

GENESIS FILES

A Joseph Radkin Mystery



Bob Biderman

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Joseph Radkin Investigations
Book 2

BLACK
APOLLO
PRESS

Chapter 1

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

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

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

The woman sifted through the discards with a practiced movement, taking the waste remains and putting them into a cloth sack before moving on. It was all done with a certain methodical poise, a

certain dignity that one rarely found among the urban poor. But these people were different. Back in their native land, he suspected, they had been hunters and gatherers. Here, in San Francisco, rubbish bins, not fruit, were underneath the trees.

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

“Is that you, Radkin?”

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

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

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

“You want an assignment?”

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

“I did. Now I’m asking you whether you want an

assignment. You've got the choice of saying 'yes' or saying 'no'. And the way I figure it, if by some strange quirk of nature you happened to find another job you'll say 'no' - after all, there was that paraplegic who got hooked up to mechanical water-wings and managed to swim the English Channel, so anything is possible. Otherwise you'll jump at the chance to work for me again."

"What makes you so loveable, Lamont?"

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

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

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

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

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

“Because you knew the guy, Radkin. And maybe there’s more to it than what’s coming out.”

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

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

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

“I don’t joke about labs blowing up, Radkin. Especially when they’re part of hospitals.”

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

“Shut them yourself!” he had snapped. “You’re always getting up to piss anyway!”

“Is that what you’re going to say when the baby is

born? 'Feed it yourself! You're always getting up to go to work anyway'!"

To avoid the unwanted drama of a midnight quarrel, he had stumbled out of bed and that's when he had heard the infernal sounds of the fire-engines racing through the streets.

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

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

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

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

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

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

a sex angle.”

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

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

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

“Let me call you back, Lamont...”

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

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

“OK what?”

“OK, sir?”

“I can’t believe it!” Polly said that evening when she had come home from work and had let her puffed-up body drop like a lead weight into the easy chair below. “You swore up and down that you’d never work for

that . . . that . . .” she searched for the appropriate word, and finding none that would truly fit she resorted to generalities, “that creature again!”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“What are you talking about then?”

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

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

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

“Aborted,” she said quite simply.

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Many times,” he agreed.

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

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

"My oven is on. I'm always warm when my oven is on," she replied.

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

She smiled. "I'll tell you when." She waited a moment. "Now!" she said. "Did you feel it?"

He nodded. "Yeah. It's alive."

"You're telling me! It's eating me out of house and home!"

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

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

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

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

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

Polly closed her eyes. "All right, that's enough. It's getting out of hand again."

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

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

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

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

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

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

“I doubt it,” he said.

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

He nodded. “Sure ...”

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

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

“Not again!”

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

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

“Where are you going?” he called out.

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

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

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

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

Joseph grunted.

“Then she went out with some guy ...”

“Who?”

“I don’t know.”

“What did he look like?”

“Nice . . .”

“Fat? Skinny? Large? Small? Two heads? Horns?”

Nice is no description at all, Polly. I've told you that before."

"Mature, gentlemanly, unsarcastic-in short, everything that you're not."

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

"She's got a right to her own life, Joseph."

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

"Are you expecting someone to answer?"

"I'm expecting you to tell me if you heard me say that."

"Joseph, they went to a meeting together . . ."

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

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

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

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

“Don’t I know!”

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

“You can say that again!”

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

“I do?”

“Oh, Joseph!”

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

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

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

“Spinach.”

“Besides Spinach.”

“Oedipus?”

“Besides Spinach and Oedipus.”

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

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

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

“What do you want to do then?”

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

“That?”

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

“But Polly, you know how hard it is for me now. Whenever we do it these days I keep feeling like I’m going to bump into its head!”

“You’re not going to bump into its head, silly! It’s in

a waterproof sack all tied up tight. Spinach will never know what's going on."

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

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

"But Polly, it's so obscene!"

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

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

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

"Yeah, I do," she said.

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Frightened? Why frightened?”

“What if . . .”

“What if what?”

“What if it’s got twelve toes?”

“It probably could keep its balance better than us. Twelve toes wouldn’t be so bad.”

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

“If it doesn’t have arms we’ll teach it to use its feet as hands. I saw a documentary once about this guy who didn’t have arms and he became an extraordinary painter. He used his toes like fingers.”

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

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

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

“So you sing it a lullaby?”

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

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

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

“OK.”

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

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

“No,” she replied.

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

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

“Did you ever speak with Greene?”

“Once or twice. I liked him a lot. He was one of the

most dedicated people I think I ever met.”

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

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

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

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

“No.”

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

“A little corny,” said Joseph, “but that’s the kind of

a place it was.”

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

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

“Or woman .”

“Yeah. Anyway, I’m sorry he died.”

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

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

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

“Maybe . . .”