

No Continuing City

By Dorothy Day

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Summary: In a fiction-like style, tells a story of Mary Blount, a wife and working-class mother who goes to the city hospital clinic for a prenatal checkup. She begins the day joyfully, but ends experiencing indignity and cruelty from the nurses who fail to listen to her and understand her need for modesty. (DDLW #936).

Down in a dim basement apartment underneath that of Monica's, Mary and Joe Blount lived.

Gerry was nestling up to her mother. Mary was putting her to bed, and Joe Blount, her husband, a small man with an engaging face, stood in his work clothes and watched them.

Gerry was six years old and very vivacious around bedtime. She liked to sniff at her mother's arms, her neck. "You smell like a little baby cow. You smell like a loaf of bread." Gerry playfully bit at her mother.

Joe did not much care for this love-making between Gerry and his wife. He wanted a little attention himself. He clutched his wife as she passed him.

"Give us a kiss, Mary."

"Can't you see I'm busy."

"You're always busy. You pay too much attention to the kid. I want you."

"You always want me." But she smiled at him.

"I'm glad another's coming."

"Gee, a woman likes to hear her man say that—"

"You'll belong more to me then."

"How do you get that way? I'll be busier than ever with two kids and the janitor work besides."

"Well, you won't be giving it all to Gerry. With two it's just kids. Not the kid. You'll think more of me then."

"Joe, I couldn't think more of you."

Mary was a big comfortable woman and she liked to be compared to a little baby cow. She thought it sweet of Gerry. Her hair was reddish gold and her skin was milky white. She was deep-chested and placid and worked hard with her husband. The two of them earned forty dollars a week, and that of course was a lot of money, but then they had to pay rent besides.

Mary intended to have her baby in the public ward of the hospital just as she had had Peter. It would cost her only thirty dollars and she would put up with the inconvenience of going to the clinic and being in the ward with thirty other women. Her friend, Jenny, who kept a rooming house next door, always paid out one hundred and fifty dollars for each of her children. What with births and deaths that family was always in debt.

A few months before the baby was due, Mary set off one afternoon, leaving Gerry to play with Monica. It was a windy cold afternoon in October, with the smell of rain in the air. Mary bowed her head before the wind and clutched her coat closely about her against the unaccustomed cold. The dust and cold brought tears to her eyes. But it was good after the long hot summer and the torrid days of September.

It was good, too, to be having a holiday from the house at such an unwonted time. To be free and walking the streets when she was usually washing out tiled halls and collecting trash.

She would be having these little holidays now every other week until the child was born, and then a good long holiday of ten days in which to rejoice in a leisurely fashion over her blessings.

Suddenly Mary felt hungry. She was always a small eater in spite of her size, and lately the warm, close house and the smell of food in the halls and garbage in the airshafts took away her appetite. She thought that it would add to the holiday spirit to drop into a bakery lunch room and have a bowl of soup.

It would be a reckless expenditure of money, but now that Mary realized it, she was very hungry indeed. She would never be able to sit through several long hours at the clinic without a bite to eat.

So she stopped in a Jewish bakery lunch room and ordered herself a bowl of beet borscht. It was hot and sweet and there was a flaky potato in the center of the dish. She did not order the rolls and pat of sweet butter, because that would cost an extra ten cents. The soup was fifteen.

The clinic was not far away now, and when she went on she did not feel the cold so much. She was only a little late, and after she had been given her ticket of admission to the clinic, she found herself tenth in line and the doctors already there. Usually they were an hour or so late.

She settled herself down on a bench, comfortably preparing herself to listen and join in the talk of the other mothers. She had had these nice times before when she had had Peter. Good, sociable times once a week, as good as a sewing circle, better, because the women were unanimous in their interests.

"I swore the next time I had one I'd have it at home," one woman was saying. "But here I am again. In some ways it's more comfortable at home and in some ways it ain't. It's the food and sleep mostly. I used to get so hungry in the hospital. Corned beef and cabbage handed me an hour after the kid was born.

A rotten egg every morning and lukewarm coffee! Gee, what wouldn't I have given for something piping hot?"

"Don't I know it!" another chimed in. "It was a good thing they let ye have visitors every day, otherwise ye'd starve."

"Yeah, I had my last at home, too," a young girl was saying. She was a little thing and pretty in a fragile way. "It was the sleepin' and eatin' I was thinkin' of. But they was twins—and a devil a lot of sleepin' I did at home. I'd thought that my husband could help me, poor lamb. 'This is your work, ain't it?' I said to him. 'You put 'em there, didn't you? Well, you can stick around then and help!' They was born ten minutes apart, one of 'em yelling, and the other blue. The doctor wrapped them both in cotton—they were too little to put any clothes on—and put them in front of the oven. One of 'em always seemed to have the worst of it. They was fighting inside like they been fighting ever since."

"I'll bet you'll be glad to get away since."

"I'll bet you'll be glad to get away from them for a while, having another," Mary said.

"Yes, it'll be a little rest. I've got two besides the twins and I had 'em both here. Do you remember how they used to wake you up at four o'clock to give you a basin to wash your face?"

"Wonder if Miss Springer, that jolly nurse, is here yet. She was a nice one. Hey, Aggie, do you remember how when you and me was here last time she mixed our babies up just for fun? She was a jolly soul. But I was mad like hell. The fright she gave me."

"We're months apart this time."

The talk went on, and in groups of four, the women were called into the clinic. Within an hour Mary's turn had come.

The doctors did a lot of laughing and talking as they worked about. Nurses went in and out among the screened cubicles.

Mary was given a sheet and told to undress.

She was proceeding briskly, glad that her turn had come, when she discovered that the sheet which had been given her was far too small for her large body. She was a modest soul, and very shy, so it was with difficulty that she could bring herself to put her head out between the curtains and ask one of the nurses passing by for another sheet.

The nurse was busy and tossed her head as she passed.

Mary hated to stand there with her head poking out between the screens. She felt grotesque, laughable, and since she was a dignified woman the situation was humiliating.

She put her head out again, and catching at another nurse as she passed, she asked again for a larger sheet.

“Do with what you’ve got,” the nurse said testily.

“But it doesn’t cover me,” Mary said miserably.

The nurse paid no further attention and Mary sat down on the little stool inside the cubicle and tried to control her trembling. She was not angry. She scarcely knew what it was to be angry, but she was shaking with shame and humiliation.

She suddenly thought of the black-faced men she had seen at an amusement park, sticking their heads out from holes in canvases for people to throw balls at. She felt similarly exposed to blows as she once more put her head out. She felt grotesque not only in the scant child’s sheet which she clutched about her breast, but in having to put her head out and try to get attention.

“Please,” she kept saying, her face red and contorted with shame. “Please, miss—please, nurse!”

The spirit of perversity among the nurses was contagious. The first two had refused to heed her and the other three did likewise. It seemed as though Mary would have to go out into the examination room with two other women with no other covering but the tiny child’s sheet which by some miserable chance had been given her.

“Please, nurse. Please, doctor. I can’t come out like this,” she begged, her eyes full of tears. She was in an agony of nervousness. Her hands were cold and clammy. She could feel perspiration running between her shoulder blades.

“What’s wrong with her, anyway?” one nurse complained.

“What’s that woman in there beefing about?”

“It’s another sheet she must have. She doesn’t like the fit of that one.”

“Tell her to shop over on Fifth Avenue. Probably she’ll get a better fit over there.”

“But it won’t cover me,” Mary sobbed.

The nurses only laughed.

Mary sat on the little stool in the cubicle while the long minutes passed. She was forced to submit to their cruelty. But she felt that happiness had gone out of life. All the pleasure she had felt in the new life that was in her had fled. The pride in her increasing girth seemed ridiculous now. She thought of her calm happiness of an hour ago, her pathetic pleasure in the holiday, her greedy delight in the bowl of soup, in the conversation of the women outside, and she thought what a blind fool she had been to find the world such a good place.

She felt tiny and debased, and from her small suffering she realized the magnitude of the world’s sorrow. It was not a good place, this world; it was full of jeering laughter. She sat on the stool and wept.