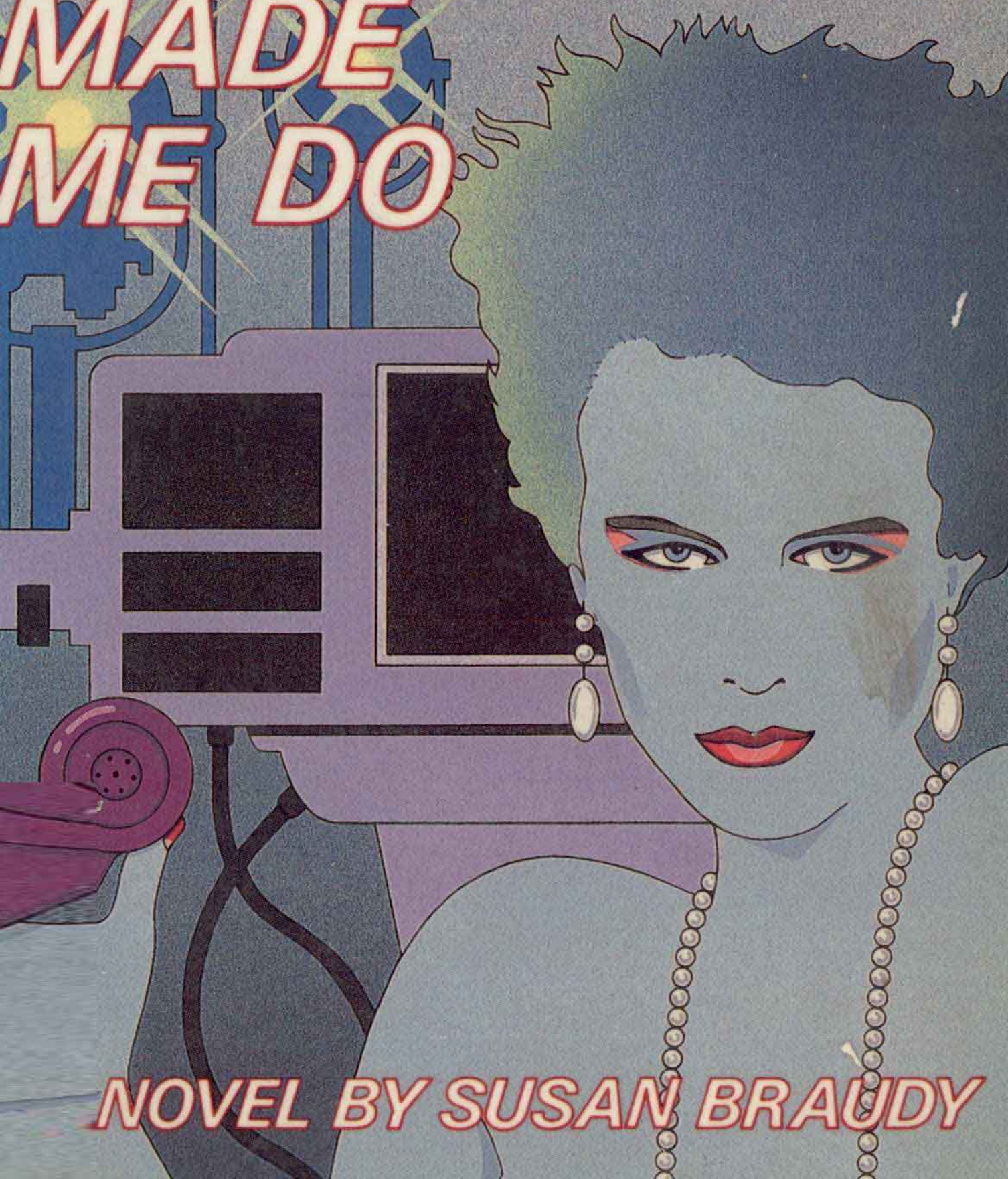


WHAT THE

Movies

MADE
ME DO



NOVEL BY SUSAN BRAUDY

What the Movies Made Me Do

A Novel by
Susan Braudy

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What the *Movies* Made Me Do

Prologue

Pre-credit master shot: daytime, icy Manhattan sidewalk, winter 1964. Sound track "she loves you, yeah, yeah, yeah . . ." Camera pans past movie marquee, *THE GREATEST STORY EVER TOLD*, then frames earnest girl in trench coat and muffler dashing from theater to hail a cab while the Beatles sing "and you know that can't be bad. She loves you . . ."

Rolling up the cab window, I congratulated myself. What a great birthday! I had gone to movie after movie, watching a popcorn bonanza in the morning and then five New Testament epics. I was twenty-one and a provincial Jewish girl; to me miracle movies were better than life.

I tapped the driver's shoulder. I'd manically saved most of my salary earned that first winter in New York filing address plates at a small film magazine. Feeling reckless, I told him, "Take me to a great restaurant, someplace movie producers eat."

He twisted around at me, his arm stretched out along the top of the front seat. He didn't start the meter.

"They're in Hollywood."

"Not all of them."

"You rich?"

"No."

“From out of town?”

“Philadelphia.”

He stared at me, incredulous. “You in school?”

“I didn’t mean to start an interview.”

He slapped down the meter handle and looked out the window for somebody to share his derision.

I remember speeding past Saks Fifth Avenue, where the women’s boots looked trim and expensive compared to other sections of the city. That’s the beauty of fashion. It intimidates even the most ignorant.

He stopped in front of a blue awning over a narrow scarlet carpet on a street of quiet brownstones. A silver limousine parked in front of us. I paid him slowly from my little pay envelope. Unaccustomed to a taxi, I hadn’t yet learned that the most expensive luxury in the teeming city was privacy. A doorman helped me out of the cab and I stretched tall. I was here in New York where I belonged.

When I entered Le Petit Mouchoir, I smelled cooking wine and heard the lyric and prissy counterpoint of string quartet music.

“Alone?” The waiter eyed my trench coat.

“Yes.”

He snapped his towel, and prancing ahead, sat me at a round table. I spotted a French movie actor whose sideburns matched his suntan. I ordered in French. The brains were soft. With a little sucking they fell apart on my tongue. When I signaled the waiter for a second glass of Burgundy wine, I saw another familiar forehead at a nearby table. My heart hammered. It was my friend Anita’s father smiling in a navy suit and her mother wearing her usual black turtleneck jersey. Anita was my New York friend from school who spent her junior year abroad in Germany and loved *Ben Hur* even though she was Jewish.

She was the one person I tried to be like. At Bryn Mawr,

girls like Anita from progressive Manhattan schools had looked like expensive beatniks. She cut quite a figure, a small-boned show-off smoking black cigarettes and wearing a tight black turtleneck, high-heeled stiletto boots and no under-pants under the old dungarees. I used to stand in the doorway of our smoker and listen to her tales before we became friends.

I envied Anita's drive; she was going to be a Hollywood movie director, no doubt about it, she was already doing odd jobs that winter in a cutting room in Burbank. We had done a joint honors thesis that was a documentary film of a black burlesque house on South Street. As producer, I rerouted truck traffic at night for her exterior establishing shots and sound takes and kept the owner of the burlesque club happy by casting him in the film. I never paid him a penny; a good producer doesn't spend money unless he has to. As director, Anita stole the old movie camera from the athletics department three nights a week.

I had just called Anita long-distance, between Bible movies, about my crazy idea of making a short for young adults about Jesus, showing him as a Jewish rabbi and teacher.

I was embarrassed to tell about it.

"You want to put the Jew back in Jesus?" she asked sweetly.

"Jesus was a leader who went up against the big rabbis." I stamped my feet. The telephone booth was freezing.

"Since when are you so religious?" She knew my parents never even joined a synagogue, because they were enlightened.

"I dunno, maybe I want to be more Jewish."

"Well, that's one movie I'd never be interested in, snooks," she advised me before she hung up. "I got to go help cut a scene where all these sparrows on dental floss go flying into an actress's face."

Now, without greeting them, I watched her parents eat duck with their fingers. I felt shy, they'd think I was kooky and they might insist I join them. They knew how New York worked.

When the waiter suggested dessert, I worried about spending too much, but asked for chocolate mousse. He bowed respectfully.

"L'addition," I added.

When the check came, I burped, stricken. Thirty-six dollars, one week's salary. After a moment I picked up my pocketbook and walked past the fireplace toward a sign marked "Les Femmes." I left nothing on my gilded chair. My table was neat, the single salad fork across the empty plate, wine-glass nearby empty. In the black tile bathroom, a woman in a black sweater handed me a starched towel.

"M'ci, m'dme."

I fished in my pocketbook for two quarters.

"M'ci," she hissed.

I ambled back toward my deserted table, proud of myself. My friend Anita's parents were gone, leaving a wild ruin of napkins, crumbs, duck bones, and plates smeared with drying sauces. I was tipsy. I loved my day of movies. I loved the restaurant. I loved the whim that took me here. I didn't have to share it with my family, who were upset by their rare restaurant visits. They seemed jolted by unfamiliar data.

"George, look at your fork. Call the waiter, it's filthy."

"Find out if they cook in margarine, last time I was here I ordered fried veal and it kept me up all night."

"Keep your hands away from the white rolls, they spoil her appetite, here's the waiter, George, he'll take the basket away."

I strolled past the tall metal cart of six trays on wheels festooned with glistening tarts, swirling mousses with thick cream icings. The company of a date wouldn't have been as

much fun either. He would make friends with the waiter; it would be his restaurant; he'd have picked it. He would choose the wine, enjoying a complicity with the steward while he tasted it. I would be cowed into eating slower. I would wait politely for him to finish each course. He would pay the check.

Near my small table something had happened. The hatcheck woman was whispering in French to the *maître d'* while my waiter flapped his hand towel angrily at his palm. His anxiety clashed with the prim chamber music. The hatcheck woman saw me and she hit the waiter with her elbow. Then the three of them closed in around my table looking at me while I slid down into my chair. My mousse hadn't arrived. Everything in the restaurant seemed to stop. Everybody was staring at me. What could it be? Was it the brown leather miniskirt I bought on sale for \$4.99 that week at Loehmann's?

"Where were you?" the waiter asked. The others nodded indignantly.

I flushed. It was a good thing Anita's parents were gone.

"Do you have the full amount of the check?" he continued.

"What is the problem?" I was toughing it out despite my growing humiliation.

"We thought you left, uhm, without payment of your bill." The *maître d'* spoke from behind him in a conciliatory voice.

My face went hot. Curious shocked faces blurred around me. I pulled out my pay envelope and turned the bill over on its little black tray. "I didn't eat mousse," I said, my fingers shaking. I felt surrounded.

"Very good, m'nselle." The waiter picked up the bill and scratched his pen at it.

"Du café?" he asked.

"No." I wasn't in the mood anymore.

I counted all my bills and quarters onto the tablecloth and left the waiter four dollars. Lucky thing I had a subway token. With a flourish of his head, he acknowledged my pile of money. As I walked past him, he folded the four-dollar tip and held it out at me. People were still staring. I shook my head.

“Take it”—he shoved the bills at my wrist—“for your inconvenience.”

“No,” I said, pushing by him.

At the front of the restaurant I paused to ask for my coat from the hatcheck woman, who was now guarding the closet. “It’s not your fault,” she said to the back of my neck while helping me on with my old Bryn Mawr trench coat.

“What?” I twisted around.

“We don’t get many single girls in here, except working ones, and they pull dirty tricks on us.”

“Tricks?”

“Eat a full meal and skip out on the check.” She smiled and her teeth were perfect. “Only we got no back exit.”

She patted my shoulders. “Woman eating alone, well, they watch you like a hawk. I told them you were fine. But I was surprised they let you in, considering how many times we been burned.”

I squeezed her hand and then twisted the brass doorknob. Wrapping my muffler over my chin, I ran down the red carpet with tears in my eyes. I didn’t belong inside that restaurant yet, and I had missed out on my first chocolate mousse. It was over my head. I didn’t know the rules of this huge city, but I vowed to learn them.

My day in New York would come, I’d make a great movie and show them, or so I told myself over and over again as I sat on the deserted uptown subway, shivering and yawning from the heavy Burgundy wine.

One

Credit sequence against black, then slow horizontal wipe across screen right to left and we see same fancy French restaurant with mirror fireplace and rickety gilded chairs. Sound track comes up prissy Mozart violins. TWENTY YEARS LATER rolls across the middle of the screen.

When I arrived the blue-striped canopy looked like hundreds of others. But something clicked when I saw the mirror fireplace. I handed the pretty hatcheck girl my raccoon coat and briefcase filled with screenplays and my sneakers and stopped short—what had I done with my old Bryn Mawr trench coat?

Then I glimpsed Barry's wiry gray head beyond the fireplace near the cart of desserts. He looked daggers while he traced angry fork lines on his napkin. I waved at him over a party of elderly Swiss people. Poor man had picked this stiff restaurant to celebrate my fortieth birthday, and he'd been cooling his heels for almost an hour.

I pushed my way through the crowd. Tonight, in his good navy suit, his hair combed over his receding hairline, Barry looked like a manic tycoon. In fact, he is a Jewish scientist with a magnetic mind, close to a Nobel Prize for his brain research. He has left two plump pillows on my bed and a silver

razor on my bathroom sink. We have been trying to love each other for two years, but everything I do hurts his feelings. And I knew we were in for a fight.

I waved again. A waiter wheeled the dessert cart between us. Tonight I was late because my boss at the studio in Hollywood had kept me on the phone trying to sleaze out of spending seven hundred thousand to build two period sets on our Burbank soundstage. I kept watching the minutes tick by while Michael Finley shouted things like "Cheat the exteriors! Find a big synagogue, it's Israel, for God's sake, and work on the production values. The hay looks like goddamn plastic."

Michael Finley hates my supervising the movie. I fought for years to get that privilege as a New York executive. I'm doing my best on *Prophet*—that's the working title of my first production. Daily they pouch me Polaroids and budgets on an El Al jet. Thank God Michael doesn't know I haven't talked to our director, my old pal Anita, since yesterday morning.

Unfortunately, my secretary missed Barry tonight at his Princeton lab. I have no other men, I have a full-time career. Barry doesn't trust me. He's jealous of my boss. He's jealous of my job as east coast executive at the studio. I hurried past a crowd of tourists to get to him.

These days I am at the top of the movie business, slugging away in the thick of studio politics. I was a respected film critic, and after struggling through the industry I am finally supervising the movie I dreamed of. I run an office, sign my own checks, and pay my rent and medical bills. I have amazing orgasms, and I groom myself like a great beauty. I was a gawky, gigantic, and wall-eyed graduate student. Now I am tall and thin with lots of fierce dark hair, a full mouth, and jittery eyes with dark smudges under them.

I inched around the dessert cart to kiss Barry hello. His

lips shook with reproach. Sitting down, I began stammering excuses. He fixed his wise, beautiful, and pained eyes on me, made me all the more moist by his contact lenses.

“My wife never kept me waiting.” He was off and running.

“She loved you unconditionally.”

“That was her weapon,” he sighed. This was the real problem. His divorce was coming through this month, after years of separation.

“She still loves you, Barry,” I said.

“I don’t want to discuss it,” he said. No woman’s love could please him. We both knew it. He was a shy man, full of shame and pain about sex. But as long as we were struggling to make a relationship I knew he wouldn’t stray from me, no matter how much he pushed me away, or pretended to be sleeping his light unbreathing sleep after we made love. He was as fearful of casual sexual encounters as any woman of my generation. He’d been faithful to his wife for twenty-two years.

“My dear, I have no appetite. I am in despair.” He worked his fingers into his eyes.

I took his wrists from his face and kissed both palms. “What are you thinking?” I whispered.

“Man is the only animal who knows he’s going to die,” Barry pronounced.

“Wrong,” and I hugged him around the neck, “man is the only animal who knows chocolate candy tastes great with caramel and nuts.”

He hugged me back finally with reassuring squeezes. “Oh, my dear,” and he laughed, “my dear, dear girl.” He rocked me a little in his arms. “I wait for you, as Kafka once said, like an ox. I wait for you forever. It’s your birthday night, don’t fret. Let’s talk about us. How’s my forty-year-old?”

“Defeated.” I brushed his lips with mine again. “I don’t like being forty, I never expected it.”

He rubbed my nose with his. “I know, dear, and I’m afraid I’ll die before I finish my research. I know what we are,” he whispered, “we’re two cowardly ghosts rounding a corner and bumping smack into each other. We jump up and down and shout ‘eek.’ It’s something supernatural. I recognize you and we both want to flee as fast as our legs can carry us.”

Before I could answer, the waiter slipped a cardboard wine list under Barry’s nose. Barry loves performing, he likes me to listen. The waiter’s wrists stuck out from the sleeves of his jacket. I gulped ice water. I had the funny feeling the restaurant had gone down. “I just want a glass of white Burgundy.”

“Darling, Carol, leave it to me, please?” Barry raised his eyebrows at the waiter. The man coughed nervously.

“Certainly.” When the waiter left I covered Barry’s clenched fist with my hands. “I’m glad you chose this restaurant. I came here years ago all by myself to celebrate my twenty-first birthday.”

He clasped my fingers back. “My darling, it’s your night, don’t fret.” When he touched me I knew he loved me.

“I didn’t mean to ruin your plans,” I said for the third time. “Let’s enjoy ourselves.”

“The truth is, you don’t care enough,” he mumbled, but he sat there squeezing my fingers for a long minute before he put his napkin back on his knee. We munched rolls in time to a repressed Bach violin solo. I suggested we both order brains in black butter sauce, in honor of his work mapping the mysteries of the human brain. He believes he’s going to solve the mind-body problem by proving the brain just another body part, and there is no soul.

When they arrived he stabbed a forkful and pursed his

lips distastefully. "Awful," he said. Another strike against me. The brains were overcooked and rubbery, not the ambrosia I remembered. Some memories are better than trying to repeat the experiences.

I recognized the solemn Bach as something Barry played. Better not mention it now. He was once a child prodigy and still owns a Stradivarius violin. But his fingers slowed from lack of practicing. When we first fell in love, he swore he'd sell his violin and buy me and him and my dog Rocky a large cooperative apartment. Better not mention that either.

He was keeping time with the music, his chin making little nods.

"How's your work?" I asked.

"I had a showdown with that High Episcopalian putz from Salk," he began.

I loved hearing his voice, husky with feelings, a little highfalutin; these native New Yorkers broaden their *a*'s and drop their *r*'s. I smiled at him, clasping my hands under my chin, listening. I was dying to avoid the fight sizzling under our conversation.

"He's stealing my Indian molecule assistant, but he can't take two goddamn years of research and my government grant with him. If the kid goes to Salk, he goes naked. I'm afraid all the work I've done will come to nothing after all these years."

I suddenly remembered how, when we first met, Barry hypnotized me at a dinner party with those suffering intelligent eyes. He wasn't thin or young, but he wove word spells, describing his work on the mysteries of the brain in glittering and passionate scientific patois. The next day I played old rock-and-roll records and dreamed of introducing him to my mother. She'd love discussing books with a bonafide Nobel laureate-to-be.

Now he tossed his fork onto the table. "I can't believe it,

you're not listening," he accused. "We have got to talk." My heart sank. I knew this Salk intrigue by heart.

"I was thinking about the night we met." I blushed.

"Don't sweet-talk me," he snapped, "like some meretricious movie mogul."

"I can't win with you." I sagged over my cleared plate.

"I needed your advice," Barry added balefully. "But you were out of the office all day." He admitted my expertise only in office politics. It wasn't a big moral compliment. He looks down his nose at movies. I think he envies the glamour.

"I was out working."

"Your job is ruining us. That's the big problem."

"I'm in trouble," I blurted.

"Oh, my dear." His whispery voice shook with elegant hysteria. "Tell me what the bastards did now."

Tears smarted my eyes. He was being kind.

"Well, I'm worried. Anita didn't take my calls today. And Michael Finley's going to find out. It's not like her."

"Nobody in their right mind spends nine million dollars to make a movie." He cut a corner of his baked endive. "Maybe she ran off with Jack what's-his-name, your trampy star."

"Jack Hanscomb? No way," I said too fast.

In the middle of any discussion Barry likes his little jokes. Everybody in the world knows Jack's last name.

"Admit it, you're drawn to that man," Barry said.

"I'm not that dumb," I lied. For once he had me. He has a fantastic picture of me as sexually uncontrollable; because he's attracted to me, he believes all men are.

Barry was saying, "Well, just call the police, a woman like Anita doesn't disappear off the Israeli coast. It isn't Nazi Germany." He chuckled. Any whiff of a reference to the Holocaust satisfies him profoundly. "Forget the movie, find yourself some serious work."