

Chapter 1

EMBATTLED PRODIGY (1915–1934)

“I Heard the Voice in the Burning Bush”

It was a cold, clear Sunday afternoon in New York City. The year was 1929. Fourteen-year-old Joy Davidman was walking through the park and enjoying the snow that had fallen a few hours before. The strange quiet that accompanies a snowfall made the sunset hour enchanting, especially when she looked at the row of ice-clad maple trees that stood between her and the lowering sun. “As I looked up they burned unimaginably golden—burned and were not consumed. I heard the voice in the burning tree: the meaning of all things was revealed and the sacrament at the heart of all beauty lay bare; time and space fell away, and for a moment the world was only a door swinging ajar,”¹ she was to write—later.

This was not Joy’s first mystical experience, and it wouldn’t be her last. For an instant she believed that she had entered a spiritual realm as real as the material world so familiar around her. But the cold wind on her face and her reflex recollection of her father’s admonitions against any such conclusion, brought her mind back

to the mundane. She shrugged off her response as the glandular reaction of a sensitive person upon encountering unusual beauty. Beautiful things just did that to people. Science had not explained it yet, but it would one day. "I went home, reflecting that I had had another aesthetic experience. I had them fairly often. . . . For I was a well-brought-up, right-thinking child of materialism. Beauty, I knew, existed; but God, of course, did not."²

If most American children grow up in homes where God is worshiped, or at least indifferently assumed to exist, then Joy Davidman's upbringing was out of the mainstream. Although her mother made perfunctory nods in the direction of the Judaism of her birth and attempted to preserve the forms of faith, Joy's father was an outspoken atheist who exhorted others in his household to share his view. Joy actually grew up in a family where religion was at once respected and deplored. The faith of her ancestors could not be ignored; nevertheless, whatever attitude Joy adopted toward the religion of the Old World seemed to invite criticism.

Helen Joy Davidman (everyone called her Joy) was born into a family where battles over religion were inevitable. Both sets of grandparents immigrated to the United States in the late nineteenth century, part of the great migration of southern and eastern Europeans who entered America during the years between the 1880s and World War I. These were the so-called new immigrants, "new" because they were from the south and east of Europe rather than from the north and west, where most earlier American immigrant movements originated. These "new" Americans were different from most previous settlers because they were predominantly Jewish and Roman Catholic, rather than Protestant. Approximately 80,000 Jews, most of western European origin, lived in New York in 1870. They comprised less than 10 percent of the population. By 1915, the year of Joy Davidman's birth, nearly 1.4 million Jewish persons lived in the great metropolis; and they

totaled almost 28 percent of the population. Most of these newcomers were from eastern Europe.³

Both of Joy's parents were part of this great migration. Her father, Joseph Isaac Davidman, was born in Poland in 1887. He arrived in New York with his parents, brothers, and sisters in 1893. Joseph Davidman's father left Poland because most of the Jewish people there, as in other parts of eastern Europe, were either banished or trampled upon by religious persecutors. The elder Davidman brought his family to New York, where they resided on Manhattan's Lower East Side. At first a peddler with a pushcart, he eventually found work as a clothes presser in the garment district. Joy's grandfather reveled in America's free religious environment: he not only maintained a kosher home, but worshiped regularly and observed all traditional Jewish holy days. He died when he was only forty-eight, falling victim to pneumonia—the result of preaching in the streets, trying to convert Christians to Judaism.⁴

It was in an Orthodox family, then, that Joy's father grew up. Religion was central in the Davidman home, even after the father died. But despite Joseph's mother's attempts to keep her four boys and three girls in the fold of traditional Judaism, New York's diversity influenced their home as it did the homes of most Old World immigrants. The children wanted to grow up and fit into the dominant population. To be accepted, to earn money, and to get ahead were the young people's goals; achieving these aims often required shedding ethnic traditions.

Holding tightly to Old World religious and social traditions in a dynamic New World city seemed to be a prescription for failure in the eyes of many young Jews. If one did not choose to become completely "Americanized," only a good education or a revamped economic system could promise a better future. As social scientist Nathan Glazer observed, summing up the changes affecting America's East European Jews in the late nineteenth and early

twentieth century, “they might abandon the practice of Jewish religion, but this was less conversion than the embrace of an alternative secular faith—socialism or rationalism, say, which often seemed to the outside world as Jewish as Judaism itself.”⁵

Glazer’s description fits Joseph Isaac Davidman. He turned his back on his parents’ religion and set out to improve himself through education, and to improve his lot and that of his fellow Jews through socialism. Always a hard worker, he earned enough to pay his way through New York’s City College, where he was to entertain seriously thoughts of socialism and atheism. After college Joseph became a public school teacher, and later a junior high school principal.

The woman he married came from a similar but not identical background. Jeannette Spivack’s parents were Jewish, too, but in the Old World they were much better off financially than the Davidmans had been. Family lore maintains that Jeannette’s father was a prosperous merchant. A native of a village near Odessa in the Ukraine, he was allowed to travel on business throughout Russia, a freedom not always extended to Jews. Although the Spivacks were relatively well established in the land of Czar Alexander, they decided to forfeit what they had for the promise of a better life in America and they immigrated to New York when Jeannette was five. In particular, Joy’s grandfather was concerned about education. Because he always was a feminist he chose to go to the United States so that his girls could have access to institutions of higher learning, a privilege that would be denied them in Russia.

Jeannette Spivack’s father and mother were not spiritual people. As Jeannette saw it, some Jews prayed and others fought. She was proud that her father was a fighter. Although he was not hostile to Judaism, he maintained a tepid indifference to it throughout his life. Instead of religion, his interests were business, secular education, and social activism. To these things, particularly things of

the mind, he devoted his energy, time, and talent. Jeannette, therefore, was brought up in a fashion that enabled her to be comfortable with a secular—even atheist—Jew just as long as he was an intellectual with a social conscience.⁶

In 1909 the bright and petite Jeannette Spivack married Joseph Davidman. They had much in common. She, too, had earned a degree from the City College of New York and was pursuing a teaching career in the public schools. They both loved books, venerated education, saw socialism as the hope for tomorrow, and were desirous of upward mobility. Jeannette preferred to preserve the forms of Judaism for the sake of tradition, although she was neither spiritual nor pious, and while Joseph was slightly annoyed by his wife's traditionalism, he never made an issue of it because he would have alienated too many people. Had his father been alive Joseph's professed atheism would have devastated him; as it was, it disconcerted his mother and his mother-in-law, and it was sometimes irritating to his more conservative wife, who appreciated and sometimes romanticized the ways of the Old World.⁷

Their differing views on Judaism notwithstanding, the newlyweds were in agreement in enough other ways to be well suited to each other. The Davidmans worked hard and saved from their earnings. Soon they climbed out of the Manhattan ghetto, and like many upwardly mobile Jews from Eastern Europe, moved to the Bronx, the event symbolizing their arrival as members of the solid middle class. Secure in a more open and attractive neighborhood, Jen and Joe, as they were known to friends and relatives, made plans for a family. Helen Joy was their firstborn. She arrived on April 18, 1915. Howard, Joy's only sibling, was born four years later.

New York City was a tumultuous place when Joy Davidman was born. The strain of change was everywhere evident as trucks and automobiles competed with carts and buggies, and electric

streetcars gradually replaced the horse-drawn variety. Some of the great city's streets were paved, but all thoroughfares were generously covered with horse droppings. The fashionable avenues were equipped with street lamps, and the better buildings displayed awnings of variegated shapes and colors. The Great War had cut immigration to a trickle, but hundreds of thousands of people still jostled one another as they struggled for survival and advantage. Factories consumed people as quickly as they discharged pollutants. Much of the urban giant was noisy, dirty, and dangerous; yet it continued to attract newcomers from rural and small-town America with inducements of excitement, novelty, anonymity, and economic opportunity.

As Joy grew up in the Bronx, she was far away from the congestion and roar of the metropolis. The Woodlawn section, where she spent her early childhood, was pastoral in comparison to most of the city. When she was small "it possessed the quality of a bit of forgotten country in the city. You could still find rabbit tracks in the snow, and there was an old-fashioned orchard with blue creeping myrtle under the trees." One woman of this era had fond memories of the area where Joy grew up, noting that "for entertainment we would walk over a bridge every Sunday where there were cows in the open air. This was the Bronx. The place was like an island."⁸ Even after the Davidmans moved to a more prestigious address near the Grand Concourse, the neighborhood was open, clean, uncongested, and safe.

From one angle of vision Joy's childhood was idyllic. Her parents were happily married; they were always comfortable financially. Even during the Great Depression, both Davidmans were employed, and no one ever went hungry. Furthermore, Joy and her brother got along beautifully. Not only was she well-fed, -clothed, and -housed, Joy was given what all well-brought-up young girls in that era expected—a piano and several years of

lessons. Besides providing the piano—a baby grand—Joy’s mother taught her to cook well, and her parents gave her an education steeped in classical music, history, and good literature.

For a young family in the 1920s and 1930s, the Davidmans were unusually well traveled. During summers, when Joseph and Jeannette enjoyed two months’ vacation, the foursome went to the West Coast, visiting California, Washington state, even Vancouver, British Columbia. On one trip they took in the Grand Canyon; other summers were spent in New England. The Davidmans especially enjoyed Maine, and for several years they went to Crescent Lake in Casco, Maine. Thirty miles north of the coast at Portland, Crescent Lake is about twenty-five miles from the New Hampshire line. During World War I, Joseph planted a “victory garden” at their summer place; because everyone in the family eventually enjoyed this enterprise, arrangements were made with a local caretaker to till the soil and work in some fertilizer each spring so that when the Davidmans returned, the plot of ground was ready for sowing. They seldom missed a summer even if they went west.

Joy and Howard loved to read, and they were encouraged to do so. Although there was a decent library in their spacious, well-furnished apartment, the family book collection was not enough for the Davidman children. Howard recalled that they frequently went to the public library. During the summer, if they were not out of town, they went almost every day. The librarian would allow them only six selections each, and if they were involved in a topic or author that they felt required more than twelve volumes, the two would go to another branch library, check out a dozen more monographs, and go home to master the subject. The only problem was that sometimes they returned the borrowed items to the wrong libraries.⁹

Even as a child Joy liked the humanities, reading widely in history, philosophy, American and English literature. Her preference

did not run to Henry James or John Galsworthy, both of whom were too stuffy for her taste, but she did enjoy James Branch Cabell as a stylist. By the time Joy was fourteen and ready for college, she was exceptionally well informed. After all, she had been reading since the age of two and a half or three, and the photographic memory to which everyone who knew her well attests, enabled her to retain things in a most extraordinary manner. Her brother noted that she could peruse a page of a Shakespeare play once and have it memorized.¹⁰

Besides the youthful pleasures of reading, gardening, and traveling, Joy and Howard shared a love for the zoo. The siblings sought diversion from hours of study by walking to the Bronx Park Zoo and talking to the animals. Since Joy, typically, was unable to maintain an ordinary appetite for an enterprise once she found it to her liking, she required more involvement with the animals than regular viewing rules and regulations permitted. Consequently, by the age of fourteen or fifteen Joy was off on nighttime adventures. Because Howard adored his sister and viewed her as his teacher, he dutifully tagged along to the zoo after its closing hours for some nocturnal encounters with the big cats. Joy wanted to get acquainted with the large felines, rather than view them from a distance. Armed with her most charming manners, the aggressive teenager coaxed the lions to the bars, petted their heads, and fed them chocolate. Apparently the lions, as well as Joy and Howard, enjoyed the after-dark visitations, because these escapades continued without incident for a long time.¹¹

From one viewpoint, then, the years of Joy's youth were delightful. However, those who attribute significance to the quality and quantity of love and care given an infant might see the beginnings of another thread—far from stable and pleasant—in the first few months of Joy's life. Her mother had an unusually difficult time with Joy's birth. After the exhausting delivery, Jen took

her physician's advice about the necessity of an extended period of rest, and soon after leaving the hospital, she went to a dude ranch to recover. Several weeks of fresh air in a bucolic setting restored Jen's health but deprived Joy of her mother's love and care for many weeks. Although Joseph cared for the infant during this time, Joy never became close to her father.¹²

In fact, Joy's relationship with her father was dreadful. At his best, Joe could be difficult because, as one grandson put it, "He was sadly lacking in sense of humor, and was stingy about money"¹³—an assessment corroborated by his son and niece. At his worst, Joseph could be a martinet.¹⁴ His niece, Renée, was taken aback to find her Uncle Joe summoning his children with a metal whistle. She was appalled by the way Joy and Howard ran to him in the fashion of trained dogs as soon as the whistle was blown.

Renée, whose mother was Joseph Davidman's sister, would have been more horrified still if she had seen how her cousins were disciplined. Joseph was incredibly demanding; nothing less than perfection was tolerated in his house. He was demanding of himself, too. Indeed, his reputation—which he himself promulgated—was one of never failing or making mistakes. His grades in school and college had been excellent, his teaching outstanding, and his administration of school and home flawlessly efficient. Only once did anyone ever catch him in failure! He and a fellow teacher began a summer camp for New York children, and the venture was a fiasco. Joe salvaged his reputation by blaming the loss totally on the ineptitude of his partner.¹⁵

This man, who pushed himself to achieve, put great pressure on his children. While they were still young, Joseph Davidman brought IQ tests home from his junior high school and administered them to Howard and Joy. A score of 140 or more was undisputedly in the genius category, and although Howard scored

nearly 150, his father was not pleased. The lad was told he would never amount to much. Howard's dream was to become a physician, an ambition realized when he graduated from medical school in 1943. He had received no encouragement from his father, who told him that he was not bright enough for so rigorous an academic program. Nevertheless, Howard tried to please Joseph. Because Joseph liked and taught biology, Howard took up entomology, hoping to win approval from his father. Likewise, when Jen wanted Howard to become a bar mitzvah at age thirteen, the boy sided with his father and proclaimed himself an atheist. To Joseph's delight the issue was dropped when Howard said that he would announce his atheism to the rabbi and everyone else present if he were forced to take part in the ceremony.¹⁶

Jeannette, as a rule, treated Howard extremely well; while he was a child, mother and son were quite close. And Joy and Howard were close friends as youngsters. They went places together, read many of the same books, and defended one another against all comers; Joseph's harsh and demanding behavior toward them both did much to bind them together. Not until adulthood would they have a serious falling out.

While Howard had scored a mere 147 on the IQ test, Joy virtually, broke the scale. This brought a smile to her father's face, but it meant that he would push her unmercifully to excel in all things.¹⁷

The pressure to perform at peak level never let up. Even mealtime was devoted to discussions of weighty subjects, rather than light and loving family chatter. Because the perfect father could never be wrong, and because Joy was driven to be perfect, too, there was no way that she and her father could take opposite sides on an issue and leave it at that; agreement to disagree was out of the question. Inevitably, discussions evolved into arguments, and arguments eventually led to long-lasting resentments. To make matters even worse, when Joseph Davidman grew angry with Joy

for disobedience, he would hold her by the nape of the neck and forcefully slap her face several times. This punishment was used on both Howard and Joy for years, and it did not end for Howard until he went away to college. For Joy, however, it ended when she was sixteen. One evening when her father began slapping her, Joy went on the attack, ferociously scratching his face. The stunned disciplinarian never laid hands on her again.¹⁸

Although Joy's mother was soft-spoken and full of good humor—a raconteuse generally well-liked by everyone—she, too, could be cruel to Joy. Renée saw Aunt Jen as a neat, pretty, and charming woman who was almost prissy. She possessed the soft voice that is acquired by so many kindergarten and first-grade teachers. While Jen was unquestionably kind to her niece, she had a tendency to denigrate other people. Howard was to say that she used subtle sarcasm to insult people, saying a person was “pedestrian,” then apologizing and saying she really meant to say “protestant.” But the brunt of her snideness was reserved for Joy. Renée blushed with embarrassment when Aunt Jen would say, “Joy, why can't you be neat like your cousin?” Or “Look at Renée, this is how a *lady* should look in her clothes.”¹⁹

Despite Joy's problems with her father, she, too, made herculean efforts to win his praise, wanting confirmation of his approval. She read what he liked, and then sought to impress him with her recall and insights. Because he was a thorough materialist, believing everything can be explained through the existence and nature of matter, she read H. G. Wells's *Outline of History*, proudly telling her father that, like him and Wells, she was now an atheist. She was eight at the time.²⁰ She announced at age twelve that she wanted to become a writer; this pleased her father, too. And the enthusiasm with which she approached gardening allowed some pleasant times for the two of them. Joy's commitment to intellectual respectability, her celebration of reason as the only

means to discern truth, and her love for gardening and writing satisfied her father as much as anyone could. Wistfully, Howard recalled that in those particulars, Joy had become the son Joseph always wanted.

Regardless of the victories that came in the battles to win Joseph's favor and occasional applause, there was continual tension in the Davidman household. The arguments never ceased, the pressure to be perfect never lessened, and the fear of harsh discipline was always present. Fear, in short, was a constant companion.

There was another source of anxiety swirling about the entire Davidman family. As Jews, they were always pursued by the demons of anti-Semitism. A look here, an insult there—it never really stopped. It was worse when a vacation was planned. There was invariably the threat of their being denied accommodations if they strayed too far from the safe places of the familiar Northeast. But anti-Semitism was rampant even in New York with its sizable Jewish population. As Joy's gentile sister-in-law commented many years later, "You cannot understand Howard and Joy without some comprehension of the wickedness of anti-Semitism in New York City."²¹

This problem took on major proportions when it came to finding employment or gaining access to good colleges and universities. Perhaps these realities place Joseph Davidman's demanding character in a slightly more favorable light. After all, he knew it would be more difficult for his children to get ahead because they were Jewish. They would have to strive harder than and be superior to gentiles in order to have a chance in a militantly competitive society where people used every advantage, even if it meant resorting to bigotry.

Added to the trials of family and prejudice were Joy's considerable physical illnesses. As a little girl, Joy would go to bed in

pain. But annoying as they were, it was not the leather curlers that her mother insisted on putting in her hair every night that hurt her; but a crooked spine, which was not properly diagnosed for several years.²² Joy also suffered from a severe case of Grave's disease. This condition, known also as hyperthyroidism or exophthalmic goiter, is an overactive thyroid problem that causes among other things, protruding eyes. Joy's hyperthyroidism was misdiagnosed for a long time; when it was finally pinpointed, surgery was prescribed to remove part of the thyroid. The threat of surgery was removed, however, when the family found a physician who was experimenting with a radium treatment. His plan was to place a radium belt around the patient's neck for twenty-four hours once a week for an entire year. He theorized that the radioactivity would be absorbed by the thyroid gland, suppressing its hyperactivity.

Fearful of surgery, Joy submitted to this therapy almost gleefully. The treatment was an apparent success: her hyperthyroidism was cured. In retrospect, however, the cure was certainly worse than the disease. Joy's body was riddled with cancer soon after she turned forty, and many physicians see a direct cause-and-effect relationship between exposure to radium and cancer.

Grave's disease and curvature of the spine were not Joy's only medical problems. She suffered from hyperinsulinism as well. Hyperinsulinism, or excessive insulin secretion, results in a low level of sugar in the blood. Effects of this condition can include tremors, cold sweats, and an enormous appetite. Joy was subject to fainting spells and had an insatiable appetite. Joy's weight increased and to keep her from yielding to the constant temptation to eat, Jeannette had a lock installed on the refrigerator. Only after a period of scoldings, embarrassment, and confusion was Joy's actual condition diagnosed.²³

While in high school Joy suffered a severe case of scarlet fever. This ailment kept her out of classes for six months. No sooner had

she recovered from this problem than she was laid low by anemia, and once again missed school for extended periods of time.²⁴

Bouts with disease brought pain and sorrow into Joy's young life, but her ailments were mild compared with her lonely inner struggle. Her father always insisted that a person with intellectual respectability was a materialist. The spiritual world was not even elevated, in his eyes, to the level of active imagination. On the contrary, people who pursued truth and reality in the realm of the unseen were, like medieval people, ignorant and superstitious. While growing up Joy wanted, above all, to be intellectually respectable and admired by her father. Thus she embraced his materialistic philosophy without question. Later, she was to say "[We] sucked in atheism with [our] canned milk. We hardly thought about it at all, and most of us were no less religious than many churchgoers."²⁵

Nevertheless, Joy had to be true to herself. In quiet moments, alone with her thoughts, she had to admit that her emotions and desires told her that there was much more to this life than matter and energy. Joy noted that, "underneath the surface my own real personality stirred, stretched its wings, discovered its own tastes. It was a girl with vague eyes, who scribbled verses—scribbled them in blind fury, not knowing what she wrote or why and read them afterwards with wonder." She said that worldings call such creativity "poetic inspiration," but it might more accurately be labeled "prophecy."²⁶

Although Joy told herself that the three-dimensional material world was the only reality, she found this world boring, especially as it was portrayed in literature. Increasingly she was drawn to fantasy; George MacDonald's "Curdie" stories, *At the Back of the North Wind*, and *Phantastes* captivated her during childhood. As a teenager she was equally enthralled by the mystical poetry and novels of Lord Dunsany. Furthermore, as she recalled it, her "inner per-

sonality” became “deeply interested in Christ and didn’t know it.” Joy remembered that

as a Jew, I had been led to feel cold chills at the mention of his name. Is that strange? For a thousand years Jews have lived among people who interpreted Christ’s will to mean floggings and burnings, “gentleman’s agreements,” and closed universities. If nominal Christians so confuse their Master’s teaching, surely a poor Jew may be pardoned a little confusion. Nevertheless I read the Bible (for its literary beauty, of course!) and I quoted Jesus unconsciously in everything I did, from writing verse to fighting my parents.²⁷

Joy’s first published poem was entitled “Resurrection.” She described it in later years as “a sort of private argument with Jesus, attempting to convince him (and myself) that he had never risen.” Almost incredibly and certainly unintentionally she wrote “Resurrection” at Easter and “never guessed why” until she was in her thirties.²⁸

“Resurrection” was not Joy’s only poem to focus on Jesus of Nazareth. Most of her early verses included the symbol of the cross; Joy explained this to her atheist father and friends by saying that the Christians’ Messiah is “a very valuable literary convention.” Many years later she recalled that “Those verses were mainly the desperate question: Is life really only a matter of satisfying one’s appetites, or is there more?”²⁹

Outwardly Joy answered, “There is no more.” But inwardly she was haunted, haunted by a recurring dream: “I would walk down a familiar street which suddenly grew unfamiliar and opened onto a strange, golden, immeasurable plain, where far away there rose the towers of Fairyland. If I remembered the way carefully, the dream told me, I should be able to find it when I woke up.” She was told by those who embraced conventional

psychology that “such visions are merely ‘wishful thinking.’” But Joy kept asking, “Why should all human beings be born with something like that, unless it exists?” This “Legend of the Way Out” is grounded in ancient mythology, “the door leading out of time and space into Somewhere Else.” Joy was intrigued by Thomas Wolfe’s description of the legend: “a stone, a leaf, an unfound door.” She believed that we all cross that threshold in death, but for centuries writers of fantasy and mythology have maintained that “for a few lucky ones the door has swung open *before* death, letting them through, perhaps for the week of fairy time which is seven long years on earth; or at least granting them glimpses of the other side.”³⁰

C. S. Lewis, too, had been continually haunted by the vision from childhood on; he described it in *Pilgrim’s Regress* as the Island. Soon after his conversion to Christianity, Lewis developed the idea as part of his argument in defense of Christianity. Joy could not yet accept his conclusions—the supernatural as fact was still beyond her grasp in the 1930s—but she found the notion delightful in fiction.³¹

While there would be no relief from the dream for some time, there were diversions. Joy attended P. S. 21 in Woodlawn for six grades, then finished Angelo Patri Junior High School on Fordham Road at age ten. Although she had had two six-month absences due to illness, Joy completed the program at Evander Childs High School at age fourteen—a prodigious achievement. She graduated in January 1930, but stayed on and took courses for the remainder of the year.³²

In September 1930 Joy entered Hunter College in the Bronx. Part of the City University system, it had been established as a tuition-free women’s college in 1870. When Joy enrolled in 1930, the institution had four buildings on an attractive thirty-seven-acre

campus.³³ Joy continued to live at home in the Bronx with her parents; this kept her tied more closely to her parents, more than most college students, but she was only fifteen and hardly ready to go out on her own.

Although she still answered to her father, during the Hunter College years, Joy took her first steps toward liberation and maturation. Novelist Bel Kaufman, perhaps best known today for *Up the Down Staircase*, was Joy's closest friend at Hunter. Kaufman remembers her well. When Joy arrived at Hunter, she was slightly plump for her 5 foot 2 inch frame. Her piercing brown eyes, short dark hair, and beautiful complexion were appealing and distracted people from her poor taste in clothes. Like Bel Kaufman, Joy was an English major with a passion for writing short stories and poetry. Joy was recognized as being exceptionally bright, well read, and quite sophisticated intellectually—if a bit naïve and immature socially.³⁴

While Joy loved her courses in English and French literature, she positively reveled in her work as associate editor of the Hunter College *Echo*, the in-house literary magazine, where she developed some editorial skills. *Echo* published some of her short stories and poems, as well as translations she had done of poems by others. Already proficient in German and Latin, she learned French in college, and taught herself Greek in her spare time at home. Although she was active in the English club and Sigma Tau Delta, the national English studies honorary society, the aspiring young writer made few friends besides Edith Miller, on the *Echo* staff, and Bel Kaufman.

Joy seldom dated. When she did go out, her escorts were older men seriously interested in literature. Joy found most college-aged men silly and boring, but this was probably the result of her shyness. If she decided to have a party at home—and she did so occasionally—she always turned to Bel as her mentor. What should I

do? What should I serve? What will I say? For answers to these questions, she counted on Bel.³⁵

In one area, Joy took strides well beyond Bel and the other students: Joy embarked on an affair with one of her professors, a man old enough to have a child her age. If Joy made him feel young, this Phi Beta Kappa with a doctorate from Columbia University made her feel important and sophisticated. No doubt part of his appeal was as a father figure she could love and trust. If she felt any guilt, it was not apparent; she unveiled the liaison to Bel and to her brother with an air of pride and accomplishment.³⁶

Before Franklin D. Roosevelt had finished his first term as President, Joy Davidman had achieved some remarkable milestones. She had graduated from college before her twentieth birthday; she had lost her virginity to the man of her choice; she had savored the headiness of seeing her first poems and stories in print; and she had gained at least a modicum of independence from her parents. But exciting as these experiences were, they left her feeling still unsettled. Inside her there remained a vague sort of restlessness that would not go away, and there was an emptiness that no person or accomplishment could fill.

The feeling that there was something more than the material realm returned again and again. Joy even wrote a story, published in *Echo* in November 1934, entitled "Apostate," about a young Jewish woman named Chinya, living in a Russian village. Significantly, Chinya's father is mean and stingy. In the story, he is about to betroth his daughter to a small, weak man whom she dislikes because the fiancé would accept her with a small dowry. On the eve of the wedding, Chinya elopes with a strong and enticing Christian who will marry her if she will be baptized. Just before the baptism is performed, Chinya's father and brothers invade the ceremony and mercilessly beat the helpless apostate. Her Christ-

ian groom-to-be raises no hand in her defense, the pastor flees, and the Christian bystanders laugh as she is kicked and beaten by her own kin.

“Apostate” is a powerful story. It won the Bernard Cohen Short Story Prize at Hunter the year it was published. Perhaps this tale, set in nineteenth-century Russia, was no more than Joy’s rendition of a story she heard from her mother about the Old World; on the other hand, it is tempting to see it as Joy herself wrestling with apostasy. It is possible that the budding writer had a need to tell her inner self that Chinya’s choice is unworthy of an intelligent young Jewish woman, because apostasy would end in pain.

If “Apostate” helped her sort through conscious or unconscious temptations to flirt with Christianity, another story she published in *Echo*, entitled “Reveal the Titan,” was certainly a therapeutic way of liberating herself from the pain of her dead-end love affair. “Reveal the Titan” is about a man who leaves a woman after an affair to pursue his obsession with music. Six years later he returns to his former lover and learns that she has had his child. Despite affection for her and a desire to assume his responsibility as a father, he cannot bring himself to allow marriage to compromise his total devotion to composition.

Whatever significance can be attached to these stories, Joy did not see apostasy or marriage as reasonable ways to fill her needs. Her immediate prescription for fulfillment was to put Hunter College and her lover behind her. She was looking ahead to new challenges.