

Dos Passos Review

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The Dos Passos Review 67

Digging

Nonfiction by Joyce Kleiner

No wind blew that day, only enough of a salt-infused breeze to lift a feather and carry it gently toward the splintery grape-stake fences that spread before the jumble of grand houses and modest summer shacks. The offshore fog did not enclose the horizon with the rampart-like quality it so often has on summer days at Stinson Beach, nor did low clouds reduce the limits of the sky or thicken the air with the dampness that summons out the sweatshirts and dry fleece blankets. It was a day as rare as finding a completely unbroken abalone shell. A day one could easily miss.

That is not what I noticed, however, as I unpacked the canvas boat-bag of the visors and straw hats, variously numbered sun-blocks, Frisbees and baseball catching gear that I dragged out from our beach cottage. Before I had completed my chores, my son Jake was already in the Pacific Ocean on his boogie board, riding the low but pulsing waves right up to the toe-scraping sand, then jumping up and bounding back into the waves to go again. My husband Robert stood at the edge of the waterline, lobbing yellow tennis balls with an old wooden racket into the shallows for our two Labradors—Syrus, just three-years-old, and Sadie, five years his senior.

Content that all had found their momentary avocations, I carefully spread my tropical-colored towel over the metal frame of my beach chair and set the blue and white Igloo cooler near enough to reach. My reading glasses came out next. I had one goal—read my book.

The book had been randomly chosen from the growing pile beside my bed that never seemed to get my attention. But it was the act of reading it, of accomplishing something just for me—something apart from my very distracting daily routine back home—that fueled my determination.

I have never been one who could do *nothing* very well. That is not to say I excel at anything, but rather that the act of simply *not doing* is a quality I lack. While my husband could absentmindedly play tennis with the ocean for hours,

I always felt that my time must be productive, even my relaxation time. It can be an obsessive preoccupation, this need to fill each moment with productivity.

With my shoulders yanked up to my ears, book up close enough to my face to focus within the range provided by my half-moon glasses, teeth perhaps just slightly clenched, I read. I read and I read as long as I could, consciously struggling to block out the sounds and activities around me. But halfway through the second chapter, Sadie—wet as a slob mop—dropped a slobbery tennis ball into my lap. She waited patiently for me to throw the ball for her, her eight-year-old ears up high like an optimistic puppy's, her tail making sand-angel skirts behind her. I hurled the ball back toward the ocean, and she ran after it, but I didn't want her to retrieve it for me. I was busy. Sadie found Robert more available to her.

I returned to my book.

Though not crowded, the beach had enough sunbathers chattering nearby to distract me. I resolved to always bring an iPod or maybe just earplugs with me in the future to block out the voices and ambient noise.

Jake rode the waves for a half an hour or so, and then returned from the icy water, his skin vibrating with shivers. He fell onto the warm sand and lay on his back. Once revived by the sun, he pushed himself up onto his elbows and scanned the area for his next activity. I hoped he would find another distraction or return to boogie-boarding so I could continue on my private course. He did. He walked over to the stash of beach supplies and selected one of the heavy metal shovels we brought. At thirteen he no longer dug with tiny red and yellow plastic trowels and pails; now he used full contractor quality excavation equipment. "I'm gonna dig a hole," he said. Robert joined him in this enthusiastic and random act, and together their shovels crunched through the moist, packed sand. They invited me to join them, but I wanted to accomplish something.

I refortified my commitment and returned to my book.

I had just breached chapter three when the tiny voices of two young brothers—a toddler and a preschooler—threatened to derail me again. Their giggles made it hard

for me to concentrate, their rapid movements a distraction in my peripheral vision. They had found a hole of their own. It was apparently the remnant of a Lilliputian kingdom constructed the day before, but was abandoned now—nearly filled back in with sand—but still deep enough for the two brothers to enjoy. They both jumped in and then out, and then in again. In and out. In and out. Despite my best efforts to stay focused on my reading, I could not keep from watching them. They must have done that a dozen times, engaged in ceaseless pleasure. As they approached their second dozen descents, their mother beckoned them with lunch. They scooted over to her—the hole forgotten. I watched them as they plopped down on the blanket, and each seized a sandwich and a box of juice. For a moment I remembered Jake at both those younger ages. I recognized this talent for the immediate pleasure delivered in the form of a simple hollow. Briefly, my mind retreated ten years to the day Jake and I went to this beach for the first time and he'd stopped during our walk to explore the ruins of a citadel of sand or the leg of a chest of drawers that had washed ashore.

I shook the image off and endeavored, once again, to recover the narrative of my novel.

By now Robert had stopped digging. He stood nearby, sometimes throwing the ball for the dogs, sometimes watching Jake—who was making real progress. I glanced up from my book to notice huge shovelfuls of sand hurling out like in a cartoon, and Jake, hip deep in his hole, vanishing before my eyes. Syrus stood at the side for a while, then jumped in, then out, then in again. A jogger came down the beach and stopped to look into the hole. "What are you digging?" she asked.

"A hole," Jake answered.

"Just a hole? You're not making a sand castle?"

"No."

"A fort?"

"Nope. Just a hole."

"What are you going to do with it when you're done?"

"Nothing."

She gave me a quizzical look.

I had no response. But now I became intrigued. I watched Jake dig his hole and noticed the intent expression on his face. It brought to my mind a documentary I had seen about some Tibetan monks who make the colorful sand mandalas—so beautiful and impermanent—which are later cast into the sea. They, too, had expressions of complete attention and focus on their faces.

I retrenched my efforts to capture my original intention of reading.

With both hands I tugged my sun hat down tight onto my head and slumped into my chair, raised my knees up toward my chest and propped the book against them—all in an effort to block out the encroaching activity around me. The successful reading of my book became harder and harder to accomplish. *Where was I?* The sun wrapped me in a blanket of warmth; I tried to stay focused but the book's print blurred on the page. My body slackened into the curves of the beach chair, and I reclined its back just one notch—and then I was asleep.

Syrus woke me with a full, four-paw arrival on my beach chair, knocking me over and catapulting my book into the air. I retrieved it but, now wet and gritty, it carried less appeal. I sought out my place again, though, brushing the sandy paw prints off my towel and reconstructing its position on the chair. Returning to chapter three, I couldn't remember what was happening in the story and began rewinding a few pages to remind myself.

Before I could regain my bearings a *flap, flap, flap* sound drew my eyes to the sky. A crimson and royal blue hang glider swept over me, continuing on down the beach and landing 100 yards away. Children with primary-colored, saggy bathing suits sprang over to take in this mercurial visitor; bottle brush-textured terriers and golden retrievers yapped and bellowed at the expansive nylon wings rippling gently in the last breaths of summer.

Instead of returning to my novel, I noticed the little brothers nearby with their mother. The young mother's accented voice lilted its way toward me—Danish, maybe—and her wavy long hair, the color of dune grass, meandered over one shoulder. I watched her and the older boy—a bronzed

four-year-old—both on hands and knees, raking the grainy terrain for shells and other treasures—the toddler riding on her back as if she were a Shetland pony. Her loose Mexican-embroidered blouse dipped softly, nearly sweeping the Earth's floor, her rider's pudgy toes curling up in it from time to time. I found her patient, balmy voice intoxicating. In no hurry, she clearly could move this way all day. I felt myself filling up with respect for her—envy, really. I didn't know until I saw her that I could too easily count the times I allowed Jake to slow me down to that pace, to that exquisite completeness of the moment. That sweet, tender second of their lives was as important as any other—and she was there for it.

Eventually, the two boys ran off toward the water, their voices squealing like the sound of playground swings. Soon Syrus, drawn by the sudden movement, was joining them like a third child in their little party. I noticed the preschooler running differently than the toddler—his leg and hip moving independently. But the toddler was running as if there were no joint, his hip and leg bobbing up and down in unison; he was, indeed, toddling. I never noticed that about toddlers before. They both galloped toward the Pacific, as did Syrus; but when the boys reached the edge of terra firma, they stopped cold, as if the sand itself grabbed their tiny toes. Syrus, on the other hand, barreled on into the frothy waves, biting at flotsam and bobbing kelp bulbs.

Adult voices drew my attention back to Jake. A couple had approached his project and asked him the same question as the jogger—*what are you digging?* They received the same response, and they too looked confused, but Jake made no effort to explain. They walked away. A tan and beige beagle approached next. He looked into the hole and then at Robert's stubby shovel stuck in the sand. Sniffing at the shovel a few times, he raised his leg, peed on it, and trotted off.

While Syrus had returned to his canine delight of perpetual motion in and out of Jake's hole, I found Sadie now beside me, calling it a day. Her steady gaze out to the sea gave her an air of reflection. Watching this matronly dog of mine, so recently Syrus' age, I remembered her as a puppy

curled up and sleeping in my lap on the way home from the breeders. Now her head, threaded with gray, slowly turned from time to time to regard a bird or Frisbee, but then she gracefully returned it to the billows of the sea—staring into the swells, as if hypnotized. I shifted onto my side and inhaled that wet-dog smell I, alone in my family, actually liked. As the sun absorbed the seawater from her fur, it became soft and warm and I stroked it—lost in the rhythm of the motion. Pale brown grains of sand worked their way out as my fingers combed over her. I felt lulled into a deep relaxation as the warmth and stillness of her body radiated to me through my hand.

The rim of the hole encircled Jake's shoulders now, and a man in hiking shorts and a wide-rimmed cotton sunhat walked up. Robert, still standing close by, listened as the hiker told him a story of time spent in a village in India where he watched the villagers dig a well. The alacrity of the people, despite the physical demands of the work, amazed him. The single-mindedness with which they applied themselves to the weeklong task left a permanent impression. Robert listened peacefully. He nodded his head from time to time as the stranger recalled that memorable story from his life. I began to imagine the scene. A village of people all working on one task—no one saying *I can't help; I'm too busy*. No one saying *I'll try to fit it in tomorrow*.

By now my book lay in my lap, the pages turning themselves in the subtle breeze. My body surrendered to the siren call of the warm and perfect day; my legs stretched out in front of me, my shoulders lowered, my neck extended to improve my view. Scanning the teal surf, I caught the sleek profile of a harbor seal as he glided through the curl of a wave. He dove into the foam of a breaker and disappeared. I kept my eyes focused on the spot. Eventually, his head popped up. Remaining visible for a while, he swam toward the northern town of Bolinas. I squinted to see him better and could make out his shadowy eyes and lustrous fur. Whenever he submerged I looked further north in anticipation of where he would surface. He did re-emerge from time to time, but eventually faded from view beneath the white caps. I watched for him until I caught the outline of the

Farallon Islands, floating on the horizon like Avalon. I knew a sighting of these distant islands to be rare, and they would surely fade back into the mist as quickly as they appeared. A white and stone-gray gull intercepted my gaze and returned it to my son.

I began to pay close attention to Jake as he worked his way down through the layers of sedimentary material. Stinson Beach, in particular, is a place that has few whole shells or rocks of significant size on its shores. The pounding of the Pacific must be intense at this part of the vast and connected ocean, because there is little evidence left of what this sand once was: rocks, boulders, cliffs, and the volcanoes that, at one time, erupted relentlessly but now lay dormant, far away, and miles below the farthest sailing ship.

Jake's next observers were two adolescent boys—boogie boards in tow behind them, snail-like trails in their wake. Unlike the adult passersby, the boys didn't ask what he was up to. They looked into the hole while he dug. They watched in silence for a long time. Finally one of them said, "Cool," and then they both moved on. Jake smiled.

I smiled.

By the time the air took on a chill and the beach bags and sun umbrellas of the picnickers were packed, Jake was all but gone into the new world of his own creation. Only his messy brown hair and the tip of his shovel remained evident. My book lay discarded at my side, the bookmark fluttering toward the dunes. I was content to watch Jake in this active meditation, impressed that he kept at it so long for the pure satisfaction of the process. Syrus joined Sadie in the grainy nest beside my chair—his head resting on her stomach, moving with the in and out motion of her breath, both so dredged in sand they looked breaded. Robert stood at the waterline and tossed small stones into the ocean, watching them smack the water and sink. A tall and distinct silhouette against the brilliance of the westward sun, the sight of him calmed me. His focus, now completely on this simple task, satisfied him as much as every other that day. As I watched, it dawned on me this is what drew me to him when we first met: his ability to appreciate where he is.

At last, Jake emerged from the hole. He unfolded himself, brushed the sand off his hands and body, and stared into his masterpiece. He rose so tall, I noticed. When did that happen? His so recently flaxen hair now glistened the color of wet driftwood. The little boy I took to so many beaches overshadowed me, standing on the rim of young adulthood. My eyes filled up with him. He was a moment.

Robert and I joined him beside his creation—the three of us looked down into the well of wet sand where a small pool of saltwater began collecting. But just then Jake took a breath, let it out, and turned his back on the ocean and his hole. “I’m hungry,” he said and walked toward the house.

Robert gathered most of the beach supplies, called the dogs, and headed in as well. I took one last look at the receding day and caught sight of a pelican off shore as she grazed the crest of a wave, gleaning her dinner. Then I joined them.