

THE  
WORLD  
*of*  
RAE ENGLISH

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Black  
Lawrence  
Press

*For Gene and Bobby Garber*

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## Prologue

# F : a debriefing

I dreamed of F last night, my ex-husband, who was masquerading as someone who tells the truth. It's said that you dream of the people you've loved when you're ready to say goodbye to them. It's a comfort to think of F pushing his way into a dream only to be bounced. I'd like to believe it—but it certainly takes practice. I've tried erasing F's name, thinking of him as his initial only, or as *former husband*, a generic brand, filed under *ex*. I can't keep him at bay, hard as I try—by shunning his book signings, putting a block on my caller ID, curtailing (if only for myself) his television appearances with the mute and power buttons on my remote.

He's on a book tour, promoting his second book, a memoir titled *The Pitfalls of Deceit*. His first book, *The Confined and the Released*, was on prison reform; in it he argued passionately—F has passion to burn—for the rights of convicts, present and past. (I don't know yet if the new book mentions his field work—the research he did while

-serving his sentence on location. Of course, in his first book, he did come clean. That was the point.)

F is friend to the downtrodden. The oppressed minority of *that* moment was felons. I'm not sure what it is now. As a pundit—he has worked hard to become one, he was always ambitious—F champions his minorities on a pick and choose basis. Notoriety helps—though he's become known more for his generous nature than his record. As the dark cloud recedes, he's gained in authority; even concealed, the murkiness is compelling; you might even take it for an aura. You know he knows things—from the cosmos to politics and back again—and you want to know them too. He's been a regular on talk shows—Chris Matthews, Bill O'Reilly, Piers Morgan. Often he's paired with John Dean.

I pay a price for my curiosity, but—

I've been reading his memoir. Not least because I'm in it. He calls me 'Inga Redmont'. To protect me, I suppose, and himself as well. He writes, "My ex-wife who is full of secrets has made me hers." I think that makes him very proud.

It's true. He has long been my secret. The skeleton in my closet—or one of them. They don't get out much. Even on Halloween. Don't ask, don't tell.

Furtively, I carry the book around with me, like contraband, from room to room, in a plain wrapper. (I've turned its dust jacket inside-out.) No one should know. Flipping through its pages, I discover things about Inga that I never knew: She figures in what the kids would call "the sexy parts". F is pleased to tell the reading public that he was Inga's first man. Reportedly, once, in the middle of one or another of their pleasurable interludes, he heard her murmur *'Adam'*. Yes, he acknowledges she said it out of romantic innocence, and

when she alluded to it later it was with an edge or irony—but still! He has never forgotten it. I have. He goes on: Though inexperienced sexually she was a quick study. Otherwise, she was bookish. She drew the name *Adam*, she told him, less from Genesis as from a story by a southern writer she much admired, Katherine Anne Porter; she said the story broke her heart. He got that part right.

They grew apart, he and Inga; they separated, and went their separate ways. Quite a story. He neglects to mention that the way he went was to jail. I've had my share of misadventures but they were this side of the law.

I had to put *The Pitfalls of Deceit* aside. The book seemed filled with heavy hints about who I was really. A question I've been asked before. We'll get back to you as soon as we know.

After a while, I picked F's book up again, of course. I've always been fascinated by misinformation.

And yet—I can cut him some slack: He may have been the first man of my adult life, but he was not the first liar. And I've told more than a few.

## Chapter 1

# G-Man

But it is time to set the record straight. I am not Inga. And I can tell my story better than Frank.

The story begins with two friendships: my childhood friend Norma Povich and my father's friend Ricardo whose last name I didn't know. Ricardo came to our house for eagerly anticipated visits all the time; he would sweep into our house bearing brilliant flowers for my mother and playfully pretend to kiss her hand.

Norma, on the other hand, visited just once—and after that, never again. My mother did not welcome Norma. You might even say she threw her out. Politely. At the time my mother said that Norma was not normal. Whatever that meant. In my adult life it came to mean that you formed your close attachments on the sneak and, whether you had a family or not, you stayed out of its house.

My friend Norma's departure, so sudden, broke time in half for me. I was six, going on seven, and I didn't get it. From then on, the

events of my childhood seemed to take place across a divide: Before and After Norma—and her expulsion.

I remember our final conversation. In a spooky undertone, she said: “Who do you think you are?” I think she must have known that I no longer had the answer to that question.

Before, I could have explained simply that I was descended from royalty—or occupied some other high station (exactly which one was a technicality) and in short order, I would have believed it myself.

Because I’d known for a fact, before, that my father was the most important man in the world, I had no trouble marshaling the evidence.

What else to make of my mother’s hushed reverence for him? And how attentively she cooked for him, and the beautiful way she dressed for him? Or the ritual solemnity attending his retreats to his study (though one didn’t know exactly what he did behind its closed door).

Even after the arrival of my sister, who seemed to consume my mother (they named this distraction Marta) he stayed at the center of our world. My mother, though preoccupied, continued worshipful; and I worshiped him too. I didn’t know whether he was the President or God—after a while, I took for granted that he was one or the other or both.

That he favored me consoled him, I think, after Marta came, and misappropriated my mother. I hung around him all the more, making sure he knew *my* feelings for him were unchanged. I worried that any transfer of my mother’s devotion to the unworthy baby would hurt him. I kept an eye on him and, as much as I could, on my mother. Sometimes I could see her steal a worshipful glance at him from the endless round of feeding and bathing the baby and changing her diapers. But more and more, her glances were fleeting.

I began to tell myself that her worship of him must now happen behind the closed door of their bedroom where they retreated together every night—and that somehow, that way, the family hierarchy, along with an orderly universe, was restored. Though they would emerge every morning without looking at each other, they seemed content, as if they'd settled something between them. It was then, I think, that I began to think of the night as a time of secret and devout transactions.

I met Norma Povich sometime around then, when I was delivered over to the first grade of the local public school. My mother got me ready—saw me into what she decided was a pretty dress (I thought it was frilly and too short) and looped my braids together with a bow that was unevenly tied; the asymmetry was deliberate; she set great store by my not looking like anybody else. My father, holding my hand, walked me to school, a short walk, very slowly, I thought so that I could keep up with him. But sometimes it seemed that he didn't want to let me go, and I began to wonder if there wasn't some other reason for their sending me out of the house, though once we were there he would rush away abruptly.

Sometimes I envied Norma Povich whose mother knew how to dress a six-year-old so that she didn't look like a Christmas tree. At least Norma's homespun, ordinary clothes covered her, as clothes were meant to do and let her go with the scenery. I thought it highly desirable then to go with the scenery, which for me, meant basking in my father's reflected light.

I would tell Norma about my father, whom she would glimpse sometimes in the mornings when we would arrive together, hand in hand. I managed never to notice exactly whose hand *she* was holding—I assumed it belonged to some nondescript, but serviceable adult, one

or the other of her parents. While my parents were distinguished and glamorous, hers I was sure were pasty lookalikes. Norma got a better sense of my mother, who came every day after school to pick me up, dispensed a friendly word or two for Norma like bonbons before we went our separate ways. Which my mother managed to telegraph to me were *very* separate. Norma lived far enough away so that we never visited each other's homes or played together in the playground where my mother would take me after school.

My day was framed by them, my father and my mother. That he took me to school and she came and got me became for me a law of nature—as inevitable as the phases of the moon or the rising and setting of the sun. What we believed in was each other. One day, a few years later, I woke up knowing beyond any shadow of a doubt that what was profane was to believe in one's self.

But that took a while. Meanwhile, with Norma, I made the most of the time we had together, getting as much mileage as possible out of recess and lunch. Norma looked up to me. I loved telling her stories about my home and family, how they were grand and special, my father most particularly in ways I couldn't go into, though I was full of heavy hints.

The hints had to do with World War II, now in progress. In the service of the war effort, I told her, my father was entrusted with secrets; probably they had to do with ridding the world of Hitler and other evil men. My mother was Jewish, I rattled on, and my father's mission while on earth (by this time I'd promoted him to some more elevated realm) was to save my mother's people from the Nazi scourge. (I'd hedge my bets about whether my mother's people were my people too. Anyway, I was pretty sure I'd never need saving.) Oh, and another thing, I told Norma, helping myself from her lunchbox