

Coming To

A Midwestern Tale

A NOVEL

CAREN UMBARGER

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For our grandmothers

*Life is either a daring
adventure or nothing.*

HELEN KELLER

Coming To

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Lillian slipped out the back door, pulled her skirt under her thighs and sat down on the stoop in the last, weak sunbeam of the day. In the stillness of the late October afternoon, a chill hung in the air. She wrapped her sweater tightly around herself. The old maple in the lot behind her house had delicately dropped all of its leaves into a pristine circle on the ground beneath it and Lillian loved that.

She took a big drag on her cigarette then shook the Globe Gazette open to the front page. All week long, the newspaper's headlines had been huge and black, the boldest she had seen since the war. And, bad news: **STOCK MARKET CRASH... INVESTORS FEAR WORST... BANKS POISED TO FAIL.**

The headlines in her hands looked optimistic: **STOCK PRICES RALLY.** She didn't know much about the stock market because she had never paid much attention to the financial side of things. Before she was married three years ago, her father had looked after her finances. Now, Morris, her husband, took care of all of that. She had no money of her own, anyway – just what Morris gave her for her spending allowance. Lillian thought they had plenty of money, but this current Wall Street mess seemed pretty big. It appeared that the trouble was going to have an effect on everyone. Lillian read on down the page.

Senator Brookhart, Republican, Iowa, predicted today that if the severe decline of stock prices in Wall Street continued, “banks all over the country” would go into bankruptcy.

She sucked hard on her cigarette, then blew the smoke out in a fast cloud and watched as it swirled up and dissipated in the calm air. What would it mean for a bank to go bankrupt? It sounded ridiculous to Lillian – too far-fetched.

She peered in closer to the paper to get a good look at a small article near the bottom. A group of area businessmen made a motion before the city council meeting that was held on Wednesday evening to boycott Jewish owned businesses in Mason City. Their concern was the rapid growth of Jewish owned businesses in town and the spread of Jewish families into the area. Stanley Peterson, a spokesman for the men, cited the coincidental rise of the Jewish population in Mason City and the country in general with the simultaneous instability of the economy.

Lillian sat up and took a deep breath. What on earth were those people talking about? Who were those men? She'd met Stanley Peterson. He owned the other furniture store in town and obviously didn't care for the competition from Scharf and Son's, her father-in-law's business. But, to blame the Jews for the stock market? That was ludicrous and Lillian knew it.

Practically everyone she knew – her entire family who was scattered around Iowa and the Midwest, and most of her friends in Mason City – was Jewish. For fifteen years they had maintained a growing congregation of over one hundred and fifty people. Most of the Jewish men she knew were merchants or junk dealers. And, many of them had been brought to Mason City and sponsored by her father-in-law, Reuben Scharf. All they wanted in life was a better chance than their parents had in the old country; to have nice homes and good education for their children, to get along, and to create a benevolent milieu where they could practice their faith and go about their daily lives without any trouble. And, for the most part, that's how things were.

A noisy pair of gray squirrels raced down the trunk of a big oak tree that stood next to the garage, and plunged into a pile of dead leaves. Lillian watched them turn somersaults and chase each other across the lot and up another tree.

She had faced no persecution, that she could remember, for being Jewish as she grew up in her small home town of Hampton, thirty miles from where she lived now. But, just last month, someone in Mason City had set a cross on fire on Ben and Sonia Levinson's front yard after Muslims and Jews had clashed in Palestine and news of it had reached the distant Iowan outpost of twenty eight thousand souls where Lillian now sat on her back stoop. The whole thing made her sad. Why did people have to hate each other?

She closed the paper, folded it, and took a last look at the front page. There was going to be a radio broadcast at 8:30 that night by Julius Klein, assistant secretary of commerce, over a nationwide radio hookup of the Columbia Broadcasting company, on business conditions in relation to the stock market. She might listen to that – see how much she could follow. Morris would want to, anyway.

Lillian heard his name reverberate in her mind. Morris, Morris, Morris... her *husband*. What had she gotten herself into? She turned several pages until she found the local section then squinted as she drew in off her cigarette. Lately, she could hardly believe she had really married Morris Scharf.

When she started college seven years ago, Lillian dreamed of a career on the stage. She was in every production in the theater department at Iowa City during her four years at the University, and was lauded in the town Herald and back home in the Hampton Chronicle as a “gifted dramatic actress with a bold future ahead of her.” By the time she graduated, she was ready and excited about her career.

Morris Scharf came along and inserted himself neatly into her life as though he had always belonged there. As there were so few eligible Jewish men in north Iowa, she convinced herself that his aloofness, his need to be in charge and his lackluster personal advances were not as bad as they seemed. His shortcomings endeared him to her and she eventually acquiesced to his constant entreaties to become his wife. She couldn’t see any reason why being married to Morris Scharf should impinge on her plans to act.

Her mother, gone now almost two years, saw it differently. Tears came to Lillian’s eyes as she remembered their conversation the night they sat together on the porch swing and pushed off gently with their feet.

“Lillie, dear. Are you in love with Morris?”

Her mother was usually right to the point.

Lillian didn’t hesitate.

“Oh yes, mama. He’s so handsome. I know he’ll be a good provider.”

“Handsome? Yes... but is that enough?”

Rosa looked directly at Lillian who squirmed around and tried to get comfortable.

“What, mama? Morris is going to be a dedicated husband. He always does all the right things.”

Rosa looked at her beautiful daughter, all eagerness and energy. She fingered the arm of the swing then mindlessly ran her hand over the worn, curved edge, back and forth. She spoke slowly, chose her words carefully.

“Having someone you’re attracted to is important, Lil. And having enough money is important, too, that’s for sure. But, so is being happy. I want you to be happy.”

“Why? Do you think I might not be happy with Morris? He’s going to be a good husband, I’m sure of it. Jewish men always make good husbands.”

Rosa folded her arms and leaned her head back. A cynical humph escaped from her chest.

“I’ve no doubt that he will take good care of you, in a certain way. But, is his personality interesting enough for you? Can you have a thoughtful conversation with him?”

Lillian had the swing going full tilt. She pushed off violently with her toes each time it headed backwards. Her voice went up a few notches.

“What matters, mama, in a marriage is that he does his job, and his job is to provide for his family. You know there aren’t that many available Jewish men around here,

anyway. You certainly don't want me to marry that awful Elliot Weinstein. Oh God, that would be a fate worse than death."

They both laughed.

"No, my darling."

Rosa brushed the hair back off of Lillian's face.

"Your father and I want you to be happy, that's all. I have to say, though, that you seem to have a great deal more energy and... intelligence than your husband to be."

Lillian stopped the swing with her feet and turned to face her mother.

"Are you saying that I shouldn't get married? To Morris? Don't you know? He really is intelligent. He's just quiet... opposites attract."

Rosa looked lovingly into the deep, dark eyes of her daughter. She sighed.

"I just have a prickle about this. Marriage is compromise, Lillian. The most important thing is that you have mutual respect. I hope he will be able to respect your wishes and desires as I know you will his. I just don't want you to have to compromise yourself right out of business."

Rosa looked off into the mild evening. Lillian noticed a small furrow between her eyebrows. A robin sang its last, lonely call of the day.

"I don't even know what you're talking about now, Mama. Why would you think that I would marry someone who wouldn't respect me? I know that Morris respects me. He shows it in everything that he does."

"He's courting you, Lillian. They always put on their best face."

Lillian sputtered and shouted in a loud whisper.

"I can't believe that you don't have any faith in my ability to pick a good husband. Did your mother say the same thing to you before you married your husband?"

The two women turned at the same moment to look at each other. Rosa's face wore concern, Lillian was contrite.

"I'm sorry, Mama."

Rosa put her arm around Lillian and pulled her close. Lillian laid her head down on her mother's shoulder. For a few minutes they just rocked. Finally, Lillian picked her head up and took a hold of her mother's hand.

"Mama. I'm going to marry Morris. I love him. This is my life and I'm going to do it. I'll be a good wife, you'll see. He won't have one thing to complain about."

"I'm certain of that, Lil." She nodded her head slowly up and down. "He's a lucky man."

"We'll be fine, mama. You don't have to worry at all."

"All right, my beauty, I won't, then."

They hugged for a long time. Lillian breathed in the delicious scents of her mother.

Lillian wiped her eyes and took a final draw on her cigarette – held it up in front of her and watched the end glow. It was more and more apparent that, despite what she

thought about him in the beginning, the truth was, her mother was right. Morris really was *not* a nice man. He was a bully and a, well, a tyrant, if she could say it out loud, which she couldn't. No one else's husband demanded pot roast on Tuesdays, spaghetti on Wednesdays, meatloaf on Thursdays, and something specific for each night of the week, every single week, every single month and you'd better not go off the schedule or there'll be hell to pay.

Lillian pitched her cigarette down and ground the butt furiously with the toe of her shoe. He was so insistent. It was the way he told her things – so impatient, such harshness. She gave the newspaper a sharp snap and it stood up at attention for her, then she swiped a tear away with her finger.

If it were just the control over the meals, Lillian was pretty sure she could stand him. But, Morris had it in his head that he was the supreme commander in their marriage... about everything. He controlled all the money, he controlled their social life, he controlled where everything was in the house. He had the say about marital relations, especially about marital relations, and he even tried to control what she wore. She was tired of being taken completely for granted and being treated like she was his servant instead of his equal partner - the way a good marriage was intended to be.

She tried to tell him numerous times that they could have more between them; more intimacy and enjoyment together, more spontaneity – maybe even some fun. It was something she was certain of, but she had no way to convince him. Her attempts to communicate sincerely with him had been met with rebuke and scoldings. Morris knew his place and his place was at the head of his household and Lillian's place was below him, at his beck and call. He made the decisions. After three years, marriage to Morris was not what Lillian thought it would be like.

She set the paper on her lap, pulled a wadded-up hankie from her pocket, blew her nose and then wiped it. As she pushed it back into her apron pocket, she spotted a small headline. The Mason City Community Theater was hold-ing tryouts for their winter play, *The Wizard of Oz*. Lillian's heart leapt. She'd read that play – she could do it. She hadn't been in a play since college, since before she married Morris and before she had Marcie, her fourteen month old. And, although Lillian loved her daughter deeply, fiercely, and although she honestly made a sincere effort to be a good wife, it was on the stage, acting before a rapt audience, where Lillian knew best who she was and what immense expanse of happiness life could grant her.

She looked out over the tops of the houses across the street at the sunset that was in full display. There were dark clouds piled up at the horizon and from around their bright edges, long rays escaped across the entire sky, like smiles from God... a good sign. She closed her eyes and a little prayer of hope puffed free from her breast.

The first tryouts for the play were to be held that evening, Thursday, October 24, 1929, at 6:30 p.m. in the fellowship room of the Methodist Church. She could get Clara to watch Marcie – that way it wouldn't be an imposition on Morris. She chewed a

finger nail. The play was to be directed by Harold Winston, a former theater major at the University of Iowa. The call was for all parts. She didn't even have the playbook yet and the auditions were that night, only a couple of hours away.

She stood and brushed off the seat of her skirt. How to approach Morris so everything would go smoothly, how to get herself through the next two hours until the auditions?

Before she went in, Lillian took a deep breath in the cool damp air and looked out over the trees to the sunset where most of the light had died and roiling purple thunderheads made their way across the Iowa prairie directly toward her. A quick shudder rippled through her shoulders as she hurried inside.