

Silk & Silk

A STORY

BY JEROME CHARYN



Jerome Charyn is the author of thirty-eight books, including three memoirs chronicling his childhood in the Bronx: *The Dark Lady from Belorusse*, *The Black Swan*, and *Bronx Boy*, the first two of which were *New York Times* Books of the Year. His several detective novels, among them *Blue Eyes* and *Citizen Sidel*, feature the mythic hero-cop Isaac Sidel. His latest novel is *The Secret Life of Emily Dickinson* (2010). Charyn lives in New York and Paris.

MARLA SILK grew up amid that solid wall of Art Nouveau palaces along Central Park West. Her father was involved in some mystery called arbitrage. Marla loved to tell her friends at Fieldston that his name, Mortimer Silk, was only a mask—the Silks were Marranos who had had to change their identity hundreds of years ago when they moved from Spain to Morocco.

Daddy had made quite a stir on Wall Street when he bet against the dollar and sank all the money of Silk & Silk into deutsche marks. For one or two days he must have owned half the deutsche marks in the world; and then Daddy dumped the whole lot. Marla was notorious after that at her high school.

She had the SATs of a rocket scientist. Marla picked Columbia because she couldn't leave her mom all alone. Mother was like a sleepwalker at Saks, and she got high on ice cream sodas every afternoon at Rumplemeyer's. Marla would join her when she could, while Mother wept in a mad fever. Her name was Lollie. She'd been Mortimer's campus sweetheart at Cornell. Lollie was a Lutheran from Kansas. "Your mother was willowy." That's how Mortimer had described her. "No one could keep his eyes off her for very long. She had the longest

legs in the world. Lollie was born too late. She should have been with the Ziegfeld Follies. Manhattan overwhelms her. That’s what she says.”

Marla did her own bit of penance and sat on one of the stools at Rumplemeyer’s.

She’d rather have suffered through a whiskey sour, but Marla was only seventeen at the time. They were surrounded by nurses and nannies with their aristocratic charges, and by dowagers who never missed a lunch at Rumplemeyer’s. Lollie painted her face white while she was in that pink world with teddy bears in the window.

Mother was still in her thirties then, and it was as if she had been fossilized and remained the campus queen—with a white, white face. She shouldn’t have married Daddy, a brooder from the Bronx. He’d grown up along the Grand Concourse, among a hoard of Marrano merchants. Had Mother married some king of extracurricular activities at Cornell, she might have been better off.

And now she was locked into endless lunches and teas at Rumplemeyer’s. The waiters knew her, and so did the manager and the concierge at the St. Moritz. She was their local celebrity—Mortimer Silk’s wife. But Marla couldn’t bear to see Lollie sit in her white mask.

“Mummy,” Marla would say, dizzy from the aroma of Rumplemeyer’s dark chocolate. “You can’t sit here forever.”

“Why not? I might meet a nice man—a guest at the St. Moritz. An uncomplicated cattle rancher, or someone like that.”

Rumplemeyer’s did belong to the St. Moritz, so Mother’s mind was intact, even if there was a bit of folly in what she said.

“Mother, you already have a man. And what would a cattle rancher be doing at the St. Moritz?”

“Looking for what’s precious . . . like the grazing rights to Central Park. Now scram! I don’t need to be plagued by my own daughter.”

“Yes, you do,” Marla said. But she couldn’t have a battle royal with her own mother at Rumplemeyer’s. She had to let her list all her grievances against Daddy and wait for that brush fire to burn out. And then they’d walk home together along the park.

MARLA GRADUATED SUMMA cum laude and went on to Columbia Law. And after passing her bar exam, she became an in-house lawyer at Silk & Silk. She had no ambition to work anywhere else. “Silks have to serve Silks,” was Mortimer’s motto. Meanwhile, Marla had married her high school beau, Raphael, who also went to work for the Silks. She had two lovely daughters with Rafe—Candice and Lollie Jr.

Marla realized that Lollie Jr. wasn't a proper name for a girl. But Lollie Jr. loved her name. She was as willful and enterprising as Marla and talked about building empires by the time she was ten.

But Lollie Sr. grew worse and worse. Marla no longer had time to rescue her from Rumpelmeyer's. She and Rafe lived in the same palace as Daddy, but on a lesser floor. Mother had to have a full-time nurse. She sank into a profound melancholy, and neither Marla nor Lollie Jr. could bring her out of it. Still, her decline wasn't as steep as Mortimer's.

Suddenly there were auditors and bloodhounds all over the place, and Silk & Silk was padlocked for a week. Daddy was indicted. You could watch him on the evening news as he was whisked out of his apartment-palace in handcuffs. He could have been an ax murderer in a velvet coat. That's how crazed he looked. The witch right behind him was Marla, who didn't even have a minute to comb her hair. Daddy was arraigned and released on bail. He returned to his castle like some woebegone man. "I'll kill myself," he told Marla. The government had stool pigeons inside Silk & Silk and witnesses against Mortimer at rival arbitrage houses.

He'd swindled when he had to swindle, had walked a very thin line between what was legal and what was not. And now Daddy faced twenty years at some government facility in Kansas. He would have to sit and groan with other white-collar criminals. His handsome mane was on the cover of the *Post*. He was called "Silk, the Confidence Man."

Daddy sulked and sat with egg stains on his satin robe. He was sixty-two, and his face was whiter than Lollie's had ever been. One of his hands seemed palsied. He couldn't even navigate his own spoon.

Marla met in secret with a couple of high-priced fixers, known as shadow men in that netherworld of theirs, and she did what a daughter had to do. All the government witnesses "vaporized," as the shadow men had predicted. The case was dropped. But Daddy had a stroke.

Marla shut down Silk & Silk and sold whatever assets the company had. Her husband left her.

"Marla," he scribbled in a short note, "you let me dangle in the wind."

It wasn't as simple as that. She'd kept him in the dark because she didn't want Candice and Lollie Jr. to be the daughters of a jailbird. But Rafe hadn't been wrong. He wasn't a Silk, and she couldn't entrust her father's secrets to him. Rafe ran off with his secretary, a cousin of Marla's. And Marla put Mortimer's thirty-room apartment on the market. She had to move Mortimer and Lollie into her own fifteen-room affair.

After having rescued her father from a court battle, where all the Silks would have been sullied, Marla was hired as the in-house lawyer at an arbitrage firm almost as grandiose as Silk & Silk had once been. She was thirty-seven now, and she began to paint her face white, like some Egyptian queen.

She couldn't even talk to her own girls, who would tweet or text at the kitchen table and seemed part of some arcane universe where anyone over the age of fifteen had no right to exist. She was lonely. She had love affairs. None of the lawyers or brokers she met made much of an impression. She kept a room at the St. Regis under Mortimer's name, and that's where she had her "twitters" and "tweets," as she liked to call her little liaisons.

But Marla had problems at home. Mother was bereft without Rumplemeyer's, which had locked its doors forever, and Daddy wandered around in a tattered robe from his student years, one side of his face disfigured from the stroke.

Once every two or three months, Lollie would get lost in Central Park. It wasn't serious unless she got trapped in the middle of a snowstorm. Mother had her own nurse, but Marla wouldn't trust a paid companion to extricate Lollie from the snow. So she put on her galoshes and fur hat, left her midtown office in the middle of a meeting, and plunged into the park.

Mother didn't have a favorite bridge or tree, and Marla had to travel by instinct.

She worried that Mother might fall and lie buried in the snow. But Marla always found her, as if by some hidden radar. Silence was her real accomplice, the silence of the snow; it was as if she could hear the whole planet breathe while she traversed the park.

And there was Mother, sitting on a bench beside Belvedere Castle, with snow in her lap. Whipped by the wind, the huge snowflakes had begun to sting Marla's face.

"It's a pity," Mother said, playing with her mittens.

"Mummy," Marla said with a touch of bitterness, "if you keep talking, you'll get snow in your mouth—and I'll have to call an ambulance."

"It's a pity," Mother said, trying to light a cigarette in the wind. "If I had Rumplemeyer's, I wouldn't be on a park bench. Rumplemeyer's might have consoled me."

"Console you for what?"

"For having a daughter who's a whore."

Marla considered strangling Lollie and leaving her to drift in the snow.

"Constance Bengelman saw you at the King Cole Bar. The barman told her that you have a room at the St. Regis, and that you flirt with every sort of man who wears pants."

Marla was bewildered. Did Lollie have her own network of spies? Constance Bengelman must have been one of her former soul mates from Rumplemeyer's. "And suppose I do?"

"Then you're cheap, and I raised a daughter who's a common harlot."

"But you never raised me—Daddy did. And both of us raised you."

"That's unfair," Lollie said. "That's brutal. I'm a Kansas girl . . ."

"Just like Dorothy," Marla said. "In your favorite film. But I have no Cowardly Lion to lend you."

Lollie preened on her bench. "You shouldn't make fun of a widow."

And Marla realized she could never win—Mother knew how to wound with her melancholy.

"Your father's been dead to me for years. Even before his *accident*. I suppose he had his own little chippie at the St. Moritz. I shouldn't have married. My father warned me about becoming a Jewess."

It was the same old mad tale. "Mother, you've never been inside a synagogue in your life. And neither have I."

But Marla sensed that shrewdness in her mother's eyes, even behind a shield of snow.

"Didn't your father join Temple Emanu-El?"

"Did he have a choice? Half his clients were members."

And Marla heard that purring voice out of the snow.

"Wasn't he going to give you a bat mitzvah . . . and cater it at the Pierre?"

Marla ruffled her nose. "Bat mitzvah? Isn't that where the rabbi cuts your clit?"

Both of them started to giggle like a couple of schoolgirls among the falling flakes. Mother was roaring with energy now, as if someone had stuffed her with celestial chimes. She began to march in the snow. Marla had the devil of a time keeping up with her.

MARLA CONTINUED TO haunt the St. Regis; she sat at the King Cole Bar with her glass of pinot noir, right under the Maxfield Parrish; Old King Cole looked like an idiot, surrounded by his own simpletons, his spectacles askew. Marla wondered if the king was half blind; but the reds and browns in the mural, and the king's gold hat, seemed to warm Marla's bones on winter nights. She wasn't in the mood to rut with a man. And that's when she saw him; he was a few years younger than Marla; he had flecks of gray in his hair and a tiny scar near his mouth that she would have loved to lick. She couldn't even say why that scar had aroused her so. She'd seen him before, not at the St. Regis. He could have been a Yalie, since he was wearing a tie with the

college seal. It was at Silk & Silk, that's where she had seen him. He'd worked for Daddy once upon a time.

He sat down next to Marla with all the confidence of King Cole. She liked that.

"I can have you arrested," she whispered in his ear.

He laughed. That scar near his mouth moved. "Would you handcuff me, Miss Marla?"

"I didn't give you the right to mention my name."

"Then what should I call you?"

"I forgot to bring my handcuffs," she hissed with a kind of soft venom. "You're not a Yalie, are you?"

"I went to Fordham," he said. "But Fordham doesn't leave much of an echo. It wouldn't get me near enough to smell your perfume."

"But you could have lied."

"I think you've had enough Yalies in your life . . . what should I call you?"

"Miss Marla," she said.

They went up to her room. He was tender with her . . . and brutal, pretending to handcuff himself while he pinned her to the bed. She couldn't stop running her fingers through his scalp. She was the idiot now, Old Queen Cole, who fell in love with some high-class gigolo, because it was love, and nothing less than that.

"My father fired you, didn't he?"

"Yes, he did, Miss Marla."

"You were gone in a flash. That much I do remember."

"He would have forgiven anything if I had been a Silk. We grew up in the same Bronx neighborhood."

"What are you talking about?"

"He'd lived at the Lewis Morris—I lived there many years later, when it was more like a jail, with wire mesh in the windows to keep out the burglars and the addicts. We liked to reminisce. That's why he hired me. I didn't have much of a résumé. I was lucky to get out of Fordham alive."

"And then he fired you."

"I went through all his female executives like a crazy scythe."

"Then why didn't you get to me . . . with the same scythe?"

"Ah," he said with a gorgeous smile. "I have one cardinal rule. Never touch the boss's daughter."

His last name was Banderas, like the movie star who was married to Melanie Griffith. His first name was Raoul. They met at the St. Regis almost every night, dined at the bar. At first he wouldn't take any cash from her. But she insisted.

“Indulge me,” she said. “Use it as pocket money to replenish your wardrobe with another Yale tie.”

“But I might strangle you with it if you make fun of me, Miss Marla.”

“That would be perfect—to come before I croaked.”

She would traipse home at one in the morning in her million-dollar pumps from Louboutin and find Lollie sitting there like a bulldog.

“You’ve abandoned your own girls.”

Lollie knew how to blind her daughter with a few choice barbs. But Marla wouldn’t let Lollie catch her with blood in her eyes.

“They can always text me if they’re in trouble.”

“You’re heartless,” Lollie said.

“No, I’m crazy about a man.”

MARLA HAD NO one to talk to about her Antonio Banderas. But she did ask Mortimer to accompany her into the Bronx and show her where the Silks had once resided. He was forlorn in his tattered robe. But he relished being in a limo, and his good humor came back. They traveled up to the Concourse. The Lewis Morris resembled a Park Avenue palace that had fallen into ruin. Part of its front wall seemed as if it had been burnt or been lately under siege. Its doorman had a bullet-proof vest.

Daddy had a blank look on the damaged side of his face. The stroke had ravaged him, but some fire still must have burned inside his skull. And suddenly he wasn’t ravaged at all.

“Marla, once upon a time, dentists would kill for a suite at the Lewis Morris.”

They rode down a hill to a tiny Italian ghetto with its own ducal restaurant, where the waiters welcomed Daddy in his robe. They served him dish after dish, with tiny glasses of red wine. Marla ate whatever Daddy ate. Finally she mentioned Raoul.

“He’s probably a confidence man, but I don’t care. Why did you fire him?”

She could feel Daddy wander through all that rubble in his head. The bad side of his face began to twitch.

“I never fired anyone named Raoul.”

“You talked with him about the Bronx—and the Lewis Morris. Daddy, Raoul looks like Antonio Banderas.”

The clam sauce had spilled under Mortimer’s napkin—Marla wouldn’t wipe her own father, as if he were some deranged orphan at the restaurant. But there was a boy’s mischief in his eye.

“Does he have a little scar under his mouth—almost like an unhealed scratch?”

“Yes!” She gripped Mortimer’s arm so fiercely, he started to blanch.

“He moved in with one of our bookkeepers, beat up her boys, and threatened to kill them if she didn’t hand over her paycheck—every month. He held one of her boys halfway out the window. Gabriel, that’s the name he used. And he wasn’t from the Bronx.”

“How come you never told me about this Gabriel?”

The mischief was still there in Daddy’s eye. “Tell you what? That he was the lord and master of our copy machines? The detectives who came looking for him said he was some customer. He set a man on fire in Miami.”

Marla ran home to her little girls, who weren’t so little anymore. Candice and Lollie Jr. thought she was insane when she tried to hug them for a whole minute.

“Mother,” Candice said, “you’re wrinkling my blouse.”

But Marla adored their complaints, even adored their texting and tweeting—that electric quality of their lives, where one minute morphed into another with its own maniacal message.

She couldn’t confront Raoul. He would only have lied and lied until she weakened and licked his scar again. She met with the same team that had “solved” Daddy’s other problems, had scared off the witnesses in his court case. She’d never asked these shadow men about their methods, but this time she did.

“I don’t want him hurt—just frightened to death, so he’ll never come near me or my girls.”

They must have been ex-soldiers. They had the straightest backs she had ever seen. That’s what she liked about them. They had their own touch of class. She told them about her next rendezvous at the St. Regis. She paid the shadow men in hundred-dollar bills.

“Mrs. Silk,” they said, “just you rest up. It will be done.”

She hadn’t bothered to change her name, even when she married. Candice and Lollie Jr. were Silks, just like her.

“You won’t hurt him?”

“Not a hair on his head.”

She panicked, wanted to call Raoul and tell him to run. But she knew the consequences. Raoul might have stalked her, sat at the bar, right under King Cole in his funny crown like a lunatic’s thinking cap.

She kept away from the St. Regis, though she continued to rent the room. It made her feel mysterious. Six months passed. She had to rescue Lollie one more time from the clutches of Central Park. She played pinochle with her father when-

ever she had a free moment. She hired a tutor to help Candice and Lollie Jr. with their homework and thanked God they hadn't been harmed by that maniac who'd set fire to a man in Miami. And she threw herself into her own work. She was named a senior vice president and decided to celebrate with a glass of pinot noir at the St. Regis.

Marla sat in her old chair, right under the reds, browns, and blues of Maxfield Parrish. She paid no attention to the yattering around her. She looked at the bottles of Courvoisier behind the bar. And it was as if she'd conjured him up from a dream. There he was in his Yale tie, with bruises under his cheekbone.

"Miss Marla, I told the barman that your drink was on the house. Old King Cole is as happy to see you as I am."

He hesitated, didn't sit down at first. She couldn't stop peeking at the scar near his mouth. Daddy had been right. It did look like an inflamed scratch.

She'd finished half her pinot noir, and she could afford to play the conjurer. She beckoned Gabriel-Raoul to sit beside her.

"Congratulations," he said. "Your hirelings knew how to be delicate. They could have broken my face, but they didn't."

Marla wanted to lick all his wounds and shout that she was sorry.

"You shouldn't have followed me here," she said.

"I wasn't following you, Miss Marla. This is my watering hole. I sit here like a monk and commune with King Cole."

"Whenever you're not setting fire to someone or hanging little boys outside a window."

The wound near his mouth seemed to leap out of its own carapace, like some living creature.

"I should slap your face," he said.

"I'll kill you if you come near my children."

She started to cry. She didn't even have much of a revelation. Daddy had hid behind one of his Marrano masks—he'd lied about Raoul.

She stood up and meandered up to her room, with that fugitive from Miami right behind her. She would have welcomed a beating. She's the one who had been bad. But Raoul was as tender with her as he had ever been. Marla was confused. She wanted to be spanked. Then he wrapped his Yale necktie around her neck. *Good*, she thought. *It will be the end of me.*

But he made love to her with that necktie around her neck, as if she were Yale's homecoming queen. Marla couldn't believe that he'd set fire to a man. She traced

the scars on his chest with her little finger. But she had to declare her independence from him before she was swallowed up in that wonderful map of his skin.

“Raoul, or whatever your name is, how many men did you murder in Miami?”

He smiled, and all her gruffness went away.

“Miss Marla, I couldn’t even tell you what Miami looks like.”

“Father says you were in charge of the copy machine.”

He was no longer smiling. “Yeah, I *was* his copying machine.”

“Don’t be so damn cryptic,” she spat at him. She was donning her very own mask. If she didn’t get away from Raoul and the St. Regis, Marla would be ruined.

“I looked after his mistresses,” he said.

“What mistresses?”

“Why do you think I got that cozy with the St. Regis? Mr. Mortimer kept his own suite.”

“I don’t believe it,” Marla said. But she did believe it. That’s the kind of secret Daddy would have.

“Some were call girls,” Raoul said. “I’d entertain them until Mr. Mortimer arrived. Some were fashion designers and models who needed an extra buck. Your father wasn’t interested in romance. I did most of his courting.”

“Stop it,” Marla said. “You were Mortimer’s pimp.”

“No,” Raoul said. “I never chose his mistresses. I amused them.”

“And took them up to my father’s room.”

She raged with jealousy as she imagined the tight little bodies of the models and the Rubenesque proportions of the prostitutes—their ample arms, breasts that could smother Raoul.

“That’s why I got canned. He said I made him look small, that he couldn’t tantalize these women after they had been with me.”

“And what happened when I walked into the King Cole that first time?”

“I was confused. The barmen told me you had your own room. And I figured that Mr. Mortimer had sent you, and that you were looking for a scout.”

She glared at him. “Why would I need the services of a scout?”

“To help you fish for men.”

She wanted to pluck out his eyes. But Marla played the diplomat.

“How delicate you are! But I don’t need barmen or scouts. I need you.”

Ah, if she could only have another glass of wine. She didn’t know what to do with Raoul. Should she shower him with money, like she did with those shadow men who couldn’t even scare him off? Should Marla keep him like a poodle? But she was the poodle, despite her bank account.

“I’ll give you a thousand dollars if you spend the night with me—that’s what I pay for my shoes.”

He tightened his tie around her windpipe, but even that violence in him was gentle. Marla was lost. He whispered in her ear.

“If you mention money one more time, I will set you on fire.”

She started to cry, but it was the noiseless whimper of a little girl. She could have phoned the nighttime nurse who looked after Lollie and Mortimer, or tweeted her two girls. They could survive without a mother, at least for one night. She’d never bothered to bring pajamas to the St. Regis. Marla’s room had the same soft glow as the King Cole Bar. She could see the outline of Raoul. His eyes seemed to burn in the dark—she loved that dancing, electric dark of the King Cole. She hummed to herself as Raoul wiped her tears with a finger that had the miraculous touch of velvet fur. *Lord*, as Lollie would say, *I have myself a man*. What did she care if Daddy’s detectives came for her tomorrow? Daddy didn’t have detectives. He had to negotiate each step to the toilet.

Let him tumble. She wouldn’t run home to him. Marla was spending the night with Raoul. **N**

“Silk & Silk” is excerpted from the collection Bitter Bronx.