low over it that you could almost reach up and touch it with your hands. We all crouched in the water, digging for small hardshell clams with our hands, and found a dozen. Teresa was best at it.

After supper the atmosphere was a little brighter, with the rays of the sun stealing out from under the heavy curtain of clouds and just a suggestion of freshness in the air. So the children and Stanley and I went for a walk, arriving back in the dusk, the children stumbling not only with fatigue but because they insisted on walking with their faces uplifted to the moon.

Another morning, hot and heavy, and with the first rays of the sun the cicadas begin their triumphant song. Teresa woke me to tell me they were the first of the year and it was pleasant to lie there in bed and listen to the loud crescendo rising to a climax and dying out again drowsily.

The children played out under the apple trees after breakfast, waiting for the grownups to be ready for a swim while the tide was high.

Midweek as it was, the beach was deserted and it was refreshing to swim out into the calm bay and then float, bathed in both sea, sky and sun, and silence, too, save for the happy calls of the children as they played with the little waves that foamed up on the beach.

The garden progresses and for the last week, with the heavy rains, there had been no need to water it. We are beginning to study sprays and the labels which proclaim their efficacy for aphids, thrips and leaf hoppers, Mexican bean beetles, black fly, soft scale and midge. We have been eating the lettuce, onions, radishes and a few string beans and soon the tomatoes will be ready. One of the best smells in the world is the smell of tomato plants, or perhaps the wet earth after a rain, or honeysuckle or privet hedge in blossom. The world is full of good smells down here after the heavy smells of the city and crowded humans. Even the poison ivy we have discovered has a delicious odor when it is blossoming. So there is at least one good contribution from that venomous weed which has caused at least two of our workers to swell and burn and itch through sleepless nights.

The only trouble with the garden commune is that one cannot be there all the time. There are a dozen permanent residents, and all the rest go and come to fulfill their duties in town as well as out. And it is always such a wrench to put on shoes and stockings and toil the hot long way up to the station and take the train into the city.

Bernard has just come in with another bouquet for his mother. The two children pick daily bouquets which are gathered with loving care and then forgotten—wild carrot, wild onion, bay leaves, sassafras twigs, buttercups and daisies, Queen Anne's lace, clovers and the persisting honeysuckle.

From the open window by my side as I write, the smell of new cut grass is coming in from the field by the side of the house where Stanley is cutting. He has left the city streets and his apostolate of paper selling, has Stanley, and has become the guardian of the two small, colored boys for the week.

Today five little girls came down—Dorothy and Hattie, Louise, Bernice and Elinor. They, too, are Harlem children, and they don't need anyone to watch them, they said, because Dorothy is twelve and quite used to being guardian to three or four younger than herself.

The work in town calls, and one must go back and face evictions, court cases, hospital patients to visit, callers to see at the office and folders of letters which must be answered