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**Opening Extract from...**

# The Unwitting

Written by Ellen Feldman

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# *The* UNWITTING

*A Novel*

*Ellen Feldman*

PICADOR



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If I had to choose between betraying my country and betraying my friend, I hope I should have the guts to betray my country.

E. M. Forster

Love, by its very nature, is unworldly, and it is for this reason rather than its rarity that it is not only apolitical but anti-political, perhaps the most powerful of all anti-political human forces.

Hannah Arendt

# Prologue

*November 22, 1963*

THE CURIOUS THING about marriage, one of the curious things about marriage, is that the same habit that moves you to indulgent tenderness one minute can make you want to pack a toothbrush and a change of underwear and walk out the door the next. That morning I was in the walking-out-the-door mood, though I knew I wasn't going anywhere. Not about this. Not about anything. I wasn't a fool.

Charlie sat across the kitchen table from me reading the morning papers, drinking his coffee, and humming. No, not humming. I wouldn't have minded a bit of Beethoven or Bach or a few bars of Gershwin or Cole Porter. He was keening, quietly, through his coffee. Sometimes I find the habit endearing, my own movable serenade. Occasionally I can tune it out. But when I'm annoyed, it becomes as intrusive as a buzz saw.

A shaft of sunlight streamed through the kitchen window and lay between us on the table like a sword. I glanced down at the headlines. Reading upside down is a largely useless skill I picked up working in book and magazine publishing. Charlie is even better at it.

CONGO OUSTS SOVIET AIDES
SUSPENDS TIES TO MOSCOW

My eyes moved to the left-hand column.

KENNEDY PLEDGES
SPACE ADVANCES:
OPENS TEXAS TOUR

Charlie looked up from the paper. "Want the *Trib*?"

I shook my head no. On most mornings I love the conjugal intimacies of shared newspapers and swapped opinions, but in the wake of last night I would not be so easily seduced.

His eyes went back to the paper, while his hand groped for the coffeepot. I picked it up and poured coffee into his mug, further proof that I wasn't going anywhere. A woman on her way out the door doesn't pour coffee into her husband's mug. His lap perhaps, but not his mug.

He folded the paper in half, peeled back the front page, and tucked it into the fold—the prescribed method for reading broadsheets on crowded subways and buses and at small kitchen tables. I've never been able to master the art, but Charlie's a whiz at it.

He looked up again.

"Stop brooding. She'll be fine."

He had caught me off guard. Did he really think I was worried rather than wounded, or was he pretending so he could get out the door unscathed?

"I'm not brooding," I snapped, then caught myself. I have a fear I've never confided to anyone, not even to Charlie, especially not to Charlie. One day someone will bug our apartment, and I'll hear the snippiness in my voice. I keep making resolutions to moderate it. Sometimes I succeed for weeks, or at least days at a time.

"You were the one who was worried," I went on more gently.

He looked up from the paper again and arched one eyebrow.

"You were," I insisted.

Abby had come up with the idea a few weeks earlier. If we trusted Susannah, who lived two floors below us in the building, to babysit her, surely we'd let her take Abby across the park to school. But

when it came to potential harm to those he loved, Charlie worked from a grim actuarial table of his own. He had insisted on grilling Susannah, talking to her parents, and extracting promises from Abby about waiting for traffic lights, steering clear of strangers, and sticking to Susannah's side like glue, though he knew as well as I that she wasn't likely to stray. The cachet of arriving in the company of a girl from the upper school was too heady.

I'd had my own reservations, though I'd kept them to myself. I knew my tendency toward overprotection had more to do with my childhood than with my child.

That morning Abby had gone off to school without me. I was handling it splendidly. I had followed her to the door without expressing last-minute worries and warnings. I had not had to fake allergies to cover tears. There had been no tears. I was fine.

Charlie took the last bite of English muffin. He rarely leaves food on his plate. A man who has grown up to a constant chorus of reminders of children starving in Europe, and not anonymous children either, isn't likely to. Then he stood and, holding his tie with one hand as he bent over the table, lifted his mug with the other and took a last swallow of coffee. I waited for the sigh of satisfaction that always followed the final gulp. He sighed. I would pack only a small suitcase. He started down the hall to the front door, talking about the weather—the weather!—and how it was so nice he thought he'd walk to work through the park. I followed him along the corridor, though I knew I should let him go. It wasn't the old saw about picking your fights. That was too coarse a view of marriage. It was simply that the incident was not that important. We would both have forgotten it by tonight. Only I had a feeling I wouldn't forget it. I wondered if I'd be as offended if someone other than Frank Tucker had made the remark. He'd said it the night before, then lurched out of the apartment, the adoring long-haired waif he'd brought to dinner tucked under his arm like a crutch.

Charlie reached the door, turned back, and leaned down to kiss

me. We usually kissed goodbye on the mouth, nothing smoochy, just enough to keep the franchise. I turned my cheek. I will never forget that.

One tweed shoulder was already through the door.

"So that's it? We're going to pretend nothing happened?" I had sworn I wasn't going to say anything.

He stopped and stood with his head down, his eyes closed. It was his patient stance, and it was a ruse. Everyone thought he was unflappable. I knew what it cost him.

"Nothing did happen."

"Where were you last night?"

He turned back to face me. "You know what he's like when he gets in his cups."

"If we know what he's like, why do we keep inviting him to dinner?"

I waited through another long-suffering pause. He thought those moments of silence demonstrated his reasonableness. I found them more provocative than a taunt.

"Because he's an old friend. And because I want to persuade him to start writing for the magazine again. Anyway, I thought you thought he was a stand-up guy."

"That was a long time ago. For one specific act. All I'm saying is that the comment was insulting, and you could have called him on it."

"Now there's an idea whose time has come. Get into a fight with a drunk who, when he's fried, likes nothing better than taking swings at old friends and busting up the premises."

"What if he'd said those things about negroes?"

"He didn't."

"Or Jews? Would you have called him on it then?"

"That's different."

"Why?"

He stood staring at me from the depths of his murderous patience.

"Look," he said quietly, "I'm not suggesting you had an easy time of it, but your ancestors were not auctioned off in a Southern slave market. Nor did your entire family go up the chimneys of Auschwitz."

"This has nothing to do with me. It's about principles."

"Okay, let's talk about principles. Frank Tucker, our guest, made a boorish remark. He's a bad drunk. We all know that. But he didn't murder anyone. Or sell out his best friend, which is more than you can say about some people we know. In fact, if you remember, and I'm sure you do, he went to jail for not selling out his friends. So can we just keep some perspective on this particular principle?"

I wanted to. But the memory of Tucker's lubricious voice and oily smirk as he leered into my face—the comment was made to rile not the waif under his arm or Charlie but me—distorted my perspective as grossly as a fun house mirror.

"I have to go to work," he said.

"Fine."

"I'll see you tonight."

I imagined him walking into an empty apartment. I'm home, he'd call. The silence would mock his words. Red, he'd shout. The sound would echo through the empty rooms. Nell, he'd try. Still no answer.

"Will you call me when Abby gets home?" he asked.

"Someday she's going to grow up to be a woman."

"What's that supposed to mean?" he asked, though he knew. Each of us knew how the other sparred. That's the part the love songs don't tell you.

"Then she, too, will be, according to your good buddy Frank Tucker, too dumb to do anything but type, file, and fuck."

He turned and started down the hall toward the elevator.

"See you tonight," he called without looking back.

I closed the door and stood listening to the elevator opening, then clanging shut and beginning its descent. The sound was the gnashing and whirring of ordinary life going on.

I made my way down the hall to the kitchen. I was already regretting my outburst. The sword of sunlight still lay on the table, but it had inched around so it was pointing at me. I glanced at the clock over the sink. Abby and Susannah would be getting on the crosstown bus.

As I started clearing the breakfast dishes, I caught a glimpse of myself in the side of the coffeepot. Like most people, I usually manage to arrange my face when I know I'm approaching my reflection in a mirror or window. Held at the right angle, my nose isn't long but retroussé. The heavily browed raccoon eyes I had hated as a teenager struck me now as a nice foil for my hair, which all those years ago my mother's friend Mr. Richardson had compared to the reflection of fire on burnished copper. Who would have thought that Mr. Richardson, who was in what he called the insurance game, had a poetic streak? But when I'm not on my guard, my mouth gives me away. Some boy in my past, not Charlie, not even Woody, someone with no staying power, had once called it sensual, but even then I knew it was a line. My mother had it right. Stop pouting, she used to say. You have a discontented mouth, she sometimes added. Look at yourself in the mirror, I wanted to shout at her, but never did. My job was to soften the blows she thought the world rained on her, not deliver more.

I poured the last of the coffee into my mug, put the pot in the sink, and stood listening to the silence. The apartment was never so quiet as just after Charlie and Abby left. Some mornings the hush was a buoyant peace I could float on; others it ached like hunger. This morning it had a gnawing feel. I never should have brought up Tucker's remark.

I looked at my watch. The bus would be on its way through the park now.

I carried the mug into the small room behind the kitchen, the maid's room in an earlier time for swankier tenants, now my study. The space was barely big enough for a desk, a chair, a typewriter table, shelves along two walls, and an old set of wooden library steps to reach the books at the top. A tall narrow window opened onto a miserly slice of sky.

I put the mug on the desk and stood staring at the mess of open books, uncapped pens, and scribbled notes. I usually tidied up when I stopped work for the day, but the previous afternoon I had been under the gun with the grocery shopping to do, the chicken in lemon cream to get started, the flowers to arrange. Flowers for Frank Tucker!

A sheet of paper hung limp over the typewriter roller. I leaned down and lifted it between my thumb and forefinger.

> He lay on a wooden plank in a small room in the basement of the clinic, his skin ashen in the glare of the single bare bulb that swung overhead. His body . . .

I had stopped in midsentence because I hadn't made up my mind how to continue. The paragraph was part of a piece I was writing on Richard Wright. The rumors that Wright had succumbed not to a heart attack, as listed on the death certificate, but to foul play were still rampant, though he had died three years earlier. Some pointed a finger at the communists, because Wright, who had been an active party member before the war, had turned on them; others at the CIA, which could never decide whether Wright was a useful tool in their fight against communism or an outspoken negro thorn in their side. His friends were sure the CIA was behind his death; his daughter suspected it; his wife did not want to hear about it.

I stood staring at the unfinished sentence. Stopping in the middle of a thought wasn't necessarily a bad idea. It often made it easier to get going again the next morning. Who said that? Hemingway? Frank Tucker's hero. Two posturing bellicose buffoons who just happened to be good writers. The thought of so much talent residing in a couple of overgrown bad boys made me turn away from my own stalled essay and start back down the hall, past the kitchen, to the dining room.

The hardwood floor creaked under my loafers, then went silent again as I stepped into the deep hush of the abstract patterned rug. Everything was in place: the round walnut table with the sickle-shaped pieces that slid in and out to make it bigger or smaller, the matching curved chairs, the weighted Dansk candleholders that could be angled one way or another. When we'd finished furnishing the place, Charlie had said it wasn't an apartment, it was a Scandinavian manifesto, and we'd laughed at ourselves, but with secret pride. The memory was another pinprick to my conscience. Would I prefer the place in shambles and Charlie with a black eye, assuming Frank Tucker had been sober enough to land a punch?

I kept going through the dining room to the entrance hall and took the single step down to the living room. This really was ridiculous. I should be getting to work, not prowling the premises, taking inventory of everything I'd never leave, not for something as foolish as this, not for anything.

I crossed the room to the windows. Overhead, the wind was herding the clouds like misshapen sheep. Below, the trees in Central Park licked the air like flames. On the opposite side of the street, pedestrians the size of large insects hurried along Central Park West, moving from deep shadows into sun-drenched pools of light. I glanced at my watch again. Abby and Susannah would be boarding an uptown bus, unless they'd decided to walk.

The traffic light at the corner turned green, but the line of cars didn't budge. A taxi driver leaned on his horn. The shriek of fury

rose twelve floors and shattered the silence. I went on standing at the window, imagining Charlie striding beneath the flaming trees, his briefcase thumping against his leg. Once, a few years earlier, I had looked out the window of a traffic-stalled taxi and caught a glimpse of him walking up Fifth Avenue. The experience had been disorienting. The man I slept beside every night and awakened next to every morning was, for a moment, a stranger, loping along the sidewalk toward a destination I didn't know, thinking thoughts I could only guess. The realization had been frightening, and seductive.

I really did have to get to work. I turned away from the window and started across the living room, but instead of veering right to go back to the study, I went left down the hall to our bedroom. It overlooked the park too, and the morning light flooded in, glinting off the blond wood of the dressers, puddling in pools on the pale carpet, reflecting off the shiny dust jackets of the piles of books on the night tables on either side of the bed. The top book on Charlie's table was Frank Tucker's latest. I could not get away from the man.

I walked around the bed, picked it up, and turned it over. Tucker stared up at me. Better cut down on the booze, Frank, I warned him, before the nose begins to look like J. P. Morgan's.

I put the book back on the pile, front side up, crossed the room to the television that sat on a wooden stand facing the bed, and switched it on. I never watched television during the day, not even the news. People were always telling me that they couldn't do what I did because they didn't have the discipline to stay home alone and write all day. Discipline was not one of my problems, though it seemed to be this morning.

I stood waiting while the television warmed up. On the screen, a convertible was making its way slowly down a street between crowds of cheering, waving men, women, and children. There were so many children; they must have been given the day off from school.

"Jack! Jackie!" the crowd howled. "Jack! Jackie!"

From the backseat, the President and First Lady waved back, his

mouth stretched into that dazzling grin with almost too many teeth, hers curved into a more demure smile.

"The President and Mrs. Kennedy begin their two-day tour of Texas," the announcer said, "after these messages."

I sat on the end of the bed and waited while a woman swooned over freshly laundered sheets and towels, children wolfed down soup that was just like homemade, and another woman stood under a pounding shower with an expression of such ecstasy on her upturned face that it always made me wonder what was going on below the camera's frame.

The first couple returned, still sitting in the back of the open car, still smiling and waving to the cheering crowd.

"Yesterday," the announcer resumed, "President Kennedy, on the first leg of his two-day tour of Texas, announced in a speech at Brooks Air Force Base in San Antonio that the space program would continue, despite congressional cutbacks."

"This research must and will go on," said a voice-over with an exaggerated Boston accent that would have been laughable if it had come from anyone else. "The conquest of space must and will go ahead."

"From San Antonio," the announcer continued, "the first couple went on to Houston."

Now the President and the First Lady were coming down the steps of a plane, an absurdly boyish-looking man and a maddeningly glamorous woman in a white suit with a black belt and black hat, carrying a bouquet of red roses. Didn't they ever stop smiling? Behind them, the words AIR FORCE ONE were visible on the side of the plane.

Frank Tucker had flown on Air Force One. He had a pack of cigarettes with the presidential seal and a menu with the same seal in gold at the top and the words AIR FORCE ONE in gold at the bottom to prove it. According to the menu, which I swear he carried around with him for weeks after, he'd had a sloppy joe on a roll, Fritos, cole-

slaw, and an oatmeal cookie for lunch. The fare wasn't much, but the thought of the misogynistic Tucker, who just happened to write like a dream, flying and eating even that meager meal on taxpayer dollars, and with that golden couple, annoyed me. Except that Tucker insisted they weren't so golden. JFK was monumentally unfaithful, he said. All the reporters knew it, but none of them would write about it. It was a gentlemen's agreement. Some gentlemen, I'd said when he'd told the story, but he'd only smirked.

"In Houston," the announcer continued, "the first couple made an unscheduled stop at the League of United Latin American Citizens, where Mrs. Kennedy gave a brief speech."

Now Jackie filled the screen, smiling her impeccable smile, and in her improbably breathy voice charmed the crowd in Spanish.

I sat watching her and thinking about Tucker's gossip. I was pretty certain Charlie was faithful, but I wasn't stupid enough to swear to it.

"Today," the announcer went on, "the President and First Lady will wrap up the Texas tour with a breakfast speech in Fort Worth, a luncheon talk in Dallas, and dinner in Austin."

I stood and switched off the television. The President couldn't be the wolf Tucker said. He didn't have the time.

I started back down the hall, then stopped again in the doorway to Abby's room. Volumes of Betsy-Tacy and Anne of Green Gables, childish Winnie-the-Poohs and precocious Mark Twains marched down the bookcase shelves. There were even the touch-and-feel books that I had turned the pages of for her in infancy and the illustrated volumes that Charlie had read to her a few years later. Above them sat a line of dolls and stuffed animals that she no longer played with.

I glanced at the clock on the night table. I had watched the news for longer than I'd thought. Abby had been safe at school for a good fifteen minutes. The muscles I didn't know I had tensed unknotted. My nerves stopped jangling.

I sat in the chair where I had spent so many hours feeding and rocking and singing to her, gazing at the books we no longer read to her and the dolls she no longer played with, and saw my daughter moving away from me, her long legs scissoring into the future, her coltish body morphing into womanhood, her silky auburn hair streaming behind her as she broke into a run. So long, Mom. See you around. I was nothing like my own mother, but I still had to be abandoned. If I weren't, I had failed. But I hadn't expected success to feel so bleak.

I had to get to work. I stood and started back through the apartment to my study. The framed photograph on the desk caught my attention as soon as I stepped into the room, though I rarely noticed it anymore. That's what happens when you live with objects day in and day out.

The film was black-and-white, but the sharp contrast between the almost overexposed playground and the deep shadows of the tree-shaded benches indicated that the picture had been taken on a day much like today. Light glinted off Charlie's dark hair, making it sleek as an otter's. He was wearing a crew neck sweater and a pair of khakis that sat low on his hips. The image sent a sudden erotic charge through me.

Beside him in the picture, Abby came rushing toward the camera on a swing seat, hands gripping the chains, torso cantilevered back, corduroy legs stuck straight out in front of her, hair streaking behind. The thrill of flying free and the faith that those big Daddy hands would be there to catch her when she returned, caught by the click of a camera shutter, were frozen on her face for eternity.

What was I doing fighting with this man about a drunk's inane remark? Suddenly, for no reason at all, or maybe for every reason in the world, I remembered a morning about a year earlier. I'd been in my study working, and I'd had the radio tuned low to WQXR. The news had come on, and a phrase had broken into my consciousness. *Congress for Cultural Freedom,* then the word *bomb.*

My hands had hovered over the typewriter keys. I'd reached out to turn up the volume, but I was too late. The announcer had moved on to the weather. I'd tried to remember what time Charlie had said his meeting there that day was scheduled for. I had been so busy telling Abby to hurry or we'd be late for school that I hadn't paid attention to what he'd said. I'd tried to call him, but the line had been busy. A moment later, the phone had rung. He'd heard the news in his office and knew I would be worried. He was fine, but his meeting at the Congress for Cultural Freedom that afternoon had been canceled.

I leaned over the desk now and reached for the telephone. My hand closed around the receiver. I felt the vibration before I heard the ring and glanced at my watch again. If he had walked, he'd have only just arrived at his office.

I picked up the receiver. "I was just about to call you."

"Pardon me?"

The voice on the other end of the line belonged to a man, but not Charlie.

"I'm sorry, I thought you were someone else. Who is this, please?"

The voice answered with his own question. "Is this Mrs. Benjamin?"

"Yes."

"Mrs. Charles Benjamin?"

I still did not recognize the voice, but I knew the tone instinctively. It was muted with pity and grave with the knowledge of the many ways life could turn on a dime.