

CHAPTER ONE

With its free peanuts and anonymity, the airline lounge is somewhere I can usually feel at home; but on this occasion I was in too much of a panic to enjoy its self-importance. It had been hard work getting there. The queues at Kennedy were backed up to the terminal doors; the migrants heaving trunks on to the check-in scales made New York look like Lagos.

I had done a bad thing and wanted to escape the city. Staying in an Upper West Side apartment belonging to my friend Jonas Hoffman, I had ordered in a call-girl. I took the number from a phone booth on Columbus. It seemed to me important to get the sex act into perspective, to laugh at myself in the way you laugh at other people for their choice of mates. A true view of myself and my concerns: that was what I needed.

I suppose I'd say I was a voluptuary, someone who had seen it all, yet when the super called to say there was a young lady on her way up, it struck me that I was nervous. The front door buzzed. I took a pull of iced gin and went to open it. It was eleven in the morning. She wore an overcoat of olive green and carried a serviceable handbag with a clasp; for a moment I thought there was a mistake and that she must be Hoffman's cleaner. Only the high heels and lipstick suggested something more frolicsome. I offered her a drink.

'No, thanks, Mister. Maybe a glass of water.'

In so far as I'd imagined what she might be like, I'd pictured a pin-up – or a tart with platinum hair and rouge. But this woman

was of indeterminate nationality, possibly Puerto Rican. She was not ugly in any way, yet neither was she beautiful. She looked like someone's 38-year-old sister; like the person who might be in charge of the laundromat or work behind the desk of a Midtown travel agent.

I brought back the water and sat beside her in Hoffman's huge, book-lined living room. She had taken off her coat and was wearing an incongruous cocktail dress. It was hard not to think of her family: brother, parents . . . children. I put my hand on her knee and felt the coarse nylon. Was I meant to kiss her? It seemed too intimate: we'd only just met . . . But I tried anyway, and found a world of fatigue in her response.

It brought a flash-recall of Paula Wood, a sixteen-year-old girl I'd kissed in a village hall a lifetime ago, before I'd discovered the awfulness of desire. Kissing this hooker was like kissing a mannequin; it was like a repetition – or a memory; not like a kiss at all. I went to the kitchen and poured another half tumbler of gin, with ice cubes and two slices of lemon.

'Come this way,' I said, gesturing down the corridor to the spare room – my room – at the end. Hoffman kept it for his mother, for when she visited from Chicago, and I felt a moment of unease as we went in. I pushed off my shoes and lay on the bed.

'You'd better take off your clothes.'

'You better pay me first.'

I pulled out some money and handed it over. With what looked like some reluctance, she undressed. When she was naked, she came and stood beside me. She took my hand and ran it up over her abdomen and breasts. The belly was rounded and there were small fat deposits above the hips; the lumpy navel had been botched by the obstetrician. Her skin was smooth and there was a look of concentration in her eyes – not kindness or concern, more a sort of junior-employee focus. I felt extremely tired and wanted to

close my eyes. At the same time I felt an obligation to this woman; it seemed we were joined in this thing now, for better or for worse.

After the breasts, I touched the plated sternum – and then the clavicle. As I did so, I wondered how my fingers felt to her. When you run your hand across another's skin, is it merely your intention that distinguishes a lover's heat from a doctor's care?

What this girl presumably felt was neither of those things, but a simple friction of skin on skin. I stood up and took off my clothes, placing them on a chair. With Annalisa such movements were made in a literally tearing rush. I used to panic that I would never sate myself on her; I used to fear her leaving before we had begun, because I knew as soon as the door closed I would be desperate for her again. And that was one emotion – the frantic dread – that I knew could not be right or real. That was something on which I badly needed to find a healthier point of view.

There was a mirror in Hoffman's spare room that gave me the reflection of an ageing man copulating with a stranger: here was the zoological comedy I craved as I watched white skin collide with brown, my ugly face flushed, her head down and rear extended. This was the rude comedy of manners I saw in other people's lives, and I smacked her rump in satisfaction.

I pressed her to stay for tea or beer afterwards, to gloss the exchange with some civility. She told me she lived in Queens and worked part-time in a shoe shop. In a vague way, I had thought being a New York hooker was a job in itself, not with 'prospects' and a trade union, but at least a full-time pimp beneath the lamp post. She seemed reluctant to tell me more, for fear, maybe, of breaking the illusion of glamour; I guess she didn't want me to think of her as someone who would go to the storeroom to fetch a size-seven brogue.

A few minutes later she was spreadeagled on the rug by Hoffman's fireplace, intent on a repeat. I felt reluctant to start again, but I didn't want to deny her the chance of earning more.

My motive was not so different from the one that made me, at the end of the evening at the village hall, offer to dance with Paula Wood's mother. Courtesy, perhaps; or an ignorance of what women want.

When it was done, I gave the girl another twenty dollars, which she folded into her purse with a nod of thanks.

'What's that scar on your shoulder?' she said.

'A bullet wound. A pistol.'

'How –'

'You don't want to know.'

I fetched her coat and held it out to her; there was an awkwardness as she said goodbye. Was I to kiss her, and if so how? She touched me on the cheek, then put her lips quickly to where her fingertips had been. It was in its way the most erotic moment that had passed between us.

Alone again, I slumped down in the big armchair and looked out over Central Park. A few single women were running there, probably with cans of Mace inside their tracksuits; there were no mothers with children even at this middling hour of the day. A handful of men with Walkman headphones also loped round the paths – assailants, vigilantes, hard to tell; but they didn't look like athletes. For all Mayor Koch's bumper stickers, no one loved New York in 1980. What was there to love in a city where, as you left the local bar, the doorman insisted you wait till he had the taxi hard up against the kerb, door open, ready for the getaway. It was only three blocks over, but they had told me never to walk.

After I had showered in Hoffman's mother's bathroom, I poured another gin, went back to the living room and thought about the hooker. They say that when you sleep with someone all their previous partners are in bed with you, but I've never felt that. And in any case it would have had to be some bed to accommodate the back catalogue of a professional. What I always did feel was a dim awareness of my own past lovers. The hair on the pillow, the

discomfort of the mattress, the varying degrees of guilt . . . So much of what I'd heard and read as a young man excited in me the belief that enduring sexual passion, romantic 'love', was the highest type of interaction – perhaps indeed the highest state of being – to which a human could aspire. How lamentably I had failed. How seldom had I felt the weight of all my joy and all my safety to hang on the say-so of another – though I did remember the first time it had happened.

I was twenty-eight years old and was in the Italian backstreet lodging of the girl I had been courting for some weeks. Even at this remove, I find it hard to name her, to utter those three syllables without pain; so I'll have to call her L. It being wartime – which is how I'd got the pistol wound – we had also slept together. As I stood there, I had the impression that the chest of drawers, the dull eiderdown on the bed, and the walls of the room had become iridescent. Even the thin blind seemed to be glowing. I glanced about to see if there was an overturned lamp; then I looked at her, leaning towards a mirror as she completed her preparations for the evening, dabbing at the corners of her mouth with a white handkerchief. She stopped, turned round, looked at me and smiled. I took a pace back. All evening she carried that light in every room we seemed to shimmer through.

A few hours after the hooker had left, I had a feeling that my encounter with her had not been unnoticed. It was not just the way the Super cleared his throat when I went out or the way the bartender in my usual place raised his eyebrow as he poured the drink; even the panhandler in the doorway seemed to be smirking as he eyed me. And the next day I thought I'd better get out of New York.

It suited me quite well to leave. I had come to the city for a medical conference and had listened to a number of speakers in the halls of Columbia in Upper Manhattan. Such was the surplus

weight of sponsorship money from drug companies that the junior delegates had been shifted at the last minute from bed-and-breakfast inns round Murray Hill to rooms in the Plaza hotel. I found myself on a high floor with a barn-like suite, which was of little use to me. The whole place seemed less like a hotel than a monument to construction work. I wrestled vainly with the air-conditioning controls; at night the plumbing in my unused sitting room sighed and muttered like the brain of an exhausted lunatic.

When the conference ended, I decided to extend my stay by moving into Jonas Hoffman's apartment. I had met Jonas after the war at medical school in London, where he had arrived on some American magic carpet of GI Bill or Rhodes scholarship. Our friendship had survived the fact that he had become rich by taking anxious women through their past lives in his Park Avenue consulting rooms while I was in Kensal Green, in a house that was a short walk from the necropolis. The fees from these long hours of listening had enabled Hoffman to take on the apartment from whose spare room I could see the turning colours of the autumn trees while reading the newspaper in bed.

My flight to London had been called, so I gathered my briefcase and left the anonymity of the lounge – not without a pang, I confess: I wasn't eager to confront what lay outside its vacuum. I wondered how many hundred times I had gone through the doorway of an airliner, touching its hinge and rivets as I ducked my head and summoned a smile for the cabin staff with their primly folded hands. In my seat by the window, I swallowed a sleeping pill and opened a book. The aircraft backed off the stand and idled along on its plump tyres; then it changed into a different beast as it surged madly down the runway, pushing me against the back of the seat.

My fellow passengers were soon opening their puzzle books or gazing up at the bulkhead to watch the film. My seat was at an

awkward angle, so the light striking the screen made the characters appear in coloured negative, like oil in water. The passenger in front seemed gripped enough by it, as he sat forward and munched through his bag of nuts.

After a couple of gins, I felt the sleeping pill dissolve in my bloodstream; I pulled down the blind, arranged a thin blanket over me and told the stewardess not to wake me with the tray at dinner time.

The night flight had coughed me up by six thirty at Heathrow, and the day ahead looked endless as the taxi drove me through the grey backstreets of Chiswick. When I let myself into the house, I was tempted to go straight to bed, but knew from experience that it would make matters worse. Mrs Gomez, the cleaner, had piled up three weeks' post on the hall table. I went through it quickly, looking to see if there was anything in Annalisa's handwriting, but there was only one envelope that wasn't typed or printed. I tore it open and saw a note on plain paper:

Dear Mr Hendricks, we have just moved into the top-floor flat and we are having a party on Saturday night. Please do look in if you feel like it. From 8. V. informal. Sheeze and Misty.

I had the ground and lower ground floors of the house, which was larger than the average for the area. The first floor had been occupied for more than twenty years by a Polish widow, but the top floor was in constant flux. Something about their names made me think the new people were Australian; I guessed it would be noisy and they wanted to forestall my objections; presumably they had also invited poor old Mrs Kaczmarek.

In the study was my recently acquired telephone answering machine. I had tested a number in the shop and had chosen this one because it took normal-size cassettes and its three clearly

marked buttons made it easy to operate. I could tell from the time it took to rewind that it was almost full. A peculiarity of the machine – perhaps a mistake in the way I had set it up – was that it always replayed my greeting before it played the incoming messages. ‘This is Robert Hendricks’s answering machine . . .’

My voice always displeased me. It sounded sandpapery yet insincere; it had something of the simper in it. I sat down with a pad and a pen as the tape rewound, and braced myself for my own familiar and irritating tones: I had the narcissist’s dread of myself as others heard me.

But what came out of the machine was a woman’s voice. ‘We know what you did, you filthy bastard. We know what you did to that poor woman. No wonder you ran out of New York.’

It was no one I recognised. She had an American accent and seemed to be in her fifties, or older. I went out into the hallway and waited for it to stop; I didn’t want to erase it for fear of wiping others at the same time. I didn’t hear the squeal that meant a new message was beginning, but eventually there were deeper, male, tones in the study. I went back. It was my voice: the usual greeting that concluded with the assurance that I’d ring as soon as . . . Then the callers began.

‘Hi, Robert, it’s Jonas. I’m sorry I missed you in New York. The thing in Denver was a king-size pain in the ass. I’d have had more fun pouring liquor down you at Lorenzo’s. Call me some time.’

There came the regular high-pitched sound, then another message. ‘Dr Hendricks, it’s Mrs Hope here, Gary’s mother. I know you say to ring the secretary but he’s been bad again . . .’

I sat down at the desk and picked up the pad. There were fourteen more messages, all quite normal. When I had noted down any details that needed my attention, I scrubbed the entire tape. Then I pressed Play to make sure my greeting was intact. Sure

enough, it whirred and spoke: ‘This is Robert Hendricks’s answering machine . . .’

I couldn’t understand how the abusive female caller had bypassed my greeting.