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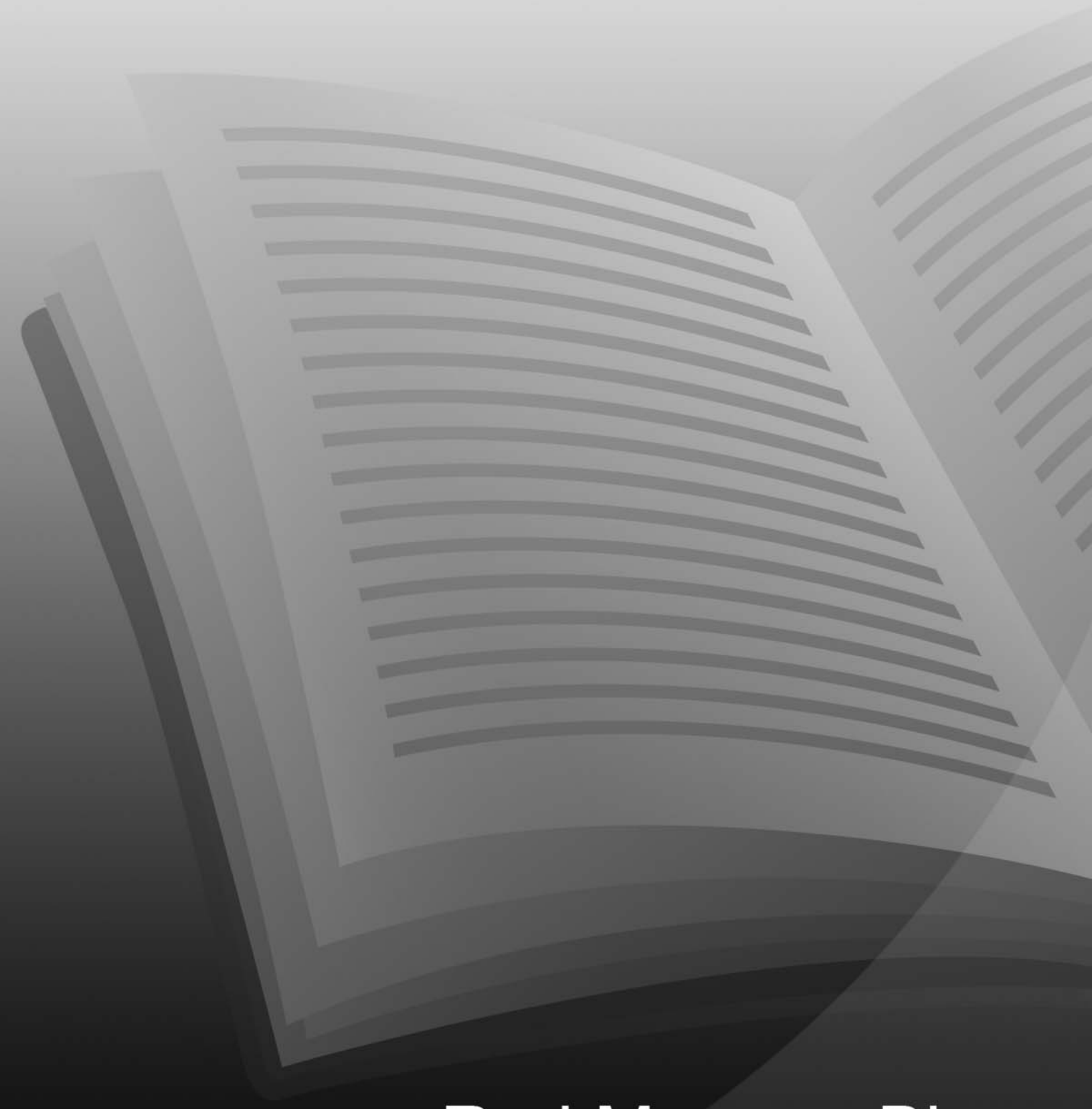

Red Mercury Blues

Reggie Nadelson

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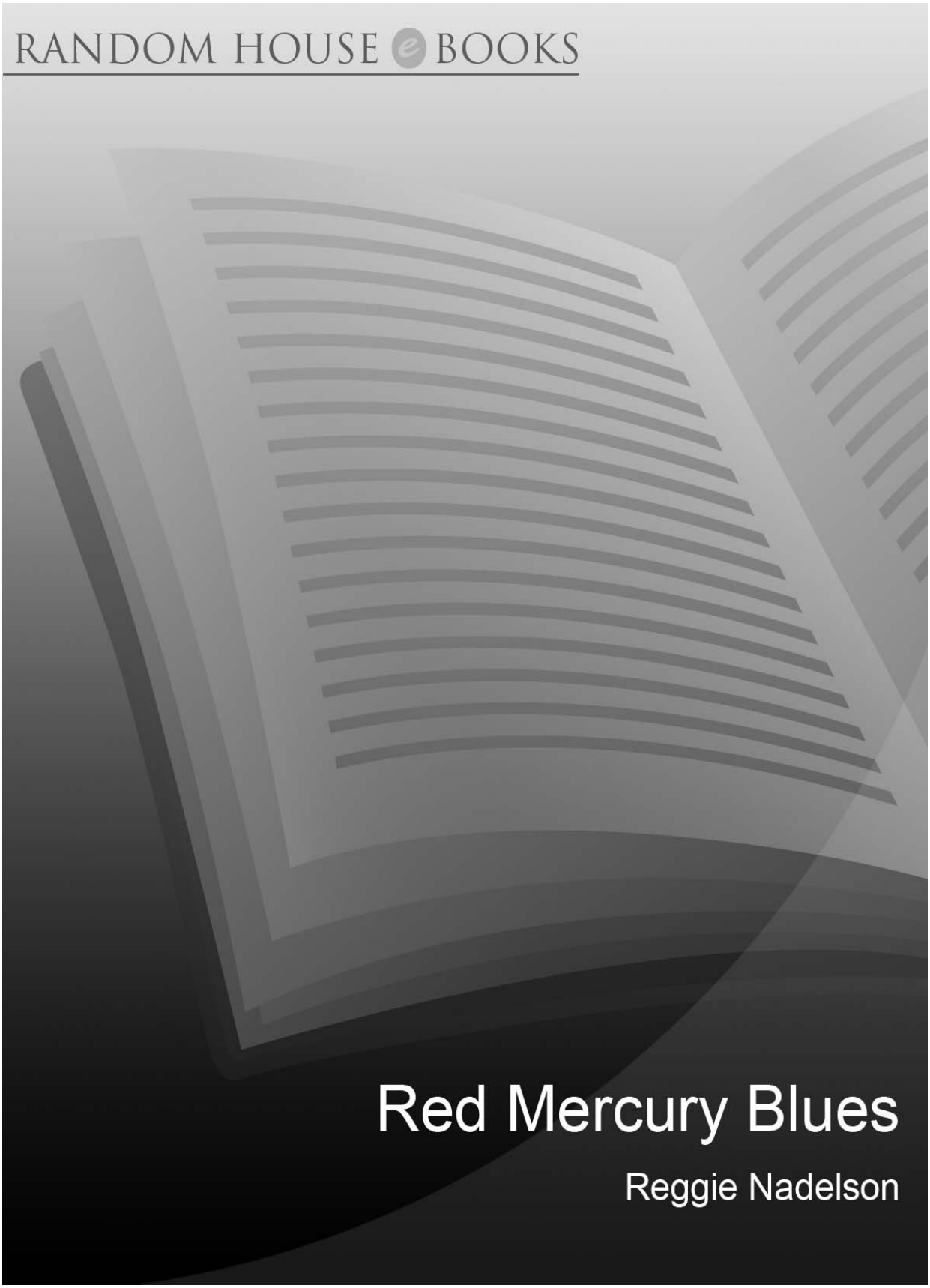

Red Mercury Blues

Reggie Nadelson

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A journalist and documentary film-maker, Reggie Nadelson is a New Yorker who also makes her home in London. She is the author of seven novels featuring the detective Artie Cohen (‘the detective every woman would like to find in her bed’, *Guardian*), most recently *Red Hook*. Her non-fiction book *Comrade Rockstar*, the story of the American who became the biggest rock star in the history of the Soviet Union, is to be made into a film starring Tom Hanks.

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Reggie Nadelson

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For Anne Graham Bell

PART ONE

NewYork

1

“There were body parts hanging from the trees.”

I was in the car coming back from Brooklyn when the radio started playing news of an airplane crash in the midwest, and a nurse who got to the scene first was saying, “There were body parts hanging from the trees.” Then I forgot about it because a weird white fog seemed to boil up fast and low off the river and cut Manhattan off.

It had rained hard all morning—rain like steel needles driving into the East River, the river spilling over its banks in places, and now the fog chasing me back from Brooklyn. I raced it halfway up the Brooklyn Bridge. Then traffic stopped dead.

Only the tops of the buildings were visible. Manhattan was an island state. Remote. Isolated. Borders cut off by fog. The buildings, eerie monsters, stuck up out of the rolling white fog and the mist hung on the Empire State Building in sheets, like ghosts on bayou trees.

I lit a cigarette as the fog crawled up my windshield. Out of the gloom, headlights flashed, a couple of kids got out of the car in front of me, tried to climb the struts of the bridge, disembodied heads sticking out of the mist, hands clinging to the railing. I sat on the bridge, smoking, waiting.

I had gone to Brooklyn early to get caviar for Dawn’s wedding because you could get good stuff for cash at Fish Town in Brighton Beach. I didn’t want to go much, I’m not crazy about dealing with Russians, but Dorothy Tae, Dawn’s ma, asked me, and I would have bought the whole goddamn sturgeon if she wanted, or gone fishing for it. It worked out fine, and a few pounds of the best Osetra in a blue can was in a cold-pack on the back seat of the Mustang.

Then it was over.

The fog rolled out. The rain quit. Suddenly. The way tropical rain stops. The city was locked back in a suspension of humidity heavy as chicken fat or depression. The sun came out again, bloated as a wiseguy's Rolex, leaking smudgy color into the sky. It was very hot, a stinker for September, as I drove off the bridge near City Hall, up Lafayette, and thought of the first time I'd crossed the bridge, when I was nineteen, coming in from the airport. I'd ordered the taxi driver—it was a rattletrap gypsy cab—to take the Brooklyn Bridge. A big shot. I was aching to show I knew the way. I didn't. I didn't know shit. I wanted to be cool, but I was scared. And then I saw the skyline: impossible, arrogant, beautiful. It made me want to cry. It made me feel I could dump the past. Twenty years later, it was home.

"Dickfist. Asshole. Sonofabitch piece of dogshit, move it!" The guy in the next car leaned on his horn. He was white and he wore a Knicks cap backwards. The light had turned green, I was gazing absently out the window. He had a point.

"Lighten up," I yelled back pleasantly and headed for Broadway to deliver the caviar, get a shower and change into my tux.

"You got some secret?" a pretty girl at Dawn Tae's wedding asked me that night. I was laughing out loud for no reason except that I was drunk. And happy. Later on, when things were lousy, I would remember having a completely wonderful time at the wedding. Dawn could have had it some place fancy, but she wanted it here; this was home. For me, too. The Taes, who run the best restaurant in Chinatown, are also my landlords, having refurbished the space in the building upstairs for lofts. They put in a

separate entrance so you don’t have to go through the restaurant. It works great.

“I’m a happy man,” I said to the girl in blue satin. Under her thin jacket, as we spun onto the dance floor, I could feel her pliant flesh. Over her head, mirrored balls the size of melons spun and sprayed reflections of hundreds of people into silvery shards of light. The smell of lilies, chilies and girls’ perfume bloomed in the heat and everywhere, vases blazed with red roses. Red for luck.

I knew I was drunk. But it was the kind of champagne drunk that made everything sharper. Later, the scene would come back as if out of a Christmas window on Fifth Avenue: the room very bright, the dancers spinning, the bride parading, old men in armchairs snoring, children spilling over their feet, waiters hefting loaded trays, the guests all moving in set patterns, as if driven by invisible motors. Sleek as a seal, Mr Tae beamed; Peter Chu came from a good Hong Kong clan; Dawn had married well.

The band played “Cheek to Cheek”. I’d trade any classical stuff you could name, even Horowitz playing Chopin, for Astaire, not to mention Dreck Doggy Dog or whoever the rap fool was, and I danced with kids who stood on my feet and old ladies who pushed me around in intricate two-steps. I danced with girls in sleek silks, perched like exotic birds on four-inch heels.

“I’m in heaven.”

The girl in blue satin looked up at me like I was a little cracked and I realized I was singing out loud. Born happy, my mother said once: a freak of nature.

“How you doing, detective?” Ricky Tae, Dawn’s brother and my best friend, drifted by.

“Great,” I said. “Great.”

As we danced, I realized the girl in blue, who had a high forehead, a great smile and terrific tits, had nothing on under the satin jacket.

“What’s your name?” she said.

“Artie,” I said, pulling her closer. She smelled good.

“You’re Ricky’s policeman, aren’t you? I thought cops were brooding. You know, brooding. Disaffected. Sick of life. Saddened by experience.”

“You’ve seen too many Al Pacino movies. I am the cheerful cop,” I said. “You want to come upstairs and try me? I live upstairs,” I said. I didn’t bother her with all the facts, didn’t mention I was on leave and thinking of quitting the department, or that the more misery I see, the more I’m convinced there is only one message, which is to live it up. She wanted brooding, I could try; I gave her the young Brando. She giggled, then drifted away from me. Dawn passed and I put my arm out and caught her.

“She didn’t like you?” Dawn looked spectacular in a red suit.

“She was hoping for Al Pacino,” I said. “You look wonderful. Maybe you married the wrong guy.”

“I wish it could have been you,” Dawn whispered, only half joking. We’d been kidding around for years, ever since I moved into the building; sometimes we used to make out on the stairs.

But it would break her father’s heart if Dawn married a round-eyed cop, and we both knew it.

“Let’s just dance,” I said and we moved out onto the floor and everyone made room for us because we were good. From the bandstand Ricky sang “I Love You Just the Way You Are”. Everyone laughed and danced, the rights spun and I held Dawn and smelled the roses.

“You’re drunk. I’ve never seen you drunk,” she said.

“You never got married before,” I said.

An hour later, I ran up the stairs to change because my shirt was soaked. Earlier, Dawn and her girlfriends had commandeered my place for a dressing room and it was drenched with delicious smells: powder; hairspray; the smell

of girls, and perfume: Dawn wore Joy. A red silk slip was tossed over my bed. I put my face in it, then snapped on the CD; Ella Fitzgerald sang “Give It Back to the Indians”.

Glancing in the mirror, I grabbed a fresh shirt. I was thirty-nine, six one, in pretty good shape. I sucked in my gut. God, I was slaughtered. I lit a cigarette, did up my shirt with fingers thick as egg-rolls, inhaled the smoke, and the perfume mixed with it and gave me a rush, like pure oxygen, or pure pleasure. I would find a nice girl, get married. Be a real American. Have fun. Listen to Ella Fitzgerald. It was OK. I was safe.

I was halfway down the stairs when my phone rang. The answering machine picked it up. Something made me go back. Something was wrong. The pulse in my neck pounding, I played the message.

Gennadi Ustinov had been shot.

My head exploded. Shot. Shot where? I stood, rigid, frozen, watching myself listening to the voice on the machine. Gennadi Ustinov shot in the face on *The Teddy Flowers Show*. Shot?

As I ran out into the street, I was uncomprehending, the city hot as hell, me running, trying to outrun the nightmare I could feel pulling me back, sweat dropping like rainwater from my hair into my eyes. The soft hot tar dragged at my feet. I kept thinking: Don’t die. Don’t die.

2

Don’t die!

Even before I got to his room in the intensive care unit, I could hear the machines breathing. In. Out. In out. In out. It was after midnight, the hospital was quiet. From halfway down the corridor, I heard the sounds of a man in outer space.

In the room, on a bed, under greenish lights, Gennadi Ustinov lay motionless, attached like a spaceman by corrugated plastic tubes to the machine that breathed for him.

Banks of machines winked. Jagged green lines on the black monitor showed his heart was still beating, and he was wired to a tangle of IVs, anchored by these fragile connections to life. His face, half covered by the plastic cone he breathed through, was drawn; he was old, he was older than I remembered.

There had been pictures. With his book coming out, there had been photographs in the papers, but his age never showed because he was a vain bastard, and you could fool with pictures. I pushed the hair out of my eyes and leaned over him and a nurse motioned me away, but an FBI agent whose name I couldn’t remember said to her, “Let him be.”

The agent had been there when I arrived at St Vincent’s, had shaken my hand with a brief, dry gesture of sympathy. My knuckles were bleeding.

In the street, after I’d left the wedding, after I’d run three or four blocks up Broadway, I’d seen a cab, and I ran for it, blocking it, hitting my fist on the hood to get the driver’s attention, throwing myself into it. The driver’s name was posted on his license: Petrov, Fyodr. I started barking orders

and the angry driver became meek, began tugging a tuft of hair. “OK, mister,” he had said. “Yessir,” he had mumbled, subservient, scared of me, and I had realized I was shouting in Russian.

“Don’t die, please,” I whispered to Gennadi Mikhailovich now, this time in Russian. “Don’t goddamn die on me.”

“What did you do?” I said to him. “Who wants you dead?”

Except for the nurse, a single intern and the agent, the room had emptied out and I was alone with him. I stood by the bed looking down. How many times in recent years had I picked up his phone messages off my machine? He always spoke English, as if to show he knew I was now an American. I never called back.

“Shall we meet, Artyom?” he wrote. I never answered the letters. I saved the tape from the answering machine, though, and put it in a drawer.

“Shall we meet?”

“Please,” my Aunt Birdie wrote me from Moscow. “Please see him. Please, Artie, for your father’s sake.”

On the narrow white bed, breathing through tubes, oblivious, was the man who had been my father’s best friend: Uncle Gennadi, I called him. I had not seen him in twenty-five years. Then Birdie wrote me. I had agreed. We were to have met the next day at my place. In his last letter, he had asked me to show him where I lived. “I am so happy we shall finally meet,” he wrote; now we never would.

The FBI agent materialized behind me and put his hand on my shoulder as I watched the green lines on the black screen go flat. Doctors hurried in, rubber soles of their shoes making busy noises on the linoleum. In a furious phalanx that cut me out, they surrounded the bed and went to work on the body that lay on it.

“I’m sorry,” a doctor said. “You’ll have to go.”

“Is he dead?” I said. “Is he dead?” No one answered.

“Who would want to kill an ex-KGB general these days?” some news knucklehead with big hair chuckled knowingly as I wandered into the street outside the hospital. I needed a smoke. “Everybody,” I said to her. Go away, I thought. “Everybody.”

On the street, a camera crew lolled against a network truck, waiting hopefully; their lights were already up. Half a dozen blue and whites were parked along 12th Street, and up near Seventh Avenue a couple of barricades cut off the through traffic. Men in suits disembarked from limousines and cabs, were whisked into the hospital, the newsguys running alongside them, arms flailing, equipment aloft.

Trying not to yawn, young cops patrolled the perimeter, the boys scratching their brutal haircuts, the girls struggling to keep their hair up under their caps, weighed down with handcuffs, guns, nightsticks, and fatigue. I felt for them, but I couldn’t reclaim the young Artie Cohen from this footsore street life.

Then, out of one of the big cars, Sonny Lippert bounded energetically, racing towards the hospital. He saw me; Sonny never misses a trick.

“Artie, I’m sorry, man.” He was solemn. He pumped my hand like a man at a funeral.

“Yeah, well, thanks for letting me know, Sonny.” It had been Sonny Lippert’s voice on my answering machine telling me Ustinov was shot. A few weeks back, during some bonding built out of too many beers, I had confided to Sonny I was going to see Ustinov. It was a mistake.

“I’m a sweet guy,” he said.

Like me, Sonny was still wearing a tux; his was unwrinkled. He shook hands with half a dozen cops on the street. Sonny Lippert is plenty ambitious; he has a huge network of buddies and keeps it well oiled.

“I got to go in. I’m on the job, man. On this case, no one sleeps,” he said. Sonny works out of the Federal Prosecutor’s office now, and he takes an interest in anything

Russian, but he never lets you forget that he was a detective once. He wears attitude that says “I’m a real cop.”

“What office you running for, Sonny?” I once heard someone ask him and Lippert imploded with rage.

“Hey, Sonny, where’s the shooter?” I called out.

Sonny pushed me away from the cluster of cops, against the hospital wall.

“Where is he?”

“We lost him.”

“You lost him? You lost a Russian who shot a KGB general on a live television show in the middle of New York City?”

“How do you know the shooter’s a Russian?”

“My penetrating intellect.” I looked down at Sonny. “What happened?”

Sonny tugged at an imaginary crease in his jacket, as saliva formed around his mouth. This could be a big case.

“We don’t know. Security sucks. There was like this chaotic thing, you dig? Audience screaming. People on the floor. He walks out. He walks out of the studio. Disappeared. But what else do you know, Art? Huh?”

“Nothing at all, Sonny.”

Sonny went in, I crossed the street and found a piece of wall I could lean on outside an apartment building. I fumbled for cigarettes, hands numb.

A few yards away, leaning against the wall of a brownstone, was a woman, a leather bag dangling off her shoulder, a cigarette in her mouth. She had red hair. A female detective in uniform stood at the curb, watching her. The woman pushed the heavy red hair off her neck and looked in my direction.

“Can I borrow a light?” she said.

“Sure.”

I dug some matches out of my pants pocket, lit the cigarettes. She was almost as tall as me.

We stood for a minute, smoking, silent conspirators. It was a stinking summer night. The relentless low rumble of

thunder was never more than an impotent whimper, you could feel fights brew up all over the city, spiraling to the surface. Across Seventh Avenue, a few junkies dealt China White, a college kid pushed Prozac at a buck a pop. All around us, walkie talkies, police radios, cellular phones and self-importance crackled and buzzed in the city night air like crickets in the country. Somewhere a bottle shattered on the pavement.

"You're a cop," she said, pushing the hair off her neck again, twisting it nervously into a knot.

"Does it show?"

"Can you call off your guard dogs?" She nodded at the cop on the curb.

I shrugged. The waiting, the tension, the growing hangover from all the booze I'd drunk at the wedding made me glad for some distraction. "I don't have much clout these days."

"I'm Lily Hanes," she said. "It was my show. You understand? He died on my show."

"He's not dead yet," I said, but she didn't answer.

Lily Hanes had been sitting in for Teddy Flowers that night and I think she talked because she was scared and I was there and I'm good at listening. The pulse in her forehead made a blue vein stand out in the white skin and she licked her dry lips and talked and I waited for confirmation that Gennadi was dead.

"I really liked him a lot. I liked Ustinov. It was hot and I was nervous as hell, and he was nice."

I didn't say anything. She didn't want answers.

"Look, I'm a reporter, not a talk-show host. I was just Teddy's back-up. It was the end of the summer season. The ratings dry up like my Aunt Martha's skin in Boca Raton, you know? But it was a good gig for me. I was nervous. We were trying out this new studio space over by the meat market and I didn't know my way around. 'Think of the show as a dinner party.' Teddy always says that. 'Try to be a good

hostess, Lily,' Teddy says to me on the phone. He's out in Bridgehampton screwing around and telling me to make like Ivana Trump. I'm always surprised someone doesn't punch his face in."

"What about the audience?"

"They were restless. They come to see Teddy needle the guests. That's what makes it a hot ticket. It's like some Japanese game show. They like him cruel. They were disappointed he wasn't there."

"He sounds like a prick."

"Teddy is a prick."

She sucked her cigarette. I wanted to put my arm around her. She smelled of almonds; maybe it was her shampoo.

I said, "You think someone set Flowers up?"

"I set it up," she said wearily. "I did it."

"What?"

"Ustinov writes a book. A tell-all about the KGB. He's not exactly OJ or Chuck and Di, but he was a good catch for this time of year. What I remember is he spoke this wonderful English. We were in the make-up room and Babe—that's the make-up woman—is working him over and I ask him where he learned it. "At Harvard University, of course," he says. Of course. On an exchange program. "I was not the only KGB agent there, naturally." That's what he says. "I was not the only KGB agent there"."

"I know," I said to Lily Hanes.

"What?"

"Nothing. Go on," I said, but she was silent.

Outside St Vincent's at one in the morning, I was listening to this pretty woman with red hair, waiting for confirmation Gennadi Ustinov was dead and I was numb and excited at the same time. She pushed her hair back again and finally tied it in a ponytail with a rubber band.

"He was so charming." She put her hands over her face for a minute. "We kidded around. I asked if he had a KGB uniform under the bed. He said he preferred Brooks

Brothers, but he did have an Aston Martin with an ejector seat and an exploding fountain pen. A Mont Blanc. Naturally. We all laughed. Then he fucking drops dead on me."

She was trembling and I thought she was coming unglued. I got her inside the hospital where it was cool and we found a waiting room and sat on orange plastic chairs. A cleaning woman pushed her bucket in our direction and we held up our feet like obedient children so she could clean around us. The disinfectant stank of rotting apples and made me gag; it was the smell of mornings in Moscow, the smell of whatever they used to wash away the drunks' vomit.

"Please. Please try to remember. Who else was there?"

"There was this real angry Russian woman in the front row who wanted to stick it to the general. In sort of a peasant blouse thing. She had these tendons in her neck that stuck out, she was so mad. Like a chicken. I remember that."

"But on the panel?"

Lily rubbed her face. "What?"

"The other guests?"

"A Russian DJ or a record producer, something like that. Sverdloff. Big guy. He seemed OK. Smart. Also a stripper from one of those nightclubs in Brighton Beach. Olga was her name. She called herself Anna K." Lily laughed emptily. "I think Teddy dug her up. Or maybe I did. I can't remember. She whined a lot. Wanted her own dressing room. Tomas Saroyan. Made his money selling private health care. Other stuff, maybe diamonds. And Leonid Zalenko."

"The fascist?"

"I used to think New York City cops were fascists. Or Richard Nixon. I was a fool."

She got up restlessly, leaning her hip against a table that held only an empty coffee carton. Her skirt rode up over her thighs and they were silky and tan. She swallowed drily. "You think there's any soda around?"

In the background I was conscious of people milling, waiting, hushed. Ustinov would rate. A big player in the old

days, a parliamentary deputy under Yeltsin, he'd get dignitary status. In the waiting room, officials muttered in Russian and English and the orderlies washed the floor. I found a soda machine and got Cokes.

"Zalenko stank," Lily said. "Literally. He chewed garlic"

"Why's that?"

"Maybe to keep away the werewolves in Gorky Park," she said and rolled the cold Coke can on her neck, then swallowed the soda in two gulps. Scrabbling in her bag, Lily found some fossilized Juicy Fruit. Like a schoolgirl, she tore the stick of gum in half and offered it to me.

"Zalenko had an agenda. Ranting about Mother Russia. The West. Ustinov just backed off. He didn't like Crowe much, either."

"Crowe?"

"Gavin Crowe. British writer who lives in Moscow. The kind of guy who always knows everyone. Short. Bad teeth."

She was breathing hard, sweating badly. "He just fell on me."

"Are you OK?" I asked and she turned away girlishly.

"God, I'm so tired." She leaned back and closed her eyes.

"Who fell on you?"

"The show started, someone got up and pointed a gun."

"One shooter?"

"I think so. I can't be sure. I felt paralysed. Like those dreams where you can't stop someone from falling? Something heavy fell on me. It was covered in blood. It was Ustinov."

"What else?"

"Stuff people tell you about wars. People screaming." She fingered the pink jacket she carried; it was smeared with blood. She had come to the hospital without changing. "All I could think of was Jackie Kennedy's suit in Dallas." Finally, Lily put her head in her hands and cried. "You know what he said?"

"Go on."

“Ustinov knew I was nervous. During the opening commercial, we’re still off camera, he looks at me and he has these wonderful blue eyes and he puts his hand on my arm. He says: ‘They are warming up, I think. I think this is going to be quite a lot of fun,’ he says. It was going to be fun.”

Around five in the morning, maybe later, the FBI agent came into the waiting room and told me Ustinov had been declared dead officially.

I went back out to the street with Lily Hanes. A stale half light came up. Even at dawn it was stinking hot. The reporter was still waiting, chirpy and hard-eyed. “Who would want to kill a KGB general?” she kept asking.

Afraid to let go, I held Lily’s arm tight and she leaned into me wearily. I wanted her to hold me. I put my arm around her shoulders.

Suddenly she pulled away, like I was some guy she’d slept with and didn’t recognize in the morning.

“I just worked it out. You knew him, didn’t you? mean you really knew Ustinov. Before. Didn’t you?”

“Yeah, I knew him.”

Sweat ran down her neck as she wrapped her arms around her bag, clutching it as if to protect herself from me. She edged toward the curb and I felt like a criminal. I followed her.

“Let me take you home. You shouldn’t be alone,” I said idiotically.

“You knew him,” she said again.

“Come on.”

“I can manage.” She was angry. “I was born here.”

I reached for her arm, but she turned and ran down 12th Street. Before she went I saw in her eyes something I’d avoided for a long time: it was my own past.

Her voice cold as ice, she called out, “What the hell are you?”

When I dragged myself home around five in the morning, I was someone I barely knew. I was angry. Scared. I switched on the answering machine and there was a voice I didn’t recognize. It spoke a literate, purring Russian that made me feel my soul was being fingered. I switched it off; I didn’t want to hear from any Ivans.

On the morning news, commentators did a lot of self-aggrandizing analysis; on ABC, Vladimir Posner appeared and spoke some sense. All I took in was that Ustinov was dead. I hadn’t dreamed it. He was dead.

The smell of girls was still in my apartment, but not of joy. Automatically, I put Lily Hanes’ name and the address of the TV studio in my computer. It was morning. Through the building, there was the clatter of kids shouting, dogs barking, TVs playing, plumbing, sex; it was early September, still summer, and the windows were all open. Normally, I love the noise of the building coming to life. I ignored it all.

Inert, hungover, sitting in front of the TV, I barely heard Ricky come in. He had a cigarette hanging out of his mouth and a tray with a coffee pot on it. He had changed out of his wedding suit into gray sweats and he put the tray down on a table, poured some coffee, handed me a mug, and sat in the sling chair, one leg hooked over the arm.

“You OK, man?” Rick said quietly.

“I’m tired.”

“Have you eaten? You want some food?”

“No thanks. You heard?”

Ricky gestured at the set. “I saw the early news. I’m sorry, kiddo, I’m really sorry.” He tossed me a pack of smokes.

“You want to talk?”

“You think it could have been an accident?”

Ricky looked at me. “When birds fly outta my butt.”

“Sonofabitch survives the entire Cold War and gets knocked off on talk TV.” I needed some sleep. “Give me a couple hours,” I said and Ricky nodded. He’s a kid, but he has real emotional tact.

“I’m going,” he said. “Get some sleep. I’m here. We’re all here, OK?”

I got a beer from the fridge, trying to put things together in my head. I climbed out the window onto my fire escape and snapped a few withered leaves off the geraniums I had set out in pots; they were dying in the heat and the stench was bitter.

The phone rang, I scrambled back in and grabbed it. A man’s voice spoke in Russian. The same voice, oozing concern, imploring attention, demanding tribute. It drenched me like napalm.

“Wrong number.” I slammed the phone down.

It rang again. I let it ring. Sonny Lippert’s voice played into the answering machine: “I want to see you.”

“Not now, Sonny.”

“Today, detective. Today. Before five. My office. You hear me? You listening?”

I would have dragged myself over to the TV studio where he was shot, but it would be ass deep in people; it would take all day for the cops on the job just to interview the audience from *The Flowers Show*.

Although I was officially on leave that month, I called my own station house and got the boss and told him I might want to offer my assistance to the Sixth where the investigation was being run. He said it was fine as far as he was concerned, but Sonny Lippert had already got to him and asked for my help personally, and Sonny was an old buddy of the boss.

I took off my clothes, put some shorts on and crawled back out and up the fire escape to the roof where I keep my bike in a shed. My back against the rough boards, I could see the river. The city made itself up out of the sludgy

morning torpor, skyline sharpening up for business in spite of the murderous heat. I finished my beer and dozed.

Half asleep, I remembered that during the siege of Leningrad, when there was nothing else to eat, Gennadi's grandmother gave him wallpaper paste. "It wasn't bad, you know," he told me once when I was a kid. "It didn't taste that bad."

He survived all of it, the war, the Cold War, Stalin's wrath, Brezhnev's corruptions, Yeltsin's drunks, and ended up murdered on a TV talk show one hot night at the end of the summer, wearing his Brooks Brothers suit. For a million reasons, or, this being New York, none at all. But I didn't believe that.

Ustinov had written a book revealing how the KGB did business, but so had half the assholes in the former Soviet Union. There had to be something else. Already I could feel the answers were in Moscow. Already the knowledge made my flesh crawl. But I would think about that later.

I went back inside and sat at my desk in front of the open window. Dawn had put roses the color of apricots there the night before and they caught the light. On my desk was the transistor radio in the shape of a baseball Gennadi had given me when I was a kid and I picked it up and turned it in my hands. "What is Mets, Uncle Gennadi? What is Mets?"

If you grow up in Moscow, you get messed up remembering. When the KGB kicked my father out of his job, no one talked to me about it. No one said anything: it was a topic for grown-ups only. But, nights, I'd see my father's crumpled face through the kitchen door as he bent over the table, working out sums on tiny scraps of paper: how much was left, what we could afford; if they would take him away. Gennadi Ustinov disappeared from our lives, but no one mentioned it.

When my father died, I found the scraps of paper piled in his dresser drawer with his socks, the diminishing returns of

a ruined life in those little sums neatly written in his impeccable hand.

The years went by, the thing in the pit of my belly evaporated. It was over, I told myself. I had unloaded the past. I was never going back to Moscow. Not even close. Going back was like death.