The Eleventh Virgin

Dorothy Day

Part One, Chapter 1

Every few months Mother Grace and the children's father had a house party and that meant the horse-chestnut tree in the back garden would have an outcropping of nickels and dimes. They grew in the branches and were hidden among the leaves and twigs around the trunk. The boys could climb for them, but June had to burrow around the roots of the tree. She was only four then . . .

There was a convenient ledge all around underneath the kitchen table where the children ate supper and they hid their crusts there. Sometimes they were able to slip away unsuspected from the supper table and sometimes Mary Milady, the "girl," went around and scooped up the crusts and made them eat them before they went out to play "run, sheepy, run." The disadvantage of that was that the crusts got mixed up and one had to eat them indiscriminately. June being a finicky child much preferred to eat her own . . .

Sadie Spielberger, whose mother kept a grocery store at the end of the block, used to lure June into the little corn field at the back of the house and while the two of them hid among the sweet smelling corn-stalks, told June things which were very interesting but which June felt that she ought not to know. There was an agreeable excitement in listening to Sadie, excitement akin to that stomach-aching thrill when one was going to the circus.

But Sadie died from eating an Easter egg which had served as a parlor ornament for ten years. It was made of sugar and by squinting through one end, June could see a cow and a milkmaid and green trees. Sadie's death, June felt, was the result of delving too deeply into life's secrets . . .

There was a brook running through the vacant lot across the street, and June and her sister Adele used to sit on the stones and try to turn hairs from a horse's tail into water-snakes, holding the long hairs patiently in the water, waiting for the heads to grow on them as you were told they did. Concentration made Adele dizzy and she fell in the water and went home howling. June was whipped for it because, as Mother Grace argued, June was two years older and should have known better. That was one of the disadvantages of playing with one's sister.

June was slapped for many things. For going to the ice-box and dipping her fingers into the condensed milk can. Two fingers could scoop up a lot . . .

At the end of the summer the weeds in the lot grew so high that June could tunnel her way through them, making large green-roofed caves here and there. One of the boys let her share his cave with him and some afternoons when the others weren't around, he took her in his arms and kissed her, pressing himself up against her. He was one of the big boys, fourteen, and when June was allowed to play with a boy of his age who was captain of the "run, sheepy, run" team which always won, she felt that she should be glad that he wanted to hug her. But there was wickedness in it. It was exciting.

June was eight then, and at school, during recess, the girls joined hands and formed a circle and sang:

"Water, water wine-flower,

Growing up so high.

We are all young ladies

And we are sure to die.

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All excepting Ju-une,

She is the fairest flower.

Fie for shame, fie for shame,

Turn around and tell your beau's name."

It wasn't always June of course who was the "fairest flower." Sometimes whole days passed before she was called upon to be one. It gave her a secret thrill to name the captain of the "run, sheepy, run" team. His name was Harvey. Then the girls joined hands again and sang:

"Harvey–Harvey's a nice young man,

Comes to the door with his hat in his hand.

Takes off his gloves and shows her the ring,

Tomorrow, tomorrow the wedding will begin.

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"Harvey's sick and ready to die,

That will make poor Ju-une cry,

Oh June, Oh June, don't you cry,

He'll be better by and by."

Not long after this was a great upheaval. The Henreddy family moved to the city where there were no vacant lots and brooks and houses with wide lawns around them. Instead there was a long tenement which stretched the entire

length of a block. There were stores downstairs and above there were five-room flats and back of each flat there was a porch as big as a room. Each porch had a gate to it, and when June went outside the gate, there was a long passageway down which she could walk, staring in at the other porches–some of them with geraniums, and nasturtiums in boxes nailed to the railing, and swings hanging in the middle of the porches . . .

For lunch there was always potato soup and for supper there were bananas, bread and butter and jelly and tea. June didn't like tea and she didn't like jelly. And she didn't like being sent after the bananas. "Get dead ripe ones," her mother always said. "They ought to be only ten cents a dozen." And Mother Grace told her if she couldn't get them for ten cents in one place to go on to the next . . .

There was housework to do. Wiping dishes and sometimes washing. Wiping up the floor, and worst of all, dusting. After June and Adele read the story of Polly Pepper from the Sunday School library, there was more fascination in housework. June even polished the faucets of the kitchen sink.

Once there was a terrible scene. Mother Grace picked up dishes one by one and slammed them on the floor. Mr. Henreddy got behind her and tried to hold her and kept saying, "Grace, now Grace dear."

June and Adele were making valentines–the next day they were going to get up early and distribute them to the other children around the porches–and they sat with gaudy bits of paper in their hands and whimpered as the smashing continued. Dan hustled them into the bedroom and made them go down on their knees and pray. Dave wouldn't pray. He just sat with white lips and pretended to go on reading.

Afterwards when it was over and Mother Grace was weak and shaking on the bed, Mr. Henreddy sent out for ice-cream for the children, but June refused to eat hers. It was too terrible an evening to think of eating ice-cream. She sat and wept. Wept for her mother, and for her father because he was so pathetic in his efforts to comfort them. And because ice-cream, generally considered a treat, made the tragedy more poignant.

The next day Mother Grace made a terse remark about losing her nerve and no more was said about it. June had a hideous feeling of shame and bitterness in her heart, but she did not blame her mother for a minute. Mother Grace was brave as a general rule. She had a sweet habit of "dressing up" in the afternoon. Not that she wasn't neat and tidy in her pleasant house dresses in the morning. But on cleaning days when the floors had to be scrubbed or after a hard morning in the common laundry in the basement of the tenement, Mother Grace was exceptionally dainty.

June loved to watch and help; to prepare the hot bath with just a drop of cologne, for Mother Grace couldn't afford bath salts; to lay out the towels and the treasured silk kimono with storks and flowers embroidered on it. And

afterwards to keep Adele quietly amused on the back porch while Mother Grace napped for fifteen minutes. She seldom allowed herself more for there was always sewing and mending to do in the afternoon.

It was a special treat to be allowed to help at the dressing, to brush out the long twist of hair.

"Oh dear, oh dear, won't it *ever* get all grey," she often said. It was beautifully white around her face and she was proud of it, for she was only thirty. "I've heard say that you could have your hair whitened, but I doubt it. There–that's enough for the brushing of it. Just see if I get all the little hairs tucked-in in back, dear. The hand-glass, please. If it won't curl, it's got to stay tucked. Women who let their hair straggle on the back of their necks, add ten years to their age–" this denunciation of the careless woman coming through several hairpins which Mother Grace kept in readiness in her mouth to tuck some more.

It was fun to powder her round neck and dimpled shoulder blades and still more fun to watch her with the pinkish, smelly powder for her face and the little dabs of rouge for cheeks and the lobes of her ears.

There was a deep sigh of pleasure for her improved appearance and always the emphatic statement that she felt a hundred times better already.

The toilet was completed when violet perfume was applied delicately to eye-brows and behind the ears, and as a reward for services rendered, to the flat bosom of June's frock.

This afternoon's toilet always brought back the smiley corners to Mother Grace's lips and eyes.

But in times of unusual stress, when the rent had to be paid and there was no money to pay it, or when Mr. Henreddy had been hypercritical about the breakfast set before him and had stamped around and made the atmosphere blue, there was relief to be found in what Mother Grace termed "dissipation."

June was sent down the street to spend fifteen cents on a bottle of ginger ale and the sewing that afternoon would be accompanied by sips of ginger ale high-ball.

"Will you have just a taste of 'oh-be-joyful' in your ginger ale?" Mother would say gayly, and June would have a thimbleful added, not because she liked the taste, but because she liked to feel grown-up and companionable. And the warm feeling produced was very pleasant, too.

Whenever Mother Grace referred to whiskey as "oh-be-joyful" she'd sigh, "dear old Uncle Charlie," and there would follow stories about him and his whaling vessel and his ice-boat on the Hudson and when Mother was a little girl. To which little June listened with absorbed attention–so absorbed, indeed, that she could not darn more than two holes in the afternoon.

One of the little girls whom June played with was called "Cathern" and was a most intimate friend. She had ten dolls "up in the closet" and that phrase

typified everything delightful to June. Once she wistfully asked Mother Grace if she didn't have a doll "up in the closet" for her. "Damn that stingy Hall woman," said her mother, and then scolded June for letting Mrs. Hall know that she wanted a doll by looking wistfully at Catherine's.

But she took two towels nevertheless and in some miraculous way with cotton and clothespins and crayons and scraps, made dolls of fascinating character and expression. And for mouths there were button-holed slits, very conveniently opened for "nippy bottles" which you could buy at the store for two cents. "Cathern" had nothing like them.

There were other things that Mother Grace did. When she noticed that "Cathern" and her sister "Gwadys" often had tea-parties in the afternoon (exclusive tea-parties to which no one was invited) she scrubbed the sooty back porch and put out a carpet and table and chairs and there suddenly appeared a surprise party of oatmeal cookies and cocoa molasses candy. And this was an exceptional party, for she invited not only Cathern and Gwadys (with intent to heap coals of fire perhaps) but six others beside.

And when Dave and Dan joined the choir and went away for a week's vacation in a camp there was an evening treat for the girls every night. Sometimes it was ice-cream and sometimes it was moving pictures and when it was ice-cream, Mother Grace divided the pitcherful (it was now ten cents worth) into three equal parts, but somehow she could never finish hers.

"A little goes a long way," she assured them, and then there was an extra portion to divide.

Mary was one of the porch children and the eldest of nine. She was a Catholic, and she told June of the mysteries of her religion and her saints one evening after the supper dishes were done, and before the smaller children had to be put to bed. The gleaming stars glimpsed through the network of porches, the soft warm night, and the dusky odorous alley made her disclosures all the more impressive. She also gave June the story of a saint to read, with the result that thereafter June prayed to Pelagia, her birthday saint, every time a whipping threatened. It didn't avert the punishment, but her faith remained unshaken. Were the saints ever saved from the caldrons of boiling oil by their prayers?

One hot night, when the hurdy-gurdies were playing in the street, and the call of the "hot tamale" man and the voices of the passersby kept the night alive, Adele stuck her elbow in June ribs.

"Tell me a story so's I kin get to sleep," she demanded.

"Won't!" June replied. "I'm thinkin'."

"All right for you. I'll tell Mother how you went swimmin' again with the boys after she told you not to."

"All right, then, I'll make an old witch's face at you and scare you."

"I'll tell Mother on you for that too. Are y'gonna tell me a story?" threateningly.

A whipping had lost its novelties and much of its terror for June. She was about to pull her sister's hair when she thought of St. Pelagia and a new game they hadn't played. Adele snuggled her hot face against her shoulder and breathed on her neck while June narrated the trials and struggles of the early saints.

"So you see," she mumbled in conclusion, "if you ever expect to get to heaven, we've got to begin trying that stuff now. They all slept on the floor and hard boards and the stone floors of prison cells and ate nothing but bread and water. I don't know what you're going to do, but I'm going to sleep on the floor tonight."

"You ain't gonna be the only martyr. Me too."

For weeks after that their bedroom at night was transformed into a bare cell, and to their glowing imaginations, visions of St. Pelagia and the Virgin with her little Christ child hovered around. And every night the smell of beer and whiskey came up in waves from the saloon below, and the Drunken Lady who lived in the flat above fell into bed and snorted and groaned with the heat all night.

And then they moved away from the tenement and for a time life lost its poignancy.