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Red Hook

Reggie Nadelson

RED HOOK

REGGIE NADELSON

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To Richard David Story

RED HOOK

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.

Also available by Reggie Nadelson

FICTION

Bloody London

Skin Trade

Red Mercury Blues

Hot Poppies

Somebody Else

Disturbed Earth

NON-FICTION

Comrade Rockstar

Part One

1

“Blue skies, smiling at me, nothing but blue skies do I see.”

I was still half asleep early Sunday morning when I heard someone down in the street whistling “Blue Skies” and it was the kind of tune that ran through your head all day. I had heard it on and off for months now, most of the summer, the guy whistling so clear and pure.

I swung my legs over the edge of the bed and got up and, still naked, picked up some cigarettes, went to the window and pushed it open wider, then leaned out.

The light was just coming up in the sky, smudgy, pink, metallic. Below me, on the sidewalk, I saw him. He had on a neon orange work vest, blue pants and shirt and a baseball cap. Head down, he was shoveling garbage, pushing it along the curb with a broom into a gray plastic garbage can on wheels. He went on whistling “Blue Skies” and I watched him and listened, lit a cigarette and sat on the window sill of my place on Walker Street. It was late summer and hot out. I was happy.

I was getting married and I was as content as I’d ever been since I got to New York more than twenty-five years ago. The music was a good omen, so piercing and sweet, especially coming from the garbage guy; he probably worked for one of the community groups that hired the homeless to clean up what the city didn’t.

That was it: the sun coming up over the East River to my left; a hot bright day; the pavement swept clean, and the guy in the orange vest, whistling. I love the Stan Getz

recording of “Blue Skies” but this sound, the whistling so pure it was more like singing, somewhere between Mel Tormé and a hymn.

My cellphone went off. I listened to the message. Sid McKay had called me again. He had called the night before, had asked me to come out to Red Hook, said he was worried about something. I didn’t go, was caught up in my own plans, then felt bad. Now there was the urgent message. I looked at my watch. It was only seven. I could make it out to Brooklyn and back in plenty of time for the wedding. Sid had helped me out on a case that mattered to me a lot. He took a big risk to help me and he never asked for anything back. Sid was a friend, and I owed him.

I took a shower, put on some jeans and a T-shirt, went out to my car and headed for Brooklyn. The city was quiet so I took the Brooklyn Bridge instead of the Battery Tunnel, which was faster but cost eight bucks coming and going.

From the bridge, I cut across to the Expressway and down to Red Hook on the river. It took me fifteen minutes. Van Brunt, the main street, was deserted. Along with the squat two-story houses were a bagel store, a few delis, a barbershop, a liquor store, a place that did metalwork, a church and not much else. I drove down to the water.

The old docklands were silent Sunday morning, ancient as the city, full of its romance with the water, beautiful, serene in the early light glinting off the river.

The dead man in the inlet a few feet away from me, what I could see of him, was trapped under the rotting dock. Spreadeagled, legs drifting in the water, I heard someone say he looked like a Christ figure.

The old receiving dock in Red Hook ran alongside an inlet that fed out into the river. On one side of the inlet was an abandoned plant where sugar had been stored. On the other side was a long brick warehouse.

People stood in a row at the edge of the water, muttering to each other, staring in the same direction like people on the street looking at fancy TV sets in a store window. A pair of detectives were there along with a guy in uniform, a diver, his wetsuit glistening and black, and a department photographer. A bearded man in overalls and work boots with a dog on a leash stood a little apart from the others, probably just a passerby out walking his mutt.

I looked at the corpse again. I had been on my way to the brick warehouse where Sid had an office when I saw the flashing lights on a car near the inlet.

“How long has he been in the water?” I said to one of the detectives, her hands jammed in the pockets of a red cotton jacket.

She wore jeans and sneakers and she was chewing gum. I let her know I was a detective in the city, but not much more. I didn’t want to spell it out, or say where I worked. I’d been doing a lot of stuff on child crime, lousy stuff, people who abused kids and I didn’t talk about it if I didn’t have to.

“A while,” she said. “They’re saying maybe since last night some time, maybe, hard to tell until they get him out of there.”

While I was out drinking, I thought, while Sid was calling me and leaving messages.

“Any idea who he is?”

She shook her head. “Not yet. They been down in the water for an hour, trying to get him loose without chopping anything off.” She took off the thin red jacket and tied the sleeves around her waist. “Jesus, sometimes I hate this fucking job, you know? I hope they’re not going to cut him,” she added, gesturing to two men in yellow slickers who appeared from behind a truck holding bolt cutters and a saw, and a bag of other tools. They headed for the dock

where they crouched down and examined the body, what they could see of it.

The detective removed the gum from her mouth. “Fucking nicotine gum, tastes like crap,” she added. “You don’t happen to have any cigarettes, do you?”

I handed her my pack; she took one and gave it back.

“Thanks,” she said. “I don’t know what the hell I quit for anyhow. Thanks a lot.” She smiled and she was a pretty woman, not more than thirty-five, great smile, good figure.

“Sure,” I said. “You’ll be here for a while?”

“For you, anything.” She laughed, flirting, then walked towards the dock.

I didn’t want to stick around much while they chopped the guy free. I started over to the warehouse on the other side of the inlet, a couple of hundred yards from the dead body.

The building was divided up into studios and workshops, and I went through the main entrance, up a couple of flights and found Sid’s place. I banged on the door. There was no answer. I went back down.

A new cement pier, maybe half a mile long, ran along the front of the warehouse out into the basin. Phone in my hand I walked out on to the pier. I was uneasy now; I was edgy; where the hell was Sid at this hour? I looked at my watch. Eight a.m. Where did he go this early on Sunday morning? He had said he was here, at the office he kept in Red Hook.

I looked out at the water; the Statue of Liberty in front of me, lit up by the morning light, was a greenish color, maybe from the old copper facing.

Red Hook was a weird fat lip of land cut off from the rest of the city by a couple of highways that had been jammed through Brooklyn. It was a square mile of what had been

the biggest shipyards on earth, isolated, surrounded on three sides by water, but fifteen minutes from downtown Manhattan.

In the other direction, away from the city, was the long Brooklyn coast, the piers and warehouses and marinas that ran all the way to the Atlantic Ocean and the beaches that were the seacoast of New York. Out in the water, a yellow water taxi sped by.

Sid had been half crazy when he called me the day before. I opened my cellphone and played back the message I got this morning. On Saturday he had called me two, three times. Please come, Artie, he had said. Please can you come on out? I'd be grateful, he had said. Drop by, he said, as if it was a social invitation, then more urgent: Can you hurry? Hurry!

Where are you? I'd said. A Mexican place, he said. Over on Columbia, corner of Van Brunt, you can't miss it. I can't come, I said. I can't, Sid. I'm getting married tomorrow. I'll call someone for you. He kept calling anyway, rambling, talking about the restaurant where he was, talking about some homeless guy he was scared of. I'm afraid, he had said. I'm scared.

All that Saturday afternoon, Sid McKay sat out on the roof deck of the Mexican restaurant on Columbia Street, sipping beer as he watched the river turn to liquid tin. He had the iPod his son sent him and for a while he listened to some music, a little Mahler, some Schubert and Gershwin. Above the river, the city was stacked up on itself, like Mayan ruins.

Sid had dropped in to the bar downstairs for a beer, then come up to the deck for lunch. He sat on after everyone was gone, drinking cold beer, reading, a stack of books and newspapers and folders in front of him on the table.

No one bothers him up here. Shutting his eyes for a minute, soaking in the last of the sun, he feels at home. Sid's a regular. He knows the guy who built the place. Sid knows the bartender, the waiters. It's his neighborhood. In some strange way, he feels altogether more at ease with himself these days, in a way he never has, not in his whole striving, ambitious, screwed-up life, though he's aware how febrile he is, how his mood can change like a fever rising, then cooling down.

Sid's wearing shorts, something he never does out of the house, but it's a hot day and he came out in khaki shorts and an old green tennis shirt. There's no one much to see him. Anyone still left in the city is heading out to the beach. You can hear the silence.

The end of summer. The city emptying out like a drain. The Republicans are coming into town for their convention. Life in the times of George W. Bush, Sid thinks. A lot of praying. Lot of propaganda in the news. The Republicans are coming. The invasion, he thinks.

He looks out at the water again. Like everyone else, Sid's eye is first caught by the vacancy in the sky. Can't help it. Like your tongue finding the missing tooth. Three years next week since the Twin Towers went down. Three years since everything changed.

He takes off his reading glasses, gets up and leans out over the railing, craning his neck to catch a glimpse of Liberty in the harbor; he's still plenty sentimental about the view he's been looking at his whole life. If you go downstairs and across the street and over to the edge of the water, you can look Liberty dead in the eye. Governor's Island, too, and the Buttermilk Channel in-between.

The history of this area of Brooklyn, of the old docklands, its images occupy Sid's mind like antique woodcuts: in them he sees the ships and warehouses, the

sailors, the carts and horses, and the women who once walked the channel, muslin caps on, long dresses hitched up around their waists, carrying wooden pails of fresh milk; the channel so shallow that they could walk across it in the time it took for the milk to turn to buttermilk.

What was Brooklyn like, he always wonders, when Walt Whitman was the editor of the original *Brooklyn Eagle?* When this was a separate city, the third biggest in America, alive with people protesting slavery, abolitionists raising their fists and Whitman urging people to stand up for the "stupid and crazy", to be invulnerable to fear. And there have always been black men in Brooklyn, men like him he thinks, too, half proud, half sardonic. Arms still on the railing of the deck, Sid polishes off his third beer.

There's even been talk of reviving the *Eagle,* the great newspaper. People talked about Pete Hamill, of course, also of Brooklyn, for editor. Once, Sid would have liked a shot at editing it himself.

Sid grew up in Brooklyn, has lived here all his life, not near the docks, of course, which were forbidden. The waterfront was dangerous when he was a kid.

It excites him, though, the way this part of Brooklyn is coming back. Out of the wreckage, he thinks. It is thrilling, people coming in, everyone wanting a piece of the action. Developers prowl Red Hook's streets these days, wanting in, and some of them call Sid because he knows his way around; they wheedle and plead for information. The historian, the philosopher, the poet of Red Hook, Sid has seen himself described in a magazine article.

Laughing to himself, leaning against the railing for support, he gathers up his books: Pushkin short stories, biographies of Walt Whitman and Paul Robeson. Real poets. Collectively, they are Sid's bible. He puts the books in the worn green book bag and tries to reclaim the scrubbed boy

who bought the bag decades before as a Harvard freshman. Sid puts in the folders that are full of his own notes.

Still standing, he looks down at the street and he sees him. Sees him again. Sees the homeless man and feels panic. The sight rips into Sid's reverie. His mood changes. He grasps his cellphone.

He calls Artie Cohen again to say where he is, what he sees. Artie doesn't answer.

He's already called Artie once, or maybe twice, that morning when he saw the homeless man near his building, the man watching his windows. In spite of the heat, a chill ripples along the skin of Sid's arms. The man has been around before: a week earlier, he walked up to Sid, hand out, begging. Crossing the street, Sid pretended he was in a hurry, not giving the man a second look. I should have helped him. I should have given him a buck, he thinks now. He dials the phone again.

Artie answers. Artie? Can you come? Drop by? He makes it as casual as he can, but he's scared.

I can't come, Artie tells Sid. I'm getting married tomorrow. Sunday. I'm sorry, Sid, he says and reminds him he's invited to the party. Sunday night, he says. Tomorrow. Come on into the city.

Sid won't go to Artie's wedding, though, not a party with strangers. Once maybe, when he was a pretty famous guy, when he worked at the *Times,* when he showed up on TV, and knew people and went to parties every night, but not now.

They were pretty close, him and Artie, and he tries not to feel resentful at his not coming to Brooklyn. When Artie worked cases that interested Sid and he was covering the city, they had seen a lot of each other. They kept in touch. They helped each other out. But Sid can't face a crowd.

I used to love it, Sid thinks; I loved parties, I went to all of them, knew everyone, always up for a good time. I was a lot younger. I'm sixty-five years old and retired, and I don't like parties much.

Sid thinks: who else can I call? He doesn't trust any other cops the way he trusts Artie Cohen.

Over the river, the sun's getting ready to slam itself down into the water in an outrageous splashy New York sunset. Sid puts some money on the table, tries to laugh, tries to feel detached, ironic, but he looks down at the sidewalk again, searching for the homeless guy.

It's getting late. It's September, the melancholy time of year he hates because it starts getting dark early. Already, though Sid has barely noticed, people are settling in at the other tables around him on the deck, inspecting menus, ordering food and drinks.

Sid picks up the cane he's been using since he hurt his ankle playing tennis, an old walking stick made out of sassafras wood, he gathers up his book bag, then begins to limp towards the stairs, still regretting he lost his favorite stick long ago, the Jimmy Carter peanut-head stick he got when he covered Carter's presidency. He's too vain to use the aluminum cane the hospital gave him, and he knows it.

In the bar, Sid orders a last beer. He gets a pack of cigarettes, something he hasn't done for years and, bag over his shoulder, heads for the street.

Unwrapping the cellophane, feeling it crackle, smelling the tobacco, he lights up like a kid sneaking a smoke. It tastes great.

Looking up and down the street, Sid waits anxiously in the doorway of the restaurant, but the homeless guy has gone. The street lights are on. People drift into the restaurants along the block.

It’s fine out, a balmy evening and Sid sets off to walk the mile or so back to his place, leaning hard on the cane, but enjoying the cigarette, the night air. He passes close to the Marine Terminal, and the vast desolate lots for impounded cars, all of it butting up against the water.

“I was a fool to be worried,” he says and realizes he’s said it out loud. “Old fool.” He tosses away the cigarette.

On Coffey Street he walks across the little park and out on to the new pier. Halfway, his ankle begins to throb and Sid stops short, sits down hard on a bench. It’s a few minutes from his place. Somehow he loses track of time and nods off.

A few minutes later, Sid’s eyes snap open. His nerve endings feel raw. Someone close by is watching him. He gets up, brisk now, walking as fast as he can towards his building, and then realizes he’s heading right for it, whatever it is, because he can smell it. He smells the stink.

He smells the guy before he sees him, then he hears the voice, whining, asking for change. The man is in front of him, coming closer.

Change, the guy says softly, got any change? A dollar? Fifty cents? I’m hungry, man. Please.

It’s the same man Sid has seen before. His own height and color. Medium brown, but ashen from booze and drugs. Inside the layers of rags and filth is a human being who looks like him. He can tell that the man knows it, too.

Eyes gluey with glaucoma, thickened by cataracts, the man peers into Sid’s face. A kind of dim surprise registers. He reaches out a hand. Sid keeps moving.

See you around, the guy mumbles in a drugged daze, and looks at him again and Sid feels that in the man he can see his own death.

Stop, Sid says to himself. Cut the melodrama. Then he wishes, for the second time that night, he’d given the man

some money.

Before he finally disappears, the man circles Sid one more time, leaving his stink, like an animal marking out territory.

2

“You have any idea what color he was, the dead guy?” I said to the detective in the red jacket who was still near the water when I got back from Sid’s warehouse.

“Watch it,” she yelled and grabbed my sleeve. “Jesus, you almost fell the fuck in,” she said.

I said again, “You have any idea? His color, I mean. White? Black?”

“Black. I think someone said he was black. I heard them say. One of the guys got a look. Why?”

I felt cold. “How long is this going to take?”

“Give it half an hour. You OK?”

I passed her my cigarettes again and for a few minutes we stood and smoked and I looked across the inlet at a ten-story metal cone where sugar cane had been stored when it came off the ships. I’d read somewhere that Ferdinand Marcos owned it once, him or his cousin, or some other Filipino con man.

The place was derelict. Fire had reduced the machinery, the chutes, gears, wheels and slides that had serviced the cone, to a mass of burnt twisted metal.

The detective looked at the inlet.

“Poor bastard was probably in the wrong place at the wrong time. There’s not much crime around here anymore. I bet he was all boozed up and fell the fuck in.”

She said she’d lived around here her whole life and had seen plenty of crime, especially after the shipping moved

out to the big container ports over in Bayonne.

“Jersey,” she added contemptuously.

She could remember when there were crack deals on every block, people squatting in abandoned buildings, using them for toilets, gunfire all night. When she was still a kid, the school principal had been gunned down in broad daylight.

“Used to be a bucket-of-blood kind of place,” she said. “People dumped their shit by the water, they even tossed out their dead cats, garbage guys would come once a week and scoop it up.”

Times were better, she added, the waterfront getting developed, a supermarket coming in, even Ikea sniffing around.

“Red Hook is now officially cool.” She grinned. “People fighting over real estate. Artists moving in. They’re planting parks along here in front of the old warehouses. It’s good,” she said. “It’s OK. My pop would have died laughing. He was a longshoreman, old school.” She crossed herself and threw her half-smoked cigarette into the water. “You know something about the dead guy? You have an interest?”

I nodded.

A police photographer I hadn’t seen before, in a vest with neon yellow stripes, darted in front of me, trying to get a good angle on the dead man in the water. It struck me: there was a lot of manpower.

“You always get so many people out here like this?” I said.

“I was thinking the same thing. Fucking beats me how there’s so much attention,” she said. “I mean the Republican convention coming to town, every fucking law enforcement person doing double, triple time getting ready for the politicians, and you get a bunch of people out by the

docks in Red Hook crack of dawn Sunday? Someone with connections must have been interested."

"Yeah."

"Boy, I'm glad this summer is almost over, what did they call it, Summer of Risk?" She grinned sarcastically. "Now all of us are supposed to cancel our vacations, and go guard rich Republicans and the rich assholes giving them a kazillion dollars. Not to mention the fucking protestors. You ever been around one of those political events?"

I shook my head.

"I was down in Houston once, first Bush, Bush the father, not Junior, not the shrub. I was a kid just starting college, and it was something. There was like nutjob Christians throwing plastic fetuses at people because they hate abortions and there was some really rich ladies, I never saw such big diamonds, and it was like hot, like a hundred and fifty degrees. Never mind, where was I?" she said. "We got a system where only rich people get elected, and no one even cares, you know? I mean I'm for law and order, and I'm for capital fucking punishment, and I want to kill every terrorist bastard myself, with my bare hands if I had my way, I mean I think we should just like cull them, you know? Like animals. But it doesn't mean I like rich people stealing from me either, and I don't like seeing American soldiers abuse prisoners in Iraq, I mean what the hell are we, you know? They keep telling us, get over it, get over it, things are better, and then they crank up the fear, and I think: what the fuck are they doing?" She shrugged. "I just wish they'd fucking let us alone, bastards in DC who don't give us a nickel for security."

Everyone was pretty pissed off at the constant change of alert levels by Homeland Security. Red, Yellow, Orange. Everyone was fed up because New York got a lousy deal on federal dollars for security.

I said, “Yeah, Feds.”

She laughed. “Don’t know shit from Shinola as my grandma used to say, right? They could come to New York once in a while, but they sit on their fat asses out there in DC and we never see anything. You read that last FBI bulletin with what they call indicators associated with suicide bomb attacks?”

Distracted, thinking about who I could call, and where the hell Sid was, I nodded. You could almost always get help from another cop in New York if you made conversation about how ludicrous the Feds were.

She said. “I love the part about how you should look out for ‘Sweating, mumbling prayers or unusually clammy and detached behavior.’ Or wearing disguises. Or the chemical odor. Sounds like every asshole that rides the subway. Chemical odor? My kid got plenty of chemical odor, you know? It’s called weed, you know? I come home I smell chemical odor. Some War on Terror. Why don’t they take a look around the ports, you know? You could bring a radioactive elephant in and no one would notice. You need anything I can help you with, apart from waiting until they get the dead guy up?” She put up her hands, palms out, and shrugged. “Nothing’s over, you know?” she said. “Hello? You OK? You were on a different planet, man.”

“Yeah, I know. I’m sorry. How much longer until they get the body out of the water?”

“Like I said, give it half an hour maybe.” She put her hand on my arm. “So if you wanted, one night I could take you to one of the Republican shindigs, you get tons of free drinks and food and stuff. Good stuff. I heard one place they were serving Chateau fucking Lafite and Kobe steaks, you know? I can always get assigned to this stuff, I’m a woman, I’m Hispanic, you know.” She smiled and put out her hand. Her nails were bright pink. “Clara Fuentes,” she said.

“Yeah, thanks,” I said and introduced myself. “Not this year, but thanks.”

“You’re taken, right? I’m not surprised. Sure,” she said, then got a card out of her pocket, scribbled her home number and her cell on it, handed it to me, and added, “If ever.”

“Thanks.” I started to turn away.

“Hey.”

I turned around.

“Take it easy,” she said.

*

I walked along the inlet away from the corpse to where a few small boats were tied up. I didn’t like boats much. All the times I had gone fishing, I loved it, but I was always scared, so I drank plenty of beer and concentrated on the fish. Also, I was a lousy swimmer. I almost drowned off Coney Island when a girl—a sad Russian girl trying to make a life and failing—walked into the waves and I couldn’t save her.

Trouble was that I loved being near the water. I loved the city waterfront. It was one of the things that had seduced me about New York from the beginning. But boats scared me.

All the time I was waiting, I could see the guys down in the water now, trying to free the corpse, still setting up to chop off the dead guy’s arms, but hesitant.

It came back to me, the little girl who was murdered out by Sheepshead Bay on a case I did. Everyone thought it was a copycat at first, a repeat of an old cold case where another little girl got cut into pieces by a monster who was still out there. I didn’t want to think about it. It wasn’t related.

For maybe the sixth time in half an hour, I tried Sid's phone and tried not to listen to the sound of the saw. Saw on flesh, on bone. A small whirring noise in the quiet morning when the only other sound was a lone tug that hooted out on the sun-drenched river.

"Artie? It's Artie, right?" It was Clara Fuentes, the detective, and she was yanking my arm. "I'm not supposed to say anything, but you obviously got an interest, and I heard someone who was down in the water say it definitely was a black guy, and also about sixty years old, maybe seventy, far as they can tell, I just heard, one of the guys went down under the pier and said best he could see was he'd been in the water, the black guy that is, a while, hours anyhow. Can't tell if he just sucked up water, or there was booze or drugs."

"Jesus."

"Yeah."

I said, "Anyone been around this morning? You notice anyone passing by? Locals?"

She shook her head. "I've been here all the time; except for the guy with the dog, and a couple of other residents we all know, not a lot of people coming out, and if they did we kept them way back. Who did you have in mind?"

I thought about Sid. "It doesn't matter. What else?"

"You look like shit. You need to sit down? You think you knew this guy?"

My hands were shaking. "Yeah, something like that," I said, sure now that it was Sid. He was dead. He had called me. I didn't go.

"It's the stink, you know?" she said. "Even when you can't smell it you think you can, right?"

I nodded and dug out my cigarettes. The pack was empty.

I went to the deli over on Van Brunt Street where I bought a fresh pack, cracked it open, held one in my fingers while I ordered some coffee, then stood and drank it staring at bags of pork rinds and potato chips and boxes of cookies with labels in Spanish. I tried to keep calm, keep focused.

Over the counter were a couple of signs offering specials on “Swis Chez samwiches” and “Hot Kanish”. New York English had become a different language, and I laughed, thinking of the foodies who, driven by nostalgia, thronged East Houston Street on weekends for a real knish at Yonah Schimmel’s. Me, I couldn’t stand any kind of knish.

New York had the biggest immigrant population since the 1920s. Four out of ten people in the city born somewhere else. Like me. I swallowed some more coffee.

Standing in the store, wondering, like I always did, why they bothered putting ridges in the potato chips, I half listened to a conversation between the deli guy, a squat man with a pointy nose wearing a Mets shirt, and a customer, a woman with white hair and a shopping cart.

It surprised me that they were speaking Russian. Russians had moved out from Brighton Beach across Brooklyn, into the immense flat interior of Flatbush, like Muscovites moving out across the steppes. I didn’t think they’d moved as far as Red Hook.

At the deli, the conversation in Russian was about how gas prices were killing everyone that summer, and even if you drove to Jersey they screwed you, and about how developers were coming into Red Hook and there would be jobs for working people like them, finally, unless the artists fucked them over.

I finished the coffee and tossed the carton in a garbage can, and went back to the waterfront. I hoped like hell they were finished getting the dead guy out of the water. It was almost nine.

3

They were already loading a couple of rubbery black body bags by the time I got back to the inlet, zipping them up, piling them in an ambulance that had arrived. The corpse was gone. Disappeared into the bags. Body parts, maybe. I didn’t know. One bag for each. More respectful, I heard someone say. Each what? Arm? The rest of him? His head?

I remembered suddenly how they bagged body parts in Israel. After every bomb blast, you saw them. The kind of blast that killed my father on a bus he took regularly to his chess games. Wrong bus. They got the wrong bus. It had been intended for a different bus on a different route. When I got there, there were limbs on the street, and the religious crews had moved in. They collected the pieces. They had special bags. Religious Jews gave body parts a burial: even if you got a limb amputated, even a little piece of finger, they gave it a funeral. Otherwise, someone told me, you’d make a lousy show in heaven or wherever the fuck people supposedly went. Which was nowhere. You didn’t go any place. You were just dead.

In Brooklyn, in the heat, I thought I could smell the bags. It was boiling now. I was sweating.

“It was supposed to be me, I think,” a voice said and I turned around and saw Sid McKay standing at the edge of the dock, leaning on a cane with one hand, a shopping bag in the other. “You look surprised, Art. Maybe you thought it *was* me,” he said.