

Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Reveries of a Solitary Walker*, 1778

Fifth Walk

OF all the places I have inhabited (and I have been in some that were delightful) none ever rendered me so truly happy, or left such pleasing impressions on my memory, as the Island of Saint Pierre, in the Lake of Biene. This little island, which is called at Neufchâtel the Isle of La Motte, is little known, even in Switzerland, no traveller, that I recollect, having mentioned it; notwithstanding it is very agreeable, and peculiarly calculated for the happiness of a man who loves to circumscribe his steps: for though I am, perhaps, the only one in the world to whom Fate has given law in that particular, I cannot believe I am the only person who possesses so natural a taste, though, to the present moment, I have never happened to meet with anyone of that disposition.

The banks of the Lake of Biene are more wild and romantic even than those of the Lake of Geneva, since the rocks and woods approach nearer to the edge of the water, and in other respects are no less delightful. If well cultivated meadows and vineyards are not so numerous; if there are fewer towns and houses, there is more natural verdure, fields, study retreats and groves; in a word, agreeable and well-contrasted objects more frequently present themselves. As there is no commodious road on these smiling banks for carriages, the country is little frequented by travellers; but is highly interesting to the contemplative philosopher, who loves to ruminate at leisure on the charms of Nature, while retiring into a silence broken only by the cry of eagles, the mingled warbling of various song-birds, or the rustling of torrents which precipitate themselves from the surrounding mountains. This beautiful basin, which is almost round, contains near its centre, two small islands; one, cultivated and inhabited, which is about half a league in circumference; the other, smaller, desert and wild, which will in time be totally destroyed, from the transportation of earth, which is continually being removed to repair the devastation made by the waves and storms on the larger one. Thus, in every instance, the substance of the weak; is employed to give additional strength to the powerful. There is but one house at this place, which is large, agreeable, and commodious, this belongs to the hospital of Berne, as does the whole island, and is inhabited by the Steward of this estate, his family and domestics; who has poultry in abundance, a dove house, fish-ponds, lie. The island, though small, is so diversified by its various products and aspect, that it presents a variety of prospects; being proper for every kind of culture, you see alternately, fields, vineyards, orchards, and rich pastures, shaded by groves of trees, and intermingled with shrubs of all kinds, which, from the vicinity of the water are kept perpetually fresh. A high terrace, planted with two rows of trees, runs the whole length of the island, and in the middle of this terrace a pretty saloon is erected, where the inhabitants from the neighbouring shores meet and dance on Sundays, during the vintage. In this island I took refuge, after the lapidation of Môtiers, and found its situation so delightful, and the life I led there so conformable to my humour, that I resolved to end my days in this place, and had no inquietude, except a doubt, whether I should be permitted to execute this project, which did not accord with that which carried me to England, for I already began to feel that inclination, and those presentiments of future suffering which yet pursued me. I wished this asylum had been made my perpetual prison, that I had been confined there for life, and deprived of the power or hope of quitting it; cut off from all communication with the rest of the world, ignorant of what passed there, that I might forget its existence, and that mine also be forgotten.

I was permitted to pass only two months in this island, but I could have passed two years, a whole eternity there, without one moment's weariness, though I had, except Teresa [Thérèse Levasseur], no other company than the above mentioned Steward and his family, who were all very good sort of people, and nothing further; but that was precisely what was necessary for me. I reckon these two months as the most pleasing part of my life; I was so truly happy, that I could have been satisfied with it during my whole existence, without a single wish arising in my soul to exchange that felicity for another kind of enjoyment.

What did this happiness consist of, and what was it I so particularly enjoyed? I leave that to be guessed by the present generation, from the description I shall give of it. The precious *far niente* was the first and principal of these enjoyments, which I indulged unto the utmost extent, and all I did during my residence there, was but the pleasing and necessary occupation of a man devoted to indolence.

The hope that nothing more could be derived by my persecutors than to leave me in this lonely spot, where I had willingly ensnared myself, which, it was impossible for me to quit with privacy or without assistance, and where I could have neither communication or correspondence, but through the medium of those who surrounded me. This inspired me with expectation of concluding my days in more tranquillity than I had hitherto passed them, and the idea that I should have time to settle all at leisure, occasioned me to neglect everything. Hurried there naked and alone, I successively sent for my wife, my books, and some other little necessaries, which I never had the pleasure of unpacking, but left my cares and chests as they arrived, living on the spot where I hoped to conclude my life, as in an inn, which I purposed to quit the next day. I found everything here so perfectly to my mind, that to have made any change would have spoiled all. One of my greatest pleasures was, to leave my books well packed, and to have no ink-stand, and on receiving any troublesome letter, which I was obliged to answer, I borrowed the Steward's, grumbling the whole time, and hastening to return it, with the vain wish that I might have no more occasion for pens or ink. Instead of stupid manuscripts and musty books, I filled my apartment with; flowers and plants, for I was then in the first server of botany, which taste the Doctor d'Invernois [Jean-Antoine d'Invernois of Neuchâtel], had lately inspired me with, and which presently became a passion. Rejecting, therefore, all laborious researches, I was only for studies which suited an indolent life, and would furnish amusement, without much trouble. I undertook to compose: the *Flora Petrinsularis*, and describe all the plants of the island, without a single exception, a detail sufficient to have employed all the rest of my days.

'Tis said that a certain German wrote a book on the zest of a lemon; I should have written one on each herb the field produced, on every kind of moss that adhered to the trees, on each weed that covered and: adorned the rocks; in short, I designed that not a single blade of grass or vegetable atom should escape an ample description.

In consequence of this noble resolution, every morning after breakfast (which we partook of all together) I went, with a magnifying glass in my hand, and my *Systema Natura* under my arm, to visit a certain portion of the island, which I had, for that purpose, divided into four parts, with an intention to explore them successively in each season of the year. Nothing can be more singular than the delight and ecstasy I experienced on each observation of the structure, organization, and action of the sexual parts in the fructification of vegetables; which system was hitherto absolutely new to me. The distinction of generical characters which I traced among common plants till others should present themselves, and which I had not before the least conception of, charmed me beyond measure. The long forked stamina of

the *Brunelle*, the observations I made on those of the nettle and pellitory, the explosion of the fruit of the balsam-apple, and the bud of the box-tree, a thousand little acts of fructification which I observed for the first time, overwhelmed me with delight; I was ready to run to everyone and enquire, whether they had seen the horns of the *Brunelle*, as [Jean de La] Fontaine enquired if anyone had ever read Habakkuk. In two or three hours, I usually returned with an ample provision—a stock of amusement for the employment of the afternoon at home, in case of rain. I employed the rest of the morning, in going with the Steward, his wife, and Teresa, to see the husbandmen, and observe the harvest, usually putting my hand to the work; and frequently, when the inhabitants of Berne came to visit me, they found me perched up in a great tree, girded about with a sack that I was filling with fruit, and which I afterwards let down by a cord. The exercise I had taken in the morning, and the good humour inseparable from it, rendered rest at dinner-time very agreeable, but when it was too long, and the fine weather invited me abroad, I could not spare so much time, and while others were yet at table, I stole away, then leaping into the boat, rowed it to the middle of the Lake, and when the water was calm, laying at my whole length, with my eyes towards Heaven, let it drive slowly with the waters, sometimes, for several hours, enjoying a thousand pleasing, though confused reveries, which, without any particular and fixed object, were, in my opinion, an hundred times preferable to what I had ever found among the most delightful of what are called the pleasures of life. Sometimes on being informed by the declination of the Sun, that it was time to return home, I found myself so far from the island, that I was obliged to labour with my utmost strength to reach it before night.

At other times, instead of passing my time on the water, I amused myself in walking along the verdant banks of the island, where the limpid waters and refreshing shades frequently invited me to bathe; but one of my most customary excursions, was a voyage to the small island, where I used to disembark, and pass the afternoon in extremely circumscribed walks, in the midst of water-pepper, thistles, rook-stalk, and shrubs of every kind. Sometimes reposing on the top of a sandy hillock, covered with graft, wild thyme, flowers, and even clover, which possibly had been sown there formerly, and was very proper nourishment for rabbits, who might multiply there in peace, without fear for themselves, or injury to anything. I made this remark to the Steward, who sent to Neufchatel for some rabbits, and went with great ceremony, accompanied by his wife, one of his sisters, Teresa, and myself, to establish them on this little island, which they began to people before my departure, and where, without doubt, they continued to increase, if they could sustain the rigor of the winter. The planting of this little colony was a holiday, and the pilot of the Argonauts could not have been prouder of his office than I was on that occasion, while taking the company and rabbits from the large to the small island; nor did I forget to remark, that the Steward's wife, who was extremely apprehensive of water, embarked with confidence under my care, and showed no signs of fear during the passage.

When the Lake was too much agitated to permit my navigating it with safety, I passed the afternoon in walking through the island, herbalizing in all parts, or seating myself on some pleasant solitary spot, enjoyed at ease the charm of contemplation. At other times, I gained the natural terraces and heights of the island, from whence my eye ran over the magnificent and delightful prospect of the Lake and its shores, crowned on one side by the neighbouring mountains, exhibiting on the other a view of open and richly cultivated plains, beyond which the sight was lost among the bluish mountains which bounded the horizon. On the approach of night, I descended from these eminences, and, seated on the sands at the edge of the Lake, or in some concealed retreat, where the roaring of the waves, and commotion of the waters

taking my attention, chased the idea of every other agitation from my soul, plunging it into delicious reveries, during which night frequently stole on me unperceived.

The ebb and flow of the water, its continual noise, increased at intervals by the wind, perpetually striking on the organs of sight and hearing, kept up those inward sensations which my reveries almost extinguished, just enough to make me sensible of my existence, without the trouble of reflection; and if at times some comparisons occurred On the instability of worldly concerns, which were aptly compared to the troubled face of the waters, these light impressions were quickly effaced by the continued uniformity of the scene. Charmed, without any active concurrence of my soul, I felt myself so powerfully attached to the spot, that when informed by night and the appointed signal, that it was time to return, I could not quit it without regret.

After supper, when the evening was fine, we walked all together on the terrace, and breathed the fresh air from the Lake, or, seated, in the pavilion, laughed, chatted, or sung some good old songs, which were preferable to the laboured composition of our modern ones; and, at length, retired to rest, content with the pleasures of the day, and desirous of spending the succeeding one in a similar manner.

Thus passed my time, during my residence on this island, when not interrupted by unforeseen and troublesome visitors. But what was there in all this sufficiently attractive to excite in my heart regrets so lively, tender, and durable, that after fifteen years, it is impossible to think of this beloved habitation, without feeling myself in a manner transported thither by the ardour of my wishes?

I have remarked during the vicissitudes of a long life, that the periods of sweetest enjoyment, and most lively pleasure, are not those whose remembrance wins and delights me most. These moments of delirium and passion, however charming they might be, appear from their vivacity itself, but as points thinly scattered along the line of life, being too detached and rapid to constitute any permanent idea of felicity. The happiness my heart regrets is not composed of fugitive moments, but is an uniform and lasting condition, which has nothing ravishing in itself, but whose continuation increases the charm, till at length it arrives at supreme felicity.

Everything fluctuates on earth; nothing remains in a constant and lasting form, and those affections which are attached to external things necessarily change with their object. We are ever looking forward or backward, ruminating on what is past, and can return no more, or anticipating the future, which may never arrive; there is nothing solid to which the heart can attach, itself, neither have we here below any pleasures that are lasting. Permanent, happiness is, I fear, unknown, and scarcely is there an instant in our most lively enjoyments when the heart can truly say, *May this moment last forever!!!* How then can such a fugitive state be called happiness, which leaves an uneasy void in the heart, which ever prompts us to regret something that is past, or desire something for the future?

But if there is a state where the soul can find a hold strong enough to lean on securely, to attach its whole being to, without a single wish to recall the past or anticipate the future, where time appears avoid, and the present is extended without our noticing its duration, or tracing its successions without any idea of privation or enjoyment, pleasure or pain, desire, fear, or sensation, except of our existence, that sentiment alone employing it, while this state lasts, the person who feels it may call himself happy; not possessing an imperfect happiness,

poor and dependent, but a complete felicity, perfect and full, which leaves no wish or void in the soul.

Such is the state in which I frequently found myself in the island of Saint Pierre, in my solitary reveries; whether stretched in a boat which I let float to the will of the waters, seated on the banks of the agitated Lake, on the borders of a beautiful river, or by a brook murmuring over its pebbled bottom.

In what does the enjoyment of such a situation consist? In nothing beyond ourselves, nothing foreign to our own existence, for while this state lasts (like the supreme) the enjoyment of that alone is sufficient felicity. The consciousness of existence, divested of every other sensation, is a sentiment of contentment and peace, which alone suffices to render it dear and satisfactory to whoever can put away those sensual and earthly affections which perpetually disturb and embitter our terrestrial felicity.

But the greater part of mankind, agitated by continual passions, are little acquainted with this state, and having imperfectly enjoyed it, during a few instants, perhaps, thence form a very inadequate idea, which prevents their feeling its worth. Perhaps it might not be convenient, in the present order of things, that, lost in pleasing ecstasies, mankind should be disgusted with an active life, since their multiplied wants have prescribed it as a duty. But an unfortunate being, cut off from human society, who can no longer perform anything useful here below, either for himself or others, may find in this state a pleasing consolation, which neither fortune or man can deprive him of.

It is true that these consolations cannot be felt by all minds, nor in all situations. It is necessary that the heart should be at peace, that no passion should arise to disturb this calm; it requires not only a disposition adapted to it on the part of the person who is to experience this felicity, but a concurrence of surrounding objects; neither an absolute repose, or too much agitation but an uniform form and moderate disposition, not subject to sudden gusts of passion, or utter despondency.—Without motion, life is but a lethargy; but if the agitation is unequal, or too violent, it awakens our feelings, fixes them too much on external objects, destroys the pleasure of the reverie, and, tearing us from ourselves, instantly replaces us under the yoke of fortune and mankind, giving us back the sensation of our misfortunes. Absolute rest is productive of melancholy, and presents the image of death; then the assistance of a cheerful imagination is necessary, which voluntarily presents its aid to those on whom Heaven has bestowed it. This degree of emotion, therefore, if not supplied by outward objects, should arise from within ourselves; this lessens our repose 'tis true, but it is also more agreeable, when the inward soul does nothing more than lightly touch the surface. There should be only just enough to recollect ourselves, and forget all our misfortunes. This kind of reverie may be enjoyed in every situation where we can obtain tranquillity; and I have often thought that in the Bastille, or in a dungeon, where no object struck my sight, I could enjoy agreeable contemplations.

It must be allowed, these were more agreeably produced in a fertile, though solitary island, naturally circumscribed and detached from the rest of the world, where nothing but smiling objects presented themselves, where no painful remembrances were recalled, and where the society of a small number of inhabitants was connected and pleasing, without being sufficiently interesting to occupy me entirely; where, in fine, I could either give myself up for the whole day to those occupations which were most comfortable to my disposition, or to the most luxurious indolence. The occasion was, doubtless, delightful, and a contemplative mind,

that could even produce agreeable chimeras, when surrounded by displeasing objects, could enjoy itself completely when presented with a concurrence of every charm that could fill the senses with delight. Awaking from a long and charming reverie, beholding myself surfeited by verdure, flowers and birds, letting my senses wander to the distant romantic shores and vast extent of crystalline waters, I connected all those pleasing objects with my fictitious enjoyments, and returning by degrees to my reason, could scarcely distinguish the point of separation between ideal and real delights; so much did everything concur to complete the happiness of that quiet solitary life I led in this charming abode. Why cannot I recall it? Why cannot I go and finish my days in that peaceful life, without ever quitting it, or seeing any inhabitant of the continent, who might once recall those calamities of all kinds, which have been showered on me during so many years? Delivered from all earthly passions which are engendered by the tumults of society, my soul would frequently bound above its atmosphere, and anticipate its communion with those celestial intelligences whose number it shortly hopes to augment. I know mankind will beware of affording so quiet an asylum, but they cannot prevent me from transporting myself each day on the wings of imagination to that happy spot, and enjoying, for some hours, the pleasure I tasted while I dwelt there. Was I on that island, my pleasing reveries might be more conveniently enjoyed; but if I can imagine myself there, is it not the same thing? It is frequently more; for in addition to abstract and monotonous contemplation, I join every charming idea that could vivify the scene. Real objects frequently escape my senses, during these ecstasies; but the more profound my reveries, the more expressively they represent ideal ones. I am frequently in the midst of these delights, and they appear even more charming than when on the island of Saint Pierre I actually beheld them.

The misfortune is, that as imagination cools, they are represented with more difficulty, and are of shorter duration—Alas! 'tis when we are about to quit this mortal covering, that we are most embarrassed with it.