Louise Intends to Spend the Ocean Voyage Reading Fairy Tales in Her Cabin

Margaret Davis

The voyage at sea is supposed to cure Louise of the scepticism which has become more frequent lately. She often stares at us morosely though we tried all the usual cures. We turned up our noses, snapped our fingers, shrugged, curled our lips, sneezed, whistled, and sneered until, exhausted and disfigured, we almost believed Louise would never return to our senses.

But now here we are in our dear little sailor suits playing "Thar She Blows" with the champagne and tossing flowers to the hoi polloi gathered on the docks. Bon Voyage! Farewell! It is as if we were all going on the trip together and so, to sustain this generous illusion, we lean over the rail, waving and waving and smiling.

This seems lost on Louise, however. We had also hoped to cure her of a disappointing tendency towards the enigmatic. But when we assembled for a fire drill, she addressed us through the captain’s megaphone: "We have lost the ability to make of our lives a glorious moment. Instead we have become the moments of our lives.”

Now Louise won’t play. She won’t ring toss or take a spin around the decks or toss her head fetchingly. Instead she sits in her cabin reading fairy tales.

After some discussion we decide to take a firm stance. We all like Louise, of course, with her whimsical nature, but the thing has gone too far. “Louise,” we boom through the door, “don’t you want to enjoy yourself? A bright young woman schlepping around like this. It reflects badly on all of us: your parents, your friends, all of us.”

She calls, “Scholars are divided on the length of time Sleeping Beauty actually slept. Figures range from five years to five hundred, but in each case (and I believe this is the crux of the thing) the time span is far longer than would be possible for an actual person.”

We look at one another and retreat temporarily.

We like Louise for many reasons, cleanliness not the least of them. She brings to mind many of our favorite words: breeze; rafts; moons (half, full, sliver of a, harvest); fodder; mother; provender. Dry Land.

If we had to name her greatest shortcoming, we would say Louise is unconvinced. We’re all in the same boat, Louise. We will sink or swim together. For every 700 saved, 1,493 will be lost.

“Mm-hmm,” Louise says, turning another page.

In the evenings we gather on deck to read from a book on child care. "The child who learns that its slightest cry will be rewarded with attention becomes a spoiled child. A spoiled child is an unmanageable child. Life is for the most part unpleasant, strict and, in the end, just—though not always fair. To shield a child from Reality fosters cruel illusions.”

This being the case, we are hard pressed to explain Louise’s current unmanageableness.

The papers say dream therapy is all the rage. We try to interest Louise, not even mentioning the time she dreamed of wolves eating her mother. "You mustn’t dream such things about your mother who loves you," we said then. "Promise never again." Having seen the look on her sleeping face, we doubt she has kept the promise anyway. When she says she has no dreams, we remind her of the hours spent asleep in one lifetime. Reckoning two or three dreams per night . . .

Louise says, "Your dreams are sand and furry, dignifying nothing.”

When she is not abusing us, she broods. What about the time her sister shaved all the hair off her Scottie? Or the time someone went through the family album drawing a beard on every photo of Louise? Nothing was proven, though her sister was seen burying a grease pencil in the flower beds.

You needn’t ask yourself if you like your sister or not. You only have to love her. We do the rest. We reprimanded her; we gave her hard looks. We teased her into stuttering and then teased her for stuttering. Occasionally we promise to cure her, which is more than you can do, Louise.

That’s what we’re here for: divide and conquer.

Louise says she intends to wait. She names some of the great waiters, besides Sleeping Beauty; Rapunzel; the Man in the Iron Mask; Cinderella; the 47 Retainers; Penelope; Lady Marian..."

"Just what are you waiting for?"

"For things to get better. They always get better if one only waits long enough (c.f. above list)."

We try to get Louise into the swim of life. We sign petitions; canvass; march for those who can’t; lick stamps; lick ankles; justify the ends (anybody’s); pass resolutions; draft constitutions; uphold the monarchy; the republic; the democracy; run wild in the streets; grit; clenched; do! do! do!

"Very nice," Louise says. "See above list."

We look around and, it is true, nothing has changed . . . But! But everything has shifted around. We say this to one another encouragingly.
A psychological penetration:
"Is it because of your father, Louise?"

Louise's father kisses everyone after breakfast. He's in a hurry, late for work. Goodbye, goodbye! He doesn't come home for supper, but the next day there's a telegram from Texas--"will explain all soon"--but he is never heard from again.

Louise's mother says, "Well, what was he to me, after all?" She calls him "your father" to stress that she, at least, has no biological connection. We take great pains to reassure Louise that she is not to blame for his disappearance, but it seems this is not her preoccupation.

"Can you just do that?" she wonders. "Just sink out of sight without a trace?"

A titanic feat indeed, Louise, but an unfortunate choice of words.

To pass the time she reads us a story. We assemble outside her door, murmuring in our charming way. Louise reads, "Once upon a time there was an imaginary ship full of made-up people. The imaginary ship sped towards a rock which knew itself to exist because it melted a bit every day. This ship--"

Grey mutterings. Undercurrents of displeasure.

Read us another, Louise. She continues anyway, but we refuse to listen, instead mingling together, mixing outrage with skilful insight.

She's excessive, that's what. She reads mockery in our smiles, gives advice where agreement would suffice, tells us more than we want to know, brings up the past, anticipates the worst and says so. Once snubbed, she neither forgives nor forgets. She mocks the men, but she mocks the women, too.

Come out to face reality, Louise. It's not true there is an infinite amount of happiness in the world. You must learn to believe you are content. Perhaps you have already received your share of satisfaction. Have you thought of that?

When your mother finally smiled at you, why wouldn't you respond?

She says: "I have agreed to many things. I promised to be a new and better person. I wore bold colors. I looked people in their eyes instead of their shirt buttons, I ended sentences with exclamation points instead of dots. I resolved! I read can labels."

"But I made no difference. I had no effect. No one has lived happily ever after."

"So you waste your life reading fairy tales."

"If my life is not a story, then stories must be my life."

We become stern. "Suppose everyone said that? Is this any way to be, Louise?"

Of course not.

Or perhaps it is, and she won't say: this is the possibility that keeps us pressing in for a last look at Louise turning the pages of her fairy tales. The door finally closes and she is lost to us, shrunk from view.

At the rear someone begins singing quietly as the first icy waters lap at our ankles.