RANDOM HOUSE eBOOKS

Comrade Rockstar

Reggie Nadelson

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About the Book

Dean Reed was an American singer who became the biggest rock star in the history of the Soviet Union. He was so famous his icons were sold alongside those of Josef Stalin. Yet few people in the West had ever heard of him. Reggie Nadelson first saw Reed on a TV chat show in 1986; six weeks later he was found dead in a lake in East Berlin. Was he murdered by the CIA? The KGB? A jealous husband? Nobody knew.

Commissioned to write a film about him, Nadelson chased the mystery of his life and death across America and Eastern Europe, her own journey mirroring his. For a quarter of a century, from 1961 to 1986, Dean Reed, with his guitar on his back, Dean Reed took the music with him. He played 32 countries; his albums went gold from Bulgaria to Berlin. The Russians gave him a Lenin Prize. He was their American.

Comrade Rockstar is not just the story of Dean Reed's progress from Hollywood starlet to Cold War Cowboy, but an account of a search that took Reggie Nadelson from Denver to Berlin, and from Hawaii to Moscow. As she travelled, the Berlin Wall was breached and Dean Reed became an increasingly alluring figure, his life an unrepeatable tale from the Cold War world.

Encountering the characters who peopled Dean Reed's world, she was drawn into the seedy, sometimes moving, often hilarious sub-culture, of sex, politics and rock 'n' roll . . .

About the Author

A journalist and documentary filmmaker, Reggie Nadelson is a native New Yorker who also makes her home in London. She is the author of six novels, five featuring the detective Artie Cohen (“the detective every woman would like to find in her bed” — *Guardian*): *Hot Poppies, Red Mercury Blues, Sex Dolls, Bloody London, and Disturbed Earth*.

Comrade Rockstar

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arrow books

To Leslie Woodhead

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Introduction

More than anything, this is a tale from the Cold War. It began for me on a Sunday night at home in New York in April, 1986. I was only half-watching as *60 Minutes* began and the little clock on the logo went tick-tick-tick and the title of the piece came up on the TV screen. “The Defector”, it was called, and then there was Mike Wallace in shot, describing the piece, his voice familiar, resonant; no one in America has a more hypnotic voice than Mike Wallace, and he was talking about a rock star named Dean Reed. I’d never heard of Dean Reed.

The man in the frame now was tall, slim, and improbably handsome, all that thick good hair, the blue eyes, the juicy lips and promiscuous smile, and he was strumming a guitar and singing “Heartbreak Hotel” fit to bust.

I couldn’t take my eyes off him. What made it so intriguing was that Reed appeared to be an all-American boy, yet he was in Red Square, being mobbed by Soviet fans, people plucking at his clothes, throwing flowers, begging for autographs – and this during the Cold War. People gazed at him adoringly and behind this big American, a man whose presence was obviously so addictive, so adhesive that everyone wanted a piece, was the Kremlin, heart of the Evil Empire, as Ronald Reagan who was President at the time called it. By now I was crouched near the TV set, transfixed.

The scene shifted as Wallace sketched in the life. Born in Wheat Ridge, Colorado, in 1938, Dean Reed was an American kid with an itch for stardom. At twenty, he set out for Hollywood to try his luck. He had a nice singing voice and he looked great. One of his tunes went gold in Latin

America and Reed, always restless, headed south. In Chile, he became a superstar. He also saw the misery in which most people he met lived, and he got politics. By then it was the Sixties and, like millions of other young Americans, Reed was ripe for conversion.

“Come with me, Dean Reed,” said a talent scout from Moscow, who heard him sing at a peace conference in Helsinki. He took Dean back to Moscow and made him a star in the Soviet Union, where tens of thousands of kids thronged to his concerts. Dean, they shouted, Dean Reed!

He sang “Rock around the Clock”, he did the Twist in Minsk, he touched people and made them touch each other, and he radiated good health and good looks. His voice wasn’t much, but he could carry a tune and whack a guitar, and all of it electrified the audience.

On my TV screen now was a sea of young Russian kids, prim in their white blouses and Young Pioneer scarves, and Dean among them, giving off body heat so potent you could almost feel it through the television. And at his feet, the girls swooning, blushing, throwing red carnations and their neckerchiefs, as he swiveled his narrow hips and preached peace and love, offering them sex and politics and rock and roll all tied up together.

For almost twenty years, he held the East in thrall. He was their American – their first.

“He was the embodiment of the whole country’s dream about America,” said a young woman in Moscow. “He came and was a smashing success,” a Soviet official said. “He became a celebrity. Here it was like it was with the Beatles for that time in England.” A fan I met in a Moscow record shop said, “The girls, young girls, are crying, just crying, ‘Dean Reed! Dean Reed!’”

Reed’s albums went gold from Berlin to Bulgaria. He made cowboy movies, Eastern Westerns with stand-in Indians cast in Uzbekistan. He played the radical circuit, too – South

America and the Middle East. He sang “Ghost Riders in the Sky” to Yasser Arafat.

Dean Reed settled in East Berlin, where he married an East German movie star, but he kept his American passport and he filed his tax return annually with the Internal Revenue Service. In fact, he was not technically a defector at all. He called himself an American patriot.

Hard to remember now that, even in 1986, the USSR was still Communist – Gorbachev had been in power only a year – and the rest of Eastern Europe still practically invisible behind the Iron Curtain. It is hard to remember how amazing this seemed: An American rocker in Red Square. Fans clinging to him, throwing flowers.

“Dean was as big a star over there as I’d ever seen anywhere,” said an American friend who visited him in the East. “We were never anywhere without him being recognized. Every child, every old lady, everybody knew him.”

Artemy Troitsky, Russia’s premier rock critic, remembered, “His name was everywhere. Our dear American friend, Dean Reed, was on TV. He was on radio. He was in the papers. His mug was even on paper bags.”

Six weeks after I saw the piece about Dean Reed on *60 Minutes*, I saw his obituary in the *New York Times*. It was a short obit down the page that I wouldn’t have noticed if I hadn’t seen *60 Minutes*. Drowned in the lake behind the house in suburban East Berlin where he lived, the obituary said. I wanted more.

It was 1986, the Berlin Wall was still up, and information was hard to come by. I started making phone calls. Looking for people who had known Reed. Getting hold of clips from foreign newspapers. Waiting. Obsessing. After a while, a tiny trickle of material about Reed’s mysterious death turned into a stream of speculation. Nothing firm. Nothing satisfying.

“Accidental death by drowning” was the official East German report, but the follow-up stories concluded that this was pretty fishy. Dean Reed had been an excellent swimmer. He was in great shape. He was only forty-seven.

The Cold War. Rock and Roll. Sex and Death! I was pretty sure that Dean Reed, the life, the way he died, had the potential for a great movie. I tried it out on Leslie Woodhead, a director at Granada Television who had worked in Eastern Europe a lot and a rock fan who had made the *Stones in the Park* with the Rolling Stones. I told him the story and it took him about two minutes to commission a drama-documentary.

Then came a year and a half of research and, though the drama-documentary never happened, I wrote this book.

The Berlin Wall was still up and information at a premium. Rumors ran wild. All kinds of people came out of the woodwork: people who had known Reed, or met him once, or slept with him, or said they did. Because Dean Reed was dead before I began, the tales were as often about the tellers, people whose lives were changed, made thrilling or terrible – or both – by their connection with Dean Reed.

For every event, personal and political, there were at least two versions, sometimes three or four or five. Some people were difficult to reach or didn’t want to talk. My own obsession was with the East and the Soviet Union. For that reason some of the people, Reed’s first wife Patty, his daughter Ramona, who were extremely important to him, barely appear here.

This isn’t a conventional biography; it isn’t really a biography at all. I think of it as a kind of travel book through a now half-lost time and place. Most of it was written on the hoof between the end of 1987 and 1990. My search for Dean Reed took place at the end of the Cold War, as the socialist empire cracked up and the monolith began to topple like those statues of Lenin pulled down by the crowds in Moscow.

From the moment in June 1986 when I saw Dean Reed's obituary, I followed his ghost, trailing the evidence, mired in the big rich fruitcake of a life, Dean moved through it singing "Bye-Bye Love" with Phil Everly in East Berlin and Woody Guthrie songs on the Siberian Express, and making spaghetti westerns with Yul Brynner. He was part Forrest Gump, part political hustler, part American hero.

Comic, triumphal, tragic, incredible, here were all the things about the East that I'd never read in any newspaper, these tales about music and style and sex and teenage life, about what rock and roll meant to them, about what the Beatles meant in the USSR. Above all, here was the story of the yearning for the West. Here was a Cold War sideshow invested in one handsome American boy from Colorado who, guitar on his back, struck out in search of fame and fortune and found it on the other side of the world. And even after I had finished this book and Leslie Woodhead made a BBC documentary based on it, the story stuck to my life. In 1999, I got a call from Hollywood.

"I've sold your book to Tom Hanks," my agent said.

And it was true, as it turned out, and eventually I met Tom Hanks, but that came later.

It is fifteen years now since the Berlin Wall came down on November 9, 1989. Fifteen years! So it seems like a good time to take another look at Dean Reed. After the Berlin Wall fell, I was able to track down information about Dean Reed that I couldn't access before. Otherwise most of this book appears as it originally did in 1991, things as I saw them on the road in those astonishing years.

Looking back, what I feel most now is how exciting it was as late as the late 1980s: the still thrilling, still terrifying crossing over the Berlin Wall, the look behind the Iron Curtain, the sudden contact with the so-called enemy and the realization that, for many, all they wanted was our music. Give us rock and roll! Dean Reed gave it to them.

Here was a guy who lived at the intersection of East and West, them and us. It was the crossing over that gave Dean Reed glamour, and made him Comrade Rockstar.

Reggie Nadelson
New York
November, 2004

One

1

DEATH IN BERLIN FOR DEFECTOR WHO CHANGED HIS TUNE

MYSTERY OF POP STAR IN LAKE: IT WAS MURDER SAYS MANAGER

DEAN REED, THE SINGER WHO WENT EAST AND THEN WANTED
TO COME IN FROM THE COLD

THE CRUMPLED NEWSPAPER cuttings dated June, 1986 were in my bag as I climbed up the viewing platform near Checkpoint Charlie and looked down at the Berlin Wall. It was the first day of my search for Dean Reed, how he died, and who he was; most of it lay on the other side of the Wall that split the world for as long as I could remember. It was November, 1988.

Down a jumble of gray streets fifteen minutes from the center of West Berlin, the Berlin Wall wasn't marked on a lot of Berlin maps, but it felt like the border of the world. Whenever I heard the phrase "Iron Curtain", in my mind's eye I always saw the Berlin Wall.

I saw it for real now, in front of me, this curtain of fortified concrete, eight feet high, twenty-nine miles long, topped with balls of barbed wire, covered on the Western side with graffiti, splattered in the East with blood. I was on my way to the other side, to East Berlin, where Dean Reed lived and died, to see his house, to find his albums, to try to get a sense of who he was, this man who had haunted my dreams since I had first seen him on *60 Minutes*.

Dean Reed's death had been the subject of plenty of speculation. It was variously believed that he had been

murdered by the East German Stasi, the KGB, the CIA, and neo-Nazis.

From the top of the viewing platform at Checkpoint Charlie, I could see not just the Berlin Wall but the other side. I looked at the unsmiling border guards in a watchtower peering through binoculars at the tourists, who looked back through their cameras. Between us was the dead zone of no-man's-land. A few months later, a twenty-two-year-old waiter jumped over the Wall because he could no longer wait, and he was shot dead. He was the last person to die there.

On the platform near me, a West German woman was showing the Wall to an English friend. Turning to me, she said, "Do you think they shall take this down? They are sometimes talking so."

"I hope so. Wouldn't it be great?!" I exclaimed.

She smiled knowingly, tucked her beautifully cut blonde hair behind her pink shell of an ear, and shouldered her Gucci bag.

"If they take it down, there will be trouble," she said. "First Turks shall come over, and then German nationals. These East Germans shall take our jobs. They will invade our department stores."

That's what really got to her: if they dismantled the Wall, the East Germans might charge into the KaDeWe, denuding it of most of its 400 varieties of sausage and all of the handbags. She didn't have to worry. Two years later, on the Sunday in November when the Wall was sliced open and East Germans raced into the West, the *New York Times* reported: "The big department stores such as KaDeWe were closed, despite recently passed legislation that would have allowed them to stay open."

"You know what I am thinking?" she asked.

"What?"

"If the East Germans take the Wall down, we in the West will have to build another."

I climbed down from the platform and got back in the car.

The line of cars moved slowly into the border crossing. Leslie Woodhead, who was hoping to make a drama-documentary out of the Dean Reed story, was with me on this first trip East and I was glad. He had worked in Eastern Europe a lot and I figured he was knowledgeable when it came to doing business in Communist countries. As we pulled into the crossing proper, passing from West to East, then stopped, a man pushed a little mirror on wheels underneath the car in front of us.

"The spy's carpet sweeper," Leslie said.

My stomach turned over as we edged forward. A pale border guard put his head out of his cubicle like a jack-in-the-box and stared into the car. I had never been to the East before, but I'd seen all the movies.

The building where you showed your passport reminded me of a drive-through confessional; the young soldier, like an angry priest, snatched my passport, then snapped his window shut, leaving us to wait without any identity under a sickly white light in no-man's-land.

Eventually, the guard returned our passports and we bought day visas inscribed on what felt like cheap toilet paper, stiff, slick, brown, foreign.

Creep, I thought silently. "Have a nice day," I said, and the guard looked startled.

Whenever Dean Reed went through Checkpoint Charlie, though, he apparently always said "hi" to the guards, and Hans, or Heinz, or Hermann, whoever was on guard duty, would go home and say, "Dean Reed passed by today." He was so famous that for years you could just write DEAN REED, EAST BERLIN on a postcard and it would get to him.

The empty streets that led away from the border were full of potholes. The walls of the dank gray buildings that lined the roads were still pocked with shell marks from a war that had been over for more than forty years. I was expecting posters

with socialist slogans or banners or stylized graphics of Lenin's head, but here there were none. There were only the crappy streets with half the streetlights broken, crumbling buildings stained by the insistent rain, and shop windows that featured maybe a sparkly nylon blouse or a can of Spreewald pickles or some fancy china no one wanted. Still there was something thrilling about it, about being here; I had crossed the Berlin Wall. How could I have known then that, in two years' time, the Wall would be a pair of earrings in Bloomingdale's?

"I want a Dean Reed record, please," I said to the clerk at the Melodia record shop on the Leipzigerstrasse, where "Winter Wonderland" was playing. The saleswoman, who had thick ankles and thick glasses, ignored me. I shouted at her the way you do when you don't speak a language and feel that if you say it loud enough in English someone will understand.

"Dean Reed, please. *Bitte*?" I added and pointed vaguely at the albums.

"Winter Wonderland" was more her sort of thing. It was the most popular song in East Germany that year except for "Baa Baa Black Sheep". "Oh Tannenbaum" was also high on the charts, but it was almost Christmas.

"Dean Reed, Dean Reed," I insisted, my voice rising. A man with a little green fedora shot me a disapproving look.

"Shhh," he hissed.

The woman with thick glasses turned away impatiently, nodding brusquely towards the door, and so I began to speculate that, even dead, Dean Reed was a non-person, a subject not for discussion in this country where you could not discuss much, not out loud anyway.

Outside, in the streets, the shoppers plodded by, their expressions dour and disengaged. On the Alexanderplatz, a brutal piazza big enough for an army to maneuver in, a wind came up and drove the freezing rain in slanted sheets against us.

“*Be Our Guest*” in German flickered in neon on the Stadt Hotel. The doorman there loomed up out of the gloom, wielding his umbrella like a Kalashnikov.

“Nein! Nein! Nein!”

He was absolutely furious. We were not hotel guests. Only hotel guests were allowed inside. There were rules. He was the doorman. This was his door.

“Go,” he shrieked and hid under the umbrella.

Across the square we found a forlorn espresso bar. Its walls were a sort of distempered duck-egg blue and the table tops were covered in scratched linoleum. But the Flying Pickets were on the sound system and the espresso machine, which had clearly been lovingly cared for, gleamed. It was an object that shimmered with the suggestive promise of sunny countries and laughter and good coffee.

“Halifax,” Leslie said.

“What?”

“This is Halifax, 1951. Where I grew up. The Bon Bon Coffee Bar on Commercial Street. You could listen to Guy Mitchell and Frankie Laine and Ruby Murray on the jukebox . . . you don’t know what I’m talking about, do you?”

I ordered something from the menu. It was some kind of chopped beef on toast. Minced, minced beef, I thought. Leslie shuddered.

“That looks like dog’s vomit.”

The Dog’s Vomit Café was how I came to think of the duck-egg blue espresso bar on the Alexanderplatz.

“How could Dean Reed have lived here?” Leslie asked, his voice full of disbelief and some despair. “What could he have wanted badly enough to live in this bloody place?”

East Berlin must have had something, something to entice a man like Dean Reed, I thought to myself. Maybe this was just façade; maybe it was too soon to understand. After all, I had friends in London who preferred East Berlin to West, who talked about the opera and museums, the Berliner

Ensemble, and the socialist ideals. Maybe it was too soon for me to get it. People in the west sometimes spoke of the quality of friendship in the GDR, the way you could take the time to sit and talk because no one was rushing to work in a country where everyone was always fully employed. A couple of years later, however, when the Wall came down, it was revealed that what lay behind the façade was much worse that it had seemed that first day. Not only ugly, but polluted, impoverished, run by gray-faced old despots with a vicious secret police so ubiquitous that one in every three or four citizens was involved with it.

Right now, though, I wanted a record. There were none in the West because Dean Reed had never played in the West or recorded there.

On the Alexanderplatz was a second record store; in the drizzle, a line had formed outside it. A couple of muscular black American GIs, presumably stationed in West Berlin, passed us and held out their hands, palms up in despair as if to say, “They told us you could get cheap stuff here, but there’s nothing to buy.”

I could see the record shop was almost empty. Still, our line of forlorn customers stood in the rain because you were not allowed inside without one of the orange plastic shopping baskets which were in short supply. As one customer left the shop, he handed on his basket to the next person in line.

The baskets were too small for the records, though, I realized when I got one and went into the shop. The clerks didn’t care if you bought anything either and they were irritated if you didn’t have the right change; there was nothing much to want anyway.

Right there in the dreary record shop, I lost whatever was left of my political virginity, of any vestige of the socialist fantasies I was raised on as a “Red Diaper Baby” in Greenwich Village. My mother had been in the Communist Party when she was young, and I came of age in the Sixties

when everyone believed in peace and love and universal disarmament. Even in the late 1980s, I probably clung to some kind of sentimental version of it all. I had friends whose parents still stood up when they heard the "Internationale", in one case during a performance of *Reds* at the movies. ("Down in front," somebody shouted from the balcony. "We want to see them kiss!")

So my absolute conversion to capitalism came with a small orange plastic shopping basket in a record store on the Alexanderplatz in East Berlin. Simple-minded, maybe, but the practical effects, the everyday results of a system, were always a lot more potent than any theory.

Rock records were scarce in the East, though before long rock and roll would be the soundtrack for the revolutions of the late eighties. Swaying mobs with lighted candles would appear in Gorky Park in Moscow; the crowd in Prague's Wenceslas Square in 1989 would rattle their key chains like a cheery punk band to celebrate the Velvet Revolution; in East Berlin, as early as 1987, kids climbed into the trees near the Wall to listen to concerts in the West, or to look at the new Soviet premier who was a lot like a rock star.

"Gorby, Gorby," the kids hanging in trees near the Berlin Wall would shout, as if the Soviet premier were that year's rock star. And, in a way, he was.

Over that year, during my first encounters with the world where Dean Reed lived, I finally saw why. He had been a star. He was an American guy singing the music that everyone yearned for, the music that made you feel alive if you were young. It was the best, most joyful expression of the sedition which was the only way to keep from shriveling up in an oppressive society. In West Berlin, I met a man who smuggled synthesizers and cassettes past Checkpoint Charlie, not for profit, but as a gesture of solidarity with the rock and roll underground.

In the record store on the Alexanderplatz, flipping albums methodically, front to back, in bin after bin, long after I had given up, Leslie scanned each cover and found nothing. Not for the first time that day I had the eerie sense that Dean Reed had never existed in this strange country, where the rules were made to fence people in, to make them conform, to keep them quiet. How could the exuberant cowboy I'd seen on TV have been part of it?

Suddenly, Leslie whispered at me, "Over here."

The album was titled *Country Songs* and Dean Reed's picture was on the cover. He wore a cowboy hat and he was smiling and he looked wonderful, full of life. I held the album. I touched his hat. I carried it gently in the orange plastic basket to the cashier, who glared at me because I didn't have the right change. I didn't care. Dean was real now; I could touch him.

Outside, we located the rental car and climbed in and decided to risk the trip to Schmockwitz, where Dean Reed had lived. It was not on the map of places you were permitted to visit, according to the day visa printed on the stiff oily paper. All day we had discussed if we should risk it. But it seemed innocent enough, the half-hour drive into the suburbs, and Leslie turned the key in the ignition.

I propped the Dean Reed album on the dashboard. My feet were soaked and I took off my shoes and hung my socks on the radiator to dry. Outside a thick mist, a kind of soaking drifting fog clung to the windshield. In an endless tangle of suburban streets, we got lost.

Then, all at once, it seemed, we bumped over the cobblestones into the village of Schmockwitz itself. I had assumed that Schmockwitz must be the Graceland of the East. There would, I hoped, be souvenirs, mugs and keyrings, albums and posters, all with Dean's face on them, maybe even a replica of his guitar or a talking Dean doll.

We pulled up in front of a tavern, one of those Berlin pubs with lace curtains in the window. As I opened the door, the

buzz of voices went silent. Everyone looked up from their food. I felt like an interloper as, in unison, a half-dozen hefty burghers stopped their Sunday lunch and stared at my bare feet. No one smiled. There were no Dean Reed beer mugs.

Backing off, I got in the car and Leslie drove down a narrow road between bare birch trees. Slush spattered the window. The rain, heavy now, fell from a greasy leaden sky. We took a wrong turn. We ended up in front of a large building that was shuttered for the winter. A sign I could just decode announced that it was a Communist Party Rest House. The car wheels squealed and we backed out in a hurry. We were lost. It was dark. The woods seemed to close in from both sides of the road. It was completely deserted.

Paranoia turned on the projector in my head and the movie flickered into life: it was in black and white with a creepy grain and the pulsing soundtrack of an irregular heartbeat. Whoever had it in for Dean Reed, whoever killed him, was somewhere down this road. Someone who was looking for us.

We would miss closing time at Checkpoint Charlie; we were way out of bounds, beyond the limits of our visa. We would spend the night in an East Berlin jail among officials who were not only Communists but also Germans, and perhaps there was a small concentration camp still open somewhere . . . that would be it, a small camp. Rigid with fear, I sat, watching my socks flutter on the radiator. I thought I heard the wail of a German police car siren rise and fall. It was coming closer.

6A Schmockwitzer Damm was a low-lying, white stucco house with an orange tiled roof, a garage, a lawn. A large carved wooden R was perched on a post in the yard as if it were a ranch: the Double-R ranch; the Dean Reed Dude Ranch of Schmockwitz.

On the other side of the house from the road was a stretch of lake the color of tin. It was the lake where Dean Reed’s

body lay for four days before it had been dragged to shore in June of 1986. The place felt deserted, lonely, desolate.

I took the newspaper clippings out of my bag and read the article by Russell Miller, a British journalist. Miller, by chance, had arranged to interview Dean Reed for a magazine the weekend he died. From West Berlin, where Miller was staying, he had called the house at Schmockwitz. The interview was scheduled for the next day, but Mrs. Reed told him that Dean was ill and could not see him. In the middle of the conversation, a man came on the line – it seemed to Miller that he had snatched the phone away from Mrs. Reed. He told Miller that Dean was in the hospital and that he should go home and would be contacted. Then he gave Miller his name and a telephone number in Potsdam. He was Mr. Weiczaukowski, he said.

Puzzled, Russell Miller went back to London and, on the following Tuesday, when he heard the news that Dean Reed was dead, he called Potsdam. There was no Mr. Weiczaukowski at the number he had been given. He wrote a story for the *Sunday Times*, and so the mystery was cranked up. It grew and leaked and multiplied.

“I have over 2000 scenarios,” Dean Reed’s mother would tell me. “And it’s about up to 3000 now, I think . . . each scenario brings up a new way I think he was killed.”

“I read something about maybe there being drugs, or that there were some political implications,” a friend of Reed’s told me. “I’ve heard the CIA whack,” said someone else. “I’ve heard killed by a jealous lover. Or the KGB.”

And so it went. Eventually, the rumors spread so that nobody could unpick the truth about his death from the rumors. KGB, CIA, eventually I became hooked on the creepy network of conspiracy buffs. Already, for months, I’d been trying to get a fix on it, had talked to Russell Miller, who was as perplexed as I was. Now, finally, on this dank December day in 1987, I was here in this silent, cold place. The house was shut up. No answers.

I said, “Let’s go.”

It was wet and dark and I was frightened; we had seen the house. I wanted to go. I felt we were out on a limb with no backup, no way back if we got lost. But Leslie insisted on getting out of the car to take pictures of the house because, if he made a drama-documentary, his production designer would need them. He took his time while I sat in the car. It wasn’t just for the production designer, I could see that. It was an obsession for him, this part of the world, this other place across the Wall. In a way he was addicted to Eastern Europe. It tested you and then you could go home, a no-exit with a revolving door, an adventure with a return ticket, he always said.

“Cheer up,” he said now, turning to take yet one more picture, then getting back in the car and revving up the motor of the car loud enough to wake the dead. “Listen, honestly, this is nothing at all compared to when I was filming a documentary about torture in Brazil.”

Down that country road, in the encroaching gloom on the other side of the Berlin Wall was where I seriously began looking for Dean Reed. It was December, 1987. The Berlin Wall had gone up in August, 1961, which was just about the time Dean Reed had left America. He never lived there again, and he died in this lake in East Berlin. Who killed him? Who was he? A true believer? A spy? Just a guy, an American with a guitar and great looks and a lot of ambition?

Leslie drove a few hundred yards and stopped and got out of the car. I followed him to the little cemetery by the side of the road. A few wet flowers lay on a headstone. It seemed incredibly sad somehow that the dazzling American I’d seen on TV should end up in this lonely place. I bent down. On the headstone, in German, was inscribed simply: *Dean Reed. Born Colorado*, 1938. *Died Berlin*, 1986.

2

WHEN DEAN REED was seventeen, he raced a mule 110 miles for a quarter. He did it on a dare, his mother told me, and he nearly dropped dead and so did the mule. Some people said it showed his tenacity and grit, but she figured it was just a funny thing a kid would do. Anyway, Reed won and someone caught him in a photograph. At the end of the race Dean's face glowed with triumph. Racing that mule was ambitious, brave, and hokey, and it had the feel of one of those old folk songs where heroic men in bare feet race locomotives.

"I still have that quarter somewhere," said Dean's mother, Ruth Anna Brown.

Mrs. Brown now lived in a condo on the north shore of Oahu in Hawaii. I went to see her because I wanted her to tell me how her son had died. Instead, for a while, we talked about his childhood: how, born in 1938, he grew up in Wheat Ridge, Colorado. We talked about the mule race and she looked for the quarter.

Hawaii seemed as far away as you could get from East Berlin and the Dog's Vomit Café. The islands were like a trail of denatured but delectable crumbs, nibbled off the coast of California and flung far away across the South Pacific. The sun shone, holiday-makers tanned their plump flesh, girls in bars wiggled their hips and their straw hula skirts, and everyone drank things from huge pineapples with pink plastic parasols in them.

Up near Wahiawa, where Mrs. Brown lived with her fond husband, Ralph, the air smelled of pineapples. The fruit, whose smell made you giddy, grew on plantations that were as plush and tidy as wall-to-wall carpeting, but the

mountains just beyond the fields were raw and imposing. The settlements had a breezy ramshackle charm, and on my way to Mrs Brown's I'd seen plenty of surfers with heavy tans and hard bodies and pale vacant blue eyes lounging outside the bars and burger joints.

Mrs. Brown got up suddenly from her chair and went to the windows, one at a time, fastening the wooden shutters, then closing the windows. There was a storm coming and you could hear the wind and somewhere a flag flapping in it like wet laundry.

I liked Mrs. Brown. She was a handsome woman with fine, powdery white skin and hair, but she wasn't a fragile old lady. She was tough and funny, and some of the time she (Well, my goodness!) camped it up, her hands on her hips, full of self-mockery and good humor. Her back was straight and she wore a sweatshirt from the University of Hawaii, where she had just finished her doctorate in women's peace studies. At seventy-four, she was immensely hospitable and naturally wary, and she had an unbending determination to see right done by her boy who was dead in East Berlin. At first we made small talk.

Mrs. Brown was no fool. Courteously, she asked who I was. Leslie Woodhead, who was there too, talked about the drama-documentary he hoped to make, and I mumbled something about writing for the *Guardian* and tried, shamelessly, to refer to my right-on past on various picket lines and peace marches. Ho Ho Ho Chi Minh, I almost said. It was OK; Mrs. Brown got the point.

"I had that child for a special reason. I always thought that Dean was born under a magic star," she said.

Mrs. Brown sat on the carpet between the television set and a brass-bound trunk. I sat beside her. The trunk was full of memorabilia. Every so often, she reached into it and brought out pieces of Dean; there were record albums and tapes, videos and scrapbooks, and copies of Dean's autobiography, a small book with dark blue covers, written

in German. Everyone I met had a copy of Dean's little blue book and in each, on the flyleaf inside the blue covers, was an inscription in his big childish hand, invariably wishing the recipient peace and love and all good things for a socialist future. And then there were the photographs of Dean: Dean in his high school letter sweater, Dean and the mule, Dean with his guitar, Dean with his white Chevrolet Impala convertible. His mother next to me, his images spilled on the carpet, I began to feel I knew him a little; already I was thinking of him as Dean.

She was rueful. In spite of the trunk, she felt she had so little of Dean left. She said that she possessed not so much as his belt buckle – Dean's widow would not give it to her, she said. So, when a year or two later, the Colorado Historical Society organized the Dean Reed Collection, she was happy. Eventually I met Stan Olliner, the curator of the collection. He was a bespectacled man who carefully put on white cotton gloves before showing me the Reed archive, which included film scripts and pictures and diaries, as well as a plaster casting of Dean's teeth. Dean had always carried the cast with him in case he should break a tooth on the road, Olliner explained. "Dean was a pack rat, thank goodness," he added. "He literally saved everything."

All of it had been donated by Dean's widow, Renate. She even apparently offered Olliner Dean's dog, Emu, for when the dog died and could be stuffed. Olliner said, no thanks.

"In no way could I justify a stuffed Emu to the Colorado Historical Society," its director told the *Denver Post*. Mrs. Brown thought it was all perfectly wonderful anyway.

"I think Dean's looking down and saying, 'Wow! I just knew I'd come back to Colorado, no matter what.'"

All day long, as we sat with Mrs. Brown on her living-room floor, the television was on, and images of Dean – some from contraband videos of television specials he'd made, others from documentary films about his life – flickered across it. Pictures of Dean lay on the carpet in black and

white and color. 1938–1986. I knew I should get to the point and ask Mrs. Brown about Dean's death, but it made me feel like an intruder. Anyway I didn't want to stop her from telling the stories which poured out of her in random order as she turned over the photos and glanced up at the videos and talked about her kid. I couldn't turn away from the images, either.

On the wall was a large glossy photograph of Dean; in it he was wearing a beaded Indian neckband and the eyes looked a little mournful. It had been taken not long before his death, and as I stared at it, I found myself dredging up a poem by e. e. cummings. The verse that I'd loved as a moony teenager came back and it reminded me of Dean Reed:

Buffalo Bill's
defunct
who used to
ride a watersmooth-silver
stallion

and break onetwothreefourfive pigeonsjustlikethat
Jesus
he was a handsome man and what I want to know is how
do you like your
blueeyed boy
Mister Death

Dean Reed was born on September 22, 1938, in Wheat Ridge, Colorado. It was one of a string of small towns on the fringe of Denver when Denver was still a cow town. Wheat Ridge was resolutely rural, not yet eaten by Denver's urban sprawl. Ladies put on their hats for a day out in Denver.

"All we had was just a very small house and two enormous chicken houses at the back, where we kept the chickens," said Ruth Anna Brown. "We had a cow – I made my own butter and whipping cream – and a pig. I think the kids