

71 QUOTATIONS



Mary McCarthy

(1912-1989)

GIRLHOOD

I knew perfectly well that children could not pray to be delivered to evil and was only being clever.

As a schoolgirl, she had exchanged dirty jokes with the college boys from Eugene and seen them stop the car and lunge at her across the gearshift.

EDUCATION

What they wanted to introduce into their region was a center of "personalized" education, with courses tailored to the individual need, like their own foundation-garments.

Vassar had inspired us with the notion that the wide, wide world was our oyster. A few years later, a census was taken, and it was discovered that the average Vassar graduate had two-plus children and was married to a Republican lawyer.

Whenever, during the summer, he took a party of students abroad under his genial wing, catastrophic events attended him. As he sat sipping his vermouth and introducing himself to tourists at the Flore or the Deux Magots, the boys and girls under his guidance were being robbed, eloping to Italy, losing their passports, slipping off to Monte Carlo, seeking out an abortionist, deciding to turn queer, cabling the decision to their parents, while he took out his watch and wondered why they were late in meeting him for the expedition to Saint-Germain-en-Laye.

IDEAS

Points in the argument clicked like bright billiard balls.

The idea seemed so obvious, like a store waiting to be robbed.

The remark dropped like a stone into the pool of silence, setting up echoes of itself, little ripples of sound that spread and spread and finally died away.

Both held the advanced ideas that had been current in the eighteen-sixties and that remained advanced in the present era, though with a certain pathos, like an old hat that has never been worn.

The ideas he put forward, familiar enough when clothed in their usual phraseology, emerged in his writing in a state of undress that made them look exciting and almost new, just as a woman whom one has known for years is always something of a surprise without her clothes on.

Mr. Sheer could shut off sections of his life, as a submarine can shut off compartments, and still survive.

Venice, as a city, was a foundling, floating upon the waters like Moses in his basket.

The old car was a cartoon of man's afflictions, out of *Job* by Laurel and Hardy.

AMERICA

Life for the European is a career; for the American it is a hazard.

It is not the poet but the silver-tongued lawyer who is our real national bard.

The theater is the only branch of art much cared for by people of wealth; like canasta, it does away with the bother of talk after dinner.

The inalienable rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness appear, in practice, to have become the inalienable right to a bathtub, a flush toilet, and a can of Spam.

The American character looks always as if it had just had a bad haircut, which gives it, in our eyes at any rate, a greater humanity than the European, which even among its beggars has an all too professional air.

It has to be acknowledged that in capitalist society, with its herds of hippies, originality has become a sort of fringe benefit, a mere convention, accepted obsolescence, the Beatnik model being turned in for the Hippie model, as though strangely obedient to capitalist laws of marketing.

The immense popularity of American movies abroad demonstrates that Europe is the unfinished negative of which America is the proof.

POLITICS

Scratch a socialist and you find a snob.

Bureaucracy, the rule of no one, has become the modern form of despotism.

The truth was that...her proletarian sympathies constituted a sort of snub that she administered to the middle class, just as a really smart woman will outdress her friends by relentlessly underdressing them.

Marxism was to become for Jim's generation what an actress had been for the youths of the Gilded Age. During the first years of the New Deal, there were many flirtations.

He could not drop into the life of a Communist front man, because this would have involved a suspension of individual judgment, a surgical sterilization of the moral faculty.

He thought that you could probably trust Mr. Roosevelt and Comrade Stalin to abrogate liberty only just so much as was absolutely necessary--and always in the right direction, that is, to abrogate your opponent's liberty rather than your own.

What I was witnessing was the breakup of the Party's virtual monopoly on the thought of the left. Among the writers who had been converted to Marxism by the Depression, Farrell was one of the first to free himself.... An orthodoxy was cracking, like ice floes on the Volga.

Every word she [Lillian Hellman, Communist] writes is a lie, including *and* and *the*.

SEX

Every age has a keyhole to which its eye is pasted.

A doubt would suddenly dart out of her, like a mouse from its hole.

She held herself stony in his embrace, and felt indeed like a rock being lapped by some importunate wave.

It was getting rather alarming. I realized one day that in twenty-four hours I had slept with three different men. And one morning I was in bed with somebody while over his head I talked on the telephone with someone else... I did not feel promiscuous. Maybe no one does.

By a queer reversal, the very safety pin in her underwear, which she had blushed for earlier in the morning, came to look to her now like a symbol of moral fastidiousness, just as the sores of a mendicant saint can, if thought of in the right way, testify to his spiritual health.

This freedom of speech of hers was a kind of masquerade of sexuality, like the rubber breasts that homosexuals put on for drags, but, like the dummy breasts, its brazenness betrayed it: it was a poor copy and a hostile travesty all at once.

A proud, bitter smile formed on her lips, as she saw herself as a citadel of socialist virginity, that could be taken and taken again, but never truly subdued.

She fought him off, though she had an inclination to yield, if only to re-establish ascendancy over him.

She seemed preoccupied, bored, polite. It was like kissing Nancy when she had toast in the toaster.

So finally I agreed to marry Wilson as my punishment for having gone to bed with him.

I get stupid in solitude.

You say your husband can't sleep with you because you're a "good woman." I suggest you enlighten him. Tell him what you do with Harald. And about the progressive school teacher with the wife and six children. That ought to get his pecker up. And have him take a look at this apartment. And at the ring around your neck. If a man slept with you, you'd leave a ring around him. Like your bathtub.

MEN

He squinted on his partner from a knot-hole of male assurance.

He felt a harsh desire to initiate that innocence, to ply it with brute facts, like drink.

He lowered the pitch of his feeling; his thoughts went on tiptoe, gently, circling round her.

He was deferential, ingratiating, concerned for your pleasure, like a waiter with a tray of French pastry in his hand.

He held her in suspense for a moment--like a conductor, she thought, with raised baton over the woodwinds of her feelings.

Their Anglo-Saxon sense of fair play was warm for a moment between them--he could feel it in his stomach like a shot of whiskey.

Every word he uttered had a weight of great consideration, and his deep young voice creaked, like a pair of high shoes ascending a dark stairway with precaution.

As happens with sports and hobbies, his enjoyment was solemnized by expertise, the rites of comparing, collating, a half-deliberate parody of scholarship like the recitation of batting averages.

I never gave her anything to be jealous of. I protected her. Whenever I slept with a woman, I made sure Kay could never find out. That meant I could never break clean with them. No matter how fed up I was.

The very notion of assignations, trysts, affected him in much the same way that the notion of crop rotation affects the American farmer.

I feel as if I had gotten somebody with child in the course of an innocent flirtation.

She had showed him the cage of his own nature.

He began to feel joyfully unhappy.

WOMEN

She was not one of those happy trouble-makers who toss the apple of discord around as though it were a child's ball.

I'm afraid I'm not sufficiently inhibited about the things that other women are inhibited about for me. They feel that you've given away trade secrets.

Her voice was like a pointer, moving sharply on a map or blackboard, which gave her an air of authoritative impersonality, though as a matter of fact she was congenitally nervous and suffered from intermittent eczema, asthma, shingles, and all the usual disorders of the repressed female brain-worker.

It was a peculiarity of this woman poet that she turned her whole body slowly from the waist when addressed by a new interlocutor, as though she were an obliging ear-trumpet maneuvering into position to take account of some strange new noise reaching her from afar.

WOMEN'S LIBERATION

She was exactly as gallant as a soldier who moves forward flourishing the standard, because he knows that if he does not do so, his officers will shoot him in the back.

Her tone, he thought, was precisely that of an army officer who professes to hate war.

You use your wonderful scruples as an excuse for acting like a bitch.

Nobody had told me that I was also the sister of the Harpies.

She had been driven by the demon of arrogance.

She could not bear to hurt her husband. She impressed this on the Young Man, on her confidantes, and finally on her husband himself. The thought of Telling Him actually made her heart turn over in a sudden and sickening way, she said. This was true, and yet she knew that being a potential divorcee was deeply pleasurable in somewhat the same way that being an engaged girl had been.... It was as if by the mere act of betraying her husband, she had adequately bested him... She and the Young Man began to tell each other in a rather breathless and literary style that the Situation Was Impossible, and Things Couldn't Go On This Way Any Longer....The gossip-value of a divorce and remarriage was obviously far greater than the gossip-value of a mere engagement, and she was now ready, indeed hungry, to hear What People Would Say.... ["Cruel and Barbarous Treatment"]

RELIGION

The teachings of the Church did not interest her [grandmother], except as they were a rebuke to others.

The company of saints appears as a community of equals, sandaled pioneers of a model Republic.

THE END

The happy ending is a national belief.

In morals as in politics anarchy is not for the weak.

The true self, like the poor relation, must be taught to keep his distance.

If someone tells you he is going to make a "realistic" decision, you immediately understand that he has resolved to do something bad.

To know God and yet do evil, this was the very essence of the romantic life.

The sizzling chop...appalled her, as though it were a foretaste of eternity.

Michael Hollister (2020)