

HERMAN WOULF

AUTHOR OF WAR AND REMEMBRANCE



Marjorie Morningstar

—A TIMELESS LOVE STORY!



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Marjorie Morningstar

A Novel by
HERMAN WOUK



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TO THE MEMORY OF
MY FATHER
ABRAHAM ISAAC WOUK
1889-1942

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I • Marjorie

1

MARJORIE

Customs of courtship vary greatly in different times and places, but the way the thing happens to be done here and now always seems the only natural way to do it.

Marjorie's mother looked in on her sleeping daughter at half past ten of a Sunday morning with feelings of puzzlement and dread. She disapproved of everything she saw. She disapproved of the expensive black silk evening dress crumpled on a chair, the pink frothy underwear thrown on top of the dress, the stockings like dead snakes on the floor, the brown wilting gardenias on the desk. Above all she disapproved of the beautiful seventeen-year-old girl lying happily asleep on a costly oversize bed in a square of golden sunlight, her hair a disordered brown mass of curls, her red mouth streaked with crackling purplish paint, her breathing peaceful and regular through her fine little nose. Marjorie was recovering from a college dance. She looked sweetly innocent asleep; but her mother feared that this picture was deceptive, remembering drunken male laughter in the foyer at 3 A.M., and subdued girlish giggles, and tiptoeing noises past her bedroom. Marjorie's mother did not get much sleep when her daughter went to

a college dance. But she had no thought of trying to stop her; it was the way boys met girls nowadays. College dances had formed no part of the courtship manners of her own girlhood, but she tried to move with the times. She sighed, took the dying flowers to try to preserve them in the refrigerator, and went out, softly closing the door.

The slight noise woke Marjorie. She opened large blue-gray eyes, rolled her head to glance at the window, then sat up eagerly. The day was brilliantly clear and fine. She jumped from the bed in her white nightgown, and ran to the window and looked out.

It was one of the many charms of the El Dorado that it faced Central Park. Here on the seventeenth floor there was no one to peer in on her nakedness but the birds of the air. This fact, even more than the spacious view of the green park and the skyscrapers, gave Marjorie a sense of luxury each day when she awoke. She had enjoyed this freedom from prying eyes for less than a year. Marjorie loved everything about the El Dorado, even the name. "El Dorado" was perfectly suited to an apartment building on Central Park West. It had a fine foreign sound to it. There were two categories of foreignness in Marjorie's outlook: high foreign, like French restaurants, British riding clothes, and the name El Dorado; and low foreign, like her parents. By moving to the El Dorado on Central Park West her parents had done much, Marjorie believed, to make up for their immigrant origin. She was grateful to them for this, and proud of them.

What a wonderful day it was for horseback riding! The warm breeze smelled of new grass, here seventeen floors above the murmuring auto traffic. The sky was bright blue, with little white tufts of cloud, and the green park was tufted with white too where cherry trees were blossoming. She felt unbelievably good as recollections of last night came back to her. She hugged herself with pleasure, crossing her arms and clutching her bare pretty shoulders with her hands.

Her dreams of the gawky days of thirteen and fourteen had come true, and more than true. Four years ago she had scampered and squealed with other skinny dirty little

girls in the playgrounds of Bronx public schools. Last night she had walked on the moonlit grounds of Columbia College. She had faintly heard the young men who lived in the dormitories shouting and laughing, a wonderful rich male noise. She had danced in a wood-panelled hall decorated with colored lanterns and great blue flags, and sometimes she had been only inches away from the smiling band leader, a famous man. She had danced with dozens of boys. Even when the band was resting a victrola had played, and there had been more boys to dance with her to the thin scratchy music. One of them, the son of the owner of a great department store, was going to ride with her today in Central Park.

She picked the black dress off the chair and smoothed it gratefully. It had done its work well. Other girls had floundered through the dance in wretched tulles and flounces and taffetas, like the dresses her mother had tried for two weeks to buy for the great occasion. But she had fought for this tube of curving black crepe silk, high-necked enough to seem demure, and had won; and she had captivated the son of a millionaire. That was how much her mother knew about clothes.

There was a rap at the door. "Marjorie, are you up?"

"Just getting into the shower, Mom." She darted into the bathroom and turned on a drumming rush of hot water. Sometimes her mother came in and shouted questions at her through the shower curtain, but she didn't today. Marjorie returned to the bedroom and waited for a moment, watching the doorknob. Then she walked to the full-length mirror on the closet door, and draped the black dress against her bosom, pleased by the contrast it made with her naked shoulders and tumbling hair.

At this moment—it was quite an important moment in her life—she grew hot, and prickled all over. An intuition about her future came flooding into her mind, like sunlight at the drawing of a curtain. She was going to be an actress! This pretty girl in the mirror was destined to be an actress, nothing else.

Since entering Hunter College in February of the previous year, Marjorie had been taking a course of study

leading to a license as a biology teacher; but she had long suspected that she was going through empty motions, that chalk and blackboard weren't for her. Nor had she been able to picture herself settling into dull marriage at twenty-one. From her thirteenth year onward a peculiar destiny had been in her blood, waiting for the proper time to crop out, and disturbing her with premonitory sensations. But what she experienced on this May morning was no mere premonition; it was the truth bursting through. She was going to be an actress! The daydreams of her childhood had not been mere dreams, after all.

In the light of this truth—for it was not a resolve, not a decision, but rather a sudden insight into an existing truth—all her life seemed to take shape. Puzzling things were explained. Contradictions melted away.

This was why she had triumphed at Columbia last night, and this was why she had been such a fish out of water all her life in the Bronx. This was why without effort she had been the star of all the playlets at school and in summer camps. Even as a child she had had a quick mind, a gift of mimicry, an excellent memory, and self-possessed charm. Some instinct had taught her early to imitate the speech of her English teachers. Long before her family moved to Manhattan she had been half mocked and half admired in the highly critical society of the Bronx gutters, where her nickname had been Lady Pieface. Now, in an amazingly short time, she had transformed herself into a Central Park West charmer, the belle of a Columbia dance. She had sometimes wondered at her own remarkable advance—her quick mastery of collegiate slang, her grace on the dance floor, her polished charm of gesture, above all her unfailing run of bright talk, which always sounded clever even when there was nothing in it. She knew that in truth she was still very much Lady Pieface of the Bronx playing a hastily learned part. But her performance had been getting better week by week; and last night she had scored an unmistakable smash hit. The wonder of all this vanished, on the supposition that she was an actress discovering her powers.

She dropped into the chair at her desk, letting the dress fall over her piled-up unfinished homework. White steamy clouds from the shower, shot through with yellow bars of sunlight, were filling the room. Marjorie kept staring at herself in the mirror through the vapors, unmindful of the roaring waste of hot water. Had there ever been successful Jewish actresses? Of course: Sarah Bernhardt, Rachel—and now that she thought of it, rumor described half the great stars of Hollywood as Jewish.

But her name wasn't good. It wasn't good at all. There was wondrous resonance in *Sarah Bernhardt*, stark elegance in *Rachel*—whereas her own . . . Marjorie Morgenstern . . .

Then came the confirming flash, the white streak of revelation. Such a simple change! Not even a change, a mere translation of the German compound, and her drab name turned into an incantation, a name that could blaze and thunder on Broadway. She pushed aside the dress, seized a pencil, threw open her biology notebook to a blank page, and hastily printed

MARJORIE MORNINGSTAR

She stared at the name, sprawled in dark blue ink over the light blue lines of the page. She took a pen and carefully wrote, in the small, vertical hand which she was trying to master,

Marjorie Morningstar

For a long time she sat looking at the page. Then she wrote under the name

May 7, 1933

She ripped the page out of the book, folded it, and locked it in the rosewood box where she kept George's

love letters. Then, singing, she disappeared into the foggy bathroom.

Mrs. Morgenstern had eaten breakfast several hours earlier with her husband, who was unable to sleep once the day dawned, Sunday or not. Calculating the time it would take her daughter to shower and dress, she placed herself at the breakfast table again a few seconds before Marjorie came out of her room. In her hand was a cup of steaming coffee. She was not lying in wait to grill Marjorie. Surely she was entitled to an extra cup of coffee on Sunday morning.

"Hello, Mother dear." Marjorie draped her jacket on the arm of a chair.

Mrs. Morgenstern put down her coffee. "My God."

"My God what?" Marjorie dully dropped into the chair.

"That sweater, Marjorie."

"What about it? Don't you like the color?" She knew what her mother didn't like. She had spent the last few minutes at the mirror worrying about the sweater. It perfectly matched her British boots and breeches and tweed jacket, and the russet band on her perky hat—all new, all being worn for the first time. It had looked charming in the shop, that cat-smooth russet cashmere, and the size was correct. But the fit was snug; mighty snug. Marjorie knew that a pretty girl in a tight sweater created a commotion. It was very vexing, she thought, and so silly; in the South Seas nobody would think twice about it. She had decided to brave it out. Her mother might not like the sweater, but Sandy Goldstone probably would.

"Marjorie, people will think—I don't know what they'll think."

"I'm a big girl, Mama."

"That's just what's bothering me, dear."

"Mom, for your information girls don't ride horses in pink quilted housecoats that make them look like tubs. They wear sweaters."

Mrs. Morgenstern, short and stout, was wearing a pink quilted housecoat. But this kind of argumentation was standard between them; she took no offense. "Well, Papa

will never let you out of the house. Is that all you're having for breakfast? Black coffee? You'll be a nervous wreck by the time you're twenty-one. Have a bun, at least.—Who was at the dance?"

"The junior class of Columbia College, Mama, about two hundred and fifty boys, with girls."

"Anybody we know?"

"No."

"How can you say that? Wasn't Rosalind Green there?"

"Of course she was."

"Well, we know her." Marjorie said nothing. "How is it you're going riding? I thought your lessons were on Tuesday."

"I just decided to go today."

"Who with?"

"Billy Ehrmann."

"How come you're wearing your new riding habit?"

"Why not? Spring is here."

"You don't have to impress Billy Ehrmann."

"Well, I've got to start wearing it sometime."

"Yes, once you've learned to ride. But what's the point, just for a lesson in the armory?"

Here Mrs. Morgenstern was driving to a material point. Marjorie had been taking the armory lessons in a borrowed old habit of an El Dorado neighbor, Rosalind Green. Her mother had bought her the new outfit on the understanding that she wasn't to wear it until she graduated to the bridle paths of the park. Marjorie could lie to her mother cheerfully, and with a good conscience, but she had several minor lies going, and it seemed a weariness to take on another. "Mom, I'm not going to the armory. We're going riding in the park."

"What? You've only had three lessons. You're not ready. You'll fall off the horse and break your neck."

"That'll be something to look forward to." The girl put her cup down with a clink and poured more coffee.

"Marjorie, I am not going to let you go riding in the park with that fat clumsy Billy Ehrmann. He probably can't ride any better than you."

"Mother, please. We're riding with two other couples and a groom. We'll be safer than in the armory."

"Who are the others?"

"Well, there's Rosalind and Phil."

"Who else?"

"Oh, some fraternity brothers of theirs." Marjorie was determined to let her mother know nothing whatever about Sandy Goldstone.

"Who?"

"Oh, some fellow. I don't know his name. I know he's a very good rider."

"How do you know that, if you don't even know his name?"

"For heaven's sake, Mom! Billy and Phil said so."

"Was he at the dance? Did you meet him there?"

"I think maybe I did. I don't know. I met a hundred boys."

"Is he a good dancer?"

"I don't know."

"Where does he live?"

"Mom, I'm late. I said I don't know the boy——"

The telephone rang, and with immense relief Marjorie sprang into the foyer. "Hello?"

"Hello, pooch."

The proprietary nickname and the old twangy voice brought the usual pleasurable warmth to Marjorie, mingled this time with a dim feeling of guilt. "Oh—hello, George, how are you?"

"What's the matter? Did I wake you up?"

"No, George. Matter of fact, I was just going out, so excuse me if——"

"Out?"

"Just out in the park. Riding."

"Well, well. Riding in Central Park. You'll be joining the Junior League next."

"Don't be funny."

"Well, how was the Columbia dance?"

"It was miserable, thanks." Her mother, she saw, had come to the doorway of the dining room and was openly listening to the conversation. Marjorie made her tone

more affectionate. "I never realized how young a crowd of college juniors could look and act."

"Well, sure, how old can they be?" said George with a relieved lift in his voice. "Nineteen, average. Less, some of them. I warned you you'd be bored stiff." George Drobles was twenty-two, and a graduate of City College. "Well, pooch, when am I going to see you?"

"I don't know."

"Today?"

"I've got a ton of homework, dear."

"But you say you're going riding."

"Just for an hour. Then I'll be at the desk all day, really, George."

"Take off another hour."

"Dear, I'd love to—it's just such a long trip from the Bronx down here, just for an hour——"

"I'm not doing anything. It's Sunday. It's been almost two weeks—— Look, I'd just about decided to go to the art museum anyway. I've got the car. I'll drop by. If you feel like it, we'll go for a drive in the country. If you don't, why I'll just go on to the museum."

"Well——"

"See you about one or so, okay, pooch?"

"All right, George, sure. Love to see you." She hung up.

"What's the matter between you and George all of a sudden?" said Mrs. Morgenstern with pleasure.

"Absolutely nothing. Mother, I wonder whether you know that people don't usually listen to other people's phone conversations?"

"I'm not people. I'm your mother. You don't have anything to hide from me, do you?"

"There's a thing called privacy, that's all."

"I hope the great love isn't beginning to cool off."

"It certainly is not!"

"I haven't seen him in such a long time. Does he still have that red nose?"

"He does not have a red nose."

"Bronx Park East is a long way from Central Park West," said Mrs. Morgenstern with a majestic sigh. Mar-