
The Peaceable Kingdom

by Nancy Willard

In 1966 my husband, Eric Lindbloom, ran for Congress on an independent ticket in order to raise the issue of American involvement in Vietnam. His campaign took us to places that I am sure were omitted from the itineraries of his opponents: Republican Hamilton Fish, Democrat Joseph Resnick, and Conservative Jean Hervey. "The Peaceable Kingdom" was written shortly after the election of Joseph Resnick.

The day my husband, Eric, decided to run for Congress on a peace ticket in an area so Republican that Roosevelt is said to have driven through its smallest towns with drawn shades, we learned about the Bruderhofs.

"They're a peaceful community, sort of Utopian," a local bookseller told us. We were discussing the war in his shop on Saturday afternoon and noticed a neatly printed collection of photographs of children and their artwork. "They have their own publishing house, and a workshop for children's toys—you've heard of Community Playthings."

We had not heard of "Community Playthings." We looked at the pictures. One showed a group of children hanging a necklace of daisies on a donkey. On the opposite page was a song: "Written by the first grade after a walk to see the neighbor's goat." There were poems about flowers and drawings of mice and several murals of children carrying paper lanterns into a sky already rampant with stars and comets. There were photographs of a high school performance of Tolstoy's "What Men Live By," and at the end of the book, a simple statement, signed by Emmy

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Arnold: "Community is a miracle. People cannot remain together for the sake of traditions. Fellowship must be given again and again as a new birth."

We bought the book and the next day we set off for the community, about an hour's drive away. Just off the main road we saw the sign, "Society of Brothers," and we turned onto a road, soft with mud from the first rain of June, past a number of large sheds, very clean and tightly locked. The road ended in a broad circle of houses. Behind them, a cornfield showed like a tasselled fence. On what could perhaps be called the green, except that it was not, stood a rusty steamroller, covered with children.

There was no one else. We turned off the car and a stillness seemed to drop on every thing—the houses, ourselves, and the half dozen children, all very blond, who played quietly on the monstrous back of the machine. The little girls wore daisies wreathed like crowns on their long braids, a curious point of decorum, I thought, in the quiet scuffle of the game. They took no notice of us, and we watched them as if they were birds who would fly off at a rustle or a sneeze.

Suddenly we saw a young man coming toward us, carrying a book in his hand.

"You would like to see the community?"

Eric put his head to the vent, as the window of our old car did not roll down.

"If it isn't too much trouble—"

The young man put his head to the vent and called politely, "Not at all. I'm on guest duty."

The slight accent made him seem remote and a bit formal.

We got out of the car and the young man, as if he had expected us, gestured us toward the two main buildings, larger than any of the other houses.

"My name is Gunther," he mumbled, so that I hardly caught the words and hesitated to call him anything. "You are interested in how we started?"

We nodded.

"The first Bruderhof community was started after World War I in Germany. When Hitler came to power, we went to Paraguay, then to America. We now have communities in England, Pennsylvania, and Connecticut."

"And you have lived with the community all your life?"

He glanced at us curiously. "Even those who are born in the community are encouraged to go back into the world for a while, before joining. It is a solemn vow, to join."

"Do you have a church?"

A look of bewilderment crossed his face. He puzzled a moment over the right words.

“Well, we are all one. When you join, you give up everything. You share, you have it all in common.”

“You mean not everyone here belongs to the community?”

“Oh, no. Some are guests. Some who know nothing about us take a meal with us and then they stay. Some never join. When you join, it is a calling.”

He opened the door of the first building and we stepped out of the sunlight into a large cool room filled with long tables. By each table stood a box of books. The titles of hymns and folk songs, some in German and some in English, flipped past my thumb.

“We eat together in this room,” he said quietly. “The children from the upper school have decorated it.”

I turned around. Behind me, three wooden panels hung out from a tree split lengthwise and polished smooth but still edged in bark. Foxes, ferns, children, horses, cats, daisies, and stars, cut in silhouette from different shades of veneer, ran together in the fields of heaven.

“It was made for a wedding. This one shows midsummer. And here is the creation—”

He broke off when he saw Eric examining what looked like three billiard cues set in an elaborate frame.

“That’s our chime. The men made it in the workshop. It’s on wheels so we bring it into the dining room when we sing, or use it for the choir. Would you like to see the workshop? Or the school?”

School was not in session. Children playing nearby glanced at us indifferently as we passed to the second building, a large white clapboard house with a veranda. The rooms inside, with their heavy walnut doors and high ceilings, had a peculiar elegance about them.

We walked past the tiled fireplace and the finger paintings of the kindergarten and the pie on the blackboard of the second grade, divided into tasks, with children’s names and each task neatly lettered inside: dusting, sweeping, and, every fourth wedge or so, snacks. Then we went upstairs, past the small desks and rickety glass case showing arrowheads and somebody’s idea of the Pharaoh, its clay paws crumbling; past the project room with its tiny flag of yellow and white and black, and its explanatory sign: “We gathered the wool from our own sheep, we carded and spun it, we dyed it with natural dyes, we wove it on our loom.”

Tacked on the last door was a poem, “The Tailor and His Mouse.” At the foot of the page, the mouse, heavily crayonned gray, was dancing for joy. Gunther noticed my surprise.

“This is—well, the principal’s office. But we don’t like to call her that.”

The workshop was closed, but Gunther was eager to open it for us. The children, still wearing their wreaths, had climbed off the steamroller and were sitting with their parents on the hillside in front of the houses. It is Germany, I thought, but Germany in the memory of those who have left it. It is Germany in the twenties, with trainloads of boys and girls in peasant blouses, taking their violins and guitars to the countryside, looking for the God they lost during the war.

Standing in the quiet workshop, with the clean dust of the wood rising under our feet, it was easy to imagine living here. If the schoolroom brought back early memories, the workshop, with its smell of newly cut planks, brought even earlier ones. Yet the shop was large and efficient, with a conveyer belt and a packaging machine and shelves of wooden wheels, carts, and cabs, waiting to be assembled.

“These toys are finished,” said Gunther, pointing to a row of trucks, chunky and unpainted.

“Do you sell a lot of them?” asked Eric.

“Too many. We gave some to F.A.O. Schwartz, and this year we fear we shall make a profit.”

It is the oldest problem of the industrious idealist.

I wanted to ask who lived in the community but knew it was an unanswerable question. When we left, Gunther gave us a catalogue showing the toys and the children and the community worshipping in a circle of silence. It also contained the beginnings of an answer:

Our aim was to show that under the rulership of God men could live a life of loving harmony and brotherhood, having ‘all things in common’ as recorded in the Acts of the Apostles. We discovered that throughout the Christian era other groups including the Monatonists, Waldensians, Franciscans and Anabaptists had glimpsed the same vision and striven for its expression.

We felt especially akin to the early Christians of the first and second centuries but were also inspired by Eckhard, Thomas à Kempis, Jacob Boehme, George Fox, Kierkegaard, Tolstoy, Dostoevsky.

We welcome inquiries and can arrange visits at any of our communities. We have no list of membership requirements to mail you, for membership is a process of mutual acquaintance, understanding, and experience in the daily life.

Of our guests we ask only that where the length of stay permits, they share in our work and life in an open and seeking way. We neither charge guests for accommodations nor pay them for their work.

At once I thought of the squabbles that break out among people living under one roof, between the saved and the damned, the living and the dead. Was there no fighting in the kingdom of God on earth? For it is out of fighting, internal or otherwise, that the seekers come. The quest of the first Bruderhofs took its shape from the war. As Emmy Arnold recalls it in her account of the movement, it has the fragility and appeal of a lover's promise:

Eberhard and I had the idea of buying ourselves a gypsy trailer, or even several, and traveling from village to village this way, from town to town, with our family and those who wanted to join us. We would make music, bring joy and help to people, and teach our children as we went along. We would travel without destination, staying in a particular place only as long as our help was needed and accepted there by the widows, the children and the sick, whose destroyed homes we would rebuild. This idea found a good deal of response in many people.

They settled, instead, for a guest house at Sannerz, where a small group began to live the life in community. The guests came from every kind of faith, or lack of it, imaginable. There were vegetarians who could eat nothing but raw fruit or ripe fruit, and one who could eat nothing and starved himself to death. There was a wife who had run away from her husband and a young girl who wanted to forget an unhappy love affair. There was a fugitive who vanished behind a cupboard during one of the communal meals when through the window he saw the police coming. An opera singer arrived one night and sang to everyone for a whole evening. Another night, a family appeared, each member dressed like a wildflower, with no other explanation for themselves than, "We come from the woods, we live in the woods, we will return to the woods!" Sometimes tramps came, drawn by the singing.

And there was Hans Fiehler, in his red wool cap, peaked like a gnome's, and his red waistcoat with "Hans-in-Luck" written across the back, who traveled through the villages with two violins and a family of ocarinas. The ocarinas he had named Grandmother, Great-grandmother, Mother, and Child. The violins had no names; the good one he had brought from Italy, the tin one he got from the Gypsies. During the inflation of 1924, he went to one of the generals in a certain town and proposed to make a film of the army feeding the poor, if they would take their field kitchen into the city. It was, he suggested, an excellent way to restore their prestige. On the appointed day, he appeared with his camera, shouting his instructions to the general like a veteran director: "Stand up smartly! Serve it yourself!" The hungry were filled but the camera was empty.

The community, then as now, was full of children. Babies were brought by the Gypsies, who would steal them away again years later. Others were left by unwed mothers who came for help during their confinement and disappeared afterward. Others, orphaned or sick, were simply left.

Supporting so many required an income. "We thought of basket making," says Emmy, "or needlework, for instance, making the Schlitz style of house shoes or slippers, or something like that." At Christmas they rehearsed a play and took it from village to village, placing an empty sack at the door of the hall. The audience gave what it could—a sausage, a loaf of bread, a slice of ham. It was easy enough to be poor then.

In the hectic days of the campaign that followed, we thought to ourselves: we will go back to the Bruderhofs. We thought half-seriously of living there ourselves. The peace Eric argued for seemed an abstraction next to the living peace we had seen. At the same time, neither of us really wanted to subordinate our own wishes to those of a community. And to leave the world now seemed an act of selfishness, done in the name of grace, unless one could devise a community that accommodated evil rather than excluded it. Of those who rejected grace, the wild man of Weissenfels stuck most clearly in my mind, as Emmy describes him.

He was a big, brawny man who wore little clothing. His hair was long like a girl's, adorned with a pink ribbon, when he suddenly appeared among us. In those times his appearance was not too conspicuous, but when he suddenly disrobed completely during the midday meal and said cynically, 'To the pure everything is pure,' we realized that we were dealing with something more than eccentricity. He was sent out of the room immediately.

When Eberhard offers to free him of his impure spirits, he gives a Faustian shriek and disappears, "and nobody could catch up with him," says Emmy. "And we never heard of him again."

Into what army did he flee, I thought, or in what gutter outside what bar in the city did he die, or in what river did he take his life? And what kind of kingdom will give him peace?

Once it seemed to me I caught a glimpse of him—an old man now, in a tattered overcoat and turned-up shoes, standing outside the tattooed man's booth at the Dutchess County Fair, where Eric was passing out campaign literature. Among the regular earnest faces that filled the granges, schools, leagues of all sorts when Eric spoke, I never saw him, though once when we found ourselves in a country clapboard church, answering the questions of some oddly militant Quakers, I felt an ominous presence in the darkness outside, like that of someone waiting for your life. The audiences listened and did not hear; they gave us cookies and enough coffee to ruin our kidneys. We did not hear from the Bruderhofs.

Then one day we received a note from the Catholic Worker Farm not far from us: would Eric go there and address the Peacemakers, a pacifist group holding its yearly gathering there?

Eric knew a good deal more about the Peacemakers than they knew about him. After weeks of hostility here, he thought, he could get an honest dialogue started. There was no need to argue against the war to people who went to all lengths to avoid paying taxes that might be used for arms. Some lived by taking several small jobs and making a minimum income, thus avoiding the tax altogether. Others allowed the government to take whatever they had, knowing it was almost nothing. When the government auctioned your house, you bought it back again, at twice the cost, but you had avoided paying for someone else's death.

We knew of the Catholic Worker Farm through Martin Corbin, the editor of its newspaper, who had attended some of our meetings. He was a thin quiet man, whose clothes, neat but salvaged from another era, never seemed to fit him properly; he wore them with the absentmindedness of the man who has settled his mind on more permanent things. He and his family lived at the farm, which took in anyone who asked to come. We had read about St. Joseph's, the hospitality house in the Bowery for which Dorothy Day often solicited funds in the paper. From her descriptions, we gathered that it was no simple vision of peace they were after.

What to do about the able-bodied who take advantage? How to meet those who drink and have all but exhausted the patience of the people truly trying to forgive seventy times seven? It is easiest when we have literally given away all we have and can say only, "We have no more money."

If we arrived in the afternoon, we could look around the farm before meeting the Peacemakers in the evening.

About a mile beyond the American Legion of Tivoli, which aims its ivy-decked cannons over its tidy lawns at passersby, the road turns muddy and disappears into a thicket of trees. We parked the car near what looked like the ruins of an Italian villa and climbed out. Where the horizon dropped to the Hudson River behind it, a figure on hands and knees was weeding a garden.

On the other side of the road stood a low house on a hill. There were several church pews set out for benches, bleached gray in the sun, and a broad circle of chapel shapes with peaked roofs, cut from plywood and fixed on poles, marking the stations of the cross. In the well-trodden grass of the hillside, someone had carefully laid out a plot of myrtle and daffodils, shaped like a heart. A small sign dedicated it to the Virgin.

Then through the arch of the villa we saw still a third house. In the yard two women sat watching us with mild interest. One was small and middle-aged,

crouched like a bird over her bit of sewing. The other, holding an afghan on her lap, was tall, white-haired, and majestic as a caryatid.

Eric and I came forward and introduced ourselves.

"I'm Dorothy Day," said the caryatid, "and this is Margaret. Please sit down. The Peacemakers won't be back till tonight. We're listening to 'Rigoletto.' Do you know 'Rigoletto'?"

"No," I said apologetically.

"Too bad! It's one of my favorites. I've seen and heard it many times—no, not seen it. I was standing in the top balcony of the old Met, you couldn't see anything."

"Isn't it awful!" exclaimed Margaret. "It's like you're going to fall right over."

"Oh, I loved it!" She shifted the afghan on which she was working; it was growing heavy on her knees. "Isn't it lovely? People give us so many odds and ends of wool. Ah, now they're going to play an aria I like. When the intermission comes, we'll have coffee out here. We're adamant about opera, you'll have to excuse us."

Her tone indicated that the aria was, at that moment, a good deal more important than we were. Somewhat abashed, we listened to it beating like a chorus of grasshoppers in the little transistor. Beyond, the Hudson glittered between banks of elms and maples turning to honey in the sunlight. The air was pleasantly warm, and no one wanted to speak or move. Then Margaret began snipping away at a stencil of leaves on a piece of linen.

"And what," I asked, "are you making?"

"It's cutwork. It's not for the Catholic Worker Farm," she added quickly, as she held up a napkin laced with flowers. "I started it in the days when I thought I needed a set like this. Now I'm finishing it for discipline."

"We could auction it off," said Dorothy Day, smiling. "Raise a little money for the new building. We own ten apartments in the city, and the city makes you remodel when you buy. I've been arrested as a slum landlord!"

She chuckled a little, and a white cat, thinking he had been called, crawled out from under her chair.

"That's one of Peggy's cats, isn't it?" said Margaret.

Dorothy Day turned to us.

"Peggy had fifteen cats and she insisted on keeping them all in her room. They were so pampered they couldn't go outdoors. A new girl came to visit us and we assigned her to clean up the room. I thought when she came she didn't look like

she'd stay. There were clothes all over that cats had spoiled and she actually had to scrape the floor. When she left, she wrote an article about us."

"She said she'd lived on lettuce," said Margaret. "Then another girl came, she did about half the room, and she left."

Dorothy Day smiled. "We could use it as a test for newcomers."

The cat darted off in pursuit of some children who ran past, baiting it with a string. The aria ended, then blazed into a hoarse chorus. I walked up to the house and stepped inside.

Waiting in the darkness, when my eyes had grown accustomed to it, were several large rooms, a round table with literature on it, and posters lettered with quotations from Augustine. I picked up one of the pamphlets that showed part of a breadline at Chrystie Street: craggy-faced men, hungry-eyed and unshaven, hands stuffed into the pockets of their overcoats, which flapped on their bodies like tents. As I was looking at it, someone quite close to me coughed.

Startled, I turned around. An old man was sitting motionless on a chair, watching me with a dull gaze. Our eyes met; he lifted his lips as if to smile, baring toothless gums. Now I heard a clatter of dishes in what appeared to be the kitchen, one room beyond us. Perhaps he was waiting for the coffee, which suddenly kindled the quiet room with fragrance.

I smiled a little uneasily, hardly knowing how to respond to him, and went outside. A splendidly-bearded man, pushing a wheelbarrow full of tools, rattled up the road and disappeared behind the house. I sat down with the others again, and Dorothy Day took up the conversation as if I had never left.

"That's Reginald Highill," she observed, nodding in the direction he had taken. "He does all our repairs. Two men had a fight on the stairs and one made a hole right through the wall. Reggie saw it and cried, 'A grotto!' So he made a grotto for a statue."

The door of the house opened and an enormous woman emerged, her arms full of cups, followed by a little elf of a man, as bald and pink as a baby.

"This is our cook, Hans Tunneson."

The cook gave us a shy smile and set the coffee pot on the grass and disappeared, leaving his large companion to hand round the cups.

"We were talking about the grotto," said Margaret.

The large woman settled herself into a chair and pushed the gray strings of her hair over her ears.

"I've seen the grotto," she observed. "I also saw its inception."

But if insult was intended, Dorothy Day took no notice. “We live with these problems,” she said quietly, as if she were realizing it again for the first time. “They’re all around us here. Seems like we’re always on trains, meeting people, bringing people. You don’t have the chance to get up on a soapbox. You have to change them one by one. During the war we had a Japanese woman and a Chinese cook. The woman refused to eat the food. Thought it was poison. And after the bomb she had to hear people say, ‘Well, they had it coming.’”

“Is she still here?” I asked, astonished.

“Oh, she’s dead now. I believe it was all that talk about the bomb that killed her.” She sighed. “And the workers and the scholars, they don’t always get on. The scholars look down on the workers and the workers don’t respect the scholars. Here”—she motioned to the large woman who had joined us—is one of the scholars. She’s translating a book on Rabelais from Russian into English.”

At this the woman threw up her hands vehemently. “You can’t imagine, it is so difficult! You are supposed to laugh when you read Rabelais. But I weep! You wonder what a Soviet has to say about Rabelais? I will tell you. Rabelais keeps the deep folklore, you know, the joy and the triumph of the common people.”

Gloomily she sipped her coffee. “People are not joyous anymore. It is dark now.”

Dusk had settled in. A large boat glided spectrally into view, seeming to push its way through a sea of black treetops.

“Boats from all over the world come here,” observed Dorothy Day. “And people. You wonder how they come. Sometimes, after a meeting, they just stay. A few slip in each time. Then I ask, ‘And when do you have to leave?’ ‘Oh, I don’t,’ they say, ‘I’ve got no place to go.’”

“Remember how many people stayed after the jazz concert?” said the scholar. “There were people sleeping on the porches, anywhere they could find a place. We’ll soon be like Newport.”

“There was one man,” said Dorothy Day, “who came and made a beeline for the bathroom. I never found out who he was. I wonder who invited him.”

“I thought you did,” exclaimed the scholar.

Dorothy Day shook her head.

“We asked the children about him. They said he was sleeping on the beach all morning. He told them he’d kicked up the pavement in New York during a demonstration and that he wanted to assassinate the president.”

I had a clear image of him in that moment—a big brawny man with hair long like a girl’s, tied in a pink ribbon, running out of a woods.

“There is such a hunger for community,” said Dorothy Day. “There are so many wandering strangers and monks and scholars—Tolstoy’s wife called them ‘the dark ones.’”

It was now so dark we could hardly see one another, and her voice seemed to come from a great distance, calling the past awake.

“You should have come to see us at Maryfarm on Staten Island. We had a Russian acrobat who’d worked as a strong man in the circus. When the moon was full, he’d do cartwheels down the hill behind the house. It terrified John—he’d just come to us from the Bowery and was getting over pneumonia, and after that he slept with a meat axe under his pillow.”

And then she read our thoughts, and added with a sly smile in her voice, “There are nonviolent ways of assisting yourself. For example, you can tackle somebody’s legs—” Over the crickets and frogs we heard the slamming of doors down the road.

“Ah! The Peacemakers are back!”

Flashlights darted on the path and across the lawn. As the laughter moved farther away we heard steps near us and Martin Corbin’s voice saying, “Let me take you to the library. That’s where you’re to speak.”

The stations of the cross and the sun-bleached pews were invisible now. But through an open doorway on the first floor, we saw Reggie moving among rows of metal beds, carefully stepping over the signs of occupancy in one corner: a meatgrinder, a broken lamp, underwear wadded over a radiator, and a Dobbs hatbox. Outside, the blankets drying on the bushes looked like sleeping bears.

“That’s the dormitory,” said Martin. “Here—do you want to see the chapel?”

He flicked on the light. The room was chilly and the altar was appropriately flanked by an organ and a large potbellied stove. In front of the pews were several statues of the Mother and Child and a woodcut of the thorn-crowned Christ. The combination of the ordinary and the religious gave it the look of a friendly monastic’s cell. Only the sign at the door suggested that this chapel was not primarily for retreat “Please pray for those at St. Joseph’s, for those on the picket line, for bread, for the writers, artists and scholars and workers among us, and for the following, who are in prison,”

and there followed a list of names.

Now we heard voices and the shuffle of footsteps overhead and we went upstairs to meet the Peacemakers.

The room quieted as we came in. They had seated themselves in chairs, on the bare floor, among boxes of books and stacks of *The Nation* and *The Catholic*

Worker yellowing with age. On the quilt near the speaker's table sat a man cradling a guitar and a young woman holding a baby. Behind them unfolded the rows of faces, watching us with a touch of skepticism and a good deal of intelligence. An old Negro man, white-haired as Elijah, motioned to a spritely old lady in a floppy hat to wheel his chair closer.

Then a younger man, very neat but obviously warm in his white T-shirt, stepped forward and introduced Eric, with the directness and reserve that often come together in the wake of certain kinds of suffering.

Eric began to speak of the war. Wasps and June bugs flew in through the open windows, danced around the naked light bulb on the ceiling, and thudded at our feet. I listened half-attentively to the arguments I had heard so often before, and for the faint applause that always came when the last word had sunk into oblivion.

"...A vote for a peace candidate is a protest vote. I do not expect to win. I am running because the language of votes is one language our president understands."

A pause; soon I would hear Eric's closing plea and the moment of polite silence. But somewhere in the back of the room a hand shot up.

"And what if you did win? What would you do then?"

The eyes of a middle-aged man, dressed with the threadbare neatness of a country clergyman, were looking directly into Eric's own.

"Well, of course it's very unlikely that I'll win," said Eric. He did not add that the remoteness of this possibility was a running joke between us.

"But what if you did?"

Eric made a vague open gesture with his hands.

"I'd do what I could to stop the war."

The man regarded him fiercely for several minutes, but when he spoke, his voice was quiet.

"No," he said at last. "You would start out trying to stop the war. Then someone would tell you, Give in on this tiny point, and I'll help you push that bill on urban renewal. Just this one point. What would you do?"

Silence.

"I think I would try not to play that game," said Eric. "I'm not a political animal."

The man shook his head and a wise smile lit his face. "They all play it," he said. Then he turned to those on either side of him. "How many here are registered voters?"

One hand appeared—Martin’s.

“We don’t mean to discourage you,” said the man gently, “but we’ve seen it happen over and over. I know that this seems to you a good thing. I know, too, that nobody ever found peace through politics. Politics will sell you out.” Then softly, as if to himself, as if no one else were present in the hushed room: “The only revolution that brings peace happens in the heart.”

There was an awkward pause, then the meeting adjourned for ice cream in the ruined villa across the way, which turned out to be a spacious shed. We sat down together at long rough tables while Hans Tunneson and the Russian scholar and Reggie scooped out ice cream. An attractive young woman with long red hair placed her crutch carefully under the table and plopped down beside me.

“You sat nice and still,” she smiled, holding up a sketchbook to show me a quick drawing of a girl’s head. “Have you been here before?”

“No,” I said.

“Oh, it’s lovely here in the summer. I work in the city but I spend my vacation here every year. This is the last day of their meeting.”

“I didn’t see you here all afternoon.”

“No, some of us went to visit another peace group. It’s called the Bruderhofs. Do you know them?”

I said that I did and asked her how she liked them. She considered my question carefully.

“Well,” she said at last. “All I can say is, when we found ourselves out on the road again, everyone started jumping up and down.”

“You didn’t like them?”

“Oh, it wasn’t that. It’s just that everything was so orderly. I mean, nobody dared to say anything. There was so much we wanted to ask, but nobody dared.”

Beyond the open door, a skewer of lights moved slowly over the dark water, and two boats hailed each other. I put my empty dish on the tray that Hans Tunneson was passing around and walked over to Eric.

“It’s late. We should go soon.”

As we stepped outside, somebody tugged at Eric’s sleeve. We found ourselves face to face with a short potbellied man whose eyes seemed to pop from his head with excitement.

“Excuse me but I wanted to ask you—if you’re elected, will you handle personal problems?”

He jogged from one foot to another; he looked as if he might explode. Eric puzzled over the question.

“I’ll try, but I don’t know quite what you mean.”

Then the man burst out, in a shrill, violent voice, “They castrated me when I was in a veterans’ hospital, and something’s got to be done about it!”

Helplessly, Eric took down his address: General Delivery, New York City. The sorrows that a man may be asked to represent are without limit.

About two months after the election had been lost, we received an invitation from the Bruderhofs. Their high school students were presenting “Amahl and the Night Visitors” and there would be refreshments afterward. The townspeople were invited to attend.

The workshop was hunched in snow. Men, bundled in scarves and caps, flapped their arms to keep warm and pointed the way with flashlights to a parking area between the main building and the school. Small groups of girls, wearing long braids and long stockings and sensible oxfords, were carrying pots of coffee and trays of sandwiches to and fro, hugging their arms against their sides. Occasionally one glanced down at my nylons, then up at my face, with curiosity but without desire.

The men had raised a special platform to seat people in the dining room and left the center area clear for the performance. Not an empty seat was to be seen. We waited impatiently for the lights to go out, and at last a tall man in a blue corduroy jacket strode to the center of the room and motioned us to be quiet.

“Mona, who is to play Amahl’s mother, sprained her ankle yesterday. We want to share that with you. She did it on a trampoline. It was quite bad. But she said, ‘We must go on. It takes one’s mind off oneself to do it.’ The school nurse bound her ankle up tight. And we said, ‘Wouldn’t you know, the night before?’”

We shook our heads sympathetically, and the children in the audience craned their neck as a young man quietly set a crutch at the edge of the stage, in case it should be needed.

None of the performers could sing, but it did not matter. And afterward, wise men and shepherds, still in their leggings and capes, mingled with the townspeople, as we all crowded outside and hurried along the icy path to the schoolhouse.

A throng of excited children met us at the door, but a small middle-aged woman, wearing the inevitable drindl skirt and black stockings, ushered us into the nursery, where young girls eagerly presented us with trays of sandwiches and coffee.

“Mine begged to come,” said the woman, “but I made them go to bed or I knew I would see them lined up by the fence outside.”

We smiled and followed her from room to room, shuffling along with the crowd, admiring the decorations. There were paper chains and murals of lantern processions and on every blackboard a nativity or chorus of angels, done with colored chalks, or simply a greeting: "Welcome!" The ordinary ceiling lamps were hidden behind translucent globes imbedded with seaweed, dried ferns, flowers, seashells and paper stars and moons.

"The children in the upper school made them as a surprise," she explained. "They made them in the workshop and wouldn't tell anyone what they were doing. You blow up balloons and cover them with plastic. It's very hard—someone opens the window for fresh air and the whole thing collapses. There's one for each of the seasons and each of the four elements."

She was even more determined than Gunther had been that we should see everything and presently we found ourselves in the workshop, walking among the benches and vises and jigsaws, each hung under the proper label. Signs reminded you to put away the crayons, to clean up the worktables, to leave all as you had found it. Near the kiln was a shelf, holding angels, beehives, vases, and elves under roadstools, all oddly flesh colored, waiting to be glazed.

"Here is where the boys work with their teachers. We got the electric potter's wheel for Christmas. I come down here and work sometimes. And we have a printing press, too. Have you seen our book of stories, *A Christmas Star*? It was all set by hand.

In the project room, which I recognized only by the little black and yellow flag on the wall, some of the men from the community had gathered to survey the activity. The man who had spoken before the play stepped forward when he saw Eric and introduced himself as Eberhard Arnold.

"We followed your campaign here with much interest," he said. "Did you get many votes?"

"Less than three percent," said Eric. "But we've found other things we can do. We're organizing silent vigils in other downtown areas. People stop and ask you what you're standing for, and you tell them—"

"And some people join you," suggested one of the men.

I turned to the woman who had been showing us around.

"Do those of you in the community vote?"

The question threw her into a confusion. She smoothed her apron nervously and fixed her eyes on a small crèche in the corner.

"I don't know; what would we vote for?" she blurted at last.

I asked her about the crèche and with evident relief she picked up the delicately painted figure of Joseph for me to see.

“An old lady who died a few years ago made it. She used to sit up in her room, working.”

Then a great silence fell upon us. No one knew what to say, so we smiled pleasantly at one another, to show that the silence marked a moment of communion between us; then like awkward children at a party, we began to stare at our feet in growing embarrassment.

“We are having our own silent vigil,” remarked Eberhard at last.

And we all burst out laughing so suddenly that women and children put their heads in the door to see what had happened, for whenever one man seemed to stop, the rest took it up again, grateful for this escape from our mutual shyness.

“In general, though, the response to your campaign was good?”

“I think our best constituents were from the Catholic Worker Farm,” said Eric. “I spoke there during the campaign. They take in anyone who needs help.”

“And many who are beyond hope,” observed another man prudently. “And sometimes they hurt themselves by it. We’ve had connections with them for about fifteen years. You never know what to expect there.”

The children gathered closer at the edge of our conversation, enclosing us in a ring of solemn faces. Some of them were perhaps sixteen or seventeen, yet they had the subdued look of those who know they are children and are allowed to stand in the world of their fathers only by permission, which is not often given.

“They begged to stay up,” said Eberhard, “but we said, Not unless you work. So they are working. Only then could they stay up with the adults.” Then, in a gentler voice, he added, “It’s a great thing for the children to have so many of you come.”

“You have many friends outside,” said Eric.

“We want to know our friends better.”

What an event a birth must be in such a place, I thought, with so many parents to love each child that comes into the world. The face of love is dazzling; you hardly know how to meet it. It looks at a photograph of a man sleeping on the street and asks, “Why does he sleep there?” And the teacher, who recounts the story, says, “He has no home.” Then love answers, with the voices of children, “Then we must find him and bring him home to us.”

But the voices are small and do not carry, and the man is asleep, or drunk, and in any case, too far away to hear them.