

## OVERVIEW

Is it possible for a woman to be single and happy? In the 21st century, after multiple waves of feminist revolution and backlash, our answer to this question is still: it depends. Yes, we might answer, but only for a while. Yes, if she's young. Yes, if she's rich. Yes, if the alternative is far, far worse. Yes, of course—but what does “happy” mean, anyway?

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The woman in the photograph below was the first mainstream American writer to concern herself with the particular happiness of single women, who for centuries had been scorned, feared, pitied, or ignored. In 1936, she published a witty and quietly radical self-help book for this maligned sisterhood of “extra” women. That bluntly titled book, *Live Alone and Like It*,



became a surprise bestseller. The surplus spinster—the “extra woman”—was reborn as a chic, independent “Live-Aloner.”

Marjorie Hillis was an unmarried minister's daughter from Brooklyn who had spent more than twenty years on the staff of *Vogue* in New York. Whether because of her fortieth birthday or the ongoing bite of the Depression, by the early 1930s she was looking for a deeper connection with readers

than the magazine offered. She wanted to write a book, and what better subject than what she knew best—that it was possible for women to be happy without husbands and children. She would teach her readers to cast off other people’s values, to make their own choices and mix their own cocktails, and become the secret envy of their married friends. For inspiration, she had only to look in the mirror.

Marjorie was an unlikely poster girl for rebellious independence. The daughter of an ambitious Midwestern preacher and his wife, she was born in Peoria, Illinois, in 1889, and moved with her parents and brother to Brooklyn at the age of ten. The new century was just around the corner and her father, a devotee of Teddy Roosevelt, threw himself into the role of moral leader and head of the prestigious Plymouth Church in Brooklyn Heights. His wife kept his house, managed his schedule, and raised their children—but she too had ambitions to help other women through her writing. In 1911, she published a book warning self-reliant modern girls that they would find true emotional fulfillment only in marriage and family. A quarter-century later, her daughter would turn that message on its head: Women would never truly be happy until they learned to stop putting other people’s desires ahead of their own.

The central message of *Live Alone and Like It* might be timeless, but the book was a product of the Depression. After thousands of men lost their jobs in the wake of the 1929 Wall Street Crash, many women went out to work for the first time to support themselves and their families, and enjoyed their first taste of economic independence. Even if they didn’t get jobs outside the home, the work of stretching the household budget had become a national duty—no less an authority than Eleanor Roosevelt called on women to take charge of the purse strings at home and set an example for the government. The Live-Alone message found its audience

among women whose world had been shaken up, and who were secretly rather excited at the prospect.

At home or out on the town, at work or in love, the Live-Aloner in the 1930s became a bona fide cultural phenomenon. Marjorie followed her debut bestseller with *Orchids on Your Budget*, a guide to living frugally but fashionably on a single salary. *Corned Beef and Caviar for the Live-Aloner* contained recipes, menus, and entertaining tips for the solo hostess, while *New York: Fair or No Fair* offered advice to unchaperoned women visiting the spectacular 1939 World's Fair—including where they could rent a date for the evening in order to gain admission to the most glamorous nightclubs in the city. When Marjorie belatedly married in 1939, newspaper headlines crowed that she had betrayed her readers. But after just ten years, she was widowed, and began to write again. *You Can Start All Over*, she told her older and wiser Live-Aloner in 1953, then a few years later, encouraged her to *Keep Going and Like It*. She knew that being young, free, and single was very different from being divorced, widowed, and alone in midlife—especially in the conservative 1950s. But whether she was capturing the zeitgeist or fighting against it, her message was consistent: women needed to declare and fight for their independence throughout their lives.

The Live-Aloner's story is much bigger than Marjorie Hillis, and while this book is rooted in her biography and books, it is more than the story of an unjustly forgotten female writer. *The Extra Woman* tells the story of the Live-Aloner from her first appearance in the 1930s, in the sliver of possibility between Depression and war, through the backlash of the 1950s and into the dawning of second-wave feminism in the 1960s. Using the subjects of Marjorie's books as a framework, the book will explore domestic pleasures and urban adventures, economics and

work, sex, marriage, widowhood and old age, as single women—young and old, black and white, experienced them in this period of rapid social change in America. Along the way it will tell the stories of the writers, artists, actresses, designers, and political leaders who showed ordinary women the possibilities that awaited them if they delayed or rejected marriage, and chose instead to build a life they truly wanted.

## CHAPTER OUTLINES

### INTRODUCTION—FINDING MARJORIE HILLIS

Whenever I tell people about Marjorie Hillis, the first question I'm usually asked is how I found out about her. Like most things that well and truly upend your life, it was something of an accident. One Christmas a few years ago, just after my father had died unexpectedly, a friend gave me a worn 1936 copy of *Live Alone and Like It*. It was an oddly comforting gift at that moment, a retro self-help guide that even I, a thoroughgoing skeptic about such things, could embrace. We read snippets out loud for laughs from the question-and-answer section "Etiquette for a Lone Female" ("Question: Is it permissible for a youngish un-chaperoned woman living alone to wear pajamas when a gentleman calls?"), but later in bed I found myself devouring the whole thing, and taking it quietly to heart. After all, as Marjorie Hillis says, "the chances are that at some time in your life, possibly only now and then between husbands, you will find yourself settling down to a solitary existence."

But who was Marjorie Hillis? Following a few Internet crumbs to archives in New York and Indiana, I pieced together a picture of this plain, pragmatic daughter of a famous Brooklyn preacher. Once an aspiring poet, she became a magazine editor and eventually, a self-help guru who transformed the status of single women from pitiful "extras" into glamorous and self-possessed "Live-Aloners." From the late 1930s to the early 1960s, her books taught readers how to dress, decorate, entertain, work, travel, and grow old following nobody's whims but their own.

We look back to these midcentury years now for their style, but our connection is stronger than the shape of a sofa or the drape of a dress. In the wake of the Wall Street Crash in 1929, a crisis that severed the simple connection between wealth and happiness, Americans became obsessed with how to redefine success and make the disaster over into an opportunity. Self-appointed experts peddled philosophies of positive thinking, self-reliance, and the appreciation of small pleasures, in an effort to reassure people that they weren't just at the mercy of the markets but could take charge of their own destinies. Today, amid the similarly slow and unequal recovery from the 2008 crash, it's easy to detect a similar yearning in the popularity of books, apps, and advice columns that tell us to embrace the precarious economy, purge ourselves of physical baggage, and train our minds towards optimism. In each era, the proliferation of self-help can be traced to the failures of government and the economy to materially support people; but at the same time, there's no doubt that a spirit of experiment and daring can arise from the sense that nothing will be the same again.

*The Extra Woman* tells the story of a particular type of woman, the glamorous Live-Aloner, during a period of extreme social upheaval. It traces her fortunes from the depths of the Depression, through the war that sent her out into the working world and the postwar black hole of domesticity that sucked her back, and ends with her venturing out again at the dawn of the radical sixties. Class and race unavoidably shaped her experiences, as living alone and supporting oneself was, by and large, a privilege of the wealthy and white. Yet the spirit of the Live-Aloner had an impact far beyond the women who could afford to emulate Marjorie Hillis directly. She offered a new vision of happiness and success, at a moment in history when Americans were obsessed with finding, and defining, both.



## CHAPTER 1—SELF HELP IN HIGH STYLE.

From the moment her book was published in the fall of 1936, Marjorie Hillis embraced her role as ambassador for the pleasure-filled, optimistic philosophy of *Live Alone and Like It*. But her own independence was hard won. The years since the Wall Street Crash, and the deaths of both her parents, had been an exercise in picking up what was left of her life and putting it back together in a very different shape. Rejecting the traditionalist, hearth-and-home philosophies of her father and mother, both self-help authors in their own right, she discovered that she could be just as happy in a “solitary ménage” as in the bosom of a family—and that other women might be also.

Her job was an essential source of joy. After more than twenty years on the staff at *Vogue*, Marjorie had risen to become a deputy and friend to the magazine’s longtime editor Edna Woolman Chase. *Live Alone and Like It*, with its embrace of fashion and its witty, snappy tone, was a clear product of the Condé Nast magazine empire. But the book’s popularity was also due to the self-help craze of the mid-30s, when writers like Dale Carnegie and Napoleon Hill grew rich on a gospel of success as a product of determination and a positive mental attitude.

Marjorie shared those gurus’ faith in the power of optimism, but unlike them, she understood that society judged and restricted women’s choices in particular ways. By telling her female readers that they could resist family pressure, take charge of their own money, and even that divorce was nothing to be afraid of, she turned the vague promises of self-help into a concrete, proto-feminist plan for independent living.

## CHAPTER 2—THE PLEASURES OF HOME.

Although she was a minister's daughter, Marjorie Hillis had no time whatsoever for self-denial. Anyone who claimed that material objects and the pleasures of the flesh were shallow or sinful was quite welcome to the drudgery of marriage and motherhood. For the Live-Aloner, Marjorie cheerfully endorsed bubble baths, cocktails and dinner by the fire, and insisted that a home should be welcoming and comforting whether or not it was shared. In her third book, *Corned Beef and Caviar for the Live-Aloner*, she shared (occasionally hair-raising) menu ideas for both solitary meals and dinner parties, and banished the old-fashioned notion that it was improper for a single woman to invite a man to supper.

During the 1930s, the home became an important site for pleasure as well as shelter, as people saved money by spending leisure time indoors. The previously upper-class profession of interior decorating became a widespread passion, largely through the efforts of its flamboyant star, Dorothy Draper, who after her divorce in 1930 became famous for creating screamingly bright interiors for the country's most exclusive hotels and resorts. But she also publicized her bold, idiosyncratic taste through her *Good Housekeeping* column and a pair of advice manuals, *Decorating is Fun!* and *Entertaining is Fun!*, which encouraged readers to pair wide stripes with blooming chintz in shades of crimson, teal, and lime. Even in a studio apartment, the Live-Aloner could create a stylish space, and invite in whomever she chose. And after the repeal of prohibition in 1933, keeping a well stocked home bar was an essential mark of sophistication.

The glamorizing of domesticity helped conceal the labor and strain of keeping a home together during the Depression. For thousands of women less moneyed and daring than Dorothy

Draper, help came from a widowed St. Louis housewife named Irma Rombauer, who assembled a collection of recipes and cooking advice as a means of supporting herself after her husband's suicide. Despite its grim origins, the collection, which became the kitchen staple *The Joy of Cooking*, focused on pleasure, not penury. Its chatty, personal approach encouraged women to experiment in the kitchen and reassured them that they wouldn't fail. Although *Joy* addressed itself to housewives, a sequel, *Streamlined Cooking*, tapped into the burgeoning market of single working women in search of a speedy supper. Eating alone might seem lonely, but with the right knowledge and attitude, it could become a source of indulgence and luxury. Those concepts were not antithetical to Depression thinking—on the contrary, in the face of so much bad news, they had become more important than ever.

### **CHAPTER 3—IT'S UP TO THE WOMEN**

In *Orchids on Your Budget*, her sequel to *Live Alone and Like It*, Marjorie Hillis made it clear that independence was impossible without smart money management. The Live-Aloner of the Thirties didn't have access to a credit card; a girl like "Miss S.," who moves from the South to Chicago and fritters away her income during the summer, has no way to buy herself a proper winter coat when the snow comes. And as the Wall Street Crash had made painfully clear, a husband was no guarantee of a steady income.

The Depression was a shock to traditional breadwinning arrangements, but it could also be a liberation. One of the most provocative chapters in *Orchids on Your Budget* is titled "Can You

Afford a Husband?” It presents marriage as an allowable indulgence, should a wealthy working woman take a fancy to a penniless artist, and gives no hint that the men involved would object to the arrangement. This might have been wishful thinking. Mass unemployment was unmooring to men—as Hanna Rosin detailed in her 2012 book *The End of Men*, periods of economic catastrophe upend traditional breadwinning arrangements—and a sympathetic press tended to vilify women who went out to work. Yet despite this pressure, there were two million more women in the workforce in 1940 than in 1930, even before the war caused their numbers to skyrocket.

Whether or not they earned their own money, women in the 1930s could not ignore the state of the national economy. Female voters played a crucial role in FDR’s elections, while the First Lady represented a version of work, marriage and leadership that was unlike anything they’d seen before. In lectures, columns, and books, Eleanor Roosevelt urged her female audiences to understand their own power and the value of their domestic experience. “All government, whether it is that of village, city, state or nation,” she wrote in 1933, “is simply glorified housekeeping.” As if to prove her point, her husband appointed the first woman to a Cabinet position—Labor Secretary Frances Perkins, who fought in court for the right to keep her own name when she married, and who single-handedly supported her bipolar husband and daughter. In office, she championed social security and minimum wage laws, transforming the working lives of millions of American men and women.

In 1938, Marjorie Hillis published *Work Ends at Nightfall*, a departure from her previous books that shared little of their success. That was not exactly surprising, as it was a book-length tale in verse about a day and night in the life of seven working female friends in New York, with

jobs ranging from the glamorous (photographer, columnist) to the mundane (stenographer, shop assistant.) The poem makes clear that although career success is important, it doesn't entirely compensate for loneliness. In this different genre, the Live-Alone guru cast doubt on the optimism of her earlier books and acknowledged that like her characters, she felt occasional pangs of regret at missing out on family life.

#### **CHAPTER 4—THE MODERN CITY AND THE WORLD OF TOMORROW**

Wherever else the Live-Aloner might try to forge her path, New York was still the ultimate place for adventure and reinvention. The city's notoriously wild 1920s nightlife was tamed, for a while, by the domestic turn of the Depression, but city dwellers and tourists didn't lose their appetite for drinking, dining, and dancing. In the late 30s, post-Repeal, dining out became a public spectacle that was shared even among those who couldn't afford to go to the glitzy cabarets that mushroomed along Broadway in the defunct ballrooms of midtown hotels. Radio broadcasts from the stages of these nightclubs piped New York's music and glamour into homes across the country, and Hollywood in the talkie era loved to display "café society" in all its glory.

New York in the 1930s was an unequal blend of high style and hard times. In Harlem, the Depression had brought a sudden, devastating end to the cultural ferment of the 1920s Renaissance and its dreams of racial equality. In Greenwich Village, the bohemian, Paris-trained photographer Berenice Abbott captured the city's extremes and contrasts—both architectural and human—in a ten-year documentary project that culminated in the 1939 book *Changing New*

*York*. Like her contemporaries Dorothea Lange, chronicler of dustbowl poverty, and the groundbreaking photojournalist Margaret Bourke-White, Abbott demonstrated the perceptiveness and artistry of women behind the camera. And although she was not technically a Live-Aloner, the photographer concealed the truth; as lesbians had for generations, she used her apparent spinster status as cover while sharing her downtown loft, and her life, with her female partner.

The culmination of the decade's disparities was the 1939 World's Fair, attended by 40 million people over eighteen months. Planned as a triumphant sign that the city was emerging from the Depression, the fair, dubbed "The World of Tomorrow," showcased scientific, artistic, and technological innovation (President Roosevelt's opening of the fair was the first television broadcast.) Marjorie Hillis took the opportunity to direct visiting Live-Aloners towards a big-city adventure in her 1939 guidebook *New York—Fair or No Fair*, detailing the most reputable hotels and glamorous nightclubs. Since the truly famous venues, like the Stork Club and the Rainbow Room, barred single women from entry, she pointed her readers toward a service called The Guide Escort Agency, which would rent out carefully vetted men as dates for the evening. Unfortunately, by the time the book came out, the city had shut the service down in a fit of moral panic. It was a sign that the brief golden age of the devil-may-care Live-Aloner was coming to an end.

## **CHAPTER 5—ROSIE THE RIVETER VS. MRS ROULSTON.**

In 1939, Marjorie Hillis made headlines when she announced that after three years riding high as the Live-Alone guru, she was getting married. Newspapers announced her wedding to Thomas Roulston, a widowed Brooklyn grocery-store magnate, with undisguised relish, crowing that Miss Hillis had finally given up the pretense of loving the single life and was abandoning her readers. But Marjorie had never claimed that living alone was preferable to marriage, merely that it was possible for a woman to enjoy her solo state when it came (as it almost certainly would.) For now, she would try to like married life. The couple settled on Long Island, and for a while, it looked as though marriage might silence Marjorie Hillis.

Beyond the walls of Roulston's Huntington estate, the country was watching fearfully as Europe descended into war. The ramping up of industrial production across the United States sent thousands of women out to work, many for the first time, and tens of thousands also volunteered to serve in the Women's Auxiliary Army Corps. Work outside the home was reframed as the patriotic duty of all American women, no matter their race or class—albeit underpaid and strictly temporary. But as more and more men left home to fight overseas, the idea of living alone quickly lost its glamour. It became a hardship endured out of necessity; a source of anxiety and anguish.

At the end of the war, the symbolic Rosie the Riveter and her real-life counterparts were expected to welcome their soldiers home and resume their domestic duties as though nothing had changed. As the 1950s dawned, the reign of the Live-Aloner seemed definitively over. Marriage rates were on the rise, and the average age of a woman on her wedding day tumbled. The dream of a chic city pad to call one's own was pushed out by babies and suburbs, even though this cultural norm excluded thousands of Americans whose lives did not fit its narrow, white and

upper-middle-class constraints. Single women found themselves “extras” once again, both pitiable and threatening to families and society. But this time, there was nobody to champion their rebellion.

## **CHAPTER 6—LIVE ALONE AGAIN (AND LIKE IT?)**

In 1949, after a decade of marriage, 75-year-old Thomas Roulston suffered a fatal heart attack. His widow found herself a Live-Aloner once more, at the age of almost sixty. Before long, as she had once before in the wake of loss, she turned her back on suburban silence and she set her sights on the city, packing up her Huntington estate to take an apartment on the Upper East Side of Manhattan. Almost immediately, she began to write again. In 1951, she published *You Can Start All Over*, a new book aimed at widows, divorcées, and aging Live-Aloners who were determined to hold onto their independence as long as possible. Once again drawing on her own experience, she told her readers there was life after divorce, or even death.

Of course, single women were still working, playing and searching for happiness as they had always been. But their pursuit now seemed menaced on all sides. *Life* magazine reported in 1956 that the “Single Career Woman” was likely to suffer “psychological damage,” even if she liked her job. In Hollywood, the dangerous dames of film noir threatened the nuclear family, while the heroines of weepy “women’s pictures” choked back their desires in order to conform. Like most businesses in the 1950s, the film industry allowed few women to progress past the receptionist’s desk—with the striking exception of Ida Lupino, a British-born actress, who went

on to write, produce, and direct her own films, including 1950's *Outrage*, one of the first American movies to center on a young woman's rape and its repercussions.

Being an independent woman in the 1950s was fraught with danger, but occasionally it still looked tempting. In the mid-1950s, the novel, play, and eventually movie *Auntie Mame* became wildly popular. Based on novelist Patrick Dennis's own aunt, the wealthy and outlandish Mame Dennis, played by Rosalind Russell, laughed in the face of social convention and entreated lesser mortals to "Live, live, *live!*" Although she became a 1950s icon, Mame's time was actually Marjorie's—the swinging New York of the 1930s, recalled by her nephew in rose-tinted splendor. As the 1960s approached, nostalgia for the freedom of the Live-Alone era would become just one of the forces gathering the strength to drive profound change in American women's lives.

## **CHAPTER 7—THE FEMINIST LIVE-ALONER**

The new decade had barely begun before single girls were everywhere. They had a new guru, Helen Gurley Brown, editor-in-chief of *Cosmopolitan* magazine, and a new bible, her 1962 book *Sex and the Single Girl*. Although she shared an emphasis on financial independence with Marjorie Hillis, Gurley Brown was far franker about sex: she believed women should have as much of it as they pleased and (notoriously) turn it to their advantage in the workplace. Having married the film producer David Brown in 1959, Gurley Brown was no longer a single girl herself, but it hardly mattered in a world suddenly obsessed with young, independent career girls. Marlo Thomas, in the 1966 sitcom *That Girl*, gave them a cute, chic, wide-eyed role model,

while newspapers hungrily reported on their adventures, striking a very different, admiring tone from the headshaking pity of ten years before.

Much of the cultural celebration of the 1960s single girl looked back to the Live-Alone era for inspiration. Mary McCarthy's shockingly frank semi-autobiographical novel *The Group*, published in 1963, explored the post-collegiate lives and loves of a clique of Vassar graduates in the years following McCarthy's own graduation thirty years before. In the same year, Betty Friedan's groundbreaking feminist polemic, *The Feminine Mystique*, also recalled the way that 1930s magazines had cheered on the era's independent heroines, in contrast to the domestic drumbeat that had drowned out the ambitions of her contemporaries.

Most of the discussion around singleness and the burgeoning feminist movement in the early 1960s focused on young women. But Marjorie Hillis continued to write and share her wisdom with an older generation. Her 1967 book *Keep Going and Like It: A Guide to the Sixties and Onward and Upward* promised to teach readers "How to be as glamorous in December as you were in May." On the back is a portrait of the white-haired author, resplendent in a satin blouse with huge fur cuffs and dark silk skirt, leaning toward the camera with one eyebrow arched conspiratorially. The world might have changed, but her message had not: "A woman can grow old charmingly, importantly, gaily, gloomily, or just plain dully," she wrote—and it was up to that woman to choose her path actively. As always, she believed that happiness was a matter of determination, not situation.

## **AFTERWORD—THE LIVE-ALONER'S LEGACY**

Four years after she published *Keep Going and Like It*, Marjorie Hillis Roulston passed away at the age of 82, just missing the debut of *Ms.* magazine, the passage of Title IX, and the Roe v. Wade decision. A brief obituary in *Time* magazine sniffed that she “glorified spinsterhood,” while the notice in the *New York Times* focused on her civic roles, praising her as a pillar of the community like her father, rather than as a feminist pioneer. But her smart and witty books—and the life on which they were based—lit a path through the middle of the twentieth century for women who didn’t think they could “have it all,” but were seeking something simpler: the right to dictate their own destiny. She remains one of our most clear-eyed and sharp-tongued guides to the quintessential American pursuit of happiness.

In the twenty-first century, with technology allowing us ways of connecting that Marjorie Hillis could hardly have imagined, we seem to be no closer to understanding what makes or keeps us happy, after our basic needs are met, and the self-help industry is as healthy in the current economic recession as it was in the 1930s. For women, the pressure to balance career achievement and domesticity is as strong as ever, with every stride towards equality in the professional realm seemingly matched by a ratcheting-up of the stakes of “success” in the home. Whether we’re single or not, we know that happiness is more complicated than a well cut dress, a well ordered home, and a well mixed Manhattan. But while we try to figure it out, the *Live-Aloner*, that elusive and influential cultural icon, has more to teach us than we knew.