

JOSEPH RADKIN INVESTIGATIONS



Bob Biderman

Catalogue
&
Sampler

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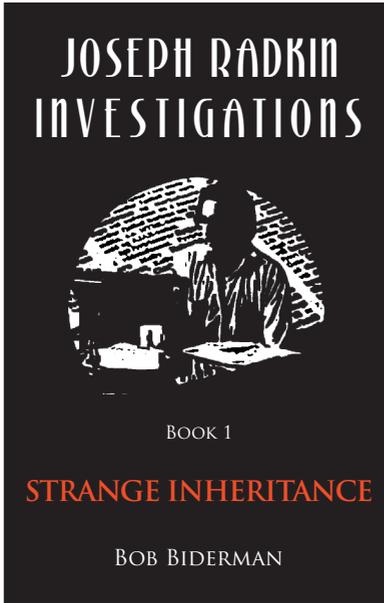
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Book 1: Strange Inheritance

by Bob Biderman

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Strange Inheritance begins with a carton of letters and a stack of hundred dollar bills - an inheritance Radkin has received from his recently deceased dad. As Radkin's father was a life-long union activist who died disillusioned and broke, where did all this money come from? Tracing his father's mysterious life from clues in letters written aboard a remarkable merchant ship bound for North Africa during WW II, Radkin stumbles upon a compelling story of one man's quest for social justice in the aftermath of the cold war.

"This is a wonderful pot pourri of a book - part thriller, part contemporary history, part family saga... It is also gripping reading, beautifully written and, at times, very funny." Tribune

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Chapter 1

Lamont

JOSEPH RADKIN SAT at his desk and pondered a sheet of paper which he had inserted into his old Underwood typewriter about fifteen minutes before. The paper had a title running across the top in dark caps which read: 'SEXUAL ECONOMICS IN REDEVELOPMENT'.

That, however, was crossed out in blue ink. Underneath, again in caps, was another title: 'GAY STORMTROOPERS INVADE THE FILMORE'. That, too, was crossed out to be finally replaced with: 'BLACK TO LAVENDER – THE POLITICS OF REDEVELOPMENT'.

His phone rang. He answered it, showing some crumpled pages away in the process. It was Lamont. He cringed.

'Radkin? Where the hell are you?

'Right here, Lamont.'

'You promised me that goddamned article by noon. You know what time it is?'

Joseph glanced at his watch. 'Five after?'

'It's seven minutes after noon! So why isn't your two bit ass over here kvetching while I'm blue penciling your best line because it's entirely irrelevant to the story? Answer me that, Radkin!'

'I'm just putting the finishing touches to it. I'll be there in an hour.'

'An hour? The paper goes to bed at three! You think all we have to do is wait around for your crummy piece on queers in the marketplace?'

'This isn't my idea of great news, Lamont. It's yours, remember?'

'Don't give me your bleeding heart routine, Radkin. Did you want the work or not?'

'Yeah, Lamont, I wanted the work. OK? I'll be there in an hour.'

'Not a minute after one, do you hear Radkin? Not a minute after!'

'I hear you Lamont.' He hung up the telephone and began to type.

Jeffery Roggan, better known to his friends as Fifi, is eighteen years old, white, and works as a dishwasher at one of the city's gay nightspots. He also is the cannon fodder being used to launch economic war against poor black families living in the Western Addition...'

A house and some money in the fridge

‘How much did you get for it?’ asked Polly, dicing the onion and then sliding it casually from the wooden cutting board into the pot of sizzling olive oil. He watched her slice a clove of garlic, admiring the way her fingers moved, deftly, without hesitation, and wondered how she avoided cutting herself.

‘Fifty bucks,’ he said with a laugh that had more irony than humor in it.

Polly made a face by wrinkling up her nose and pressing her lips together, which gave him some idea how she might look in another twenty years. ‘Fifty dollars? For a week’s work?’

Joseph sipped his tea and stared out the kitchen window into the back garden. The flowers were just beginning to bloom, those that hadn’t been strangled by the ivy, that is. He half thought about cutting back the ivy, but there was so much to do. ‘Did you get a chance to read it?’ he asked.

‘Yes...’

‘Well ... what did you think?’

‘I thought it was good, but ...’

‘But what?’

‘I just think you have to be careful with articles like that...’

‘How so?’

‘It’s too easy to make gays the scapegoat for everything.’ She was stirring the vegetables as she added the seasoning. A wonderful aroma was filling the room.

‘I wasn’t making them the scapegoat for everything. But I think a certain element in the gay community has a lot of answering to do.’

‘That’s just it, Joseph. Why the “gay community”?’

‘They’ve defined themselves that way, Polly.’

‘But that doesn’t mean you have to fall into the trap...’ The afternoon sun was filling the kitchen. It was a large airy room with a huge wooden table and lots of cupboard space. It was the kitchen that had sold Polly on the house.

‘What a wonderful place to hold a party!’ she had said as they had wandered through the vacant rooms of the old two-storey Victorian.

‘Does that mean you want to put down an offer?’ the agent had asked somewhat incredulously.

‘Yes, I suppose so,’ Polly had said. ‘What do you think?’ she had asked Joseph.

‘I guess so,’ he had said.

And it had been as simple as that. The offer had been accepted and within a month they had moved in. It was only then that they had started having second thoughts. For by that time they had discovered that the roof leaked, the windows had dry rot, the electricity shorted out whenever Polly plugged in her hair drier, the water hadn't enough pressure to take a decent shower, and the living-room floor sloped at such an angle that if you dropped something round at the south end it would roll swiftly north.

After several weeks, however, they had grown used to the idiosyncrasies of their new domain. They each had their separate space now Joseph had a study and Polly had a small 'L' shaped room in the rear of the house, which had once been a pantry and was now her office. But best of all, there was that wonderful kitchen.

Polly poured in the can of tomatoes and added a touch of wine. She stirred the concoction with a wooden spoon. 'You could write about Jewish speculators in the same way. But you wouldn't do that, would you?'

'No. But it isn't the same thing...'

The money for the house had come from his mother. They had received the cash in the mail one day, several months after his father had died. He had phoned his mother that night.

'Where the hell did you get that money, Mom? I almost had a heart attack when I opened the package. You can't send cash through the mail like that...'

'Use it in the best of health,' she had replied.

'But, Mom ... fifteen thousand dollars in hundred dollar bills?'

'I have enough for myself. You have a wife. Buy a house. Give me a grandchild finally...'

'You're sending us fifteen thousand dollars to have a grandchild? Why don't you give the money to Beth and have her buy one on the baby market?'

'I sent Beth money, too. You should thank me instead of causing your mother more pain.'

'I'm sorry, Ma. I know you meant well. It's just ...'

'It's just what?'

'I can't just take fifteen thousand dollars from you, Ma. Where did it come from? insurance?'

'Call it insurance if it makes you happy. Look, boychick, I never had any money to give you before. Take it and use it in the best of health. I wouldn't do it if I was depriving myself.'

Polly had wanted to know if there were any strings attached. It had been

a sensible question since her parents had never given her anything without having qualified it first.

‘What can I do?’ Joseph had said to her. ‘She wants me to think of it as an inheritance. How can I send it back?’

‘Why doesn’t she want us to put it in the bank?’

‘She wouldn’t tell me, Polly. She said she couldn’t speak about it over the phone.’

‘But where are we going to keep fifteen thousand dollars in cash?’

‘I don’t know. How about the refrigerator?’

Polly shook her head. ‘I don’t want to open up the fridge and see all that money every time I want something to eat.’

‘Well then, how about the freezer? We never use it anyway.’

So they had stuffed as much of it as they could in the freezer section of the refrigerator. The rest was put in the vegetable compartment.

‘Maybe a house isn’t such a bad idea,’ Polly had said after having thought about it overnight. ‘The speckled ceilings here give me the creeps and I always have nightmares that one day the old goat who owns this place is going to kick us out. Besides, we’re paying everything we make on rent and food as it is. What happens next year when the rent goes up?’

‘A house is a trap,’ Joseph had replied. ‘Once you start investing in it you become a slave to the place. What happens if you want to leave?’

‘We could rent it out.’

‘And become landlords? Is that what you want, Polly?’

‘We could sell it then.’

‘What if no one wants to buy when we want to sell?’

The choice had been made for them, however, when they had received a notice in the mail which said that their flat had been sold from under them and the new owners would be moving in.

‘That’s the way it works,’ Polly, had said. ‘It’s unfortunate, but a tenant just doesn’t have any rights in this city. Anyone who can afford it is better off buying a place of their own.’ And that’s exactly what they did.

Back in the kitchen the sauce was beginning to bubble over and Polly turned down the heat.

‘Take the cover off,’ Joseph advised. ‘Spaghetti sauce needs to breathe.’

‘Who’s cooking this, you or me?’

‘You are. Look, I don’t think that it’s the same thing with the gays in the Filmore as it was with the Jews who own slums in Oakland or the Chinese

landlords in North Beach. Gays aren't a race. I'm talking about sexual exploitation. The article is about young kids who are being victimized because they've chosen to live outside the social norm...'

'So what's the point?'

'Oh, come on Polly! You know the point as well as I do. Christ, you know how the game is played. These kids are offered cheap pads in black areas where the middle class won't go because they're afraid of being mugged. But once a few white bodies are living there, a few others follow. Then a couple of cafes open up because of the low rents, and one of them becomes a sudden "find" because it's located in the ghetto and "isn't that quaint". And before you know it everyone's flocking to live in the new little sanitized corridor which now is lily-white and as safe as Pacific Heights.'

'The point, Joseph, what's the point?'

'The point is that these kids are gay and the interests that they're serving are as socially exploitative as the most reactionary robber baron...'

'But that's the system, Joseph. And what you're saying is that gays aren't immune to it any more than anyone else.'

'I'm saying that gays are better at it because of their lifestyle and the way their community is organized.'

'And I'm saying that articles like yours only make people more intolerant...'

'And I'm saying that you don't know what the fuck you're talking about!'

She put down her wooden spoon and stared at him. 'You needn't get abusive. You asked for my opinion.'

'And you gave it to me, didn't you?'

'Well, what did you want? You're just sitting there watching me cook. Why don't you get up and make the salad?'

'I just wanted a little understanding ... I had a hard day ...'

'I had a hard day, too. You're not the only one who has hard days, Joseph.'

He looked down at the table. He didn't feel like arguing and neither did she. 'I'm sorry,' he said.

She came over to him and rubbed his cheek with the back of her hand. 'You know what we're arguing about, don't you?'

He looked up at her. 'Yes.'

'Well, what are we going to do about it?'

'I don't know. I can't call her up and say we changed our minds, can I?'

'No. I suppose not. But ...'

'But what?'

‘Oh, I don’t know...’

He stood up. ‘What kind of lettuce do we have?’

‘Romaine or butter. It’s in the fridge under the hundred dollar bills.’

‘Any tomatoes?’

‘Look in the wire basket.’

‘How about cucumber?’

‘No. But there are radishes.’

He set about collecting the ingredients. ‘Why did we ask her to come? Do you remember anymore?’

‘Guilt, Joseph. Pure, unadulterated guilt. We didn’t want to rent the upstairs because we didn’t want to be landlords. And we didn’t want to leave it vacant because too many people are without homes.’

‘So we asked her to stay with us ... I didn’t believe she’d accept. Did you?’

‘I suspected she might. Anyway, I thought you wanted your mother to come...’

He looked at her with a shocked expression. ‘Me? You thought that I wanted her to come? For heaven’s sake, why?’

‘Because your father had died ... because she’s your mother.’

‘But who wants their mother living upstairs?’

Polly filled a large cauldron with cold water from the sink and brought it over to the stove. ‘What’s done is done,’ she said. ‘Let’s try to make the best of it. I suspect she’ll only stay a few months before she starts missing her friends back in New York. And she’ll want to be near Beth again. It’s a different life here in San Francisco...’

‘Maybe that’s what she finds so attractive. What kind of pasta did you get? Is it fresh?’

‘No, I’m sorry. I didn’t have time to pick any up. The meeting with the community relations people lasted till five thirty. By the time I got out the stores were closed.’

He was putting the finishing touches on the salad. ‘Any dillweed left? How did it turn out? Do you have the makings of an alliance?’

‘It’s in the spice rack under the fennel. One could hardly call it an alliance. Everything about it is so ephemeral. People come together around one issue and fight like cats and dogs around the next. There’s agreement around district elections, but after that...who knows? We have spinach tortellini or artichoke spaghetti. Which would you prefer?’

‘Artichoke. You know it’s really funny ... do we have more olive oil?’

‘Yes. It’s by the cutting board. What’s funny?’

‘How about lemon?’

‘In the wire basket. What’s funny?’

‘In the 50s the left was fighting for city-wide elections to break the stranglehold all the Little Caesars had in the wards. Now we’re fighting for district elections because we say downtown interests are the only ones who have the money to wage a citywide campaign. That’s funny.’

She watched the salted water in the cauldron come to a boil. ‘That’s not funny. That’s political strategy.’

‘Call it whatever you will, there’s a touch of irony...’

‘There’s always irony in politics.’ She began adding the spaghetti, a little at a time, watching the strands bend and sink into the foamy brine.

He added some olive oil and a squeeze of lemon to the greens and then gave them a toss with the salad tongs. ‘There’s one thing about my mother coming ...’ he began.

She had stirred the spaghetti and now was setting the table. ‘Bring me the napkins, will you? You were saying...’

He brought over two paper napkins. ‘I was saying that the good thing about my mother coming is that we’ll finally find out about the money thing.’

‘So that’s what’s bothering you.’ She had gone back to the cauldron and was giving some final stirs to the boiling pasta.

‘Yeah ... you mean you don’t think about it anymore?’

Polly drained the spaghetti, put it in a ceramic dish and then ladled the sauce on top. She brought it over to the table. ‘I thought we agreed not to look it in the mouth,’ she said.

Joseph put some spaghetti on his plate and tasted the sauce with the tip of his tongue.

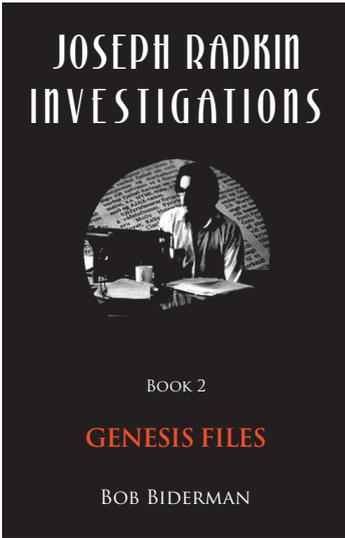
‘What do you think?’ she asked.

‘Needs a touch more garlic.’

Polly groaned.

Joseph wrapped the spaghetti round his fork with a few quick, professionally executed motions. Suddenly, looking down at his plate, something caught his eye. ‘Hey, what’s this green thing in here?’

‘Maybe it’s one of your mother’s hundred dollar bills,’ she replied.



Book 2: The Genesis Files
by Bob Biderman

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Formats: Hardcover, Paperback, eBook

When an outbreak of salmonella at a San Francisco hospital coincides with a mysterious and deadly explosion at its research laboratory there is some dangerous detective work to be done by Joseph Radkin, a feisty investigative journalist and anxious father-to-be, reluctantly covering the story for a down-market tabloid. What was Dr Greene, the last bastion of community medicine, doing in the laboratory at the dead of night? And why was he there with Professor Krohl, a genetic engineer 'whose idea of public health was giving every frog an extra head'?

"Has a zip and freshness of narration hard to resist ... funny as well."
The Guardian

"A pacey tale with a vigorously human hero and a central theme that, distressingly, comes closer to reality than fiction." The Lady

Chapter I

SOMETHING CAUSED him to look up. It was the same uncomfortable sensation that ran down his back when someone was watching him from behind. This time it was his front.

Outside his study window was a tiny park with a great banana tree which the Nicaraguan gardener had planted a few weeks ago, hoping, by some miracle, it would bear fruit. An elderly woman was rummaging through the trash bin underneath the tree. She was staring at him. Or, at least, he thought she was.

He had seen her before. Maybe not her, but someone like her. Someone who could have been her sister or her cousin, he supposed. They all dressed the same in their loose-fitting slacks and dark cotton blouses and their embroidered pill-box hats. They all had the same coal-black eyes and they all had those grotesque wooden plugs fitted in their earlobes like a tribal lip.

The woman sifted through the discards with a practiced movement, taking the waste remains and putting them into a cloth sack before moving on. It was all done with a certain methodical poise, a certain dignity that one rarely found among the urban poor. But these people were different. Back in their native land, he suspected, they had been hunters and gatherers. Here, in San Francisco, rubbish bins, not fruit, were underneath the trees.

The ring of the telephone sitting on his cluttered desk just inches away from his ear was so startling that it made him break the point of his pencil on page thirty-two of his *magnum opus*. He picked up the receiver and let his raw nerves explode: "Hello!" he shouted. "Who the hell is it?"

"Is that you, Radkin?"

Joseph let out a sigh at the unwelcome voice from the past. "Yeah, it's me, Lamont. Who do you expect to answer when you dial my number? Frank Sinatra?"

"Sinatra, no. A drunken ex-reporter with the scruples of an agent from the Comintern, perhaps."

"What do you want, Lamont?" Joseph asked, gritting his teeth. The day had started out bad, it was bound to get worse.

"You want an assignment?"

"An assignment?" Joseph almost laughed. "I thought you fired me!"

"I did. Now I'm asking you whether you want an assignment. You've got the choice of saying 'yes' or saying 'no'. And the way I figure it, if by some strange quirk of nature you happened to find another job you'll say 'no' - after

all, there was that paraplegic who got hooked up to mechanical water-wings and managed to swim the English Channel, so anything is possible. Otherwise you'll jump at the chance to work for me again."

"What makes you so loveable, Lamont?"

"Maybe it's my good looks and charm, Radkin. You got ten seconds to make up your mind."

Joseph groaned. For some reason his stomach began to hurt. Maybe it was the fatty chicken soup his mother had brought down last night to fill up Polly's bottomless pit. More likely it was the thought of working for Lamont again.

"What kind of assignment did you have in mind, Lamont? Counting the number of glory holes in Frenchy's porno shop?"

"Nothing as grand as that, Radkin. I save the really good stuff for our aces. This is more your speed. A simple, uncomplicated accidental death."

"Then why don't you get Johnson to write an obituary for you and save yourself the two bits for the phone call?"

"Because you knew the guy, Radkin. And maybe there's more to it than what's coming out."

"Who are we talking about, Lamont? Do I get a hint before I have to decide?"

"Malcolm Greene, the director of the People's Medical Clinic - or should I say ex-director. You did a story on him once."

"Greene's dead? You're kidding!" Joseph remembered him well. He had done the story last year on the struggle to save this last and final refuge of community medicine. Malcolm Greene was the only administrator Joseph had admired - and that was probably because Greene had never seen himself as one. He had hated bureaucrats as much as Joseph did.

"I don't joke about labs blowing up, Radkin. Especially when they're part of hospitals."

"So that's what happened ..." Joseph muttered. He could usually sleep through anything. But last night Polly had shaken him awake and had forced him out of bed to shut the windows even though it had been uncomfortably hot.

"Shut them yourself!" he had snapped. "You're always getting up to piss anyway!"

"Is that what you're going to say when the baby is born? 'Feed it yourself! You're always getting up to go to work anyway!'"

To avoid the unwanted drama of a midnight quarrel, he had stumbled out

of bed and that's when he had heard the infernal sounds of the fire-engines racing through the streets.

"It must be a five alarmer," he had said, climbing back into bed after pulling the windows shut. "When did you start hearing them?"

"If it wasn't for the fact that you join the land of the living dead every goddamn night, you'd have known it's been going on for hours," she had said somewhat resentfully. Pregnancy for her hadn't been all bliss.

"For God's sake, stop mumbling Radkin! It's bad enough trying to make sense of your New York twang!" Lamont shouted through the phone.

Joseph cringed at the pain in his ear. "What the hell was Greene doing in a hospital lab in the middle of the night?", he asked after twisting his index finger into his ear-hole a couple of times. "The clinic is a separate building."

"The question is what he was doing there with Professor Krohl."

There was a note of exasperation in Joseph's voice. "Come on, Lamont. Every story doesn't have to have a sex angle."

"In my paper it does, Radkin!" Lamont cut in.

"That's just one of the reasons I don't write for you anymore, Lamont. Besides, people don't have affairs with genetic engineers. Guys like Krohl are too busy splicing buzzers to bees and waiting for their Nobel to be delivered. Anyway, Greene wasn't like that."

"This is San Francisco, Radkin, lest you forget. People screw sheep on the subway here. You'd be amazed at all the things that people choose to have affairs with. But am I gonna write the story or are you?"

"Let me call you back, Lamont..."

"Forget calling me back, Radkin. I want an answer now. Yes or no?"

"OK." It was like reaching out and grabbing a moldy piece of cake just because you're hungry. He knew he'd regret it later."

"OK what?"

"OK, sir?"

"I can't believe it!" Polly said that evening when she had come home from work and had let her puffed-up body drop like a lead weight into the easy chair below. "You swore up and down that you'd never work for that ... that ..." she searched for the appropriate word, and finding none that would truly fit she resorted to generalities, "that creature again!"

"You used better epithets before," he said, bringing in her ration of white wine.

She took the glass and drank and then let out a deep sigh—a response which Joseph thought was either gratitude for the wine or pining for the time when she had been articulate.

“I seem to be walking around in a cloud of pink fluff these days,” she admitted.

“At least it’s pink,” he said. “My cloud seems to be more muddy brown.”

Which brought her back to the subject at hand. “But why Joseph? For heaven’s sake, I thought we decided you’d work on your book for a while. After Spinach comes you’re not going to have much chance, you know.”

Joseph shrugged and took a drink from the glass of Scotch he had poured himself when he fetched her wine. “We could always use the money.”

“Money?” She stared at him and then burst out laughing. “How much money has Lamont ever paid for one of his assignments?”

Joseph cringed. “That’s not the point ...”

Polly raised her eyebrows. “Oh, no? I thought it was.”

He stared at her. Sometimes, these days, she was absolutely radiant: all blushing with baby and smelling of health and vitality. Then she was the spirit of optimism itself. But other times, especially after work or in the middle of the night when she had gotten up for her hourly pees, she was like a human blimp that had mugged itself in the dark. Then nothing he could do was right.

“I’m interested in the story for other reasons,” he said. “It’s not every day that the administrator of the only decent health clinic in town decides to get blown up in a research lab with a genetic engineer.”

“This isn’t the best of times to start playing detective, Joseph,” she said patting her magnificent protrusion.

“Who’s talking about playing detective?” he asked with more than a trace of annoyance in his voice.

“What are you talking about then?”

“I’m talking about ironies. Don’t you see? Here’s a man who spent his life trying to fight for the right of basic medical care blown to smithereens with another man whose idea of public health was giving every frog an extra head.”

“I think you might be climbing out on another precarious limb, Joseph. Genetics made it possible to cheek Spinach for Down’s Syndrome,” she said pointing to her stomach.

“And what would we have done if Spinach hadn’t been cleared of that particular crime?” he asked narrowing his eyes.

“Aborted,” she said quite simply.

“You’re awfully smug for someone who sweated like hell,” he shot back.
“When it actually got down to it ...”

“Yes?” she said, as his voice trailed away. “When it actually got down to it?”

“What if they mislabeled the amniotic fluid? Things happen, you know.”

“That’s why they run the test twice, Joseph.”

He glared at her. “Mistakes can happen twice, too.”

She took a deep breath. “We’ve discussed this before...”

“Many times,” he agreed.

She struggled to her feet looking tired and vulnerable. She gazed at him with her soft green eyes and said, “Why are we arguing, Joseph?”

He shook his head. “I don’t know.” He walked over and took her in his arms. He stroked her hair. “You’re so warm,” he said.

“My oven is on. I’m always warm when my oven is on,” she replied.

He put his hand down low. “Can I feel it kick?”

She smiled. “I’ll tell you when.” She waited a moment. “Now!” she said.
“Did you feel it?”

He nodded. “Yeah. It’s alive.”

“You’re telling me! It’s eating me out of house and home!”

“You look pretty well fed to me,” he said, stepping back a pace and admiring the view.

“OK, male sexist pig. You try having one and seeing what it does to your figure!”

“I like what I see,” he answered. “I always thought you looked good fat!”

She swatted at him with the flat of her hand. “Joseph, sometimes you are a perfect ass!”

“We all strive for perfection, my dear,” he said with an endearing smile.

Polly closed her eyes. “All right, that’s enough. It’s getting out of hand again.”

“I know,” he agreed. “This was supposed to be the best of times.”

“I feel so raw around the edges, Joseph.” Tears started to trickle down her cheeks. She smiled. “I don’t even know why I’m crying.”

He looked at her guiltily. “I’m sorry, Polly. I’ll call Lamont tomorrow and tell him to go to hell.”

“No,” she shook her head. “I don’t know why I jumped down your throat like that. It could be an important story.”

“Really, Polly. It’s no big thing. In fact I ought to have my head examined for even thinking of working for that baboon again.”

Her eyes brightened. She looked at him kindly. “Sleep on it, Joseph. You might feel differently about it in the morning.”

“I doubt it,” he said.

“Whatever you decide, make sure it’s your decision. I don’t want to stand in your way.”

He nodded. “Sure ...”

“Anyway, what’s for dinner? I’m starved!”

“Ummm ...” He looked down at the floor. “Spaghetti.”

“Not again!”

“I’m sorry, Polly. I just didn’t have time...”

She glared at him and then turned on her heels and stomped toward the door.

“Where are you going?” he called out.

“Upstairs to your mother!” she shouted. “At least she knows how to cook a decent meal!”

They were lying in bed with the lights out. The shades were pulled down and the room was as dark as the moonless night.

“So she dosed you full of chicken soup? And what else?” he asked suspiciously.

Polly giggled. “Women’s lib. Imagine! Your mother filling me with women’s lib!”

Joseph grunted.

“Then she went out with some guy ...”

“Who?”

“I don’t know.”

“What did he look like?”

“Nice ...”

“Fat? Skinny? Large? Small? Two heads? Horns? Nice is no description at all, Polly. I’ve told you that before.”

“Mature, gentlemanly, unsarcastic—in short, everything that you’re not.”

“So after lecturing you on the perils of the male gender she goes out with a guy. Can you beat that?”

“She’s got a right to her own life, Joseph.”

“Polly, did I say she doesn’t have a right to her own life? Who in this room heard me say that my mother doesn’t have a right to her own life?”

“Are you expecting someone to answer?”

“I’m expecting you to tell me if you heard me say that.”

“Joseph, they went to a meeting together ...”

“What kind of a meeting? Is he going to get her arrested again? What’s our kid going to think about having a grandmother who’s an ex-con? Did you ever ask yourself that?”

“Spinach will be very proud when it’s old enough to understand the reason. Besides, you’re just saying that because she’s your mother. Everyone else who got arrested at Livermore Radiation Labs gets the hero of the year award in your book.”

“That’s just it, Polly. Who wants a mother who’s a martyr? Why can’t she just grow old gracefully like everyone else?”

“Who the hell grows old gracefully in this country, Joseph? Half the aged in the communities I work in live off dog food and sour milk. Your mom’s got the right idea. A wrinkled finger can still poke you in the eye.”

“Don’t I know!”

“Look, Joseph, your mother’s finally coming out of a long period of mourning. She’s decided that her life didn’t end when her husband died. She idolised your dad, you know. And now she’s overcompensating a bit.”

“You can say that again!”

“Why can’t you understand? She’s changing course at seventy years old! You have to applaud her for that.”

“I do?”

“Oh, Joseph!”

“You’re always taking her side, Polly. You know that, don’t you?”

“I’m just trying to tell you that you’re not being totally objective.”

“Polly, you tell me one person who’s objective about their parents?”

“Spinach.”

“Besides Spinach.”

“Oedipus?”

“Besides Spinach and Oedipus.”

“You made your point, Joseph. Don’t run it into the ground.”

“What’s the use of making a point if you can’t run it into the ground, Polly?”

Polly let out a quiet sigh. “I don’t want to argue with you tonight, Joseph.”

“What do you want to do then?”

“You know...” she said in a soft, seductive voice.

“That?”

“Yeah.” He felt a warm hand work its way down his thigh.

“But Polly, you know how hard it is for me now. Whenever we do it these

days I keep feeling like I'm going to bump into its head!"

"You're not going to bump into its head, silly! It's in a waterproof sack all tied up tight. Spinach will never know what's going on."

"How do you know, Polly? I mean, how do you know for sure? Maybe it's got a peep-hole. Maybe it senses things we know nothing about."

"Come on, Joseph she said determinedly. "I promise you. Spinach will be none the wiser. It's fast asleep, in a dark, watery bag, deep in a primeval sea, safe from all worldly harm." She drew closer, pressing her gigantic belly next to his.

"But Polly, it's so obscene!"

"Yeah, but obscene things can be fun, too."

As usual, she had her way. He didn't complain.

"Feel better?" he asked. Her head was tucked into the crevice between his arm and his chest. He fancied he could see her eyes glowing in the dark.

"Yeah, I do," she said.

The room was quiet. All that was heard was the rustle of sheets and the occasional car passing outside their house, alone in the depths of the night.

After a while Polly said, "I need you to be a little gentler now. Do you think you could try?"

"Yes," he said. "I'll try."

"It's so strange having a baby inside me. Someone's there, a person, an honest-to-goodness person, who you've never met. It's so strange."

"From two to three. I'm glad it takes nine months. It gives you a chance to get used to the idea."

"From nothing to something," mused Polly. "From zero to one. From seed to flower. Sometimes I get so frightened . . . She grabbed his hand and squeezed.

"Frightened? Why frightened?"

"What if ..."

"What if what?"

"What if it's got twelve toes?"

"It probably could keep its balance better than us. Twelve toes wouldn't be so bad."

"What if it doesn't have arms? I mean I know it has feet. The poor thing kicks like a demon!"

"If it doesn't have arms we'll teach it to use its feet as hands. I saw a documentary once about this guy who didn't have arms and he became an

extraordinary painter. He used his toes like fingers.”

She sighed. “Sometimes it talks to me, you know.”

“No, I didn’t know. What does it say?”

“It asks me to sing it a lullaby. It says, ‘Mommy, I’m frightened. It’s dark down here and I’m afraid.’”

“So you sing it a lullaby?”

“Yes. I sing it a quiet lullaby. I rub my belly very softly and sing: ‘Hush little baby don’t you cry. Mama’s gonna sing you a lullaby ...’”

He leaned over and whispered in her ear. “I love you, Polly.”

“I love you, too, Joseph. Let’s be friends, OK?”

“OK.”

Again they were silent. Time passed. Time stood still.

“Are you asleep?” asked Joseph after a while.

“No,” she replied.

“You used to go to the People’s Medical Clinic, didn’t you?”

“Yeah. Not only for myself. I used to bring some of the homeless people I worked with too. It was the only place in the city they’d be treated with any respect.”

“Did you ever speak with Greene?”

“Once or twice. I liked him a lot. He was one of the most dedicated people I think I ever met.”

“A rare breed,” Joseph said. “You don’t find too many doctors like that.”

“I never heard you say a good word about doctors before.”

“He was different, Polly. He wasn’t out to control the real estate markets. Personal wealth didn’t mean much to him.”

“There was a good feeling in that clinic,” said Polly. “You could tell it right away. There was a sense of trust. No one felt like they were going to be disposed of by a petty bureaucrat who couldn’t have cared whether they lived or died. There’s a rocking chair in the waiting room that has a little plaque on it — ‘In the memory of Sarah Brown’ it says. Once I asked someone who she was. You know who she was, Joseph?”

“No.”

“She was an old lady from the community who used to come to the clinic because she had no one to talk with at home. She used to come there and just sit in the rocking chair and talk with the patients when they came in. When she died, they put a plaque on the chair so they’d remember her.”

“A little corny,” said Joseph, “but that’s the kind of a place it was.”

“You think it will close now that he died?”

“I hope not, Polly. But sometimes things like that depend on one man.”

“Or woman .”

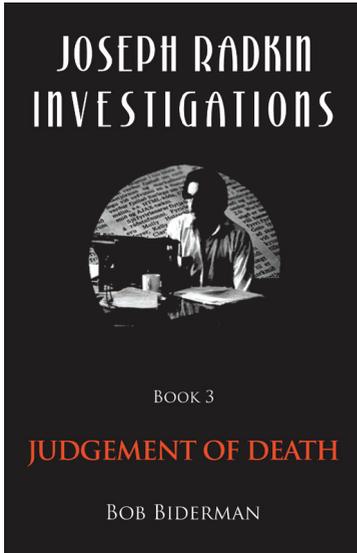
“Yeah. Anyway, I’m sorry he died.”

“It’s a real tragedy, Joseph. Besides, he was so young.”

“Young or old, it’s the way he died. He didn’t die of a heart attack or falling off a cliff. He got blown up in a lab with a genetic engineer.”

“I guess you ought to do the story, Joseph.”

“Maybe ...”



Book 3: Judgement of Death
by Bob Biderman

ISBN 9781900355384

Formats: Hardcover, Paperback, eBook

Joseph Radkin is sent to London to take over a story comparing two sensational poison trials: one contemporary; the other a notorious Victorian case. His assignment soon takes on a sinister aspect as Radkin learns that his predecessor's death may not have been an accident. Tracing the shadowy connections between past and present, Radkin uncovers corruption – and worse – among the highest echelons of British society.

"More red herrings than a Moscow fishmonger's" Yorkshire Post

"Roller-coaster pace leaves reader breathless." The Guardian

Chapter I

THE SKY had a heavy grayness that seemed to swallow all the light. It was as if someone had stuck a pole into a rain-cloud and given it a stir, dispersing the gloom like a blotch of ink dropped in a puddle of water. Joseph took a bite of his sausage-roll and felt the grease run down his chin. It was that sort of day.

He reached inside his pocket, took out a paper towel copped from British Air and used it to wipe his chin. He was sitting on a park bench not too far from the Grand Old Duke of York (the one who had ten thousand men). The Duke was perched some fifty feet up a concrete pole and both of them — he and the Duke, that is — were staring out at a strange assortment of winged rodents fighting over the remains of a cornetto some swastika'd skinhead had tossed in the pond with the panache of a Vandal after the sacking of Rome.

Glancing at his watch, he saw the second hand relentlessly work its way around the dial. It was ten past two. At a quarter of one his plane had landed at Heathrow. Now he was here in a park he had come to ten years before to eat another sausage-roll bought at the same bloody cafe. Ten years ago it had tasted like crap. This time it tasted worse. It served him right for being a creature of habit, he thought. He looked at the limp and oily thing in his hand and felt his stomach grow sour. Maybe the cook had died. Maybe this was all that was left of him. He gave the thing a heave and watched it plonk into the murky lake below.

Across the avenue that ran ribbon-straight from the Empire's triumphal arch to the palace of the Queen, and set underneath the concrete stairs that led up to the Duke's lookout post, stood the Institute of Contemporary Arts. Surrounded by all the pomp and circumstance, this den of nouveau culture seemed to blend into the clubby atmosphere like a chameleon on a desert rock.

A pair of innocuous wooden doors provided an entrance through the imperial wall of stone. Joseph walked inside. Much to his surprise, he suddenly found that he felt quite at home. One of Darwin's little discoveries that eventually shook the world was the relationship between protective coloration and survival. From the inside, all international sanctuaries for artists had much the same look of defiance, whether they were in New York, London, Paris or Rome; but they still had to blend into a hostile world, he supposed.

It didn't take him long; he recognized her at once. She was standing in the alcove that passed for a trendy bookshop, glancing through a miniature volume of Masereel woodcuts. He came up behind her.

"You ever see anything by Rockwell Kent?" he said. "Amazing what stories those guys could tell with just a chisel and a block of wood."

She turned and gave him a quick once-over with her enormous eyes. "Are you an authority on chisels?" she asked. "Or do you just like talking to yourself out loud?"

He looked half-apologetic. "You're not Kate O'Malley?" he asked. "Short brown hair, five foot two, a little heavy on the eye makeup ... you really do fit her description."

She raised her eyebrows. "Joseph Radkin? Tall, dark and handsome?" She shook her head. "You don't."

He smiled and stuck out his hand. "Pleased to meet you, Kate."

"I'd hold off deciding if you're pleased or not until we've had a chance to speak," she said as she gave his hand a shake. "Coffee?"

"Why not?" He gave a quick look around. "Where?"

She jerked her thumb toward a hallway on the other side of the room. "There."

He followed her across and watched her flash a card at a bored attendant sitting with his feet up on a table, reading a punky fashion magazine.

"What did you show him?" asked Joseph. "Your artist's license?"

"It costs sixty pence to get in if you're not a member," she explained as she moved swiftly down the hall, ignoring the walls and what passed for an exhibit.

Joseph took a quick look at the canvases on display. "They should pay us," he said.

"Try Piccadilly, if you like your nudes on velvet, chum," she replied without giving him a second glance.

The hallway led into a large, multilevel space. The balcony had a bar, very chicly black on white, a huge mirror to admire yourself in or cause yourself to cringe, and windows that looked out onto the promenade. The lower level had a series of cafe booths with smooth, flowing lines that turned themselves into curlicues the 1930s took for style. To the left and through an arch, you could see a self-service arrangement of salads and stuff sitting prettily behind some glass just like it would have been in California. If you had a nose for curry you might have smelled it back there too.

"Nice," he said. "Very art deco ..."

“Glad you approve,” she replied. “Are you having anything to eat? You are on an expense account, aren’t you?”

He shook his head. “Not yet. I’m still negotiating though.”

She sighed. “If we’re only having coffee, it’s better at the bar. They have an espresso machine.”

“A woman after my own heart.” Joseph winked.

She made a grimace. “All you Yanks have the same line, don’t you?”

“Depends on where we’re coming from,” he said, following her up the balcony stairs.

“It seems to me you’re all coming from New York or California.”

“The ones who say they come from California really came from New York first,” said Joseph. “But I meant in their head.”

“Then they’re not coming very far.” She glanced at the barman. “Two coffees, please.”

The barman pointed to the clock on the wall and said, “Sorry. The bar closes at half-two.”

Kate looked back at Joseph and shrugged. “Too late.”

“For what?” he asked. “I know the English make drunkenness obligatory by forcing everyone to drink by the clock, but I didn’t realize you did that with coffee, too!”

“The machine’s behind the bar,” said the attendant, taking a cloth and wiping a few sudsy glasses without bothering to give them a rinse.

“He’s American,” Kate explained.

“I know,” said the barman. “You can tell them a mile away.”

“Is it a disease?” asked Joseph. “Do I have spots?”

“You might say that,” said Kate.

“This no-coffee thing is a joke, right?” Joseph looked at her, expecting a chuckle.

She shook her head. “I’m afraid not.”

Joseph turned to the barman. “How about just giving us some coffee, pal? You’re standing there, we’re standing here. All it takes is for you to press that button.” He pointed to the switch on the machine.

“Sorry,” said the barman.

“Why are you sorry?” Joseph went on. “Are you sorry that you can’t make us a cup of coffee? Because if you are there’s an easy way to make amends ...”

The barman looked him in the eye. “I was going to say I was sorry I let the steam out of the machine,” he said in reply. “But actually, I’m not.”

“Why didn’t he just tell us that he let the steam out of the machine to begin with?” Joseph asked. They were sitting in one of the booths drinking coffee from the cafe below. He made a face. “What do you think they used to make this stuff? Dishwater?”

“The English are more circumspect than you Americans. They have trouble saying things straight out.”

He looked at her. “What do you mean, ‘the English’? What are you?”

“Irish.”

“Historically, you mean. You sure sound English to me.”

“‘Sounding’ and ‘being’ are two different things.”

“I didn’t hear you put up much of a fight about the espresso.”

“You become stoic if you live here long enough.” She hesitated a moment and then said, “Mike had difficulty with that, too ...”

“I imagine,” said Joseph putting more sugar in his cup. “I never drink coffee with sugar,” he explained, “but this stuff

“Don’t suffer over it,” she said. “Get yourself some tea.”

“Tea?” He gave her a pained look. “Is that what it’ll come to if I end up staying here?”

She put down her cup and stared at him. “Are you going to end up staying here?”

“I don’t know.” He gave his coffee another stir. “Tell me about Mike.”

“What did your big chief tell you?”

He shrugged. “Just that he had an accident. Run over while he was walking down a country road. Something like that.”

She took out a cigarette and lit up. “Perhaps ...”

He stared at her a moment. “‘Perhaps’?” Then, pointing to her pack, he said, “Let me have one of those.”

“I thought all Americans were afraid of getting cancer,” she said, sliding the pack his way.

“Well, was he run over or not?” asked Joseph, taking one of her smokes and leaning forward as she lit up a match.

“Yes, he was run over. But perhaps it wasn’t an accident.”

He looked at her through a cloud of smoke. “Are you trying to tell me that he committed suicide by throwing himself in front of a truck?”

“Mike wasn’t suicidal. What do you know about the story he was working on?” she asked him.

“Just general stuff ... West told me you had the files.”

“West!” She made a face of intense dislike. “He’s a prat!”

“You know him?”

“I met him once. He flew in for the weekend. You Americans do things like that, don’t you?”

“Only the wealthy ones. The rest of us scratch for a living like everyone else. You didn’t like our lovable leader, huh?”

“I’ve met his type before. Glib, charming, offer you the moon and give you moldy cheese.” She stubbed out her cigarette.

“He’s not so bad,” said Joseph. “I’ve met a lot worse. He’s still got a few principles.”

She let out an icy laugh. “Principles? Is that what you call them?”

“Listen, lady,” he said with some annoyance, “I come from a place where most people eat scruples for breakfast and shit ‘em out for tea. In this business nobody’s clean.”

“Well that’s America in a nutshell, I guess,” she said with a smirk.

“Who the hell are you to talk? You guys still got a queen!”

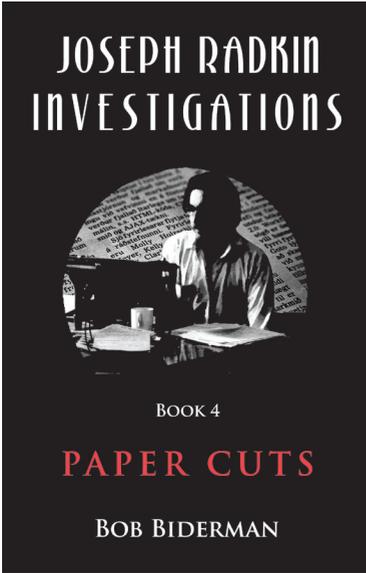
Her eyes were flashing like angry stop signs. “I told you before, I’m Irish!”

“And I’ve got an uncle who once lived in Timbuktu!” he shot back. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

She sighed. “Listen, Radkin, I didn’t meet you here to argue the relative depths we’ve sunk to in our trade.”

“Why did you meet me then?”

She suddenly seemed different to him now. There was a more compassionate look in her eyes as she said, “I wanted to give you fair warning. There’s only trouble here. Why don’t you just go back where you belong.”



Book 4: Paper Cuts
by Bob Biderman

ISBN 9781900355193

Formats: Hardcover, Paperback, eBook

Investigative journalist Joseph Radkin is sent to Oregon to look into a bitter dispute between the logging industry and environmentalists. When a famed ecologist is killed, coupled with the disappearance of a lumber boss' daughter, Radkin finds himself caught up in a dangerous story that goes far beyond clear-cutting the ancient redwoods.

"This is nothing is what it seems territory with a few extra twists, mayhem and a cruel message. Formidable!" -The Sunday Times

"A truly gripping thriller that packs a message!" - Popular Fictions

"Difficult to put down!" - Scotland on Sunday

Chapter I

IT WASN'T HIS imagination. The house actually smiled at him as he trudged down the pebble drive toward the wood-shingled facade with its three windows shaped like belly-up half moons. Set back in a grove of eucalyptus trees some hundred yards from the steep, windy road that led from the coastal flatlands to the lush Tiburon hills, and perched on the edge of a rocky cliff, the far side of the house looked out onto an expanse of blue where sky met sea in a celebration of celestial grandeur that only moneyed Californians and astronauts could truly call their own.

Following a stone path that worked its way around the smiling side to the front that faced the spectacular view, he reached the entrance and pressed the buttoned nose of a brass lion built into the woodwork of the door. The buzzer set off a series of electronic chimes that sounded the theme song from a Hollywood film.

Joseph stared at the lion's nose in wonder.

The door opened as he was about to press the nose for an encore. A pair of sparkling black eyes set in a pretty Oriental face greeted him.

"Mr Radkin?" she said in a voice that was as bright as her sleek black hair.

He looked down at her tiny figure dressed only in a silky robe that was the same color as the hair that fell lightly on her shoulders. If it wasn't that she had addressed him by name, he would have wondered whether he had come to the right place.

"Please to follow me," she said, bowing her head and dipping slightly at the knees. The bow was as brief and easy as a wink.

When she raised her head and her eyes met his again, he could see that they were laughing.

She led him into an enormous room underneath a dome. A semicircular couch of glove-soft leather echoed the shape above. Fitted into the arc of the couch, with about three feet of legroom between, was a gigantic rounded coffee table of polished mahogany. The center of the couch faced a black marble fireplace with a lion's head mantelpiece that looked like the twin of the one on the door.

"What happens when you press that one's nose?" He glanced up at the ceiling. "The dome opens and we fly out into space?"

Her head tilted slightly to one side. She seemed amused, but it was hard to say. “I sorry. I not speak English very good.”

“Don’t worry about it,” he said. “No one does anymore.”

Her eyes laughed again as she said, “A moment, please.” And then she tripped quietly out, leaving him alone in the vastness of the room.

Joseph sat down on the luxurious couch, allowing the richness of the leather to encompass him. A cathedral window to the right of the fireplace let in a brilliant beam of heavenly light of such perfection that a man of God might have given his soul to the Devil if only it could have been replicated in his church.

“Mr Radkin?”

It was a deep voice. Resonant. But then, he thought, what in this place wouldn’t be?

He turned his head past the blinding light toward the voice that had come from the direction of the circular stairs which wound like a helix from the balcony above.

A silhouette of a figure was bounding down. He heard a voice say, “Please, don’t get up.”

He got up anyhow.

Joseph felt the energy of his presence before he actually saw the man. “I’m very happy you could come.” The man stuck out his hand.

What Joseph finally saw was dressed in a white terry-cloth robe that matched the coils of flaxen hair atop his head. His face was square—or most likely had been before his chin had started to sag. He had an aquiline nose and heavy brows over deep-set eyes which seemed to be busily studying the image in front of them. It was a straightforward look from a well-used face. And if he had to sum it up, Joseph probably would have guessed its owner was pretty satisfied, even though his time was almost up. But, then again, with such an expensive view and nothing blocking the way, why wouldn’t he be satisfied? Joseph asked himself as he reached out and gave the proffered hand a shake.

So this was Saunders, Joseph thought. The man who helped bankroll Investigations Magazine. West’s silent partner—whatever that meant. Fairy godfather or entrepreneur? Surely there couldn’t have been much money in it—though Joseph hadn’t been privy to their profit sheet. As long as he got his check on time it was all right by him.

Saunders motioned to the crevice Joseph’s body had made in the couch. “Go ahead. Sit back down. Tell Yoko what you want to drink.”

He hadn't noticed her come back in. She walked like a cat. A very quiet and contented Siamese. She stood next to Saunders, smiling silently. She was about half his height and different in most every way. The contrast was striking—accentuated by their robes. Then he remembered the wire service story that had been meant for the fashion editor but had been put in his box by mistake. White on black was in this year. Or was it black on white?

“Orange juice,” said Joseph.

“OJ for you, too, William?” she asked, looking up at Saunders with her playful eyes.

Joseph glanced down and noticed that her tiny feet were naked. Her child-like toes were painted the brightest red he'd ever seen. And one of them was rubbing, seductively, up against Saunders' Achilles tendon—or so it seemed.

If Saunders felt anything, he didn't show it. “OJ all around,” he said, rubbing his hands together. “Loaded with vitamin C. Keeps you vigorous! Right, Radkin?”

“I wouldn't know,” said Joseph. “I just have a hell of a hangover...”

“Try pure grain alcohol next time,” he said. “It's the additives that get you.”

“I'll keep it in mind,” Joseph replied. He looked over to where Yoko had been. She had disappeared again. Off to get the orange juice most likely.

Saunders had moved to the cathedral window and was looking out. “Terrific view, isn't it?” he said, turning around and pointing a finger toward the glass.

Joseph crossed his legs and rubbed a painful knee that had just started acting up again. “Is that why you asked me over? To appreciate the view?” He said that to himself. To Saunders he said, “Not bad.”

“Not bad?” Even through the blinding light he could see him smile. “I thought you were our star investigative journalist, Radkin. Surely you could think of more exciting phraseology...”

“I save the hyperbole for my copy. Don't want to use it up too fast.”

The orange juice came in tall crystal glasses set on a black lacquered tray. It was fresh-squeezed. Joseph could tell by all the little seeds floating on the top.

“Let's take these out on the veranda,” said Saunders, leading the way to a sliding glass door at the far side of the room.

Joseph got up and followed, somewhat reluctantly as he was beginning to enjoy the soft leather couch. On the other hand, with a salary like his, it was better not to get used to the feel of luxury.

The deck was made of redwood. The long side faced the hills; the short side faced the sea. He could have guessed there would have been a hot tub. But he

wouldn't have pictured one so large and that spewed out so much steam.

"What did West tell you?" asked Saunders as they sat down at a large chrome and glass table under an umbrella that kept out the sun.

"He said that he was putting me on sabbatical and that I was to take my instructions from you for a couple of weeks." Joseph took a sip of his orange juice and then looked Saunders squarely in the eye. "He said you'd tell me what it was all about. But he didn't seem pleased."

"Look up there," said Saunders, turning toward the hills. "You know what those are?" He pointed to the trees.

"Eucalyptus. Polly—my wife—collects the leaves and stuffs them into old socks. The odor is supposed to keep away the fleas."

"They're not native to California, you know," said Saunders. "Brought here some sixty or seventy years ago by people with small minds and big ideas. Eucalyptus grows remarkably fast, ten times faster than your ordinary evergreen. In Australia they have a species *E. regnans*, the giant eucalyptus, that reaches a height of three hundred feet with a twenty-five-foot girth. It yields a hardwood, very strong, used in shipbuilding."

"You'd think that if they were used for shipbuilding they'd have been cut down years ago," said Joseph, raising his glass to the trees.

"That's right. And they would have been, too—except the idiots who brought them over took the wrong species. They brought over *E. globulus*, the blue gum. Commercially, the wood was worthless."

"Lucky for your view," said Joseph.

"Yes. Up until now..."

"I thought you said the wood was worthless."

"It was. However, recently they've been using them in Brazil to make paper. Eucalyptus wood is very white, you see. Much whiter than your ordinary wood. By using eucalyptus the paper companies can circumvent the bleaching process..."

"That's very interesting," said Joseph. "Bits of trivia like that can work their way nicely into stories for wildlife magazines."

"Bleaching, in case you haven't been reading the press, is what's causing the build-up of dioxin in our rivers and streams."

"And acid rain is causing the leaching of heavy metals into our ground waters," said Joseph, somewhat impatiently. "I do read the papers, Mr Saunders. And I know we haven't been treating the earth too kindly. But if all this has anything to do with the story you'd like me to write, I'd remind you

that the rivers and lakes are Michael's territory. He's a great environmental reporter. I'm more at home on the city beat. In fact, flowers make me sneeze."

"Don't worry," said Saunders, letting out a laugh. "I'm not about to issue you a knapsack and an axe." Then, looking at Joseph more seriously, he said, "And you're perfectly free to refuse my offer—it won't be held against you."

"I'll bet!" Joseph said to himself.

"But hear me out," Saunders continued. "And keep in mind that whoever takes on this assignment will be paid very well." He seemed to be studying Joseph's face again. "You're not averse to money, are you?"

"I suppose it depends on where it comes from and what I do to get it," Joseph replied.

"Money comes from paper. There's a bit of eighteenth-century doggerel which goes: 'Rags make paper, paper makes money, money makes banks, banks make loans, loans make beggars, beggars make rags.' So you see, it's all a neat and tidy little circle."

"I thought it was trees that make paper."

"In the eighteenth century it was rags. Trees have only been used for a hundred years or so."

"That's comforting," said Joseph. Then he looked at Saunders, suspiciously. "You don't want me to do a story about trees, I hope."

"Only in a roundabout way," Saunders replied. He hesitated a moment, then he said, "I have a friend—an old, dear friend—who seems to be in trouble..."

"What kind of trouble?" He knew he shouldn't have asked. But it was instinctual.

"I'm not exactly sure. He's a professor out at Meade College."

"That's in Oregon, isn't it?"

"Yes, Portland."

"What's his field?"

"Earth sciences, I think they call it. Anyway, he's very active in the environmental movement. Working to clean up the Columbia River—things like that. Seems one of the paper companies is trying to set up a new pulp mill. He's been one of the main people fighting to deny them certification."

"Because of the bleaching process, I take it."

"Yes. The process produces a number of chlorohydrate effluents, one of which is dioxin—supposedly the most toxic chemical known to man."

"And they dump it in the river?"

"Minute quantities, of course. It's only recently that they've been able to

assess the damage. It builds up, you see. In the tissues and the liver. Becomes part of the food chain..."

"I understand," said Joseph. "You want a story on the perils of the paper industry. But what's so urgent?"

Saunders turned in his chair and gazed out at the other magnificent view, where the sky met the sea. "I've been following your work, Radkin. I've seen how you've been able to make the big story out of the small."

"It depends on how big and how small you're talking about. I usually have something more to go on."

Saunders turned back around and looked at Joseph. "Oregon is our economic hinterland, Radkin. It's brimming with nature. But it's also our last untrammelled wilderness, besides Alaska. What happens there in the next few years may truly determine the fate of our nation."

"That might be going a little far."

"I don't think so," said Saunders. "Anyway, the situation in Oregon is growing dangerous. Battle lines have been drawn..."

"Between who and whom?"

"The environmentalists and the logging interests. Last week a logger was killed..."

"Shot?"

Saunders shook his head. "No. An environmental terrorist spiked a tree. That's a tactic some of those loonies use to try and stop the lumberjacks. They nail a railroad spike into the trunk so deep you can't see it. When the chainsaw hits it, the chain shatters. The backlash can kill you. It usually doesn't. In this case it did."

"I thought you were on those tree savers' side."

Saunders swallowed the last of his drink and then pushed his glass away. He seemed somewhat perturbed. "I agree with their objective, but not their methods."

That's very liberal of you, Joseph thought.

"Anyway, it came at a terrible time. Tempers are at the flashpoint now. And it's all focused around the permit battle for the new pulp mill. The loggers want it. The environmentalists don't."

Joseph rubbed his knee again. Just the thought of pulp mills made it hurt.

Saunders was staring at him without blinking his eyes. "So? What do you say?"

"Frankly—if you want to know the honest truth—it's probably front page

stuff in Oregon, page four stuff in California and might make page thirteen in New York if you're lucky."

"You're missing the point, Radkin," Saunders said, getting up from his chair and walking over to the rail. He looked up at the eucalyptus forest. "This is a private bit of research I want you to do for me. I want you to find out what you can about the events surrounding the McCullough Paper Company's permit application for their new pulp mill. And I want it by the end of the week. In fact, I want you to fax a copy to me by midnight, Friday."

"I don't get it," said Joseph. "Why?"

"I have my reasons," he said.

Saunders then turned around and made a sign toward the sliding door. A moment later, Yoko came out and handed him a briefcase. She seemed to hover by his side as he placed the briefcase on the deck table, opened it up and took out an envelope which he handed to Joseph.

"All you need to know is in here. It contains the names of a couple of people you should contact. I've arranged for a reporter on the Portland daily to assist you. There's also an airline ticket..."

"An airline ticket?"

"Alaska Airlines. The flight leaves 9.00 p.m. Tonight."

Joseph stared at him incredulously.

"There's a check enclosed in the sum of two thousand dollars. For expenses. You'll receive another check for three thousand dollars at the completion of your assignment."

"For one week's work?"

"For one week's work."

Joseph glanced at Yoko. She was full of smiles.

"Is that payment on approval?"

"I have full confidence in your investigatory skills," said Saunders. "As long as you fax me your copy by midnight, Friday, you'll receive the second check when you return."

Yoko had left the table and was walking down the length of redwood deck toward the hot tub. Out of the corner of his eye, Joseph saw her loosen the tie cord of her robe and let it fall from her shoulders to the ground. Her naked body seemed to glow in the sunlight as she slid into the steamy waters.

Taking the envelope, Joseph put it in his pocket.

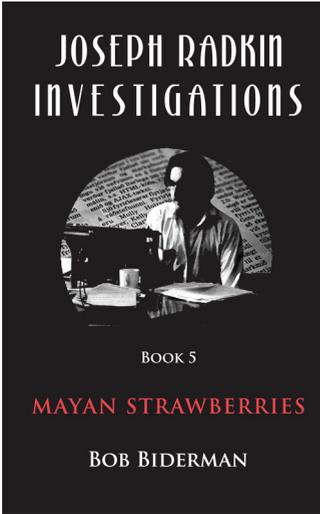
"Come William!" she called. Her voice reminded him of a sparrow. He turned to look. Her face was half hidden by the vapors. But he could see her

dainty hand held out.

He turned back to Saunders and saw him wink.

“OK?” he said.

“I wouldn’t want to hold you up,” Joseph replied. “I’ll see you in a week.”
Time enough, he thought, for Saunders to bathe and dry himself out.



Book 5: Mayan Strawberries
by Bob Biderman

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A young Mixtec Indian from Guatemala follows the trail of tears through Mexico to a migrant camp in the strawberry fields of California. There, instead of refuge, he finds himself accused of murder. Is he the killer or a patsy set up to distract attention from a right wing cult? *Mayan Strawberries* combines a fascinating anthropological study with the deadly politics of Central America

Final book of the Radkin series.

A BLACK APOLLO ORIGINAL

Chapter I

THE SHRILLNESS OF the ring jangled his subconscious like a silicon Siren calling to a timewarped Odysseus. He opened his eyes and looked up from the couch. The room was a blur. Everything seemed off kilter as if the foundation had slipped during the night bending the perpendicular. For a moment he wondered where he was. Then he remembered and wondered where she was.

The phone rang again and he reached for it with a grunt. "Polly?" he called down the line. He waited for a response but the only thing he heard was a hollow roar, like an ocean in a sea shell. The sound of emptiness.

Maybe it was all in his head. Tympanic feedback, after all, was one sign of ageing. He was about to hang up when he heard a voice. It was a woman's voice, but not the one he wanted.

"Joseph? Joseph Radkin?"

"Yeah. Who's this?" he said with annoyance.

"Elizabeth Manning..."

The voice came from the blue like a born again memory searching out its maker.

"Joseph? You do still remember, don't you?"

"Sure I remember."

"I'm sorry we've been out of touch so long. So much has happened..."

"To everyone...everywhere."

"How are you? Are you still at the paper?" Her voice sounded like she already knew.

"No. I left soon after you and Felix. You're still together, I assume."

"Still together." There was a slight hesitation. "We're living in Ecstasy now."

"I thought you always were..."

"No. Not the emotion. The town..."

"You mean that farming place up north? What the hell are you doing up there? Milking cows?"

"Running the local newspaper."

He heard himself chuckle. But it was like coughing with broken ribs it hurt. To ease the pain, he lit up a cigarette. "Come on!", he said. "Pull the other one!" He took a drag on his smoke and let the narcotic effect take over as he thought back to the days when Felix and Elizabeth were the Dick Powel and

Myrna Loy of the metropolitan newspaper set complete with wirehaired terrier. Back then, before the cokeheads ruled the roost, they had been the epitome of three martini glamor.

“It’s true,” she said. “We’ve been there over a year already.”

He watched the coils of smoke from his cigarette evaporate in the air and thought that in a world stood on its head nothing much surprised him anymore. “Must be great for six months or so,” he said, bringing the phone over to the couch and letting his body drop into the cushions. “But after that, what do you find to write about? How many stories can you do on the sex life of the potato?”

“Actually, it’s strawberry country...”

“Strawberries ... sorry.”

“It’s very beautiful up there. Really.” She didn’t sound like she was in ecstasy.

“You OK?” he asked.

“No. That’s why I wanted to talk with you...”

“After all these years? Why me?”

“I couldn’t think of anyone else...”

“Isn’t there a village priest or something?” He took another drag on his cigarette and let the smoke curl from his mouth. “How about Felix?”

“It’s Felix I wanted to talk about.”

“Concerning what?”

She hesitated a moment. “It has something to do with a murder...”

“Felix?” His voice carried a note of extreme doubt.

“Felix and I have been covering a story about a murder case that happened up there a while ago. About a farm laborer who got stabbed in the strawberry fields...”

He stared at the receiver as if it were the middle of the night and someone had just rung up to say that a man had gotten mugged in the park. It was hard to get his juices flowing for something that had become such an everyday occurrence. In the city a simple act of violence had about as much journalistic appeal as a cat puking up a mouse.

“I know little murders aren’t big news in San Francisco, but they are in Ecstasy,” she went on. “And, really, there’s more to it ...”

“There’s always more to it, Elizabeth. You know that. The problem is where it takes you.”

“I hope it takes you to Zuni’s,” she said. “I’ll only be in the city another hour

or so and I'd like a chance to talk..."

Chapter 2

IF SOMEONE HAD asked him why he went, he couldn't have given them a straight answer. Not that he always felt the need to give straight answers, but this time he couldn't if he wanted.

Maybe it had to do with feeling claustrophobic in the house, he thought as he parked the car around the corner from Zuni's. Or maybe he remembered the scent of her perfume. But one thing was for certain, it had nothing to do with the death of a farm worker in a small California town. And if her object was to get him involved, he hadn't the slightest intention.

Of course, he often felt that way in the beginning. But this had all the makings of nothing times ten. It was the bleeding heart syndrome in spades, he thought. Everyone had a story that tugged at their emotions. Put under a magnifying glass and written with creative adjectives, a housefly with torn wings could be made to seem like Camille. He'd done it himself when he was starving for work. But, in a cynical world, where the unimaginable was becoming more and more commonplace, few stories amounted to anything significant – really significant, that is. After all, how much blood could you dredge up before it started to seem like water? How much death before bodies became like so many carcasses hanging stiffly on a hook? How much fraud and malfeasance before it looked as if the entire world was on the take and it just didn't matter anymore?

He was thinking of all this as he rounded the corner. Then suddenly another reason dawned on him why he had consented to come. Zuni's was the new place where all the trendy people went to be seen. And, perhaps out of journalistic curiosity, he had a vague sense of wanting to know what was in fashion and why – if fashion had a reason, that is.

Joseph wasn't much into trendy hangouts. The Adler Museum Cafe in North Beach was more his style with its booze, jazz and funk. But Zuni's was different, he had to admit. It was as if someone had taken a bit of the Mojave Desert and shipped it to Frisco lock, stock and cactus and then hired an Indian to reconstitute it as a restaurant. The surprising thing was, in appearance it made a damn fine oasis. But that was before he caught a look at the prices.

Even though it was off hours, the place was sizzling like only a hot spot that's still on the cooker could. Once inside, he realized that in order to find a seat you probably had to have a recognizable face or else wait a few months for the fire to cool down. He didn't have the face nor was he willing to wait till the flames were doused.

He didn't have to. The head waiter approached and looked him up and down. But instead of telling him to get lost, he said, "A lady back there claims to know you, sir."

He couldn't have missed her. Nobody could. She was wearing more dangling turquoise than Zuni's should have allowed, unless they wanted their customers to compete with the decorations. On the other hand, she probably would have competed anyway with her raving mane of bright red hair. When she stood up every head seemed to pop out of joint staring at her.

Trying to be cool, he causally sauntered over to her table, aware that all eyes were shifted on him. And those were powerful eyes, he figured. Eyes he might have come up against in former investigations probably having to do with fraudulent stock manipulations. Now he was the focus of their probing stares, he thought, as his stomach turned sour.

"Joseph!" She stood up, sparkling with flashes of refracted light from all her polished bangles. "It's so nice to see you again!" She gave him a peck on the cheek. "What are you having to drink?" she asked as he thankfully manoeuvred into the chair she had reserved for him.

"Maybe a bicarbonate," he said.

Her eyes were still a glittering emerald green specked with tiny flakes of orange, he noticed as she motioned to the waiter and ordered a bottle of mineral water. He had always wondered whether that color existed in real life or was a creation of the contact lens industry. But, whatever its origin, it was very effective in offsetting all that turquoise, he decided.

She smiled and he felt that special radiance she could so effortlessly project. Some people have it, he thought, a soft magnetic field that draws things into their orbit like a tune played on a magic flute. Depending on the tune, you could either end up happily on Corfu or else shipwrecked on a desert island.

"Catch me up on the last ten years," she said, reaching out across the table and touching his hand.

"Marriage, two kids, some interesting stories, lots of boring ones, problems with money, problems with editors ... and a growing sense of malaise and discontent." He poured himself a glass of fizzy water from the bottle the waiter

had just left and said “How about you?”

“It’s as if I entered a different universe,” she replied. She said it as if the statement explained itself.

“You mean Ecstasy isn’t?” he said, half mocking, half wondering what she meant.

She shook her head and the glow seemed to melt. “When Felix was asked to resign, I was ready to leave San Francisco anyway. I was sick of the daily grind. We didn’t really know what we wanted to do. Felix, of course, wasn’t worried in the least. He always seems to land on his feet, doesn’t he?”

Joseph nodded. He knew only too well.

“Anyway, I was all in a dither. I wanted to get away, but I needed something to do. Then – well you know how opportunity just seems to fall into your lap sometimes...”

“I’ve heard about things like that happening to people forced to grow up with a mouth full of silver spoons...”

“It can happen to anyone, Joseph,” she said. “You don’t question things like that. It happened and it was as if fate held out her hand and said, ‘Here it is! Take it!’ And there it was. A little newspaper office of our very own in a small town a million miles away from anywhere. A little Eden of fertile land and clear blue skies. A town where people smiled at you and said hello when you passed them on the street...”

Joseph felt his stomach ache worse than before. He emptied his glass of seltzer and poured himself another one. “Is that what Felix was looking for, too?” he said with a trace of disbelief in his voice.

“I thought so at the time,” she said. Her eyes no longer seemed focused on him but had taken on a dreamy look. “Anyway, for a while it was marvellous. We built our house and set up the newspaper just a broadsheet, really. We brought it out occasionally, whenever we felt like. No real deadlines. No hassles. Our only problem was learning to set type and figuring out how to proof it without a mirror.”

“Sort of a twentieth century newspaper version of Little House on the Prairie, I guess?” he said, barely able to hide his sarcasm.

“It might have started out that way,” she said, fingering a bracelet of silver and jade. “But it evolved very quickly. We started taking it more seriously. There’s something enormously cathartic about going back to the basics of journalism I mean actually getting ink on your hands ...”

He looked at her hands, so silky white, and could hardly imagine them

stained with ink.

“We found ourselves suddenly tapping into the lifeblood of a community in a way we never, ever, were able to do here...”

He noticed there were lines at the corners of her eyes – lines he hadn’t seen before. He found himself wondering how age had affected her.

“It was both extremely beautiful and very frightening...” she continued.

“Frightening? How so?” he asked.

She had a pensive look; her face was calm but there was also something curious about her expression something he couldn’t define. “There are so many layers to life, aren’t there, Joseph? When you scratch one, you expose another. If you dig under that, another one appears. And soon you start to realize that it never ends.”

“I always found the layers end pretty fast, myself,” he said, “once you get to the bedrock which usually consists of greed, lust or fear. Sometimes all three. Occasionally you might hit integrity, but there’s no story in that is there? At least that’s what the publishers say.” He fixed his eyes on her face, trying to figure out what she really wanted to tell him. “What about the murder?” he asked.

Reaching for her bag, which had been conspicuously placed next to her glass, she opened it and pulled out a photograph which she handed to him. It was a picture of a young man, no older than twenty he figured. He had a sun-burnt face, with high cheek bones and jet black hair. It was a face that wouldn’t have looked out of place in a migrant labor camp. But, at the same time, it was different. He couldn’t put his finger on what the difference was, exactly. Maybe it was the look of boyish wonder.

“His name is Salvador Garcia,” she said, fixing her eyes on him. “He’s been in prison for the last three years serving a life sentence.”

“Too bad. He looks like a nice kid,” Joseph said, handing the photo back to her.

“The problem is that he’s innocent.” Her eyes studied his face for a reaction.

“Lot’s of people are, Elizabeth,” he said. “The prisons are full of them. Would you like me to apologize for the system? Or maybe you’d like to.”

“No,” she said, without a blink, “I wouldn’t like to apologize. I’d like you to listen to what I have to say without feeling obliged to be sarcastic.”

“I wasn’t being sarcastic,” he replied, “I was being honest.” But even through his rawness he realized that for her this clearly was a moving subject. “Go on,”

he continued, as he poured himself the last of the fizzy water. “I’m listening.”

“A few months ago we met a woman who lives outside of town. She told us she was a juror in a murder trial some years back and for all those years she was obsessed with the fear that she had convicted an innocent man ...”

“That’s a pretty common feeling, Elizabeth,” he said. “Any juror of conscience finds themselves racked with doubt for a long time after they send someone to prison. If you’re a sensitive person, you’re bound to feel that way even if there was overwhelming evidence for conviction.”

“I know that, Joseph,” she replied. “It was the rest of what she had to say that got us interested. You see, the young man in question wasn’t an ordinary farm worker – not your typical Mexican bracero, that is. He’s a Central American Indian. It seems that for years now Indian refugees from El Salvador and Guatemala have been streaming over the border into Mexico. Some of them have managed to link up with the migrant labor force, the fruit and vegetable pickers who follow the harvest. Most of these refugees, however, don’t have proper documentation – they either travel with forged papers or else sneak across the Rio Grande into the US and hire themselves out to unscrupulous farm labor agents who pay them a pittance if they pay them at all...”

“And many of them are angry and hostile,” Joseph cut in. “For good reason, of course. Unfortunately, sometimes they drink and get into fights...”

“Yes, that’s true. And, also, unfortunately, sometimes the wrong person gets arrested when the police come to sort out the mess. A town like Ecstasy, so far north, doesn’t have many Spanish speaking residents. In fact, one farm worker tends to look very much like another at least to the people up there.”

“Maybe you could get to the point,” said Joseph, not even trying to hide his exasperation. “If you’re saying that some people, especially if they don’t have money for a decent lawyer, are caught in the net because the cops and the courts need convictions and don’t have the patience to follow the niceties of law even to the point of giving a pig’s snout if they snag the right man, I believe you.” His face took on a tired expression as he continued: “And you know what? Even with all the insanity, once in a while, maybe even fifty percent of the time, they manage to get someone who deserves to be sent away. Sometimes people actually do commit crimes, Elizabeth even Central American Indian boys with pretty faces!”

She was gazing at him, unblinking; her green eyes were void of anger. There was only sadness in them at least that’s all he saw. Maybe he had overstepped the bounds, he thought.

He rubbed the side of his face and looked down at his empty glass. “Forget it, Elizabeth,” he said. “I’m in a bit of a mess. Polly took the kids and walked out on me the other day.”

“I’m sorry to hear that, Joseph,” she said, reaching out and touching his hand again. “Do you want to tell me about it?”

“She just got tired of me feeling sorry for myself, I guess ... and drowning myself in liquor.” His lips had worked themselves into a tiny, contorted grin. “But she’ll be back. It isn’t the first time and it probably won’t be the last.”

“Poor, sweet Joseph,” she said, trying to look sympathetic.

“Poor, maybe. Sweet, never,” he replied, angry he exposed himself like that. As a diversion from his embarrassment, he narrowed his eyes and said, “How does Felix fit into all of this?”

“I told you, we were both involved in this story ...”

He shook his head. “When you phoned, you told me that you wanted to talk about Felix and that it had something to do with a murder.”

“The story is far more complex than the simple murder of a farm worker, Joseph. We realized that soon after we began looking into it...”

“How so?” he asked, fixing his gaze on a soft twitch that had started under one of her amazing green eyes.

“I’m not sure. All I know is that once we started asking questions about the murder, the attitude of people quickly changed. It was like probing molluscs – at the slightest touch, the shell snaps shut. But it was more than that. Strange things started happening. We suddenly found ourselves very isolated in the community...”

“That’s not surprising, is it?” Joseph said. “I mean, you’ve been there for a while, but you’re still relative strangers. It probably would take you ten years before you really gained their trust. And here you are hanging out their dirty laundry for them...”

She took a little mirror from her purse and inspected her face. Then she brought out a frilly handkerchief and brushed something from the corner of her eye. When she put the mirror back, her expression had changed. He thought it was like putting on an invisible mask.

“I am worried about Felix,” she said. “And it does have to do with the murder story. A few weeks ago, he began receiving some curious phone calls – curious in that after he had finished talking with whoever called, he became very preoccupied and uncommunicative ...”

“How do you know the phone calls had anything to do with the story the

two of you were working on?” His eyes were still fixed on her face. It was one of the few things he had learned from the cops. A face was a map and if you knew where you wanted to go you could chart your course through its myriad of expressions. Cops, however, were notoriously bad navigators. But they had the right idea.

“Because I happened to pick up the extension. I heard someone making threatening remarks...”

“Was it a voice you knew?” he asked.

She shook her head. “I couldn’t say for certain.”

“Did you tell the police?”

“There’s only one policeman in town,” she said. “And I really wouldn’t trust him.”

He shook his head. “That doesn’t sound good, Elizabeth. Maybe you should think about selling your house and moving back to a place where cops are corrupt but at least there’s more than one of them ...”

“It’s our home,” she said. Her expression was stubborn and it made her look even more beautiful to him.

“Have you spoken to Felix about this? What does he say?”

“Felix has become very taciturn,” she replied with a sigh. “When he gets like that, there’s really no talking to him.”

“But he must have said something!” Joseph demanded impatiently.

“Only that he’d take care of it.”

He pursed his lips, like a doctor about to diagnose cancer. “It’s a rule of thumb in journalism that art historians should stick to the museum beat. If I wandered through an antiquities collection, I’d probably end up smashing a few vases. On the other hand, I wouldn’t be dumb enough to go messing around with a nest of hornets in my own backyard unless I felt pretty damn sure about what I was doing. They have a nasty habit of taking their revenge in the most vulnerable places.”

“That’s why I’ve come to you for advice,” she said with a little smile. “You’ve had experience with things like this and...”

“And what?” he said, narrowing his eyes.

“And you’re someone I can trust.”

He wished he could say the same about her. But he couldn’t.

She looked at him and smiled even more sweetly. “Joseph, I’d like it if you could come up to Ecstasy and spend the weekend with us.”

“I’m sorry,” he said, shaking his head. “I’d like to but I can’t...”

Moving her body softly, almost imperceptibly, so her face came closer to his, she whispered, “Joseph, I wouldn’t ask if I weren’t so frightened. Please don’t make me beg. I really need you...”

He took a deep whiff of her perfume and remembered the fragrance well. He closed his eyes. “OK,” he muttered, regretting it even then.

When he opened his eyes again, her face was beaming. She had taken out an envelope from her purse and had laid it on the table. “Here’s a map and directions how to get there. It’s not hard to find.” She stood up. The glow was back. “I’m sorry I have to rush. I’ll expect you tomorrow for dinner. We’ll have lots of time to catch up on everything then!”

She walked over to his side of the table, leaned down and brushed his cheek with her lips. “It’s so good to see you again, Joseph!” she whispered.

And then she left.

He stayed seated after she had gone. He motioned to the waiter and ordered a whiskey with a beer chaser.

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