

## To Be · *Barbara Grizzuti Harrison*

“LIFE IS TERRIBLE,” Joel said. This sentence gave him evident pleasure. “No, it is not,” Laura said. He is indecent, she thought. “It is full of joy and delight and our troubles are of our own making,” she said. She did not entirely believe this, how could one. But it vexed her to see Joel sitting in his sunny kitchen, rolling his own cigarettes—he could well afford to buy cigarettes—discoursing with relish on the terribleness of life, his own life in smooth working order. He sits at a round oak table and sleeps in a brass double bed, how can he say life is terrible, Laura thought; he would probably declare against happiness in the Pantheon. Laura had been wont, in times past, to judge people by their response to the Pantheon, which she had experienced as a place of perfect happiness and safety, as proof in fact that the world was good. She would like to have skated on a sheet of thin ice over the marble floor of the Pantheon while clouds drifted over the round aperture above. Joel said her aesthetic appreciation—that is what he called it—was a matter of upper-class social conditioning; he put it to her that the Pantheon reminded her of the dome of a Wall Street bank. “Why don’t you read the *Autobiography of Benvenuto Cellini*?” Laura now said, giggling—a Wall Street bank!—“it will inspire you with joy.” She had herself just reread the *Autobiography of Benvenuto Cellini*, and it had inspired her with joy. Miriam, Joel’s wife, who was chopping scallions at the marble counter, looked at Laura with pity. The line between pity and condescension is a fine one, Laura thought; and, the last thing Miriam and Joel wish to have brought to their attention is that happiness is generally available, she thought. They pitied Laura because, in their company, she professed to believe in the availability of happiness, a profession of faith which did not jibe with their own peculiar ideology. Laura herself was unhappy.

“What?” she said.

Joel was talking, as Laura contemplated her unhappiness, about some recent manifestation of Class Oppression and—this was a new one—Tribality. Laura declined to talk about Tribality, whatever that was. “The world does not consist of conspiracies,” she said, hoping to fend off the inevitable discussion of who was in league with whom to destroy the Third World, of which Miriam and Joel—for reasons that Laura had heard many

times but refused to make an effort of the imagination to comprehend—considered themselves satellites. Miriam and Joel sighed in unison. “The world does not consist of people conspiring,” Laura said. Actually Laura was not quite sure she wished to fend off a discussion of conspiracies, as, while she herself made no great claim to sanity, she liked, from time to time, to receive proof that Joel and Miriam were crackers. At least, she thought, I am not smug.

“They’re all the same people,” Miriam said.

“*Who* are all the same people?” Laura said. “Is Benvenuto Cellini in on the conspiracy?” she said.

Miriam and Joel exchanged glances. Miriam was scraping ginger with which to season a sirloin steak.

“For example,” Joel said, “could you argue that the old lady downstairs visits her troubles upon herself?” This rendered Laura mute. The old lady downstairs was about to be evicted, her children having abandoned her, which event Joel laboriously traced to the far-reaching tendrils and the cunning contrivances of the multinational corporations and in particular to southern bankers. “I hate Freud and Marx with an equal passion,” Laura said. “Perhaps we could give the old lady downstairs a share of the sirloin, it might considerably lighten her oppression.”

“The Israeli Mafia is in league with the Soviets,” Joel said, “and the role of the multinationals is clear when you consider. . . .”

“Why don’t we invite the old lady up for dinner?” Laura said.

“The steak is ready,” Miriam said, setting three places.

“What you lack,” Joel said, “is a world view.” That is true, Laura thought; and this plunged her into depression.

Laura had had a falling-out with Joel months before. He had tried to establish himself as her mentor at the community college where he held, tenuously, a post in the sociology department, and where Laura taught Freshman Italian. In addition to lacking a world view, Laura lacked a mentor (she was also, at this time in her life, short on friends); and for a while she amused herself, while trying simultaneously to take their preposterous views seriously, by listening to Joel and Miriam carry on about the impossibility of achieving happiness in a class-ridden society. Then one day she had said, “You are truly preposterous, you have no idea how real people live in the real world, the real world is not made up of oppressed and op-

pressors, it is made up of people—more or less happy, good or bad depending on their degree of ignorance—of whom I am one, and why I listen to you at all I can't imagine.”

“You have been conditioned,” Joel said.

“ . . . yes, at the beauty parlor,” Laura said, after which they had not spoken.

This evening she had met Joel at the butcher's, and he'd invited her to dinner, and, her unhappiness having taken the form of lethargy, she had consented to go with him. This obliged her to walk up six flights of stairs to Joel and Miriam's shabby-by-intent apartment; and this predisposed her to anger, inasmuch as Joel and Miriam could well have afforded to buy the building in which they lived, all this laboring up stairs being an affectation in aid of exactly what Laura could not be expected to understand.

“Living in Italy disqualified you for understanding real life,” Joel said.

Laura had lived in Rome, quite happily, for ten years, until she had been robbed and raped in Trastevere. There she had lived in a six-flight walk-up—and what cruel steps they were—but the reward for her exertions had been a view of St. Peter's and a terrace on which jasmine and oleander grew. “Rome, however,” she said, “is the real world, why is any one place any less real than any other place?”

“I thought you liked bean sprouts,” Miriam said. “Have some more.”

“He pays lip service to social justice but he supports Opus Dei,” Joel said, “he” being the Pope.

In Rome Laura had seriously considered the demands of the Catholic Church and had judged them outrageous. Were I a Catholic, she thought now, I should have to love Joel and Miriam, an impossibility. Then she thought of these words of Blake: “To love thine enemies is to betray thy friends/That is surely not what Christ intends.” She saw the point. Seeing the point ruled out having a world view—at least one that emanated from Rome; and, having spoken the truth when she said she hated Marx and Freud with an equal passion, where exactly did that leave her?

“Have some more steak,” Miriam said; “the dog doesn't like ginger.”

Laura went home to find her daughter reading Edith Wharton. “How's Edith Wharton?” Laura said. Laura's daughter looked up from her book and crossed her eyes. “When you were fifteen months old,” Laura said, “you spoke English and Italian. How is it that now you hardly utter

either, can you tell me that?" Laura's daughter vouchsafed no reply. Perhaps she's forming a World View, Laura thought; God help me.

At two in the morning Laura decided to write down randomly ten things she loved:

Baroque churches—Gesú, St. Augustino, St. Ignazio. She counted this as one love.

*Granite de café.*

*Penne all'arrabbiata.*

Caravaggio.

Frank Sinatra.

"I Know Where I'm Going," a movie *circa* 1939 in which Wendy Hillyer and Roger Livsey live Happily Ever After, she a fiercely independent, prickly, bank clerk's daughter who aspires to wealth, he a tender, impoverished Scottish laird blessed with exquisite manners and dedicated to the concept of *noblesse oblige*. ("A wartime propoganda film that conveys subtle messages about Class," Joel had said when she taped this movie on his VCR; "a way to lull the British working-class into believing the war would unite all classes." "I don't receive subtle messages," Laura had said; "subtle messages are lost on me. They loved each other and that's good enough for me.")

The New York skyline.

Her daughter's flesh.

Her father, dead.

Jasmine, white.

The Piazza in Piscinula. She thought of the three masked men who had robbed and raped her in an alley in Trastevere, crossed off Piazza in Piscinula, then, after some consideration, reinstated it.

Her list had come to eleven. She crossed off *penne all'arrabbiata*. Then she added:

Bittersweet chocolate and the Pantheon.

She looked at her list. It did not in her opinion add up to anything approaching a world view. Laura reckoned it might be therapeutic if she now made a list of ten important questions, important to her: Can stupidity ever be harmless? Is sensation more important than intellect? Is the one contingent upon the other? Her heart was not in it. Bored by the puerility of what she had caused to be on paper, she went to her daughter's

room. The child was still reading Edith Wharton. "How would you like to go back to Rome?" Laura said. Laura's daughter dropped her book and ostentatiously feigned sleep.

The next night Laura received a call from a friend of Joel and Miriam's, a man called Steve whom she intensely disliked in spite of the fact that he'd been hospitalized for schizophrenia, which fact, Laura thought, ought to have triggered her compassion but did not. Can one be latently compassionate, she wondered, as Steve babbled on. In Italy there was a law that declared there were no insane people, as a result of which schizophrenics and other crazy people freely roamed the streets, a contributing factor to her returning home to New York, where also crazies roamed the streets. Steve wanted her to join a protest march, something to do with a blind man with a German Shepherd who was being evicted from his apartment. "I can't make it that night," Laura said, "sorry."

"I haven't told you what night," Steve said; "it's day."

"I can't stand crowds," Laura said.

"There probably won't be more than four or five of us," Steve said.

"In which case it will do no good," Laura said; "look, I'm very sorry, I'm busy marking papers." This was a lie.

Laura called Pan Am and TWA to find out what the airfare was to Rome. She made six separate calls to six separate agents, booked six tickets, two in first-class, two in business-class, and two in economy-class (which she refused to call *coach*).

At school the next day she avoided Joel; this was made easy for her, as Joel seemed bent upon avoiding her. In her afternoon class she conjugated the verb *essere*: To Be. *I want to be in bed with Joel*. This thought darted through her mind. It surprised but did not alarm her. She scrutinized it with interest. Laura had not been to bed with anyone since the night of the three masked men—two years. Joel, to whom in the early days of their friendship she had related the events of that night, explained it as a function of Class Oppression. Laura, he said, was merely a symbol to these men of all that had made their lives mean, and their violence had had little to do with her—*per se*." A function of my walking down a dark alley, a function of my being in the wrong place at the wrong time, she thought. She had not felt like a symbol at the time. But she had permitted herself to draw some comfort from Joel's words; they gentled her into believing that

neither had she, Laura, been chosen, nor (by her congenital wooly-mindedness which sometimes gathered itself into an orb — this is how she imaged it — of flaming concentration, but which had not done so on the night of the attack) had she, Laura, chosen her rape or her rapists. Laura thought of her mind as a series of twisting dark alleys in which were contained memory and desire and which sometimes led to a round place of blazing light. She often saw herself walking through her own mind; but she could never anticipate the coming of the light. What an idiot, she thought. Then she examined the sentence she had spoken silently, and thought: Who is the idiot in that sentence, Joel? or me?

Laura invited Joel and Miriam to dinner, the origins of this impulse being obscure to her. It seemed in some way connected with her daughter, Laura did not know how — Oh if life consisted only of conjugating verbs. Joel and Miriam would expect Italian food, Laura was an excellent cook. She decided to cook Indian food, curry being a mystery to her; she wanted to see Joel eating with his fingers, for reasons she thought might become clear to her sooner or later.

The curry, of repellent texture, color, and odor, dribbled on Joel's beard. He pronounced it too mild, which was the least of its problems. Laura watched in fascination as the yellow-gray stuff mingled with the black-gray of his beard. Miriam ate fastidiously insofar as that was possible. Laura's daughter ate with *Portrait of a Lady* propped up against her water glass. Joel began, as he helped himself to more of the mess, to expound upon the reasons for hunger in the Third World, a turn of events Laura had anticipated and in equal measure dreaded and hoped for, as she knew it would provoke her to wrath, an emotion she had, since the night of the ginger-steak, wished very much to experience in Joel's presence.

"I'm going back to Rome," Laura said, aborting the conversation about hunger, which had not succeeded in making her sufficiently angry.

"What do you think about that?" Miriam asked Laura's daughter.

"Ask her what she *feels*, thinking is not instructive in this regard," Laura said.

Laura's daughter turned the page of her book with her left hand.

Joel proceeded to talk about the origins of tribality on the subcontinent.

"I don't suppose anyone cares to take me seriously," Laura said. "I'm going back to Rome. A fact. A real fact. Hello? Anybody there?"

“How do you feel about Henry James?” Miriam asked Laura’s daughter.

“Oh my God,” Laura said. “Ask her to conjugate *to be* and *to feel* in Italian,” she said. “Do you know there is no exact equivalent for the English *to feel* in Italian? I find that more interesting than Pakistan and Lord Mountbatten, to tell the truth.”

Steve called while Joel and Miriam were helping themselves to thirds. “I’m afraid you have the wrong number,” Laura said, disguising her voice with facility.

Laura’s daughter said, in her clear, high voice, “My mother lies.”

“That is true,” Laura said. “I see you’ve found your voice, however.”

*Sono, sei, è, siamo siete, sono, sarò, ero, eri, era, eravamo, eravate, erano,*” Laura’s daughter said.

Laura was suddenly immensely happy, and immediately began to question from which direction her happiness had come.

“What is the difference between happiness and joy?” she asked.

“It comes and it goes,” Laura’s daughter said.

“Which does?”

Laura’s daughter crossed her eyes.

Laura asked Miriam to name ten things she loved—“or eleven.” Miriam gave this request such earnest and prolonged attention, never once looking at Joel, that Laura was moved to silent mirth; her happiness expanded, as a result of which she pinched her daughter’s thigh. Miriam was still pondering when Joel said, “Laura, may I see you alone? About that business at school.”

Laura was on the point of asking, *What business?* but did not, and allowed herself to be led into the living room. There Joel kissed her, a very wet and very garlicky kiss which Laura entertained but did not return.

“Don’t go,” Joel said.

“We can’t stay here forever, there’s salad and dessert,” Laura said.

“Don’t go to Rome,” Joel said.

*Forse ché si, forse ché no,*” Laura said. “Wipe that goo off your beard.”

In the kitchen Laura’s daughter was singing. She was singing *Giovani-tsa*, the Fascist youth anthem. Miriam, who did not know it was the Fascist youth anthem, was smiling benignly upon her.

“Dear me, where did you learn that?” Laura said.

“Grandpa,” the child answered.

“Naughty of him,” Laura said.

“Why was it naughty?” asked Miriam, handling the word naughty as if it were itself suspect; it was not in her vocabulary.

“I prefer my mother’s lies,” Laura’s daughter said. Laura correctly interpreted this sentence to mean that her daughter did not like Joel and Miriam.

“What I want to know,” Laura said, addressing her daughter, “is, do you have a world view?” Laura’s daughter crossed her eyes. Joel dipped his napkin in his glass and applied it to his beard. Miriam asked for a finger bowl.

“*Fingerbowl!*” Laura’s daughter said. She tugged at Laura’s hair, letting her hand rest for a moment on the back of Laura’s neck.

Laura’s feelings went on a collision course. Her feelings were: pity for Joel and Miriam, a pained love for her daughter’s flesh, and—oh let it not be fleeting, she prayed—a clear and unmistakable roundness of joy.