

The Believers

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Extract

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by
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Prologue

London, 1962

At a party in a bedsit just off Gower Street, a young woman stood alone at the window, her elbows pinned to her sides in an attempt to hide the dark flowers of perspiration blossoming at the armholes of her dress. The forecast had been for a break in the week-long heatwave, but all day the promised rain had held off. Now, the soupy air was crackling with immanent brightness and pigeons had begun to huddle peevishly on window ledges. Silhouetted against the heavy, violet sky, the Bloomsbury rooftops had the unreal, one-dimensional look of pasted-on figures in a collage.

The woman turned to survey the room, wearing the braced, defiant expression of someone trying not to feel her solitude as a disadvantage. Most of the people here were students and, aside from the man who had brought her, she knew no one. Two men had separately approached her since she had been standing at the window, but fearful of being patronized she had sent them both away. It was not a bad thing, she told herself, to remain composed on the sidelines while others grew careless and loud. Her aloofness, she fancied, made her intriguing.

For some time now, she had been observing a tall man across the room. He looked older than the other people at the party. (Casting about in the exotic territory of old age, she had placed him in his early thirties.) He had a habit of massaging his own arms, as if discreetly assessing their muscularity. And from time to time, when someone else was talking, he raised one leg and swung his arm back in an extravagant mime of throwing a ball. He was either very charming or very irritating: she had not yet decided.

‘He’s an American,’ a voice said.

Audrey turned to see a blonde woman smiling at her slyly. She was wearing a violently green dress and a lot of recklessly applied face powder that had left her nose and chin a queer orange colour

quite distinct from the rest of her complexion. 'A lawyer,' she said, gesturing across the room at the tall man. 'His name's Joel Litvinoff.'

Audrey nodded warily. She had never cared for conspiratorial, female conversation of this sort. Its assumption of shared preoccupations was usually unfounded in her experience, its intimacies almost always the trapdoor to some subterranean hostility.

The woman leaned in close so that Audrey could feel the damp heat of her breath in her ear. The man was from New York, she said. He had come to London as part of a delegation, to brief the Labour Party on the American civil rights movement. 'He's frightfully clever, apparently.' She lowered her eyelids confidentially. 'A Jew, you know.'

There was a silence. A small breeze came in through the gap in the window where it had been propped open with books. 'Would you excuse me?' Audrey said.

'Oh!' the woman murmured as she watched Audrey walk away.

Pressing her way through the crowd, Audrey wondered whether she had dealt with the situation correctly. There was a time when she would have lingered to hear what amusing or sinister characteristic the woman attributed to the man's Jewishness – what business acumen or frugality or neurosis or pushiness she assigned to his tribe – and then, when she had let the incriminating words be spoken, she would have gently informed the woman that she was Jewish herself. But she had tired of that party game. Embarrassing the prejudices of your countrymen was never quite as gratifying as you thought it would be; the countrymen somehow never embarrassed enough. It was safer on the whole to enjoy your moral victory in silence and leave the bastards guessing.

Audrey halted now at the sound of someone calling her name. Several yards to her left, a stout red-haired youth was standing between two taller men in an unwitting turret formation. This was Martin Sedge, her date for the evening. He was waving and beckoning, making little smoky swirls in the air with his cigarette: 'Audrey! Come over here!'

Audrey had met Martin three months before, at a conference of

the Socialist Labour League in Red Lion Square. Despite being one year her junior, he was much more knowledgeable about political theory – much more experienced as an activist – than she was and this inequality had given their friendship a rather pedagogical cast. They had been out together four times, always to the same rather grimy pub round the corner from where Audrey worked, and on each of these occasions their conversation had swiftly lapsed into tutorial mode, with Audrey sipping demurely at her shandy, or nibbling at a pickled egg, while Martin sank pints of beer and pontificated.

She did not mind being talked at by Martin. She was keen to improve herself. (On the flyleaf of the diary she was keeping that year, she had inscribed Socrates' words: 'I know nothing except the fact of my ignorance.') There was a girlish, renunciatory streak in her that positively relished Martin's dullness. What better proof could there be of her serious-mindedness – her rejection of the trivial – than her willingness to spend the spring evenings in a saloon bar, absorbing a young man's dour thoughts on the Fourth International?

Tonight, however, Martin seemed at pains to cast off his austere instructor's persona. In deference to the weather, and to the festive nature of the occasion, he had foregone his pilled Shetland jumper in favour of a short-sleeved shirt that revealed his pink, ginger-glazed forearms. Earlier in the evening, when he had met Audrey at Warren Street tube station, he had kissed her on the cheek – a gesture never hazarded before in the short history of their acquaintance.

'Audrey!' he bellowed now as she approached. 'Meet my mates! Jack, Pete, this is Audrey.'

Audrey smiled and shook Jack and Pete's wet hands. Up close, the three men were a small anthology of body odours.

'You out of drink?' Martin asked. 'Give me your glass and I'll get you another. It's bedlam in that kitchen.'

Left alone with Audrey, Jack and Pete fixed her with frankly assessing gazes. Audrey glanced away shyly. Some of the more daring girls in the room had removed their stockings, she noticed.

She could see their poultry-white legs flashing in and out of the party's undergrowth, like torchlight in a forest.

'So,' Jack said, 'you're Audrey. We've heard a lot about you.'

'Vice versa,' Audrey said.

'Sorry?' Pete said, leaning forward.

Audrey paused, wondering if she had used the phrase correctly. 'I've heard a lot about you too,' she said.

Pete lifted his chin and slowly lowered it, as if a great mystery had now been solved. 'Bloody hot, isn't it?'

'Yes!' Audrey was wondering how to proceed with the exchange when a bearded man appeared behind Jack and Pete and planted his meaty hands on their shoulders.

'You made it!' he cried. 'How are you two old bastards? Are you having a good time?'

'Tom!' Jack and Pete cried in unison.

Their host, Tom McBride, was a postgraduate student at the LSE, notorious for his rabble-rousing activities in the student union and for the inordinate length of time he had been working on his doctoral thesis. Martin had spoken of him in worshipful tones, but Audrey, examining him at close quarters for the first time, felt an instinctive hostility. He was cocky, she thought. And there was something upsettingly pubic about his beard.

'Sorry, love,' he said, glancing at her incuriously, 'I don't know your name.'

'Audrey Howard,' she replied. 'I'm a friend of Martin Sedge's.'

'Friend of – oh, Martin? Glad to have you, Audrey!' He turned back to Jack and Pete. 'Now, you two, I want you to meet someone.' He pointed to a man standing behind him. It was the man Audrey had been watching: the American. 'Joel!' Tom cried. 'Meet Jack and Pete.' Pink with pleasure at receiving the imprimatur of Tom's attention, Jack and Pete smiled eagerly at the stranger. 'Joel is an American lawyer,' Tom told them, 'but don't hold that against him. He's quite a subversive, really.'

In spite of this recommendation, a certain hardness entered Jack and Pete's expressions. Americans, it seemed, were one of the categories of person to whom they felt reliably superior.

Joel smiled and bent towards Audrey. 'Excuse my rude friend for not introducing us. Did I hear that your name was Audrey?'

Audrey nodded.

'Joel and I were just talking about Paul Robeson,' Tom went on. 'Did you see that he's been admitted to hospital again? Exhaustion, they're saying. It turns out that Joel here has met him.'

'Well, only very briefly,' Joel corrected. 'As a kid, I used to go to this summer camp called Wo-Chi-Ca – the Workers' Children's Camp – in New Jersey. One summer, when I was twelve, Paul Robeson made an overnight visit.'

He had the American trick of seeming to smile even as he was talking. And he was stooping slightly, Audrey noticed, as if attempting to minimize the height difference between himself and the Englishmen. *He wants to be liked*, she thought.

'He was a big hero of ours, obviously,' Joel was saying, 'so we were thrilled. He toured the whole camp and then, in the evening, after he'd sung for us in the dining hall, he made this little speech, asking us to dedicate our lives to fighting injustice. The whole place went nuts. We were all ready to go out then and there and lay down our lives for this guy. Anyway, the next morning, I happened to wake up early, needing to pee, and instead of walking all the way to the boys' latrines, I broke camp rules and went around the back of my cabin, into the woods. Just as I'm standing there, doing my business, who comes around the corner but Robeson! He's come to take a leak too! He doesn't skip a beat when he sees me. He just smiles and says – you know, in that incredible voice – "I guess you and I are the early risers around here." Then he goes and finds himself a tree and does his thing. So, you can imagine, now I'm completely overwhelmed. I've got the hero of the American communist movement standing right in front of me and both of us have got our dicks out. "Oh, yes, sir," I say. "I love to get up early." Although, in point of fact, this was probably the earliest I'd ever been up in my life. And Robeson says –'

Martin appeared at Audrey's side, holding two paper cups of red wine. 'Sorry about the delay. Some bloody idiot went and lost the corkscrew –'

Audrey put a finger to her lips to silence him.

‘Oh! Sorry!’ Martin said, glancing at Joel and hunching his shoulders in exaggerated remorse. ‘Didn’t mean to interrupt.’

Joel smiled good-naturedly and went on. ‘So Robeson says to me, “That’s an excellent habit, young man, and I advise you to keep it up. Life is too short to waste it laying a-bed.” And then, while I’m still thinking of something smart to say, he steps away from the tree, buttons his fly and walks off.’

There was a moment’s mystified silence. Somewhere in the telling – perhaps when Martin had been shushed – the expectation of a punchline had been created. Tom gave a bark of ersatz laughter. ‘Ha! Just walked off, did he? Well!’

‘Fascinating,’ Martin commented drily.

‘This camp you went to sounds very interesting,’ Audrey said, eager to help the American recover.

Joel nodded. ‘Yeah, it was a sweet place. A little kooky. Instead of telling ghost stories around the campfire, we used to sing songs of praise to Uncle Joe and take pledges not to tell jokes that made fun of anyone.’ He laughed. Jack and Pete, suspecting something decadent in his mockery, pursed their lips. Once again, the conversation seemed to die away.

‘I feel so sorry for Paul Robeson,’ Audrey volunteered. ‘He’s suffered so much.’

‘Robeson?’ Martin said disbelievingly. He was still smarting from being silenced. ‘Paul Robeson suffers in a very good coat and an excellent car. I wouldn’t waste too much sympathy on him if I were you.’

‘Well, we don’t have to ration our sympathy, do we?’ Audrey replied. ‘It’s not as if it’s going to run out.’

Martin blinked at her, bewildered by this unexpected betrayal. ‘Oh, come on, Audrey,’ he said with an unconvincing titter. ‘No one takes Robeson seriously any more. He’s still defending Hungary, for God’s sake!’ He glanced around the group, seeking support. Jack and Pete nodded, but remained silent.

‘I think you’re being a little hasty, there,’ Joel said.

‘Really?’ Martin’s face had the panicky look of someone realizing that he has swum too far from shore.

‘I don’t share all of Robeson’s positions,’ Joel said, ‘but I think the guy has earned our –’

‘It’s always seemed to *me*,’ Martin interrupted, ‘that Robeson is basically a minstrel figure.’

‘Whoah!’ Tom cried.

‘You don’t really mean that,’ Joel said. ‘Or, for your sake, I hope you don’t.’ All trace of the ingratiating anecdotalist had now disappeared. ‘Paul Robeson has done more for humanity than you or I will ever do.’

‘*Humanity*, eh?’ Martin smiled at the sentimentality of the American’s vocabulary. ‘Well, I’m sorry! I’m obviously trampling on some very important childhood memory.’

Joel made a weary gesture, batting Martin’s sarcasm away. ‘Ach . . . grow up, would you?’

A redness appeared on Martin’s neck and quickly spread northward, like wine filling a glass. ‘Yeah?’ he said. ‘Well, maybe *you* should grow up, mate . . .’ His Adam’s apple was bobbing grotesquely. His eyes were glittering with tears. For a moment, Audrey and the other men stood motionless, caught up in the compelling spectacle of his humiliation.

Tom raised his palms in a peace-making gesture. ‘Come on, everyone . . .’

But Martin would not be placated. With a disgusted shake of his head, he stalked away. Audrey hesitated a moment, searching for some loophole in the laws of etiquette that might spare her from having to pursue him. Then, with a polite nod to the men, she departed also.

After Jack and Pete had slunk off, Joel turned to Tom. ‘That girl,’ he said, ‘what was her last name?’

‘Horton, I think. No . . . Howard.’

‘Pretty, wasn’t she? Is she one of mine?’

‘What?’

‘Is she Jewish?’

Tom thought that she probably was – she had had a distinctly beaky, Hebrew look about her – but not wishing to give his friend the impression that the matter of Audrey's ethnicity was significant to him, he made a show of being startled by the question. 'Christ, I don't know. I've never met her before –' He broke off, distracted by some commotion on the other side of the room. A crowd of people was gathered around the window, exclaiming loudly. 'Well, thank God for that,' he said, peering over the heads of his guests. 'It's raining at last.'

'This is the rude American from last night,' Joel said, when he called the next day.

'Oh,' Audrey said, 'you're not rude.'

'I would have called earlier,' Joel went on, 'but it took me a while to find your number. Do you know how many A. Howards there are in the phone directory? I've spoken to most of them this morning.'

'You didn't need –'

'I wanted to apologize for my behaviour last night. I think I upset your boyfriend.'

'He's not my boyfriend.'

There was a brief silence as they registered the eagerness with which she had disowned Martin.

'And you don't need to apologize,' she went on. 'He was very badly behaved.'

On the way home from the party, she and Martin had taken shelter from the rainstorm under a shop awning on Tottenham Court Road and Martin had tried to kiss her. Prompted by a hazy sense of indebtedness, she had let him at first. But the gluey sensation of his tongue in her mouth had defeated the compliant instinct and, after a few moments, she had reared away. 'I'm sorry,' she told him, 'I can't.'

'Don't be daft,' Martin had grunted, pulling her towards him.

For a while, they had struggled – lurching clumsily back and forth, like boxers locked in a hostile embrace; then one of Audrey's pumps had fallen off into the road with a clatter and Martin had

released her. 'You know what you are?' he had panted as she bent down in the gutter to retrieve her shoe. 'A fucking cocktease is what you are . . .'

'Well, you're very kind,' Joel was saying now, 'but I'd still like to make it up to you. Might I take you for a coffee or a drink some time?'

'I -'

'The catch is, I have meetings all day and evening Monday and I'm leaving Tuesday morning to go back to the States, so it's really got to be today.'

'Oh dear . . .'

'You're booked up?'

'Well, yes. I'm going to visit my parents this afternoon.'

'Hmm. And I guess you're the kind of good daughter who wouldn't put your parents off just to come and have a drink with a fellow you hardly know?'

Audrey considered this.

'Okay,' Joel said, apparently mistaking her hesitation for refusal, 'I guess I'll have to come with you to your parents.'

She laughed. 'I don't think that would work. They live in Chertsey.'

'Sure it would!' he said, warming to the role of determined suitor. 'I love Chertsey! Where is it?'

'It's an hour and a half on the train.'

'Fine! I love trains! I'll be very well-behaved, I promise.'

'I'm not sure you . . . I mean, I don't think you'd find it very amusing.'

'Let me worry about that.'

She thought for a moment. And then, to her surprise, she said yes.

They met at two under the clock at Waterloo. The previous night's downpour had slackened off to a steady grey drizzle and Joel was wearing a pristine, cream-coloured raincoat that seemed to glow in the dim light of the station. Audrey, who at the last minute had rejected the servile implications of trying to look pretty, arrived in

an anorak and an odd little rain bonnet made of transparent plastic.

‘You see, I made it!’ Joel exclaimed.

‘Yes, you did!’

They laughed, both a little stunned by the impetuosity with which they had undertaken this adventure.

Once aboard the train, a silence fell upon them and they took refuge in the view – pretending to be engrossed by the vignettes of rain-blurred suburbia slipping by their window: a woman standing, hands on hips, in the junk-filled backyard of a terraced house; a black dog racing across a sodden football field; a lone youth at a bus stop, dipping a spidery hand into his steaming bouquet of chips.

From Audrey’s anxious host’s perspective, these scenes seemed ridiculously melancholic: a parody of English drear. She blushed angrily at the dowdiness of her country – at the folly of having brought this man to survey it. And to think that she had counted on the train journey providing the picturesque portion of the trip! She glanced at Joel, still tightly wrapped in his embarrassing mackintosh, and wondered if she ought to warn him about her parents. He was looking down the corridor now, at the slow advance of a railway employee pushing a tinkling trolley of tea and buns. Turning to meet Audrey’s eyes, he smiled. His teeth were as white and symmetrical as bathroom tiles.

Joel was wondering if perhaps he had been wrong to insist on this outing. Who knew what quaint rules of English etiquette he was forcing the girl to break by thrusting himself upon her like this? Perhaps she feared for her virtue. Perhaps . . . no, he wasn’t going to worry about it. He wasn’t going to let anything spoil the fun. This was his first trip to London – his first trip outside North America. There was nothing his gaze lit upon that did not remind him of his intrepidity. The faded red leather of the train seats. The splendid dilapidation of that station they had just left. The way Audrey sat across from him so stiffly, clutching her unbecoming rain bonnet in her fist. She was, he had decided, impossibly, romantically English: a figure out of – well, out of a book about English people.

He began to tell her about himself. He described his work with the Freedom Riders in Georgia and Mississippi. ‘Negroes are the

most disenfranchised people in America,' he said, 'and they're up against the most powerful people in America: the white establishment.' He joked about the time he had been kicked by a police captain in the bus station in Jackson. He mentioned, with what he hoped was appropriate humbleness, that he had recently been asked by the Reverend Martin Luther King to join his legal team. He showed her a piece of paper on which he had copied out a quote from Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes: 'As life is action and passion, it is required of a man that he should share the passion and action of his time, at peril of being judged not to have lived.' 'I carry that with me everywhere I go,' he said. 'Just to remind myself.'

Audrey nodded, trying to hide her alarm. She did not know who Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes was, or what the word 'disenfranchised' meant. She had never met a Negro.

Joel looked at her, feeling baffled and bad-tempered. Why did she not say anything? Why did she not congratulate him on the valour of his deeds, or show surprise that a man of his accomplishments was paying such courtly attention to her?

'You haven't told me anything about yourself,' he said, wondering if perhaps he had missed some crucial fact of her biography that would explain her self-possession.

Her reply was a little reluctant – she was not as used to treating herself as a topic of conversation as he was – but she seemed to give up the facts truthfully enough. Her parents were Polish, she told him. (The original family name was Holcman.) She had grown up in Hackney, the younger of two sisters. Her father was a tailor – now retired, owing to a heart condition. She had left school at sixteen. She worked as a typist for an import-export business in Camden Town.

'You and I are both workers then,' he said with a smile. 'Not like those kids last night.' It was as he had thought. She was without distinction. This female dignity, unsupported by status or money, was a wondrous act of levitation, to be sure. But he was anxious to have it done with now – to be told the trick of it. A girl who could *never* be talked down to would be a little exhausting in the long run.

★

Audrey's parents lived on the ground floor of a small shabby-looking house just behind Chertsey High Street. The rain had turned its red brick to a sombre shade of brown. When the front door opened, an unpleasant, complicated smell of old meals gusted out from the interior. The woman who answered the door was white-haired and drastically fat. Her vast bosom strained against the confines of her floral housecoat; her swollen feet spilled over the edges of her slippers like rising dough escaping its pan. Audrey spoke quickly in Polish. After a moment or two, the woman's face lit up with understanding and she extended a chubby hand to Joel. 'Come,' she said in a heavy Polish accent. 'You are welcome.' Her forlorn smile acted on her face like a stone thrown in water. Flesh rippled; chins multiplied. Only now, as he entered the dank house, did it dawn on him that this must be Audrey's mother.

In the hallway, another door opened and he was thrust into a tiny, hot, ornament-choked room where an elderly man sat slumped before an electric bar heater. Audrey and the mother both began speaking to him at once in Polish. While he listened, the man gazed at Joel appraisingly. At length, he smiled, just as his wife had done, and stood up to greet the visitor.

Mr Howard was as slender and wizened as his wife was wide and pneumatic. When he and Joel shook hands, his tendons crackled like chicken bones in the young man's firm grasp. Joel was relieved of his coat and a cat was brusquely shooed from a crumbling, doily-covered chair. Audrey and Mrs Howard left the room to make tea.

'So, you like England?' Mr Howard asked as Joel sat down.

'Oh yes, very much,' Joel assured him. The room in which they were sitting faced on to the street, so he had to strain to hear Mr Howard's soft voice over the sounds of playing children and passing cars outside. Periodically, the shadow of a pedestrian would loom up against the net curtains, making him start.

'But the business opportunities are not so good as in America?' Mr Howard asked. His face, with its sunken cheeks and rheumy eyes, could have been the symbol for misfortune on a tarot card.

Joel paused. 'No, I guess not.'

'America is top place for business,' Mr Howard said. 'If I had my life over again, I would go to America. But now, is too late.'

He stared at Joel, as if daring him to challenge this melancholy conclusion.

Joel nodded. He was beginning to feel slightly panicked by the heat and squalor of the room. The chair that he was sitting on smelled strongly of cat pee. Mr Howard's sweater was dotted with food stains. Whatever malaise hung over this house could not be attributed to poverty, he thought. Cleanliness cost nothing, after all. His own parents, poor as they were, had always kept a spotless home. To this day, his mother would insist on boiling the antimacassars if company was coming. No, the dirt and disorder here suggested a failure of will, a moral collapse of some kind.

'It's very kind of you to let me intrude on your Sunday afternoon like this,' he said.

Mr Howard waved the comment away dismissively. 'How much do you pay your workers? What is average wage in America?' he asked.

It occurred to Joel that Mr Howard was under some misapprehension about what he did for a living. He was talking as if Joel were a businessman. Joel decided against correcting the error. He did not want to risk contradicting whatever Audrey had chosen to tell her parents about him. And, in any case, it seemed pedantic to insist on the truth when Mr Howard was clearly so engaged by the falsehood. Remembering his traveller's worldliness, he gamely rose to the challenge of posing as an entrepreneur.

Presently Audrey and her mother returned with the tea things. Audrey poured. Mrs Howard dispensed biscuits and beamed at Joel as he ate one. Mr Howard said something to Audrey. 'He says you're a clever man,' Audrey translated. Heartened by the father's good opinion and the mother's feminine twitter, Joel grew expansive. He admired Mrs Howard's teaset and affected to be interested in her description of its provenance. He listened, with a subtle knitting of his brow, to Mr Howard's sorrowful account of his heart problems. He related funny stories about his time in England and

complained light-heartedly about the awful weather. Mr and Mrs Howard chuckled in their muted, unhappy way, and told Audrey – Audrey was the medium for all compliments – that Mr Joel ought to be on the stage.

Later, when both parents had briefly left the room, Joel turned to Audrey. 'I'm having a great time,' he said gallantly. 'Your father is terrific.' He paused, fearing that this last remark might have stretched credibility. But Audrey did not cringe, or challenge the generosity of the judgement.

'Yes,' she agreed. 'He's a very good man.'

Her loyalty startled him. Even now, at the age of thirty-two, Joel was still prone to roll his eyes behind his parents' backs when presenting them to his friends.

After a couple of hours, Audrey said it was time to go. Mrs Howard protested, but Audrey prevailed. Coats were fetched. There were more handshakes. Mrs Howard kissed Joel on the cheek. The door clicked shut and they were back out on the street, breathing in the blessed coolness of the damp evening. Joel felt buoyant. He had handled the queer little episode very well, he thought. And now that he was freed from the greenhouse heat of that terrible front room, the visit was beginning to seem funny: a rich addition to his store of experience.

On the train journey back to London, Audrey was silent and formidably erect in her seat. Joel watched her anxiously. He would have liked to touch her, but he could think of no physical approach that would not seem brutish. As he considered how they would accomplish their goodbyes at the station, a gloomier view of the day began slowly to assert itself. Those parents had not really been amusing at all, he thought. They – and the great, unspecified sadness of their house – had been awful. What a silly adventure this had been: how pointless to have spent one of his last days in London chasing after a girl! In forty-eight hours he would be gone and they would never see each other again.

When they disembarked at Waterloo, he turned to Audrey with a resigned smile. 'That was great. Thank you for taking pity on a foreign visitor.'

‘It was my pleasure,’ Audrey said, ignoring his outstretched hand. ‘Shall we go back to your hotel?’

He was staying, along with all the other Americans in his delegation, at a place in Bayswater – a tatty Greek-owned establishment, with a grandiose foyer. He wondered if there would be a fuss about taking a woman to his room, but the desk clerk barely glanced at Audrey when he handed over the key.

Up in the spartan, high-ceilinged room, with its little sink, marbled green by the dripping tap, Audrey took off her damp shoes and socks and then her anorak. Joel noticed for the first time her long and elegant arms. ‘What a funny place,’ she was saying as he bent down to kiss her. ‘Have you been lonely staying here?’

Later, as they lay in bed together, he made a joking allusion to the difference in their ages. ‘I was practically in puberty when you were born,’ he said. ‘Is it strange to be with such an old man?’

‘Don’t fish.’

‘Huh?’

‘For compliments, I mean.’ Audrey bit at her thumbnail. It was unclear to her when their conversation had taken on its bantering, facetious tone. Perhaps it was she who had introduced it. She would have liked, in any case, to dispense with it now. She was still new to sex and uncertain of its etiquette, but she had an idea that post-coital conversation ought to be franker, kinder than this.

Joel laughed uneasily. He was growing tired of being at a disadvantage. Why had she done this, he wondered? No woman had ever given herself to him so quickly and with so little protest. She had behaved like – like a slut. And even now, there was no meekness or remorse in her. He wanted to say something that would reassert his dominance, something to make her blush or stutter.

‘I think I should take you back to New York with me,’ he announced.

She was silent for a moment, trying to piece together her meagre impressions of that far-off, spiky city.

‘Yup,’ he said, ‘that’s what I should do: marry you and take you to New York. What do you think of that?’

She sat up and looked around the room, at her rain bonnet lying in the sink, at her damp skirt crumpled on the floor. To be married. To be married to this man!

‘What do you think?’ he repeated, grinning.

The future was rushing up at her now. They would live together in an ‘apartment’. In a skyscraper, perhaps. They would be comrades in the fight against injustice, sharing the action and passion of their time. They would go on marches and hold cocktail parties attended by all their Negro friends . . .

‘Take me,’ she said quietly.

‘What?’

‘Take me,’ she repeated. ‘I want to go.’

Part One

New York, 2002

One

At dawn, on the top floor of a creaking house in Greenwich Village, Joel and Audrey lay in bed. Through a gap in the curtains, a finger of light extended slowly across their quilt. Audrey was still far out to sea in sleep. Joel was approaching shore – splashing about in the turbulent shallows of a doze. He flailed and crooned and slapped irritably at his sheets. Presently, when the rattling couplets of his snores reached one of their periodic crescendos, he awoke and grimaced in pain.

For two days now, he had been haunted by a headache: an icy clanking deep in his skull as if some sharp-edged metal object had come loose and were rolling about in there. Audrey had been dosing him with Tylenol and urging him to drink more water. But it wasn't liquids or pills he needed, he thought: it was a mechanic. He lay for a few moments, holding the back of his hand to his brow like a Victorian heroine with the vapours. Then he sat up bravely and fumbled for his spectacles on the crowded bedside table. In a matter of hours, he would be giving the defence's opening argument in the case of *The United States of America v. Mohammed Hassani*. Last night, before falling asleep, he had made some last-minute amendments to his prepared address and he was anxious to look them over:

Sometimes, in our earnest desire to protect this great country of ours, we can and do make errors. Errors that threaten to undermine the very liberties we are trying to protect. I am here to tell you that the presence of Mohammed Hassani in this courtroom today is one such error.

He squinted into the middle distance, trying to gauge the effectiveness of his rhetoric. Hassani was one of the Schenectady Six – a group of Arab Americans from upstate New York who had visited

an Al-Qaeda training camp in Afghanistan during the spring of 1998. Over the last two months, the five other members of the group had all made deals with the prosecutors. But Joel hated to make deals: at his urging, Hassani had held out and pled innocent to all charges.

You have been told that Mohammed Hassani is a supporter of terrorism. You have been told that he hates America and wants to aid and abet those who would destroy it. Allow me to tell you, now, who Mohammed Hassani really is. He is an American citizen with three American children and an American wife to whom he has been married for fifteen years. He is a grocer, a small businessman, the sponsor of a Little League team – a person who has lived and worked in upstate New York all his life. Does he possess strong religious beliefs? Yes. But remember, ladies and gentlemen, whatever the prosecution tries to suggest, it is not Islam that is on trial in this courtroom. Has Mr Hassani voiced criticisms of American foreign policy? Certainly. Does this fact make him a traitor? No, it does honour to the constitutional freedoms upon which our country was founded.

The basis of Joel's argument was that his client had been taken to the training camp under false pretences. One of his acquaintances at the mosque he attended in Schenectady had deliberately misrepresented the camp as a religious centre.

That's right: Hassani traveled to Afghanistan on the understanding that he was to take part in a spiritual retreat. In the coming days, you will hear how he tried, on more than one occasion, to get out of participating in the camp's mandatory weapons training – purposefully injuring himself in one instance so that he wouldn't have to fire a rocket-propelled grenade launcher. You will hear how he categorically refused invitations from the camp leaders to become involved in violent actions back in the United States. Ladies and gentlemen, you may take issue with Hassani's political and religious views. You may feel he is guilty of making an extremely poor vacation choice. But you cannot, in good conscience, convict this man of being a terrorist or even a terrorist sympathizer.

Joel glanced at his sleeping wife. Audrey disagreed with his strategy on this case. She maintained that he ought to be defending Hassani on grounds of legitimate Arab rage. Audrey took a much harder political line than he did on most things these days. He didn't mind. In fact, he rather enjoyed the irony of being chastised for his insufficient radicalism by the woman to whom he had once had to explain the Marxist concepts of 'base' and 'superstructure'. When he complained that she had become an ultra-leftist in her old age, he did so in the indulgent tones that another man might have teased his wife for her excessive spending at the mall. It was a feminine prerogative to hold unreasonable political views, he felt. And besides, he liked having some old-fashioned extremism about the house: it made him feel young.

Joel was still reading when, at six-thirty, the radio alarm on his bedside table clicked into life. He peeled off his clammy pyjama bottoms, rolled them into a ball and lobbed them elegantly into the laundry basket. He had been a talented sportsman in his youth – the handball champion of Bensonhurst, Brooklyn – and he had never lost the jock's habit of improvising minor athletic challenges for himself. He stood up now and stretched in front of the mirror on the closet door. At seventy-two, his nakedness was still formidable. His legs were strong. His chest, carpeted in whorls of grey hair, was broad. His penis was thick and long enough to bump companionably against his thigh as he strode out to the bathroom.

On the landing, he paused. Somewhere down below, he could hear the dim roar of a vacuum cleaner and the tuneless whistling of Julie, his sister-in-law. Ever since Julie had arrived from England two days ago, with her husband, Colin, she had been flitting up and down the groaning Perry Street staircase with buckets and dusters and antibacterial detergents in the saintly manner of Florence Nightingale bringing succour to a Crimean field hospital. Audrey was in a terrible snit about it. The implied insult to her own standards of cleanliness did not bother her, she claimed. (This was plausible: Audrey had always been rather proud of being a slob.) What bothered her was Julie's faith in the redemptive power of lemony freshness and her assumption that others shared it. 'If

she wants to practise her neurotic hygiene back home, that's one thing,' she had hissed the night before, as she was getting into bed. 'But I don't see why I have to put up with her powdered fucking carpet fragrances in *my* house.'

After he had finished up in the bathroom, Joel put on sweatpants and a shirt and went downstairs. He found Julie on the second-floor landing, fitting the vacuum with a special nozzle for hard-to-reach corners. 'Good morning! Good morning!' he cried as he stepped around her. In order to discourage prolonged interactions with his sister-in-law, he always addressed her as if he were calling out from the window of a fast-moving train.

Down on the first floor, Colin was sitting at the kitchen table, reading a New York travel guide. 'Good morning to you, kind sir!' he exclaimed when he saw Joel flashing by. 'Julie and I are off to Ground Zero in a bit. Is there anywhere down there that you'd recommend for lunch?'

'Nope, sorry,' Joel said as he hurried down the hall. 'Can't help you there.'

'Might I offer you a cup of tea?' Colin called after him.

'No thanks. I'm going out to get the papers.'

Joel was just opening the front door when he felt an answering push from the other side. 'It's me,' a voice said. 'I forgot my keys.'

The door swung open to reveal Joel's adopted son, Lenny, and Lenny's girlfriend, Tanya, standing limply on the doorstep, holding paper cups of Starbucks coffee. Tanya was wearing a jacket of ragged rabbit fur over her minidress. Lenny was shivering in a T-shirt. They both had the spectral look of people who had not slept in some time.

'Ah, love's young dream!' Joel cried with a facetious bow.

'Hey,' Lenny said. He was a tall man with a boyish, delicate face. Were it not for the gap between his two front teeth and the slight droop in his left eye, he would have been pretty. As it was, his raffish imperfections tipped the scale and made him beautiful.

'To what do I owe this rare pleasure?' Joel asked. Lenny was officially living back at home these days, but most nights he slept at Tanya's apartment.

Lenny cast a pale hand through untidy hair. ‘Tanya had a party at her place,’ he said. ‘Somebody pissed on her bed, so –’

‘Jesus!’ The vehemence of Joel’s tone suggested that it was his own bed that had been violated. ‘What kind of friends do you have?’

Lenny made a gesture with his hands as if he were pushing down on some invisible volume control. ‘It’s no big deal, Dad. The guy didn’t mean to . . . Can we come in? It’s freezing out here.’

‘What do you mean, “didn’t mean to”?’ Joel demanded. ‘He pissed on her bed by *accident*?’

‘Whatever. Just forget it.’ Lenny squeezed past Joel and headed into the kitchen. Tanya followed.

‘Oh, sure, go ahead,’ Joel shouted after them, ‘help yourselves to whatever you want. *Mi casa es su casa* . . .’ He stood for a moment, registering the impotence of his sarcasm, and then went out, slamming the door behind him.

Walking up the street to the bodega, he twitched and muttered to himself in disgust. Was it unreasonable for a man of his age and station to expect some peace and solitude in the mornings? Was it too much to ask that he be allowed a few hours of quiet reflection at the start of a demanding day in court? He tried to calm himself down by thinking about his opening statement, but it was no good: his composure had been lost.

Joel was by and large a sanguine man. He regarded his sunny outlook not as an accident of temperament so much as a determined political stance. His favourite quotation – the one that he said he wanted carved on his gravestone – was Antonio Gramsci’s line about being ‘a pessimist because of intelligence and an optimist by will’. Lenny, alas, had a rare ability to penetrate the force field of his positive thinking. The very smell of the boy fucked with his internal weather: made him prey to itchy glooms and irritable regrets.

Twenty-seven years ago, when Lenny first came to live at Perry Street, Joel had been very high on the idea of subverting traditional models of family life. Adopting seven-year-old Lenny was no mere act of bourgeois philanthropy, he had maintained, but a subversive gesture – a vote for an enlightened, ‘tribal’ system of child-rearing

that would one day supercede the repressive nuclear unit altogether. Lenny, however, had proved to be an uncooperative participant in the tribal programme. As a child, he had tyrannized the household with violent tantrums. As an adolescent, he had dealt pot from the Perry Street stoop and repeatedly been caught shoplifting. At last, in adulthood, his petty delinquencies had blossomed into a range of drearily predictable and apparently irremediable dysfunctions. Joel would not have minded – or at least not have minded *so much* – had Lenny ever put his rebellious impulses to some principled use: run away to join the Sandinistas, say, or vandalized US army-recruiting offices. But the boy's waywardness had never served any cause other than his own fleeting satisfactions. 'Lenny's not doing well,' was Audrey's preferred euphemism whenever he dropped out of some new, expensive college course, or got fired from the job that she had hustled for him at Habitat for Humanity, or set his hair alight while smoking crack, or was found having sex with one of the other residents at his rehab clinic. She chose to attribute all such mishaps to the traumas of Lenny's infancy. But Joel had had it with all that psychological crap. The boy was a mendacious, indolent fuck-up, that was all – a mortifying reminder of a failed experiment.

Coming back from the bodega, Joel worked up several elaborately snide remarks with which to taunt Lenny and Tanya, but on re-entering the house, he found the kitchen empty. Colin and Julie had gone off on their sightseeing jaunt and Lenny and Tanya had vanished upstairs, leaving their soggy-rimmed Starbucks cups on the kitchen table. Joel picked up the cups with a murmur of irritation and threw them in the trash. Then he switched on the coffee percolator and ambled into the living room to look at the papers.

At this hour in the morning there was almost no natural light at the front of the house, and before sitting down Joel had to wander about, turning on all the table lamps. Most of the residents on this eighteenth-century street had solved the problem of their low-ceilinged, north-facing parlours by tearing down the first-floor dividing walls and creating kitchen-dining floor-throughs, but Joel

and Audrey sneered at the yuppie extravagance of these renovations. Neither of them was of the generation that had been taught to regard sunlit rooms as a birthright, and in so far as they were aware of interior design as an independent category of interest, they thought it a very silly business indeed. Over the years, they had assembled various artefacts and souvenirs pertaining to their travels and political involvements – an ANC flag signed by Oliver Tambo; a framed portrait of Joel, executed in muddy oils by a veteran of the Attica riots; a kilim depicting scenes from the Palestinian struggle – but there was not a single item of furniture here that could be said to represent a considered aesthetic choice. The love-seat, upholstered in a nubby, mustard tweed, had been given to them by Joel's mother. The giant cherrywood cabinet and the collection of miniature china shoes it housed were an inheritance from Joel's Aunt Marion. A silver-plated andiron set, gamely arranged around the blocked-off fireplace, had come as barter payment from one of Joel's clients.

Joel sat down now and, with practised efficiency, began to fillet the papers for items pertaining to himself and today's trial. *The New York Times* and the *Washington Post* had two more or less straightforward accounts of the case that mentioned his name, but without comment. In the *New York Post*, he found an editorial that made two passing references to him as 'a rent-a-radical with a long history of un-Americanism' and as 'a man whose knee-jerk leftism is thankfully now all but extinct in today's political climate'.

He stared at the pile of newspapers for a moment and then took another pass, checking to see if he had missed anything. In a long career of defending pariahs, Joel had learned to expect and to treasure hostile public attention. It was the gauge by which he measured the importance and usefulness of his work. ('Joel never feels so alive,' Audrey liked to say, 'as when someone is wishing him dead.') Back in the 1980s, when he had been defending Al-Saddawi, the accused murderer of the Chasid leader Rabbi Kosse, protestors had organized rallies against him and put up posters around New York that said 'Litvinoff: Self-Hating Jew'. They had even made death threats against the children. By these standards, the

animosity generated by the Hassani case had been disappointingly tame: one bomb threat to his uptown law office (deemed 'not credible' by the police); a couple of people shouting 'Traitor!' in the street. And one lousy mention in the *Post*. He looked at the editorial again. Well, they'd called him un-American; that was something.

He heard his wife coming down the stairs. 'Come look, sweetie,' he called out. 'The *Post* is gunning for me!'

After a moment, Audrey appeared in the living-room doorway – a thin woman of fifty-eight, with steel-coloured hair and the dark, unblinking eyes of a woodland animal. She was wearing a denim skirt and a T-shirt printed with the slogan 'One Nation Under Surveillance'.

Joel rustled his papers. 'They say I'm a rent-a-radical.'

'Bully for you,' Audrey said.

'Did you know Lenny and Tanya were here?' Joel asked.

'I saw them.'

'Somebody urinated on Tanya's bed last night. Can you believe it? Who are these people they hang around with?'

Audrey frowned, noticing that another of the living-room's floorboards had come loose. 'Oh, do shut up, Joel,' she murmured.

Jadedness was Audrey's default pose with her husband. She used it partly in the English manner, as a way of alluding to affection by manifesting its opposite, and partly as a strategy for asserting her privileged spousal status. The wives of great men must always be jealously guarding their positions against the encroachments of acolytes, and Audrey had decided long ago that if everybody else was going to guffaw at Joel's jokes and roll over at his charm, her distinction – the mark of her unparalleled intimacy with the legend – would be a deadpan unimpressibility. 'Oh, I forgot!' she often drawled when Joel was embarking on one of his exuberant anecdotes. 'It's all about you, isn't it?'

'What do you want for breakfast?' she asked now.

'I'll have a bialy,' Joel said.

Audrey looked at him.

'What?' he said, glancing up after a moment. 'I have to have

carbohydrates sometimes. You want me to go to court on a bowl of yoghurt?’

Audrey went into the kitchen.

‘I can’t find the bialys,’ she called out after a moment. ‘Are you sure we have any?’

Joel looked up from the papers. ‘Oh, come on! I thought you were going to get some. I asked you yesterday.’ He smacked his hand against his newspaper. ‘Jesus!’

Audrey came back out to the living room and gazed at him archly. ‘It’s a tragedy, I know. How about a boiled egg?’

‘I want a bialy, goddammit.’

Audrey stood and waited.

‘All right, forget it,’ he said sulkily. ‘Gimme the egg.’

He went upstairs to shower and get dressed. In the kitchen, Audrey poured herself a coffee and put a pan of water on the stove. She was about to return to the living room to look at the *New York Post* editorial when she heard shouting from above. Putting down her cup, she went to the foot of the stairs. ‘Joel?’ There was no reply. With a sigh, she trekked up to the top-floor landing, where she found her husband raging over an empty can of black shoe polish.

‘Does no one but me ever replace anything in this house?’ he demanded. ‘Would it be too much to ask that someone else bought fucking shoe polish around here?’

‘Lenny must have finished it,’ Audrey said calmly. ‘He used it the other night, when he went to that black-tie thing with Tanya.’

The black-tie detail was an unnecessary provocation, Joel thought. Audrey had an ignoble habit of dropping Lenny in it, in order that she might then rescue him.

‘Jesus!’ he shouted, taking the bait anyway. ‘What are we running here, a hostel for the unemployed? Next time, tell him to get his own.’

‘Those aren’t the right shoes for that suit anyway,’ Audrey said, gesturing at the brogues that Joel had been intending to polish. ‘You wear the other ones with the blue suit.’

She turned away in silent triumph and went back downstairs.

Shortly afterwards, Joel followed her. With a dish-towel tied around his neck to protect his shirt and tie, he ate the egg she had made for him and drank the coffee. Then he took her in his arms and kissed her. 'I love you,' he said.

'Yeah, yeah.' Audrey helped him on with his coat and walked him out to the front step. 'Do good,' she called as he set off down the street.

Without turning around, or breaking stride, Joel raised a hand in acknowledgement. 'Buy some bialys,' he called back.

In the taxi over to Brooklyn, Joel's head pains grew worse. The metal object that was lodged in his skull had shifted to his frontal lobe now and seemed to be intent on boring its way out through his forehead. The cab driver was heavy on the brake and the jerky motion of the car as it stopped and started its way through the heavy traffic on the bridge made him moan out loud. By the time he got out at Cadman Plaza, he was dangerously close to throwing up.

Standing on the kerb, waiting for his nausea to subside, he felt a hand on his arm. He looked up to see his paralegal, Kate, peering at him with concern.

'Are you okay, Joel?'

'Sure.'

'You look a little pale.'

'I have a headache is all.' Through the veil of his pain he registered a smattering of acne around Kate's mouth and a smear of red lipstick on her teeth.

'You want me to get you an aspirin or something?' Kate asked.

Joel shook his head. 'I've taken about fifty Tylenol in the last twenty-four hours. They're making it worse, I think.'

'How about some water?' She brought out a plastic bottle from her bag.

Joel smiled wanly as he took the bottle. Dear, homely, reliable Kate. How well she looked after him! He had been doubtful, when he first hired her, about taking on such an unattractive girl. He had worried that it would be too dispiriting to have to confront her tree-trunk legs and her abominable complexion every morning. But

Kate's devotedness and efficiency had more than made up for her aesthetic failings. And after so many years of complicated and time-consuming office imbroglios with female employees, there was, he had to admit, something rather soothing about not wanting to fuck his assistant.

'Okay,' he said, handing the bottle back. 'I'm good.'

They went in through the glass doors of the Federal Courthouse and deposited their cellphones with a lady in a booth, before joining the line at the security checkpoint. One of the uniformed men standing at the X-ray machine raised his arms in greeting. 'Heeeey! Here he is! How ya doing, Mr Litvinoff?'

Joel stared at him in mock consternation. 'What happened, Lew?' He took off his watch and placed it, along with his keys, in a plastic tray on the conveyor belt. 'They didn't get rid of you yet? I thought for sure they would have fired you by now.'

Lew laughed heartily – a little more heartily than was strictly credible, it seemed to Joel. That was all right. Caring enough to fake mirth was its own sort of compliment. Joel passed through the metal detector and picked up his briefcase, keys and watch on the other side.

'A big one today, right?' Lew said.

Joel shrugged. 'They're all big, Lew, they're all big. I'll see you later.'

'All right, Mr Litvinoff, take it easy.'

In the elevator going up to the courtroom, Joel found himself pressed tightly against a young blonde. 'Well!' he chuckled. 'My lucky day.' The woman looked away disdainfully at the floor. He felt a moment's befuddlement at the failure of his gallantry and then an urge to take the woman by the scruff of her neck and give her a good slap. But he pulled himself together and went on chatting to Kate in a loud, cheerful voice until they reached their floor.

Joel's co-counsel, Buchman, a pink-faced kid from Virginia, had already arrived in the courtroom. Joel nodded hello to the prosecution team and stopped to say a few words to the court stenographer, a nice old gargoyle called Helen. Then he sat down and chatted with Buchman. Soon, the jury filed in, emanating the usual,

stagnant solemnity of citizens fulfilling their civic duty. Joel put his elbows on the desk in front of him and cradled his chin in his hands. He was feeling old. The elevator-woman's rejection had bothered him. His head was throbbing. The long day's work loomed before him like a cliff-face.

Hassani was brought up now from the holding cell, accompanied by three grimly corpulent guards. Joel stood up and stretched out his arms. 'Assalmu Alaykum!' A blush crept across Hassani's solemn, bean-shaped face as he found himself enfolded in an enthusiastic bear hug. Joel, whose personal affections tended to follow his political sympathies and who rarely managed to get through a case without falling a little in love with his client, was famous for his public expressions of tenderness towards the men and women he represented.

'You're looking good, man!' he said when at last he had released Hassani. He rubbed at the circular impression that one of his suit buttons had left on Hassani's cheek. The energy that he had expended on the hug had left him slightly dizzy, he realized. He sat down and stared straight ahead, trying to regain his balance.

Now, the court clerk entered and asked the people to please rise for the judge. As Joel heaved himself up, he heard a tiny noise in his head – a brittle, snapping sound like a dry branch being broken underfoot. At the same time, a blurry, dark margin appeared at the corner of his vision. He was just wondering whether he ought to sit down again when the room tipped on its side.

No one reacted immediately when he fell to the floor. Several people would later admit that they had mistaken the collapse for one of his courtroom stunts. After a moment or two, things began to happen. The stenographer went over and took Joel's pulse. Several journalists ran downstairs to put in calls to their newsrooms. Kate asked a policeman to radio for an ambulance. Hassani leaned over to Buchman and politely inquired about how he should proceed with finding a replacement lawyer.