



MARTIN CRUZ SMITH

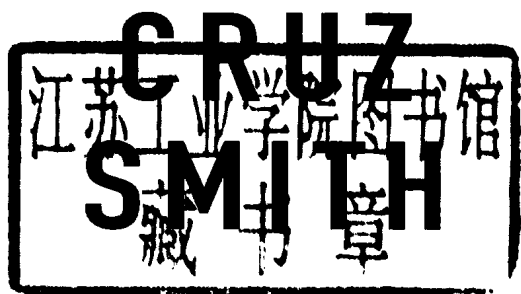
POLAR STAR

AN ARKADY RENKO NOVEL

'Splendid . . . the reader will be kept guessing to the very end'

EVENING STANDARD

MARTIN



POLAR STAR

PAN BOOKS



First published in the USA 1989 by Random House Inc., New York

First published in Great Britain 1989 by Macmillan

This edition published 2007 by Pan Books
an imprint of Pan Macmillan Ltd
Pan Macmillan, 20 New Wharf Road, London N1 9RR
Basingstoke and Oxford
Associated companies throughout the world
www.panmacmillan.com

ISBN 978-0-330-45088-1

Copyright © Martin Cruz Smith 1989

The right of Martin Cruz Smith to be identified as the
author of this work has been asserted by him in accordance
with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be
reproduced, stored in or introduced into a retrieval system, or
transmitted, in any form, or by any means (electronic, mechanical,
photocopying, recording or otherwise) without the prior written
permission of the publisher. Any person who does any unauthorized
act in relation to this publication may be liable to criminal
prosecution and civil claims for damages.

1 3 5 7 9 8 6 4 2

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from
the British Library.

Typeset by Intype London Ltd
Printed and bound in Great Britain by
Mackays of Chatham plc, Chatham, Kent

This book is sold subject to the condition that it shall not,
by way of trade or otherwise, be lent, re-sold, hired out,
or otherwise circulated without the publisher's prior consent
in any form of binding or cover other than that in which
it is published and without a similar condition including this
condition being imposed on the subsequent purchaser.

Visit www.panmacmillan.com to read more about all our books
and to buy them. You will also find features, author interviews and
news of any author events, and you can sign up for e-newsletters
so that you're always first to hear about our new releases.

Acknowledgements

I thank Captain Boris Nadein and the crew of the *Sulak*; Captain Mike Hastings and the crew of the *Oceanic*; Sharon Gordon, Dennis McLaughlin and William Turner for their hospitality in the Bering Sea. Valuable assistance was also provided by Martin Arnold, Kathy Blumberg, Captain D. J. (Jack) Branning, Knox Burger, Dr Gerald Freedman, Beatrice Golden, Professor Robert Hughes, Captain James Robinson and Kitty Sprague.

Most of all I owe Alex Levin and Captain Vladil Lysenko for their patience.

There is a Soviet factory ship named the *Polar Star*. Neither it nor the *Sulak* is the *Polar Star* of this book, which is fiction.

Contents

Plan of the *Polar Star* vi–vii

Plan of the *Eagle* viii

Acknowledgements ix

WATER 1

EARTH 229

ICE 289

Part One

WATER

Chapter One

Like a beast, the net came steaming up the ramp and into the sodium lamps of the trawl deck. Like a gleaming pelt, mats of red, blue, orange strips covered the mesh: plastic 'chafing hair' designed to ease the net's way over the rocks of the sea bottom. Like rank breath, the exhalation of the sea's cold enveloped the hair in a halo of its own colours, brilliant in the weepy night.

Water hissed from the net's plastic hair onto the wooden boards that provided footing on the deck. Smaller fish, smelts and herring, fell free. Starfish dropped like stones. Uprooted crabs, even dead, landed on tiptoe. Overhead, gulls and shearwaters hovered at the outer glow of the lamps. As the wind shifted the birds broke into a swirl of white wings.

Usually the net was tipped and disgorged headfirst into the forward chutes to begin with, then ass-end into the rear. Either end could be opened by releasing the knot of a 'zipper', a nylon cord braided through the mesh. Though the men stood by with shovels ready for work, the trawlmaster waved them off and stepped into the water raining from the net's plastic 'hair' and stared straight up, removing his helmet the better to see. The coloured strips dipped like running paint. He reached and spread the 'hair' from the mesh, then looked into

the dark to find the other, smaller light riding the ocean swells, but already fog hid the catcherboat the net had come from. From his belt the trawlmaster took a double-edged knife, reached through the dripping plastic hair and sawed the belly of the net down and across. Fish began dropping by ones and twos. He gave the knife a last furious tug and stepped back quickly.

Out of the net and into the light spilled a flood of silver pollock, a whole school which had been caught *en masse* and dredged up like bright coins. There were thick, bruised-looking bullheads; overlapping waves of flatfish, blood-red on the eyed side, pale on the blind side; sculpin with heads like dragons; cod, some bloated like balloons by their air bladders, some exploded into soft tissue and pink slime; coral crabs as hairy as tarantulas. The bounty of the night-time sea.

And a girl. She slid loose-limbed like a swimmer as the fish poured from the net. On the deck she rolled lazily, arms awry, against a mound of sole, a bare foot tangled in crabs. A young woman, not a girl. Her hair was short and her blouse and jeans were sodden and twisted, heavy with water and sand, unprepared for any return to the world of air. The trawlmaster lifted a strand of hair that had wrapped itself across her eyes, revealing the open surprise in them, as if the ship's lamplit fog were golden clouds, as if she had risen in a boat sailing towards heaven itself.

Chapter Two

Originally when it came down the rails in Gdansk, the *Polar Star's* four superstructures had been a dazzling white and the gantries and booms a candy yellow. The decks were clear; silver chains wound round the winches; the facing on the deckhouses was stylishly raked. In fact the *Polar Star* had looked like a ship.

Twenty years of saltwater had repainted it with rust. The top decks had accumulated wooden planks, full barrels of lubricating oil and empty barrels for fish oil, the refuse of piled nets and floats. From the black stack with its red Soviet band drifted the dark smoke of a diesel in poor condition. Now, seen from a distance with a good view of the hull battered by unloading side trawlers in bad weather, the *Polar Star* resembled not so much a factory ship as a combination factory-and-junkyard cast into the sea and making improbable headway through the waves.

Yet day and night the *Polar Star* efficiently caught fish. Not caught, that was wrong; smaller trawlers caught the fish and transferred their nets to the factory ship to be processed: headed, gutted, frozen.

For four months now, the *Polar Star* had followed American catcherboats in American waters from Siberia to Alaska, from the Bering Straits to the Aleutian Islands. It was a joint venture. Simply put, the Soviets provided

processing ships and took the fish, while the Americans provided trawlers and translators and took the money, all of this managed by a Seattle-based company that was half Soviet, half American. The crew of the *Polar Star* had seen the sun perhaps two days in that time, but then the Bering Sea was known as 'The Grey Zone'.

Third Mate Slava Bukovsky walked the processing line while workers sorted the catch: pollock on a conveyor belt to the saws, mackerel and rays into the fishmeal hatch. Some of the fish had literally exploded as their air bladders expanded on the way from the bottom of the sea and soft bits of them clung like mucus to caps, oilskin aprons, lashes, lips.

He passed the rotary saws to the 'slime line', where workers stood in slots on either side of the belt. Like automatons, the first pair slit fish bellies open to the anus; the second pair sucked out livers and guts with vacuum hoses; the third pair washed slime from the skin, gills and cavities with saltwater jets; the last pair vacuumed the fish a final time and laid the trimmed and dressed result on a belt moving towards the freezers. In the course of an eight-hour watch the gutting and spraying spread a mist of blood and wet pulp over the belt, workers and walkway. They were not the usual Hero Workers, least of all the pale man with dark hair loading the dressed fish at the end of the line.

'Renko!'

Arkady vacuumed pinkish water from one eviscerated

belly, slapped the fish on the freezer belt and picked up the next. Pollock was not firm-fleshed. If it wasn't cleaned and frozen quickly it would be unfit for human consumption and be fed to minks; if unfit for them, it would go to Africa as foreign aid. His hands were numb from handling fish little warmer than ice, but at least he wasn't working the saw like Kolya. In bad weather when the ship began to roll it took concentration to handle a frozen, slippery pollock around a blade. Arkady had learned to dig the toes of his boots under the table so that he wouldn't slide on the duckboards. At the beginning of the voyage and at the end, the entire factory was hosed down and scrubbed with ammonia, but meanwhile the fish room had a dank, organic slickness and smell. Even the clicking of the belt, the whining of the saw, the deep rhythmic moan of the hull were the sounds of a leviathan that was resolutely swallowing the sea.

The belt stopped.

'You're Seaman Renko, aren't you?'

It took Arkady a moment to recognize the third mate, who was not a frequent visitor belowdecks. Izrail, the factory manager, stood at the power switch. He wore layers of sweaters and a black stubble almost to his eyes, which rolled with impatience. Natasha Chaikovskaya, a huge young woman in oilskin armour but with a feminine touch of lipstick, listed discreetly better to see the third mate's Reeboks and unstained jeans.

'Aren't you?' Slava repeated.

'It's not a secret,' Arkady said.

'This is not a dance class of Young Komsomolets,' Izrail told Slava. 'If you want him, take him.'

The belt started moving again as Arkady followed Slava aft, stepping over sluices where liquid slime and fish-liver oil ran through bilge holes directly out the side of the ship.

Slava stopped to scrutinize Arkady, as if trying to penetrate a disguise. 'You are Renko the investigator?'

'Not any more.'

'But you were,' Slava said. 'That's good enough.'

They climbed the stairs to the main deck. Arkady assumed the third mate was leading him to the political officer or to a search of his cabin, although that could have been done without him. They walked by the galley and the steamy smell of macaroni, turned left at a sign that promised 'Increase Production in the Agro-Industrial Complex! Strive for a Decisive Upswing in the Supply of Fish Protein!' and halted at the infirmary door.

The door was guarded by a pair of mechanics wearing the red armbands of 'Public Order Volunteers'. Skiba and Slezko were two informers – 'slugs' to the rest of the crew. Even as Arkady and Slava went through the door, Skiba pulled out a notebook.

The *Polar Star* had a clinic bigger than most small towns could boast of: a doctor's office, an examining room, an infirmary with three beds, a quarantine room and an operating room, to which Slava led Arkady. Along the walls were white cupboards with glass cannisters of instruments in alcohol, a locked red cupboard with cigarettes and drugs, a cart with a green tank of oxygen and a red tank of nitrous oxide, a standing ashtray and

POLAR STAR

a brass spittoon. There were anatomical charts on the wall, an astringent tang to the air. A dentist's chair sat in one corner. In the middle of the room was a steel operating table covered by a sheet. Soaked through, the cloth clung to the form of a woman underneath. Below the edge of the sheet dangled restraining straps.

The room's portholes were bright mirrors because it was black outside. 0600, another hour's work to go before dawn, and as usual at this point in his shift Arkady was stupefied by the number of fish in the sea. His eyes felt like those portholes. 'What do you want?' he asked.

'Someone has died,' Slava announced.

'I can see that.'

'One of the girls from the galley. She fell overboard.'

Arkady glanced at the door, picturing Skiba and Slezko on the other side. 'What has this got to do with me?'

'It's obvious. Our trade union committee must make a report on all deaths, and I am the union representative. You're the only one on board with experience in violent death.'

'And resurrection,' Arkady said. Slava blinked. 'It's like rehabilitation, but it's supposed to last longer. Never mind.' Arkady eyed the cigarettes inside the cabinet; they were papirosis, cardboard tubes with tobacco wads. But the cabinet was locked. 'Where's the doctor?'

'Look at the body.'

'Cigarette?'

Caught off-stride, Slava fumbled in his shirt before coming up with a pack of Marlboros. Arkady was impressed. 'In that case, I'll wash my hands.'

The water from the sink tap was brown, but it rinsed the slime and scales off Arkady's fingers. A mark of veteran seamen was discoloured teeth from drinking water from rusting tanks. Over the sink was the first clean mirror he'd looked into for a year. 'Resurrection' was a good word. 'Dug up,' he decided, described him better. The night shift on a factory ship had drained what colour his skin had ever had. A permanent shadow seemed to lie across his eyes. Even the towels were clean. He considered getting sick sometime.

'Where were you an investigator?' Slava asked as he lit the cigarette for Arkady, who filled his lungs.

'They have cigarettes in Dutch Harbor?'

'For what sort of crimes?'

'I understand that in the store in Dutch Harbor the cigarettes are stacked to the ceiling. And fresh fruit. And stereos.'

Slava lost patience. 'What sort of investigator?'

'Moscow.' Arkady exhaled. For the first time he delivered his whole attention to the table. 'And not for accidents. If she fell overboard, how did you get her back? I never heard the engines stop to pick her up. How did the body get here?'

'It is not necessary for you to know.'

Arkady said, 'When I was an investigator I had to look at dead people. Now that I am a simple Soviet worker I only have to look at dead fish. Good luck.'

He took a step towards the door. It was like pressing a button. 'She came up in the net,' Slava said quickly.

POLAR STAR

'Really?' Arkady was interested in spite of himself.
'That is unusual.'

'Please.'

Arkady returned and pulled the sheet off.

Even with her arms stretched back over her head, the woman was small. Very white, as if bleached. Still cold. Her shirt and pants were wrenched around her like a wet shroud. One foot wore a red plastic shoe. Slack brown eyes looked up from a triangular face. Her hair was short and blonde, but black at the roots. A mole, a beauty mark by the mouth. He lifted her head, let it drop limply onto the table. Felt her neck, arms. The elbows were broken, but not particularly bruised. Her legs were stiff. More than from any fish, the reek of the sea came from her. There was sand in her shoe; she'd touched bottom. Skin was scraped from her forearms and palms, probably by the net on the way back up.

'Zina Patiashvili,' Arkady said. She'd worked in the cafeteria ladling out potatoes, cabbage, compote.

'She looks different,' Slava said analytically. 'I mean, from when she was alive.'

A double difference, Arkady thought. A death change and a sea change. 'When did she go over?'

'A couple of hours ago,' Slava said. He took an executive stance at the head of the table. 'She must have been at the rail and fell over when the net was pulled in.'

'Someone saw her?'

'No. It was dark. Heavy fog. She probably drowned as soon as she hit the water. Or died from shock. Or couldn't swim.'

Arkady squeezed the flaccid neck again and said, 'More like twenty-four hours. Rigor mortis starts from head to foot and it leaves the same way.'

Slava rocked slightly on his heels, not from the motion of the ship.

Arkady glanced at the door and lowered his voice. 'How many Americans are on board?'

'Four. Three are representatives of the company, one is an American Fisheries observer.'

'Do they know?'

'No,' Slava said. 'Two were still in their bunks. The other representative was at the stern rail. That's a long walk to the deck. The observer was inside having tea. Fortunately, the trawlmaster was intelligent and covered the body before any Americans could see.'

'The net came from an American boat. Didn't *they* see?'

'They never know what's in the net until we tell them.' Slava pondered. 'We should prepare a proper explanation, in case.'

'Ah, an explanation. She worked in the galley.'

'Yes.'

'Food poisoning?'

'That's not what I meant.' Slava's face turned red. 'Anyway, the doctor examined her when we brought her in and he said she is only two hours dead. If you were such a good investigator you would still be in Moscow.'

'True.'