

## Synopsis

### ANGELS IN AMERICA, PART ONE: MILLENNIUM APPROACHES

#### Act I

The play opens in late October, 1985. Rabbi Isidor Chemelwitz stands near a small coffin adorned with a Star of David prayer cloth. The Rabbi, from the Bronx Home for Aged Hebrews, provides an ad hoc eulogy for the recently deceased Sarah Ironson, though, he admits, he did not know her personally. He reads off a list of Sarah's grandchildren, among who is Louis Ironson, a character with whom we will soon become acquainted. In the next scene, set the same day, Roy M. Cohn, the powerful New York attorney, sits in his office with Joseph Pitt, chief clerk at the Federal Court of Appeals, Second Circuit. Roy asks Joe, a Mormon from Utah, about whether he likes his current job, and then, suddenly, proposes that Joe take a new one in Washington, DC, a lucrative position at the Justice Department. Joe is interested, but tells Roy that he will have to think about it and talk it over with his wife. After this, we see Joe's wife, Harper, at their home in Brooklyn. She is talking to herself, a strange soliloquy about the ozone layer as a "kind of gift, from God, the crowning touch to the creation of the world." She concludes, though, that "everywhere, things are collapsing, lies surfacing, systems of defense giving way..." Harper then directs her remarks to an imaginary figure, a travel agent whom she refers to as Mr. Lies. Harper tells him that she would like to travel to Antarctica, because she feels she isn't safe where she is now, in New York. When Joe enters the apartment, Mr. Lies vanishes. He greets Harper as "Buddy" and gives her a kiss, then asks whether she'd like to move to Washington.

In the following scene, Louis Ironson, who works as a word processor at the Second Court of Appeals, and his boyfriend, Prior Walter, are having a conversation outside the funeral home where the service for Louis's grandmother is being held. Prior shows Louis a dark purple spot on his arm. Louis suggests that this is merely a burst blood vessel, but Prior tells him that, according to his doctor, it's a Kaposi's sarcoma lesion. Prior admits that he didn't tell Louis sooner because he was worried that Louis would leave him on account of his apparent illness. Next, we see a split-scene: Joe and Harper are at home, Louis and Rabbi Isidor Chemelwitz are at the cemetery for Sarah's burial. Harper tells her husband that she doesn't want to move to Washington. He tries to change her mind, mentioning his low pay in New York. Harper tells Joe about her fears—in this case, of a man with a knife in their bedroom. Joe attributes this hallucinatory paranoia to her abuse of prescription pills. Louis speaks to the Rabbi as his grandmother's coffin is lowered into the earth, asking him what the Holy Writ has to say about someone who abandons a person in a time of great personal need. The Rabbi responds that Jewish scripture is silent on this particular matter. Joe continues trying to convince Harper that the move would be a positive one for them, that America under Reagan has "rediscovered itself" and "its sacred position among nations" and that, in Washington, he could be a part of that. Harper is unconvinced that things are getting better, noting disturbing phenomena that she sees every day. Joe counters that this is because of her "emotional problems," but Harper denies that she has any such problems. He apologizes for his

comment, and they make up, exchanging a kiss. Harper proposes “trying” a blowjob, but Joe responds squeamishly to this suggestion.

It is the first week of November in the next scene, set in the men’s washroom at the Brooklyn Federal Court of Appeals. As Joe enters, he notices Louis there, crying over the sink. Joe introduces himself to Louis and asks why he’s upset. “Sick friend,” replies Louis. As they chat, it comes out that Joe supports President Reagan. “Well, oh boy. A gay Republican,” quips Louis. Joe denies that he’s gay. Louis says that he assumed Joe was gay from the way his voice sounded.

A week later, Harper is experiencing a drug-induced hallucination, in which she sees Prior, whom she does not otherwise know. He claims that he’s not in her hallucination; rather, she’s in his dream. In the course of their conversation, Prior informs Harper that Joe is a homosexual. Harper at first responds that this is “ridiculous,” but then, upon thinking it over, she realizes that it may well be true. After Harper leaves the dream/hallucination, Prior hears a commanding voice, ordering him to “look up.” He sees a light coming from up above him, and the voice tells him to “prepare the way.” Then there is silence again. That night, a split-scene: Harper and Joe at home, Louis and Prior in bed. After pressing Joe about where he’s been going and what he’s been doing on his frequent walks around the city, she comes right out and asks him if he’s gay. Prior tells Louis that he has two new lesions on his body and other serious symptoms of illness. Louis asks Prior if he’d “hate [him] forever” if he walked out on their relationship. Prior kisses his boyfriend on the forehead, then says that, yes, he would. Joe now admits to Harper that he’s long struggled with being “one thing deep within” while trying with God’s help to change, or at least behave in a way that is “correct” and “decent.” In effect, he says, he’s become a “shell.” Harper blurts out that she’s pregnant, but Joe accuses her of lying. Louis implores his boyfriend to “please get better...please don’t get any sicker.”

In the next scene, now in the third week of November, Roy is in his doctor’s office. The doctor, Henry, tells Roy that he is showing multiple symptoms of AIDS. Roy replies that AIDS is a disease that afflicts homosexuals, and threatens to end Henry’s career should he tell anyone that Roy is suffering from the notorious syndrome. In Roy’s view, “homosexuals” are people without any social or political power; he, by contrast, is a very powerful and well-connected “heterosexual” man who, incidentally, has sex with other men. His official line, therefore, will be that he has liver cancer, not AIDS. Henry tells his patient that, any rate—and by whatever logic—Roy’s illness is “very bad news.”

## Act II

The second act opens in the third week of December. Prior is on his bedroom floor, his condition visibly worse; he calls to Louis for help, saying that he cannot breathe. Louis notices that Prior is burning up with a high fever, and insists on calling an ambulance. That same night, Harper and Joe speak more about his struggle with his sexuality. He tells her that he prays to God to “break [him] up into little pieces and start all over again.” Harper tells Joe that he is the only person she has ever loved. He asks whether she really is pregnant, and she replies that she is late in getting her period, but beyond that isn’t sure. She says he should go

on his own to Washington. He promises that he won't leave her, but she responds that she, instead, will leave him.

At the hospital, Louis speaks with a nurse, Emily, while Prior sleeps after being administered painkillers. They talk about Prior. Emily notes that this is an odd first name, and Louis tells her that, according to his boyfriend, the name goes back, within Prior's family, to the Mayflower, back even to the Norman Conquest and Bayeux Tapestry in medieval Europe. Louis decides to leave the hospital, and asks Emily to tell Prior 'goodbye' for him should he wake up. An hour later, a split-scene: Joe and Roy in an upscale Manhattan bar, Louis and an unidentified man in the Rambles in Central Park. Roy continues to press Joe, more aggressively now, to take the position in Washington. After a bit of awkward conversation, Louis and the man begin to have sex. The man tells Louis that his condom may have broken, but Louis tells him to keep going, to "infect" him. Uncomfortable with this, the man abruptly stops and leaves. Roy tells Joe that he is dying of cancer. He uses this admission to urge Louis to "let nothing stand in [his] way." Three days later, Prior's friend, a nurse known as Belize, is visiting Prior in the hospital. Prior tells Belize that Louis has gone, but Belize suggests that he'll soon be back. Prior mentions the mysterious voice that has been speaking to him, but claims that he's not allowed to tell what the voice has said to him. After Belize leaves the hospital room, the voice speaks again to Prior. It claims to be a "messenger." "Soon...I will reveal myself to you," says the voice.

In the next scene, it is the second week of January. Joe is again meeting with Roy, this time joined by Martin Heller, who works in the Justice Department. He, too, is trying to convince Joe to take the Washington job. With Joe still hesitant to commit one way or the other, Roy confesses that the New York State Bar Association is trying to disbar him, because he "borrowed" a large sum of money from a client—and failed to return it. Roy is adamant that he will die a lawyer, and he explains that having Joe in the Justice Department, close to the Reagan administration, will ensure that this remains the case. Joe replies that even if he does take the job, it would be illegal and unethical for him to interfere in this matter. When Roy pressures Joe further, putting him in a very uncomfortable position, Joe relents and says he'll think about it. Later in the afternoon, outside the Hall of Justice in Brooklyn, Joe spots Louis sitting on the steps. As they speak, both loosen up and there is some discernible, mutual attraction. Louis mentions that he's "moved out" (that is, left Prior) and that he hasn't been sleeping well. Joe replies that he hasn't either. Late that night, Joe drunkenly phones his mother, Hannah, from a payphone near Central Park. He comes out to her, but she attributes this confession to his inebriated state and urges him to go home, to his wife, and reminds him that drinking is a sin.

The next morning, another split-scene: Joe and Harper at home, Prior and Louis in the hospital room. Both Louis and Harper tell their partners that they're leaving them, as their respective conversations overlap. Joe begs Harper to stay; Prior is furious and says Louis's abandonment of him is "criminal." Joe admits that he doesn't have any sexual feelings for her. When Louis blurts out that he has to "find some way to save [him]self," Prior screams at him to get out of the hospital room. Mr. Lies appears to Harper. She tells him to take her "anywhere," and they vanish together. Then, in Salt Lake City, Hannah speaks with Sister Ella Chapter, a realtor and Hannah's closest friend. Hannah tells her that she's selling her house, as she's moving to New York City, and asks Sister Ella to get her a good price on the property. They furtively share a cigarette, as the second act ends.

### Act III

The third act begins three days later. Back in his apartment, Prior wakes up from a nightmare to find a man dressed in the manner of a thirteenth-century squire. The medieval man's name is also Prior Walter, and he is an ancestor of the modern Prior. He tells of his own death from the Bubonic Plague. A second ghost appears, another Prior Walter, this one a seventeenth-century London aristocrat. They've come to tell the modern Prior to "prepare the way." The next day, another split-scene: Louis and Belize meet in a café, Prior is at a medical clinic with Emily. Louis rants long-windedly about politics, power, and race in America, offending Belize with his comments, particularly those concerning race. After this argument cools down, Louis asks Belize how bad Prior's sickness has become. As Belize lists off Prior's worsening health problems, we see Prior remove his clothes for Emily to examine his numerous lesions. Emily seemingly says something in Hebrew to Prior. When Prior asks her about this, she denies that she speaks Hebrew at all; he must have imagined it. He tells her that he thinks he's going crazy, but she replies that it's just from the stress caused by his illness. Suddenly, there is a great beam of light, the sound of an angelic choir, and an enormous book rises up in front of Prior. Its pages burst into flames. Emily does not seem to see this at all, but Prior flees in terror. Louis, meanwhile, asks Belize to tell Prior that he still loves him.

Next, we see Harper wearing a snowsuit, walking through some cold-looking place, white with falling snow against a beautiful blue sky. Mr. Lies is with her. She tells him that she feels better in this place—"Antarctica"—and wants to remain there forever. Back in New York, Hannah is dragging two cumbersome suitcases through the South Bronx. She asks a homeless woman whether she's in Brooklyn, and if not, how to get to that borough. The woman responds incoherently, and eventually claims that she doesn't know how to get to Brooklyn since she's never been there. But when Hannah asks how to get to the Mormon Visitor's Centre in Manhattan, the woman knows precisely where it is and which subway train to take, because she goes there to watch movies for free.

That same day, Joe meets with Roy in the latter's brownstone to tell him that the answer is 'no' regarding the Washington job. Roy is disappointed and angry with Joe's decision. He digresses into talking about how if it weren't for him Ethel Rosenberg would still be alive; Roy admits that he engaged in ex parte communication with the judge during the Rosenbergs' trial, an admission that shocks Joe. When Joe attributes this talk to Roy being unwell, Roy denies being in poor health, despite earlier telling Joe that he was suffering from cancer. After Joe leaves, the ghost of Ethel Rosenberg appears, and remarks on Roy's gaunt, sickly appearance. Roy struggles to breathe, and Ethel's ghost phones 911. Nevertheless, Roy taunts, "I'm immortal. I have forced my way into history," to which she responds, "History is about to crack wide open. Millennium approaches."

Late that night, Prior lies in bed while the two ghosts of his ancestors stand over his bed, speaking in anticipation: "tonight's the night," announces the medieval Prior. The modern Prior stands up, summoned by the sound of music. He dances to the sound of wings flapping. In a split-scene, Prior is alone in his apartment, speaking about how he is the "scion of an ancient line"; Louis and Joe meet in the park. As Louis begins to cry, Joe reaches up to touch his face. They share a tender moment, and Joe, after hesitating, accepts Louis's invitation to come back to his place. Prior, meanwhile, listens to the beating of the wings, coming nearer. He's hot with a fever and frightened. Then there is a thunderous, meteor-like



sound and an explosion of blinding light, announcing the arrival of the angel, who floats above Prior's bed. She greets him as "Prophet" and announces, "The Great Work begins: The Messenger has arrived," as the play's first part concludes.