



# The Latecomer

*a novel*

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*NEW YORK TIMES* BESTSELLING AUTHOR  
of *THE PLOT*

The  
LATECOMER



Jean Hanff Korelitz

  
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*For Leslie Vought Kuenne,  
in memoriam*

*I caught him with an unseen hook and an invisible line which is long enough to let him wander to the ends of the world and still bring him back with a twitch upon the thread.*

—C. K. Chesterton, via Evelyn Waugh

## Foreword

The Oppenheimer triplets—who were thought of by not a single person who knew them as “the Oppenheimer triplets”—had been in full flight from one another as far back as their ancestral petri dish. Not one of the three—Harrison (the smart one), Lewyn (the weird one), or Sally (the girl)—had a speck of genuine affection for either of the others, or had ever once thought of a sister or a brother with anything resembling a sibling bond, let alone as counterparts in a tender and eternal family relationship.

And this despite the years of all-consuming effort from at least one of their parents, to say nothing of the staggering advantages they had enjoyed, beginning with the not-inconsiderable price tag of their making! No, a lingering discontent overhung each of those three, and had since they were old enough to glean their shared origin story, judge their parents, and basically make up their minds about the other two. For eighteen years they’d been together, from that petri dish to their crowded maternal womb to their shared home on the Brooklyn Esplanade (and their shared summer cottage—not really a cottage—on the Vineyard) and their shared education (or indoctrination, in Harrison’s view) at the lauded Walden School of Brooklyn Heights, where a frankly socialist ethos stood in bald contrast to soaring tuition ... and at no point did they ever grow closer, not even slightly, not even out of pity for their mother, who had wanted that so badly.

And then they were eighteen, and not just leaving home but desperate to begin three permanently separate adult lives, which is exactly what would have happened if the Oppenheimer family hadn’t taken a turn for the strange and quite possibly unprecedented. But it did—we did—and that has made all the difference.

PART ONE

# The Parents

1972–2001



## Chapter One

# The Horror of It All

*In which Salo Oppenheimer meets a rock in the road*

Mom had a way of obfuscating when anyone asked how she and our father first met. Mainly she said it was at a wedding in Oak Bluffs, to which she'd been brought as a date by the closeted brother of the groom, and there was her future husband, an usher for one of his fraternity brothers. Both factoids were perfectly true, though the broader assertion was also utterly false. Our parents had met once before, under frankly terrible circumstances, and this is why we all, eventually, understood how impossible it was for her to be truthful. It's supposed to be a happy question—*Where did you two meet?*—with a happy answer, opening out to a lifetime of companionship, consequence, and progeny (in our case, lots of progeny). But when that moment dovetails with the very worst event in a young person's life? Who wouldn't wish to spare him, and the person innocently asking the question, and, as it happened, our mother herself? The shock. The glare of disapproval. The horror of it all.

The bald fact was that our parents met in central New Jersey, in a conservative synagogue that looked like a brutalist government building somewhere in the Eastern Bloc. The synagogue was Beth Jacob of Hamilton Township, and the terrible occasion was the funeral of a nineteen-year-old girl named Mandy Bernstein, who had died four days earlier in a car driven by her boyfriend, our father, Salo Oppenheimer. Mandy was, by every account, a vibrant young person with a glowing white smile and long dark hair, the eldest child and pride of her family (the Bernsteins of Lawrenceville, New Jersey, and Newton, Massachusetts), a Cornell sophomore and likely psychology major, and (as far as she herself

was concerned) the joyfully intended future life partner of Salo Oppenheimer. Mandy Bernstein was one of two Cornell students who'd perished in the accident, the other being Salo's friend and fraternity brother, Daniel Abraham, a kind boy who was on a first or possibly second date with the other person in the back seat. That person was still hospitalized in Ithaca. Salo alone had walked away from the wreck.

Even then, nobody blamed him. Nobody! Even in those early days, in the grief and rage of the Abraham and Bernstein families and the many friends of the two young people who were suddenly, horribly, not there, it was somehow held by all present in the synagogue (and, the following week, at the E. Bernheim and Sons Funeral Chapel in Newark, New Jersey, where Daniel Abraham would be memorialized) that Salo Oppenheimer's brand-new Laredo had been traveling at an eminently reasonable speed down a perfectly respectable road when it hit a loose rock and—abruptly, incomprehensibly—*flipped*, landing on its roof, half on and half off the road. It was, in other words, at least in those houses of God, as if the *hand of God itself* had picked up that vehicle and dropped it back to earth. Who could explain the mystery? Who could make comprehensible the loss?

Not Salo, that was certain. He sat in the second row at his girlfriend's funeral service, four stitches in his scalp and an Ace bandage (not even a cast!) on his left wrist, out of his mind with shock and guilt, barely taking in the stream of Mandy's cousins and high school friends and the contingent of Bernsteins who'd made aliyah a few years earlier but were now, appallingly, here in Hamilton Township, weeping and looking at him but still: *not blaming* him. At least to Salo's face, everyone seemed to be blaming ... the Jeep.

Why the Jeep? *Why, why*, the Jeep? He'd had his choice of cars, and in fact had been on the point of purchasing a sparkling gray 300-D from Mercedes-Benz of Manhattan when his grandmother phoned his mother to say that it was a disgrace for any Jew to drive a Mercedes, and was Salo so removed from his own Jewishness, from the fact and fate of his own martyred ancestor Joseph Oppenheimer (Goebbels's own *Jud Süss*!) that he did not understand the company had used concentration camp labor to build armaments and airplane engines? In fact, the answer to that was: yes, as Salo's Jewishness was not particularly acute, either in the religious or, at the age of nineteen, all that much in the historical sense. Certainly he was well aware of the mythic Jud Süss—"court Jew" to the Duke of

Wurttemberg in the 1730s, convicted of a bouquet of fictional crimes when his boss died suddenly, and executed, his corpse hung in a gibbet for six years outside of Stuttgart—but that all felt so very eighteenth century, and Salo was a young man fresh out of the 1960s, when the entire culture had coalesced around his own generation's youth and vigor and renunciation of the past. Besides, he'd really, really liked that Benz a lot, its sleek shape and leather seats, the vaguely European sophistication he'd felt sitting behind the wheel. After that phone call, though, it was a moot issue, and some instinct had sent him in the opposite direction: from the Nazi Mercedes-Benz company to that perfectly all-American anti-Semite Henry Ford.

Later, the instability of those 1970s Jeeps would become something of a cliché, but at that time the notion of a rugged, gritty 4x4 driving machine, suggestive of the Manifest Destiny frontier, was one of capability, not compromise. And if Salo Oppenheimer, in the market for his very first car, was willing to forgo the interior luxuries of, say, an uber-German automobile with a long company tradition of sophisticated design (alongside the slave labor), then surely it would only be for the enhanced ability to drive the wild roads surrounding Ithaca, his college town, even in its insane winter months. A Jeep for gorges and icy highways! A Jeep for the back roads of upstate New York! A Jeep for weekend jaunts with buddies and girlfriends, who didn't even, that fateful Saturday morning, have a precise destination in mind.

In the aftermath, he had no recollection of the rock in the road, or the sickening arc through the air, bright winter sun streaming directly into his eyes. His only impressions would be the shriek of crushing metal—that absurd sardine-tin roof, crumpling on impact—and the open-mouthed surprise of Mandy Bernstein, whose sweet, freckle-dusted nose he had thought adorable, instantly, the first time he saw her at a reception for new Jewish freshmen. Mandy was made of joy, perpetually on the verge of laughter, close to her parents and younger sisters back in New Jersey (if she wasn't in her room, she was likely in the phone booth down the corridor in Balch Hall, coaxing Lisa or Cynthia through some high school social maze or perceived parental injustice) and to her cousins in Newton, the mother ship of the Bernstein family. She liked to wear her hair in a high ponytail, sometimes with a red bandana wrapped around it (a fashion she'd picked up on a kibbutz she'd visited one summer during high school), and she rotated three pairs of well-loved bell bottoms that she was

perpetually embroidering: butterflies, rainbows, a rendering of the family poodle, Poochkin, in lavender. By December of their freshman year they were “dating,” which basically meant that Salo took her out to football games and walked her home to her dorm when the library closed. They sampled the brand-new and exotic Moosewood restaurant downtown for something called “tofu” and went for numerous Hot Truck runs on the way back to their North Campus dorms. Mandy was fond of the pizza subs.

He’d brought her home only once, when she was visiting the city to interview for a summer internship with UJA (an internship she would indeed be offered, in a letter that arrived one week after the accident). That introduction had gone well, despite the Bernsteins’ obvious lack of Our Crowdiness (and despite the fact that Selda Oppenheimer plainly harbored hopes of a Sachs, a Schiff, or even a Warburg for her only son); Mandy was simply that delightful, that charming and powerfully kind, and that in love—pure, clear, and very obvious love—with Salo Oppenheimer. She loved his brain and his manners and his spindly body, tall and frail, devoid of musculature. She loved a goodness she saw in him, which Salo—quite honestly—had never pretended to see in himself. It was not precisely true that she made him wish to be a better man; it was more true that she made him *wish* he wished to be a better man. At the time, that felt like enough.

He hadn’t asked her to marry him. They weren’t engaged, though later he was deliberately vague on this issue, because he knew it would make a big difference to Mandy’s parents; the distance between “She was a wonderful girl, someone any guy would have been lucky to date” and “She was the love of my life, and I was on the point of proposing to her” felt vast, and our father opted (correctly) to let her parents believe whatever might help them bear the pain. That awful winter and spring, and for the next several years, he let the Bernsteins enfold him into their grief as Mandy’s intended: future fiancé, husband, and father of the children she would never have. Then he married Johanna Hirsch, their daughter’s Lawrence High schoolmate, and all contact abruptly ceased.

Mandy Bernstein had been Johanna’s Big Sister, not literally but within the local chapter of the B’nai B’rith Girls. This was a position she had taken seriously, leaving surprise gift baskets (bagels and cream cheese, chocolate-chip cookies) on the doorstep of the Hirsch home when she knew Johanna was studying for a test, and showing up to help out on Johanna’s service projects, like the roadside car wash to benefit the Hebrew nursing home recreation fund or the friendship letters to children

in Israel. The “Sisters” had all been randomly assigned, but Johanna was ecstatic to find she’d been paired with the popular and pretty Mandy Bernstein. *Mandy Bernstein!* A person she would not have dared solicit for friendship in the halls of their teeming New Jersey high school, where a year’s difference in age meant everything, and perceived deficits in looks, wealth, and cool meant everything else.

Johanna was one of dozens of young women at the funeral that day, each and every one of them sincerely, personally in mourning. The identity of the young man with the bandaged wrist had been freely exchanged among them, and it would be fair to say that Salo Oppenheimer was the object of a certain romantic fascination. How must he feel? So young himself, and already responsible for the deaths of two others, just as young? How would he survive the loss of his own beloved Mandy, this glowing, clever (Ivy League!) girl, the jewel of her family, school, and town? Possibly, Johanna was not the only person in the jammed pews of Temple Beth Jacob wondering what kind of person it might ultimately take to draw this devastated Salo Oppenheimer from his eternal vortex of guilt and pain. Possibly she was not the only one imagining the great love and compassion necessary to bring Salo Oppenheimer back to life.

Our mother wasn’t remarkable like Mandy Bernstein. She was an ordinary girl from a family so average and undistinguished that she cringed at their inadequacies and then again at her own disloyalty. Her father was an accountant who worked for the famous Lawrenceville boarding school, a job he’d taken so that Johanna’s younger brother, our uncle Bobby, might possibly be granted admission (Lawrenceville was still several years away from coeducation, not that our grandfather had ever given a thought to opportunities, educational or otherwise, for his female children). Lawrenceville, and the opportunities it represented, were completely lost on our uncle Bobby, who was a committed anti-intellectual (which you could still be at Lawrenceville in the ’70s) and pot dealer (which you could not be, at least not if you were caught, as Bobby certainly was). After a disastrous freshman year he would transfer to Lawrence High where his sisters were already in situ, and there he would add scores of new clients to his thriving business. (In the long run, our uncle’s entrepreneurial instincts were by no means disadvantageous. By the early 1990s he was a real estate developer with a McMansion of his own in Point Pleasant. By then, he had retired from acquiring pot for other people, and one day would even—*wonder of wonders!*—send a child of

his own to Lawrenceville.) Phil Hirsch, our grandfather, was certainly humiliated by the way things had turned out, but he still remained at the school until his retirement; his way, perhaps, of saving face.

As far as our mother was concerned, her parents had completely missed the true star of the Hirsch family, which was not Bobby and certainly not herself. Our aunt Debbie, the oldest of the three siblings, was very smart and also very ambitious, in the subdued manner of girls coming of age with the Second Wave in the '70s, all too aware of the fact that doors were opening and that she was going to be allowed—if not exactly *encouraged*—to walk through them. Debbie opted for a safe (though quietly roiling) Mount Holyoke for college, and afterward a retail training program at Macy's, chosen for no other reason than the fact that she still got a little trill of excitement from department stores. That trill wouldn't last long, not once she was spending her days unpacking boxes and checking inventory, but things clicked into place as she realized how many ideas she had about adjusting chains of command to streamline operations. Her supervisors, shockingly enough, were not interested in Debbie Hirsch's ideas, so she went to business school and eventually found somebody who was. By the time her younger sister Johanna was settling into married life and embarking on her fateful "fertility journey," Debbie Hirsch Krieger was a full partner in a consulting firm, living in a Classic Six at 1065 Park Avenue with her husband and boys, and summering in Bridgehampton.

Between the unacknowledged star that was Debbie and the perpetual fuckup that was their younger brother Bobby, our mother ducked through adolescence in a furtive attempt not to be noticed. Johanna was an average student, a volleyball team member who mainly sat and watched, and a non-mixer in either of the two cliques that dominated her high school (these were known as the *Beautifuls* and the *Weirdos*). She kept company with a half dozen or so girls from back in elementary school, was generally fearful around boys, and gave her parents not one reason to worry about (or otherwise pay attention to) her. When she was sixteen she joined B'nai B'rith Girls at the suggestion of her sister Debbie, who was about to leave home and who worried Johanna would simply disappear once she'd gone. That was when the wondrous Mandy Bernstein, not only a *Beautiful* but also a *twelfth grader*, had materialized to sprinkle her magic fairy dust over Johanna Hirsch. Months later, Mandy was gone, off to Cornell. A year after that she was gone for good.

“I’m very sorry,” said Johanna to Salo Oppenheimer that day after the service had ended. She was one of perhaps forty young women to approach him and extend her hand and say these exact words, and there was no reason for him to remember her, and in fact he did not remember her, though that had less to do with Johanna’s ordinariness than with the shrieking voice in our father’s head all through the service and burial and reception. Afterward she went in one of the cars to the cemetery and watched Mandy’s broken parents and sisters throw red clay on the coffin, and Salo Oppenheimer throw red clay on the coffin, and by the time she reached the open grave there was little left to throw. Afterward, Salo Oppenheimer had been taken away by a dowdy, dignified couple in a Lincoln Town Car, and Johanna would not see him again for several years, until the Rudnitsky wedding in Oak Bluffs.

By then, Johanna was a rising sophomore at Skidmore, not that her heart was in either her nominal major (sociology) or anything else of an educational nature. She also didn’t like Saratoga, which was full of dancers and horse people in the summer and brutally cold the rest of the time, and the series of crushes she’d developed on boys at the college always ended in some variation of *It isn’t you, it’s me*, usually delivered over mugs of terrible beer in one of the town taverns. If you’d asked Johanna Hirsch what, in the whole wide world, she cared about, she’d have been hard-pressed to come up with anything, not even—or perhaps especially not—herself. Basically, she was drifting, as she had always drifted, once in the gully of her family and now in the gully of her college “experience.” Until, suddenly, she wasn’t.

It was one of those *It isn’t you, it’s me* young men who invited her to his brother’s wedding on Martha’s Vineyard. He did not explain that our mother’s role would be that of a beard (perhaps he thought he didn’t need to), but he did warn her that the likelihood of family meltdown over the course of the wedding weekend was high: his brother was marrying (and this was his parents’ word, he insisted, not his) a *schwartz*, and his mother had been on the verge of hysteria all spring. (In other words, no, this would not be an opportune moment to turn up without an unobjectionable female date. In *other* other words, it would also not be the time to make any grand announcement about his own clarifying life choices.) Johanna was game. She had never been to the famous island where, a few years earlier, that ghastly accident had occurred with the young senator and his aide, and she was curious about the family of her nominal date, who would

call a Black person a *schwartz*, and the brother who was brave enough (or perhaps antagonistic enough) to marry someone so certain to provoke them. (To be completely fair, she'd taken the opportunity to share the relevant detail with her own mother, who'd reacted pretty much the same way as Joshua Rudnitsky's mother had.)

When they arrived on the afternoon before the wedding, she was fairly swiftly deposited with the bridesmaids: eight women of Spellman plus Wendy Rudnitsky, the only sister of Joshua and Michael, the groom. This was hugely uncomfortable as far as Johanna was concerned, not because she was white (the bride and bridesmaids were gracious and welcoming) but because the women were mostly familiar and affectionate with one another while her own connection to the event was so very tangential. She tried to at least peel off for the rehearsal dinner, but they insisted on bringing her along to the Inn at Lambert's Cove, and that was the place she recognized Salo Oppenheimer, a person she had sometimes thought of in the years since that terrible funeral. After the toasts, as the older family members began to drift off, and only the bride and groom and their friends remained chatting around a long table, she saw him outside, leaning on the porch railing with a glass of Champagne. Our mother went to him and reintroduced herself, extending, for the second time, her hand.

"I'm sorry to have to tell you where we met before," she said.

Our father turned to look at her. "Oh," he said, after a moment. "Daniel or Mandy?"

Daniel must have been the other one, she realized. The friend.

"Mandy. I knew her."

"She was such a good person," said Salo.

"Yes. I'm Johanna. I'm here with Michael's brother. Joshua."

"Oh," Salo said. "I thought Joshua was homosexual."

Incredibly, this was when the meaning of *It isn't you, it's me* finally reached her.

"We're just friends," our mother said, having already expunged whatever notions she'd held (and, let's face it, till that instant maintained) for the brother of the groom. From this moment forward it was all going to be about our father, and the great purpose of her life would be to love him enough to relieve him of his great burden, and to free him from that one, terrible shard of time in which he was so unfairly trapped, and to salve at last that wound of his, that one that wouldn't heal. It didn't occur to her, and wouldn't for years, that she wasn't the one—the only one—who'd



ever be capable of doing that.

## Chapter Two

# The Stendahl Syndrome

*In which Salo Oppenheimer tumbles and Johanna Oppenheimer  
begins to understand  
what she's dealing with*

When our father's Jeep lost contact with the earth, its tether of gravity stretching, stretching, then suddenly, irredeemably gone, I imagine a rasping sound of breath all around him, then a weirdly graceful tumble through the tumbling space inside: four bodies coiling and snapping in a fatal ballet. The feeling would have been bizarrely not-unpleasant if one could manage to excise the actual physical sensations from a broader understanding of what was happening, and it would never leave him. Sometimes, awake or asleep, he might find himself looking into Mandy's surprised eyes, or hearing Daniel Abraham's weirdly pleasant "Hey!" from the back seat, or sensing that fourth person, the invisible girlfriend, somewhere behind him in the confused air: a shadow passing darkly across his right wrist. And all that contributed to his new and very specific and lifelong challenge, which was how to continue drawing breath after having caused the deaths of two people.

He never told us, not one of us, what he'd done. He never gave any of us an opportunity to understand him.

Even before the accident, our father had been a practiced dissembler, routinely allowing significant falsehoods—such as the fact that he was engaged to, or even in love with, Mandy Bernstein—to go unchallenged. Before he killed her the main reason for this was that he did not want to hurt Mandy's feelings; after he'd killed her it was to try not to compound the pain of her family. Also, it was far easier to simply agree when people made certain assumptions, and everybody made the same assumptions, for

good reason; Mandy had not only been devoted to him but had been willing (indeed, happy!) to have sex with him in his college dorm room (this was the early '70s, after all, when a lot of nice girls wouldn't do that). And actually, it wasn't at all impossible that the two of them would have stayed together, married, and made a wonderful go of things. *Why not?* You only had to look around to see men who'd settled for far less than Mandy Bernstein! But *in love*, as he himself and at least some of his own children would later experience that—no. The truth was, he had never felt such a thing, and half disbelieved anyone who claimed to have done so.

Anyway, dissembling wasn't the same as *lying*, especially when its purpose was to spare the feelings of the bereaved, of which there were so many, including, as it happened, Johanna Hirsch. Our mother was careful never to ask Salo about Mandy, and she obviously believed that his heart (his *heart!*) could never be entirely hers anyway since it must always belong, in some part, to that poor, lost girl. Also, Salo gradually decided, even a lie wasn't an *egregious* lie when you simply lacked the mechanics for a certain thing (say, doing four-figure sums in your head, or performing a long jump of over ten feet, or feeling a deep connection to another human being). There were many such mechanisms our father lacked, a few of which he regretted far more than an ability to really love the woman he had supposedly intended to marry (or indeed the one he actually did marry). He lacked any musicality, for example; that was a disappointment. He lacked a kind of easy friendliness he could see in other people. Finally, and especially after the accident, he lacked a sense of fully inhabiting his own life, as if he were still, somehow, tumbling through that tumbling air. On it swirled around him as he struggled to right himself, and sometimes fought a powerful urge for it to simply stop. That was the biggest deficit of all. That impacted everything.

Salo's pathetic physical wounds resolved so quickly they were embarrassing. Within weeks he was back in his dormitory, back in his lectures and seminars, though he avoided the people he'd known. He limped through his classes and passed them without much effort (or much distinction), and that summer flew to Europe on his own and meandered. To the strangers he fell in with (as one does, on trains or at museums), he gave only basic information: *New Yorker*, *Cornellian*, *future banker*, and did not volunteer the harm that was now at the center of his existence. He wasn't in despair; he was just tumbling, perpetually tumbling, relentlessly at the mercy of that terrible weightlessness and the betrayal of gravity. No

one could conceivably understand that, so what could be the point of telling them?

He began his trip in Rome and drifted north through Milan, Geneva, Paris. He didn't mind being alone, though it was clear that the packs of young people, hitching or traveling by the new Student Rail Pass, were a little mystified by him. A tourist their own age and obviously affluent—he slept in hotels, not hostels—traveling alone? But of course he wasn't always alone. He was fine with meeting the people he met. He was content to buy them meals—he could afford it; why not?—or a ticket to some tourist site that could not be missed. And if they were heading somewhere next that sounded no worse than anywhere else, he often went with them, because there was no place in particular he wanted to be, so what did it matter where he was? When the world is tipping beneath you and you are tumbling even when you are sitting, even when you are sleeping (especially when you are sleeping), any place is the same as any other place.

All this, like every other private thing, he would tell only one person, who would one day tell us.

In Bruges he tried cannabis for the first time, even a little bit hopeful that it would help, but it didn't. In Amsterdam he met an art student in a café, and he had dinner with her and even went to bed with her in a flat she shared with a sculptor and a state-registered heroin addict, both amiable guys. Her name was Margot and there was an art exhibition in Krefeld, in Germany, that she wanted to see, so Salo folded his long legs into her brown Peugeot and drove east with her. When he showed his American passport at the border the guard looked sharply at him and held that look, and abruptly the hairs on Salo's arms stood up. It hadn't occurred to him that it wouldn't be innocuous, this trip. This crossing. The car was waved forward, and Margot drove on. It was his first time in Germany.

Krefeld was not so far from the border. Margot was talking about the man whose work she wanted to see, who had once painted soup cans and bananas but was now making movies of people staring or sleeping. She seemed surprised that our father had never heard of the artist, but he told her about the sort of paintings he'd grown up with on the walls of his family's New York apartment, the low-country landscapes and portraits of jolly women and smug, prosperous men. He did not tell her that some of those paintings had been donated to his university the very month he'd applied for admission; possibly he'd understood how crass, how