

JUDGMENT OF DEATH

A Joseph Radkin Mystery



Bob Biderman

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Joseph Radkin Investigations
Book 5

BLACK
APOLLO
PRESS

Chapter One

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 café. 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 café 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 café 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.”