On Pilgrimage,
October ==========

By Dorothy Day

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Summary: Vivid description of the pulsing sounds of worship and smells of death in a black neighborhood in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania. Admires the works of mercy at Mary Frecon's house of hospitality, and example of "the little way." Recalls the wonderful time children had at their labor day retreat and laments their expenses on the farm and for the breadline in the city. (DDLW #484).

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October 8

THERE IS Käthe Kollwitz, mentioned often in the art world, who died recently. [She] spent her life drawing pictures of the poor. She felt it was her job to arouse the consciences of those who looked at her pictures, and since she was the wife of a doctor and saw a great deal of human suffering, she had many a model for her work. I have only seen reproductions of a few of her things, but I was reminded so much of her this month when I visited Mary Frecon in Harrisburg at her Martin de Porres House of Hospitality at 1017 N. Seventh Street.

It has been about ten years now, maybe more, that Mary has worked there in Harrisburg, combating the indifference of the whites to the tragedy of the blacks.

No use talking. Aside from a tiny few more privileged ones, the majority of the colored are the poor of this country.

I arrived in Harrisburg one Sunday evening last month before the weather had turned cold, and it was a good time to be there, because the night was alive with dark faces and bodies, sitting on the steps of the ramshackle houses, nursing their babies, watching their children, listening to the music, the rhythm of tambourines, the clapping of hands, the singing from the tabernacles, churches of the Lord, or Pentecostal churches on every corner.

Around one corner was a tent with the flap open in the front, and on a platform was a beautiful young light-brown girl, slim and graceful, swaying to the music, all dressed like a bride or an angel in white satin – three men, well-dressed, preaching at intervals and saying nothing, punctuating every phrase, every sentence with Amen, Amen. And the music kept beginning again, and more and more of the congregation got up and swayed and sang, and people were waiting, waiting for something to happen. You felt that in the air, that waiting, that tenseness, that excitement. The rhythm of the singing [and] the clapping went on and on, staccato, sharp, till the breath quickened and the heart beat faster, and the excitement rose again and again, and again and again fell exhausted.

Someday, something will happen; someday there will be the climax, the glory, the fullness of life, release, joy, and freedom. You felt it in the air.

Meanwhile, across the street from 1017, the open windows of another church of God gave us a view of a young, sturdy Negro with seemingly inexhaustible voice who shouted, who groaned, who cried out, who kept saying over and over, "God has taken my children. He has killed them all. The Lord gave; the Lord took away. God help us all. We got misery. Everyone got misery. God killed my children. He burned my house. Oh God, God. Oh my God. But I say Amen. Amen. All right then, God killed my children. God burns my house. Amen, God. Amen."

It went on and on, and it was only when he stopped for breath and a woman on a bench near him took up the reading of the book of Job from a Bible, that we realized that he was acting out his concept of the suffering Job. He groaned; he tore his hair; his knees buckled under him; he roared in anguish. And then, after a long, long time, when the nerves were taut and could not stand any more, suddenly he stopped, and the singing began again, a single tune which was barbaric, horrible, monotonous, always the same tune, here and around the corner, down the street, the rhythm the same, the beat the same, until the pulse quickened again and the breath came short.

All through the warm night there was the smell of rats. The smell of dead things; the smell of rotting garbage. If you have ever been in a town where there are stockyards, fertilizer factories, [or] paper mills, you know the peculiar odors of our industrial system. They are not sweet.

I have smelled them in Bayonne, in Chicago, in Mobile, and they are the smell of death. I have also lived in a tenement where a rat died in the walls, and it was winter, and to live you had to leave your windows open to breathe. You could not get the rat out; you could not locate it without tearing down the house. It was a torture. And all that evening as we walked through that slum district of Harrisburg, there was that odor of dead rats coming from windows and doors, from alleys and the holes in the sidewalk.

The night was soft and alive. There was a velvety feeling in the air. The children were playing and dancing. Mothers nursed their babies. There was a hunger for beauty there, and it expressed itself in song and music and the movements of the bodies of the young.

I stayed for three days after that, and the neighborhood was something else again. When we got up to go to Mass at the cathedral which is the nearest church, and that ten blocks away, men were going from the houses with paper bags of lunch – young men, family men – [and] women going out to housework. Later on, children were on their way to school. The street had the weekday aspect. No one sat out, no one was idle save a few little ones too young for school who played in the playground that Mary [had] built with her own hands across the street, playing on the swings, the slide, and the sandbox.

The night before, the street had been for the humans. Now trucks and cars roared and raced by all day. It is a dangerous street and full of [the] noise and dirt of traffic. Directly in back are the Pennsylvania railroad tracks; down the

street are gigantic junkyards, fencing in with ten-foot fences all other vacant spaces where the children used to play. Down the street on the other side is Swift's.

What do these people eat? Beans cooked up in bacon rind. Beans and oxtail broth. Swift sells them all the trimmings at top prices. Swift smells.

An ordinary journalistic device is to paint a picture with contrasts. It is an emotional way of making a point. Our aim is to move the heart, stir the will to action; to arouse pity, compassion; to awaken the conscience. We want to do such work as Käthe Kollwitz, and so does Mary Frecon. *Compassion* – it is a word meaning "to suffer with." If we all carry a little of the burden, it will be lightened. If we share in the suffering of the world, then some will not have to endure so heavy an affliction. It evens out. What you do here in New York, in Harrisburg, helps those in China, India, South Africa, Europe, [and] Russia, as well as in the oasis where you are. You may think you are alone. But we are members one of another. We are children of God together.

Contrast Ana Pauker, whose picture appeared on a *Time*cover a few weeks ago, and Mary Frecon. It was a fearful picture. The story described her as "the most powerful woman alive," [and said that] "millions depended on her for life, bread, and spiritual guidance. . . . Ana Pauker, Communist and key figure in the struggle for the world. . . . Leading Communist in Russian satellite states from the Baltic to the Adriatic." (We notice that Finland is never listed as a satellite state. Small as she is, powerless as she seems to be, she keeps her integrity.) Ana is described as "fat and ugly, cold as the frozen Danube, bold as a boyar on his own rich land, and pitiless as a scythe in the Moldavian grain." A poetic description indeed. The magazine went on to describe a series of women, once idealistic, warm, full of pity, and now they are Amazons, fiends, ruthless, etc., etc. I cannot begin to match the invective of the capitalist press. It is better even than the Communist.

We have many a woman in politics or in the trade-union field in this country who is just as hard, bold, brazen, and ruthless.

On the other hand, you have Mary Frecon, making crab apple jelly in the little kitchen of her house on Seventh Street from the fruit sent to her by one of her sons, both of whom have fruit farms. (She does not need to live on Seventh Street.) Mary, nursing a diabetic swollen, heavy with water, holding her up at night so she could breathe, bringing the priest to her, looking after her body and soul, materially and spiritually. Susie, burned by a jealous rival, oozing pus from her infected shoulders cut by glass from broken windows when she tried to escape, nursed back to health of body and soul. Katie, dying of cancer, tuberculosis, and syphilis, her body dung now indeed, but once a thing of beauty, strung taut with life and pleasure, and now overwhelmed with torrents of pain. Lucille Pearl, dying in an alley, flies and worms feasting on the open sores of her flesh – these women dying and yet alive today in heaven, literally dragged into the wedding feast, dying happy and sure, and already before their death given a

foretaste of the life to come.

And those Communist women – Pauker, Vermeersch, Bloor, Knusinen – have they so changed? We are given a horrible picture of brute strength, all softness and tenderness gone. We know there is evil, cruelty, disease, vice; it is all around us in these slums in which we live. Graham Greene in all his books is haunted by the violence, the sin of the world. It is a fearful picture he draws too.

How to draw a picture of the strength of love! It seems at times that we need a blind faith to believe in it at all. There is so much failure all about us. It is so hard to reconcile oneself to such suffering, such long, enduring suffering of body and soul, that the only thing one can do is to stand by and save the dying ones who have given up hope of reaching out for beauty, joy, ease, and pleasure in this life. For all their reaching, they got little of it. To see these things in the light of faith, God's mercy, God's justice! His devouring love! I read one story of the death of the Little Flower, and her death just as harrowing in its suffering as that of Mary's Katie. Her flesh was a mass of sores; her bones protruded through her skin; she was a living skeleton, a victim of love. We have not such compassion, nor ever will have. What we do is so little.

The stink of the world's injustice and the world's indifference is all around us. The smell of the dead rat, the smell of acrid oil from the engines of the Pennsylvania railroad, the smell of boiled bones from Swift's. The smell of dying human beings.

Souls! But we are living in the flesh, we are very much in our bodies, and we want to know whether it is too late to do anything but save souls. No use in talking about how many *souls*there are in the neighborhood of West Seventh Street. God has made us creatures of bodies and souls, and what we know of Him we learn through our senses, exterior and interior. It is good to be able to tell that Mary saves bodies too. She feels she does so little; the years are long, and everything seems the same. But there is the story of the twins which we could tell, who were locked for a year and a half in a room and starved and beaten, and whom Mary rescued and put away in a school. And Susie is still alive, and at present in a state of grace.

But here is the story of one she did not save. Did I say in the beginning of this story that there was that feeling of waiting? That sense of violence? It came to a climax in the murder of a young woman around the corner. It happened when Mary was away, and 1017 is out of earshot of the place anyway, so she might not have known it was going on, [even] if she had been home. A few blocks away a man of thirty beat his twenty-six-year-old wife to death with a broken chair. He had been blinded in one eye some years before when a beer bottle flung from a tavern hit him as he passed by, and he was a melancholy man who drank sometimes himself and did not talk to his neighbors. He worked every day, and he and his wife were considered respectable people. They never came to Mary for help in the way of clothes, as others in the neighborhood did. There had been one scene of violence between them before, and they had separated for

a few days, but then they were seen walking down the street hand in hand.

And then this other fight had come about, and with the neighbors standing outside waiting for the police and listening to the violence within, he had beat his wife [in]to unconsciousness behind his locked door so that she died three hours after she was taken to the hospital.

And Mary faces all this misery pretty much alone. Dr. Clark helps her with the sick. The Johnsons next door are her able assistants in many a work of mercy. Young people from the Catholic high school come every week and help with the children.

Out in the backyard there is a little garden with sunflowers, marigolds, petunias, and ice plant. Out in front there is one tree.

How little it all is, as obscure as the life of the Blessed Mother and as "little" as the life and sufferings of the Little Flower!

Someday, something will be done. There will be decent places to live. Instead of a tent tabernacle with the rhythm of the jungle, there will be a church with the Mass, with Christ Himself in the Blessed Sacrament.

Yes, the nearest Catholic church is ten blocks away, but just the same, Christ is there, most surely there, in the least of His children. He has said it Himself.

The only answer to this mystery of suffering is this. Every soul seeks happiness either in creatures (where it cannot be satisfied in the long run) or in God.

God made us for Himself.

We must die to the natural to achieve the supernatural, a slow death or a quick one. It is universal. "Unless the grain of wheat fall into the ground and die, itself remaineth alone, but if it die, it beareth much fruit." All must die; it is a universal law very hard for us to realize.

If this mind or this flesh is an obstacle, we will suffer the more when this tremendous Lover tries to tear from us all veils which separate us. Some suffering is more visible, some hidden. If we long for beauty, the more our faith is tried, as though by fire, by ugliness. The more we long for love, the more all human love will be pruned, and the more we will see the venom of hatred about us. It is a pruning, a cutting away of love so that it will grow strong and bear much fruit. The more we long for power, the more we will destroy and tear down until we recognize our own weakness.

But still, suffering is a mystery as well as a penalty which we pay for others as well as for ourselves.

How gigantic was that first Sin, that turning from God! All nature travailleth and groaneth even until now because of it, St. Paul says. The blackness of it, the

peculiar hideousness of it, the loathsome perverseness of it, the empty, sterile, grotesque horror of it can scarcely be realized except as we see an echo of it in every sin and crime around us.

Some years ago a terrible crime was committed. A little girl was dragged behind a movie screen while a comedy was on the screen, and while the audience howled with mirth, the child was raped and murdered within a few feet of the audience. But why do we think of a sex crime, as though there were only one commandment! It is because our Lord Himself is likened to a lover. It is because sex is "the most deeply wounded of all our faculties" since the Fall. Because in sex, body and spirit are so interwoven, so attuned, so single-minded, so concentrated, and so alive. It is in sex love that people catch glimpses of harmony and peace unutterable. That is why thwarting sex, unfulfilled marriage, is a tragedy often dealt with by physicians and psychiatrists. If the act, which is called by St. Paul "the marriage debt," is not paid generously and to the full, people are warped and nerve-racked, curiously askew.

The prevention of conception when the act which one is performing is for the purpose of fusing the two lives more closely and [to] so enrich them that another life springs forth; the aborting of a life conceived – these sins are great frustrations in the natural and spiritual order.

So are the lives not directed to God, flowing toward him freely, eagerly, with hunger and thirst desiring Him, the very glimpse of Him like an attaining to Him, so that all suffering is as little noted as the tearing aside of the virginal veil or the budding forth of new life. In gross material reality, it is a bloody, anguished racking of body in which the soul can even exult. "With desire have I desired to eat the Pasch," Christ said.

The mystery of suffering. I feel presumptuous in writing of so high and lofty a thing. It is because I am not now suffering that I can write, but it is also because I have suffered in the past that I can write.

I write to comfort others as I have been comforted. The word *comfort*too means to be strong together, to have fortitude together. There is the reminder of community. Once when I suffered and sat in church in a misery while waves and billows passed over me, I suddenly thought, with exultation, "I am sharing suffering," and it was immediately lightened. But usually it is as the Little Flower said: "Let us suffer if need be with bitterness and without courage. Jesus truly suffered with sadness. Without sadness, would the soul suffer? And we would suffer generously, grandly; what an illusion!"

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October 11

WHEN WE went to press last month, we had only the day before finished the Labor Day family retreat, and it was too late to write about it. Now it is hard to write without boasting about it. We are the only Catholic retreat house in the United States where mother and father and all the children can come and

camp out with us for a few days to partake of refreshment for body and soul. Over the Labor Day retreat there were twenty-two children and eleven couples. Some families had left a child or two at home or with relatives. Some brought two or three or five. There were three babies around five months old. They were easy to care for, since they stayed in their cribs and were quite content to be left alone. The hardest to care for were the two-year-old ones, who could not understand why at arbitrary times their mothers answered a bell and rushed away, regardless of their very important needs, which they felt could be satisfied by no one but the mother. Of course, Julia Purcelli made a very good substitute for mother for all of them, but the two-year-olds did not appreciate that. They were not to be reasoned with. At the risk of being untheological, I'd say that the four-year-olds had achieved the use of reason. They were very well-behaved indeed.

I am tempted to write only of the children, how they slept in the long barn which housed all the children and the mothers of the young babies (except a few older youngsters, who went to a neighboring farm for the long weekend). How they ate outside at a long table; how they built a little shrine to our Lady under a wild cherry tree. How they drew pictures, some of them very strange indeed, and not only had an outdoor exhibit but brought them in procession to the chapel to give them to God in exchange for a blessing. They brought pretty stones, too, and fruits and leaves and bunches of flowers. One baby ate half its bouquet before reaching the altar.

Of the picnic which we all shared with the children on the last day and to which neighbors came from a nearby farm and from the town of Newburgh. Julia says next year the girls who helped her must come a few days early to learn a few fundamentals about the care of babies, such as pinning diapers and cutting up food, not to speak of singing songs, telling stories, arranging dances and little plays. A mother has to be all these things – singer, artist, sculptor, storyteller, dancer, impressario, toy maker, inventor, cook, laundress, and nurse. What a full life! What talents to develop! It would be hard indeed even to get a smattering in a few days.

As for the adults, I'm sure they did not have such a good time as the children. Next time we will arrange it so that the mothers of the very young ones, those who lie in the cribs and do not try to climb out, will have their infants in a dormitory with them. The mothers of the older ones will be separated entirely from the rest of their brood. Then there can be silence indeed.

Father Schott, with whom I talked in Harrisburg this month, who arranges Cana conferences for the diocese, said that on their days of recollection they have what they call a Cana silence, where the husband and wife talk only to each other but to no other families. Then they find they have not been really talking to each other for a long time, but to their children or about their children.

There are many things we will do differently next year, and we hope the parents will send us suggestions as to what to do. Mr. Rudzick, who came not once but

twice during the summer with his five children, wife, and mother-in-law, is by now a charter member of our retreat house, and I am sure can help us a lot with his ideas. He has made three retreats with us, and while he would have found it more enjoyable, I am sure, to go away alone by himself, he wanted to share things with his family. His wife could not get away, and he would not go without her.

What a wonderful staff we have, growing food, building, repairing, canning outside the big house and cooking, dishwashing, and generally running the place and the retreats. Jane O'Donnell is in charge. Thank God for them all. But of course we did not make ends meet, and since half those who came could not pay anything for their visit and just managed to get there themselves, we have a bill for staples, another for more lumber, and what with invalids to care for this winter, we need to do things to the inside of the house in the way of putting up wallboard and buying coal. Our family only amounts to a dozen or fifteen people now, but we never know who is going to walk up the road and pay a call which lasts anywhere from a week to six months. (Some stay forever.) We have sent out our appeal from New York, and we are hoping enough comes in to take care of our farm bills too.

Everyone always asks whether the farm is self-sustaining. It is one of those questions which always come up when you talk about farming. How hard it is to explain that though we raise three hundred bushels of potatoes, we use a bushel a day in New York, and we try to ship in as much as we can whenever a car is going down to the city. (No one has offered a truck yet.) Although we put up a few thousand cans of applesauce and tomatoes, still that is a drop in the bucket when you count the breadline. Just this morning as I came from seven o'clock Mass, I counted the men from Canal Street up to the house, and there were at that time one hundred and five on the street waiting and fifty inside the coffee room having their breakfast. Slim has been "on the line," serving the men year in and year out, and although he calls me "Führer-ess," he is the big boss of the line. He is beginning to talk of a vacation, "and not on the farm either, to help bring the crops in."

He thinks of long sleep in the morning and a leisurely breakfast, unrushed by the demands of two hundred or so guests.

Maybe the farm would meet expenses if we would limit our family and think of it in terms of a family-sized farm. There was never such a family as ours. Once, when the board of health was objecting to our line, we talked to their representatives about the household as being a family. "We are quite ready to regard the people living in the house [only about sixty or so] as a family, but the breadline is the *public.*"

Quite a few of the public creep in.

This month Tony de Falco, our corner grocer, who is also a college graduate and a lawyer, and to whom we owe two thousand dollars, got married. [Given] his

new state, we are sure that an early payment of his bill would be welcome. So we are asking St. Joseph, the head of our family, to take care of it.

As for other vital statistics, there are the twins, the youngest members of our household, a month old now, and gaining rapidly. Big appetites, both of them. So how in the world can we make ends meet?

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