From Union Square to Rome

Dorothy Day

Chapter 10 - Peace

Summary: A vivid description of the bucolic life in the beach house on Staten Island. Elaborates on her growing faith and life of prayer, spurred on by the beauty, stillness, and knowledge she is pregnant. (DDLW #210).

EVERY year the beaches around New York change, but so gradually, one notices the changes only year by year. The shore line down by our little house is irregular with many little bays and creeks wandering inland every few miles. In addition, small piers and breakwaters have been built which either take away the sand or pile it up. Some years before a pier a quarter of a mile down the beach towards the open ocean fell to ruin in a storm with the result that the sand is washed away from our beach to be piled up on the next one.

This leaves a big expanse of rocky wasteland, varied in color and mottled with green and red seaweed. It is a paradise for children, though hard on their bare feet. They grow accustomed to it, however, and can soon walk lightly among the stones, finding all kinds of crabs and little fish and eels caught in the pools at low tide. Every now and then I can find a lobster or blue shell crab, or a big eel; and of course there are killies, snails, and hermit crabs. We are always making collections of them.

Bait diggers come from miles around, old, gaunt, and weatherbeaten, most of them bending for hours over their digging forks, getting foot-long sand-worms and blood-worms which they sell for fifty cents a dozen. These quiet old men bring their lunches with them and seek out a sheltered spot at noon where they can eat and rest. I go down to the bait diggers and pick up the clams as they turn them up in their search for worms.

The seagulls scream over the rocks, blue and gray and dazzling white, winging their way from the wreck of the old excursion boat to the larger rocks in the water, diving with a splash into the shallow gray water for a fish. The waves, the gulls, and the cawing of the crows in the woods in back of the house are the only sounds on these fall days.

On calm days the waves come gliding in, laughing, gurgling, chasing, and overtopping each other, hastening sideways, crablike, breaking at one end into a

plumy white crest which slides quickly through the wave until it crashes against the shingle on the beach.

Farther up and down the beach, away from our tiny bay, the waves roll in from the ocean, crashing dull and ominous on the sands, but there by the house, except during storms, the waves are gentle and playful.

I wander every afternoon up and down the beach for miles, collecting mussels, garlanded in seaweed, torn loose from the piers, pockets full of jingle shells which look as though they are made of mother of pearl and gunmetal. When the tide goes out these little cups of shells are left along the beach, each holding a few drops

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The little house I have furnished very simply with a driftwood stove in one corner, plenty of books, comfortable chairs and couches, and my writing table in the window where I can look out at the water all day. On the walls hang the fruits of my collecting–horseshoe crabs, spider crabs, the shell of a huge sea turtle, whelks' cocoons, hanging like false curls, several mounted fish heads, boards covered with starfish, sea horses, pipe and file fish, all picked up in little pools at low tide.

It is an international neighborhood down here near the end of Staten Island. Down the beach are a Belgian couple, next door in an old hotel is an Italian woman from Bleecker Street who takes in boarders during the summer. The grocer and the hardware man are Irish. There are five other bungalows in our small colony, two Catholic families, and a widow of German descent. The other two houses are occupied by my own friends who moved down here after I did, Russian and Roumanian Jews.

Down on the beach in a tiny shack lives a beachcomber and fisherman who is a friend of the entire neighborhood. His home is six by eight feet in size, just big enough for a bed, stove, and chair, and there he lives winter and summer.

"I'm very happy as I am," he says. "Everybody says to me, 'Smiddy, why don't you get to work this winter and do some painting for me.' But what happens when I do get work? Last spring I painted Mr. Cleary's house for him and I kept drinking his liquor that he sells. By the time I got through I didn't have a cent of money coming to me, but he handed me a bill for ten dollars. Money is bad for me. I know it. I can trade my fish and clams for oil and food and what else do I need?" And he waved his arms expansively around and indicated the beauties of his life.

He keeps his shack in good order, with crab traps, clam forks, and fishing paraphernalia suspended from the ceiling.

I sit down on the sand in front of his cabin in a steamer chair which he keeps especially for me, and watch him cook. This afternoon the delicious smell of fried mushrooms perfumed the air. Afternoons we spend in the fields gathering pounds of them. There had been a bitter wind blowing today but we were bundled up and it was fun peering around in the dry grass. At first I could hardly tell them from the many round white pebbles that dotted the sandy soil in the fields.

Smiddy still had lobster pots out and when he pulled them in this morning he found lobsters and a few crabs. in addition to all these delicacies he has a huge frying pan full of potatoes, and another of whiting, which are coming in so thick this fall that we have to carry them in bushel baskets. I am salting them down.

Late this afternoon the wind dropped and the door of Smiddy's shack stood open and he sat there contemplating the sunset. The waves lapped the shore, tingling among the shells and pebbles, and there was an acrid odor of smoke in the air. Down the beach the Belgians were working, loading rock into a small cart which looked like a tumbril drawn by a bony white horse. They stooped as though in prayer, outlined against the brilliant sky, and as I watched, the bell from the chapel over at St. Joseph's rang the Angelus. I found myself praying, praying with thanksgiving, praying with open eyes, while I watched the workers on the beach, the sunset, and listened to the sound of the waves and the scream of snowy gulls.

"Coffee?" Smiddy asked me, and I accepted the big cup from his hand and bit into a thick slice of buttered toast with fried mushrooms on top.

Later this evening the wind rose again and whistled around the house, and the noise of the sea is loud. I read now evenings until late in the night, and in my preoccupation the fire goes out, so that I have to get into bed to keep warm, clutching my books with ice cold hands.

October 15

Some of Mrs. Mario's boarders are *still* with her, one a mother with several children.

This morning I was standing at the head of the steps leading down to the beach–it was too wet to sit any place,–and leaning against the dead pine tree, I looked out at a four-masted schooner putting up sail. It was peaceful, and there was a heavenly, pearly radiance about the water, the boat, and the sky. It had been raining all night and the waves were high, steadily pouring in, making the sound of a waterfall, a constant rush of water. The tide was out, leaving bare rocks covered with seaweed. The rank smell of the sea was strong and pleasant. But now a child's wails broke the stillness and I saw the Italian mother of four little girls, rushing down the steps to the beach with a stick in her hand. One of the children had just run out of the house and taken refuge on the sand.

I recognized that it was little Dorrie who was crying, and I felt a wave of resentment against the mother and against the three other little girls who were following her excitedly, with the ugly excitement that is strong in many children at the sight of another's suffering.

Why didn't she leave the child alone down there on the breakwater, to get over her grief, anger, or whatever it was? But the child stood there shrieking as she saw her mother coming towards her with a switch, and her cry held a note of bitter unhappiness.

The bright cerise shawl of the rugged Italian woman, striding over the sand, billowed out in back of her with the wind. She switched the child and then strode back up the beach to the summer house where she sat with the other children who had followed her gloating. Every now and then one of the other children ran over to little Dorrie to say something to her but she repulsed them and continued crying.

I felt that I could not stand it and went into the house looking for something to give the child. On one of the bookcases there is a little statuette of the Blessed Virgin that Peggy Baird gave me. It is made of wax and stands under a glass case. A friend of hers, not a Catholic (and neither is Peggy), brought it from Czechoslovakia and I love it dearly. She is dressed in the brightest of blue capes over a white dress with a golden girdle and golden bands around the neck and hem. Her flaxen hair, also made of wax, hangs around her shoulders. There is a garland of roses around her head to which is attached a golden halo which resembles a watch spring pulled out. She stands on a bright blue ball the same color as her cape and around the ball is entwined a snake, bright green with a pink and yellow apple in its red mouth. And the blue ball stands on grass which is like green noodles, garlanded with little rosebuds. It is very sweet but it is very fragile, already cracked down the back of the cape.

I would have liked very much to bring it down to Dorrie to see if it would comfort her but there were too many people around. Mannie and Mike had just come up from the beach and were hanging over the pool in the garden into which they had just put some kitties, a snail or two, and a beautiful hound fish. Nickolai, buttoned up to the chin in a heavy sweater, was trying to make a sand worm pinch the cat's nose to show what nippers it had. Besides these there were the mother and the three little girls sitting down in front of the hotel. No, altogether too many people around. Besides the child might not want it, or if she did, she might be in a mood to repulse any offers of sympathy.

What if she knocked the statuette out of my hand? I loved it too much myself to risk it. I suddenly felt that it was the most precious possession I had. Besides I'd feel embarrassed if the child repulsed me. With such thoughts are our humane impulses overruled?

So I went back to the kitchen, sighing, looking for a piece of cold toast and cheese, and when I came back, Dorrie had stopped crying, had stopped nursing her sore little legs, and was bending over the aquarium with Nick.

November

Mother sent me some of my high school books (now that I have a place of my own to keep them in) and the other day I came across these words, written on a faded slip of paper in my own writing. I do not remember writing them.

"Life would be utterly unbearable if we thought we were going nowhere, that we had nothing to look forward to. The greatest gift life can offer would be a faith in God and a hereafter. Why don't we have it? Perhaps like all gifts it must be struggled for. 'God, I believe' (or rather, 'I must believe or despair'), 'Help Thou my unbelief.' 'Take away my heart of stone and give me a heart of flesh.' "

"It is interesting to note that these requests are mandatory. It is as though God expected us to demand these things as our right, not to plead for them as favors. 'Give us this day our daily bread,' not 'We beseech Thee to give us.' "

"As to religious exercises, are not all those things silly? Yet to make the body strong there must be physical exercise, discipline, and exertion. Then why not exercises for the soul, to be done whether we care for them or not, automatically if we must, at first,–strainingly, gropingly, if we feel that way about it, but do them we must."

I wrote the above lines when I felt the urgent need for faith, but there were too many people passing through my life,–too many activities,–too much pleasure (not happiness).

I have been passing through some years of fret and strife, beauty and ugliness, days and even weeks of sadness and despair, but seldom has there been the quiet beauty and happiness I have now. I thought all those years I had freedom, but now I feel that I had neither real freedom nor even a sense of freedom.

And now, just as in my childhood, I am enchained, tied to one spot, unable to pick up and travel from one part of the country to another, from one job to another. I am enchained because I am going to have a baby. No matter how much I may wish to flee from my quiet existence sometimes, I cannot, nor will be able to for several years. I have to accept my quiet and stillness, and accepting it, I rejoice in it.

For a long time now, I had thought I could not have a child. A book I read years ago, in school, *Silas Marner,* expressed the sorrow of a mother bereft of her child, and it expressed, too, my sorrow at my childless state. Just a few months ago I read it again, with a longing in my heart for a baby. My home, I felt, was not a home without one. The simple joys of the kitchen and garden and beach brought sadness with them because I had not the companionship of a child. No matter how much one is loved or one loves, that love is lonely without a child. It is incomplete.

And now I know that I am going to have a baby.

Still November

I was thinking the other day of how inadequately we pray. Often in saying the Our Father, I find myself saying by rote the first four lines and throwing my heart into the last, asking for bread and grace and forgiveness. This selfishness humiliates me so that I go back to the beginning again in order to give thanks. "Hallowed be Thy Name. Thy kingdom come." Often I say no other prayer.

I am surprised that I am beginning to pray daily. I began because I had to. I just found myself praying. I can't get down on my knees, but I can pray while I am walking. If I get down on my knees I think, "Do I really believe? Whom am I praying to?" And a terrible doubt comes over me, and a sense of shame, and I wonder if I am praying because I am lonely, because I am unhappy.

But when I am walking up to the village for the mail, I find myself praying again, holding the rosary in my pocket that Mary Gordon gave me in New OrIeans two years ago. Maybe I don't say it right but I keep saying it because it makes me happy.

Then I think suddenly, scornfully, "Here you are in a stupor of content. You are biological. Like a cow. Prayer with you is like the opiate of the people." And over and over again in my mind that phrase is repeated jeeringly, "Religion is the opiate of the people."

"But," I reason with myself, "I am praying because I am happy, not because I am unhappy. I did not turn to God in unhappiness, in grief, in despair,–to get consolation, to get something from Him."

And encouraged that I am praying because I want to thank Him, I go on praying. No matter how dull the day, how long the walk seems, if I feel low at the beginning of the walk, the words I have been saying have insinuated themselves into my heart before I have done, so that on the trip back I neither pray nor think but am filled with exultation.

Along the beach I find it appropriate to say the *Te Deum* which I learned in the Episcopalian church. When I am working about the house, I find myself addressing the Blessed Virgin and turning toward her statue.

It is so hard to say how this delight in prayer has been growing on me. Two years ago, I was saying as I planted seeds in the garden, "I must believe in these seeds, that they fall into the earth and grow into flowers and radishes and beans. it is a miracle to me because I do not understand it. Neither do naturalists understand it. The very fact that they use glib technical phrases does not make it any the less a miracle, and a miracle we all accept. Then why not accept God's miracles?"

I am going to Mass now regularly on Sunday mornings.

November Still

I am alone these days. Fred is in town all week, only coming out weekends and a few nights. I have finished the writing I was doing and feel at a loose end,

thinking enviously of my friends going gayly about the city, about their work, with plenty of companionship.

Just because I feel restless, it is a very good reason to stay down here and content myself with my life as a sybaritic anchorite. For how can I be a true anchorite with such luxuries as a baby to look forward to, not to speak of the morning paper, groceries delivered at the door, a beach to walk on, and the water to feast my eyes on? And then the fresh fish and clams, oysters and mushrooms, Jerusalem artichokes, and such delicacies. I shall invite Smiddy up to supper tonight and discuss with him the painting of the room. I shall read Dickens this evening.

In spite of my desire for a sociable week in town, in spite of a desire to pick up and flee from my solitude, I take pleasure in thinking of the idiocy of the pleasures I would indulge in if I were there. Teas and dinners, the conversation or lack of it, dancing in a smoky crowded room when one might be walking on the beach,–the dull restless cogitations which come after dissipating one's energies,–these things strike me with renewed force every time I have spent days in the city. My virtuous resolutions to indulge in such pleasure no more are succeeded by a hideous depression when neither my newfound sense of religion, my family life, my work, nor my surroundings seem sufficient to console me. I think of death and am overwhelmed by the terror and the blackness of both life and death. And I long for a church near at hand where I can go and lift up my soul.

When I am feeling these things I cannot write them, and while I am writing them I write almost self-consciously, wondering if I am not exaggerating, but the mood which possessed me yesterday was real enough and during the evening I read desperately, trying to rescue myself from the wall of silence which seemed to close me in.

But this makes me realize that often talk is an escape from doing anything. We chatter on and on to cover our feelings and to hide from ourselves and others our own futility.

Of course conversation is often spirited and uplifts me as some books do. It helps me to glimpse the meaning in things and jolts me out of the rut in which I have been ambling along. I am spurred on to the pursuit of knowledge by a renewed love of knowledge. And yet the trouble with these conversations is that often they are not spontaneous. Some of my liberal friends, for instance, have gatherings, Sunday afternoons or Thursday nights, and the little crowd which comes feels itself a group and the conversation often seems pompous and self-congratulatory.

This exaltation of the articulate obscures the fact that there are millions of people in this world who feel and in some way carry on courageously even though they can not talk or reason brilliantly. This very talk may obscure everything that we know nothing of now, and who knows but that silence may lead us to it.

December

It is a sunshiny hazy day and the boats on the bay look ghostlike and unreal. The morning sun makes each blade of grass, each dry twig, stand out and the grasses in the field next to the house do not stir. There are only the starlings to break the silence and occasionally the far-off whistle of the train. Even the waves make no sound upon the beach for there is an offshore wind.

The cats have just been fed a dogfish apiece and are growling at each other under the porch. Fred caught the dogfish last night on the pier and he has been cutting one up to study its insides. No one around here eats them, thinking them not fit for food, except Mrs. Mario who assures us that all Italians think them delicious. So, we shall try them for lunch today.

Did I say the house was silent? Just then there came another sound, loud in the stillness. There is a bucket of soft-shelled clams out in the pantry and they squirt now and then and sound as though they were gasping and sighing.

Yesterday was a busy day. We studied biology for an hour or so in the morning in the shape of the larvae of a mussel. We went for a long row along the shore in the afternoon, every now and then stopping to investigate the flotsam and jetsam on the water. Not that the two terms should be used generally. I read a definition of them the other day, according to a Merchant Shipping Act. Flotsam is floating wreck and jetsam is property thrown overboard to avoid wreck, and in early days was distinguished from wreckage cast on the shore by the waves.

It was pleasant rowing about in the calm bay. The oyster boats were all out and far on the horizon, off Sandy Hook, there was a four-masted vessel. I had the curious delusion that several huge holes had been stove in her side, through which you could see the blue sky. The other vessels seemed sailing in the air, quite indifferent to the horizon on which they should properly have been resting. Fred tried to explain to me scientific facts about mirages and atmospheric conditions, and on the other hand, I pointed out to hun how our senses lie to us.

But it is impossible to talk to him about religion or faith. A wall immediately separates us. The very love of Nature and study of her secrets which is bringing me to faith, separates him from religion.