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BILLY BATHGATE



E. L. DOCTOROW

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Part One

CHAPTER ONE

He had to have planned it because when we drove onto the dock the boat was there and the engine was running and you could see the water churning up phosphorescence in the river, which was the only light there was because there was no moon, nor no electric light either in the shack where the dockmaster should have been sitting, nor on the boat itself, and certainly not from the car, yet everyone knew where everything was, and when the big Packard came down the ramp Mickey the driver braked it so that the wheels hardly rattled the boards, and when he pulled up alongside the gangway the doors were already open and they hustled Bo and the girl upside before they even made a shadow in all that darkness. And there was no resistance, I saw a

movement of black bulk, that was all, and all I heard was maybe the sound someone makes who is frightened and has a hand not his own over his mouth, the doors slammed and the car was humming and gone and the boat was already opening up water between itself and the slip before a thin minute had passed. Nobody said not to so I jumped aboard and stood at the rail, frightened as you might expect, but a capable boy, he had said that himself, a capable boy capable of learning, and I see now capable of adoring worshiping that rudeness of power of which he was a greater student than anybody, oh and that menace of him where it might all be over for anyone in his sight from one instant to the next, that was what it all turned on, it was why I was there, it was why I was thrilled to be judged so by him as a capable boy, the danger he was really a maniac.

Besides, I had that self-assurance of the very young, which was in this case the simple presumption I could get away when I would, anytime I wanted, I could outrun him, outrun his rage or the range of his understanding and the reach of his domain, because I could climb fences and hustle down alleys and jump fire escapes and dance along the roof parapets of all the tenements of the world if it came to that. I was capable, I knew it before he did, although he gave me more than confirmation when he said it, he made me his. But anyway I wasn't thinking of any of this at the time, it was

just something I had in me I could use if I had to, not even an idea but an instinct waiting in my brain in case I ever needed it, or else why would I have leapt lightly over the rail as the phosphorescent water widened under me, to stand and watch from the deck as the land withdrew and a wind from the black night of water blew across my eyes and the island of lights rose up before me as if it were a giant ocean liner sailing past and leaving me stranded with the big murdering gangsters of my life and times?

My instructions were simple, when I was not doing something I was specifically told to do, to pay attention, to miss nothing, and though he wouldn't have put it in so many words, to become the person who would always be watching and always be listening no matter what state I was in, love or danger or humiliation or deathly misery—to lose nothing of any fraction of a moment even if it happened to be my last.

So I knew this had to have been planned, though smeared with his characteristic rage that made you think it was just something that he had thought of the moment before he did it as for instance the time he throttled and then for good measure stove in the skull of the fire safety inspector a moment after smiling at him in appreciation for his entrepreneurial flair. I had never seen anything like that, and I suppose there are ways more deft, but however you do it, it is a difficult thing

to do: his technique was to have none, he sort of jumped forward screaming with his arms raised and brought his whole weight of assault on the poor fuck, and carried him down in a kind of smothering tackle, landing on top of him with a crash that probably broke his back, who knows? and then with his knees pinning down the outstretched arms, simply grabbing the throat and pressing the balls of his thumbs down on the windpipe, and when the tongue came out and eyes rolled up walloping the head two three times on the floor like it was a coconut he wanted to crack open.

And they were all in dinner clothes too, I had to remember that, black tie and black coat with the persian lamb collar, white silk scarf and his pearl gray homburg blocked down the center of the crown just like the president's, in Mr. Schultz's case. Bo's hat and coat were still in the hatcheck in his case. There had been an anniversary dinner at the Embassy Club, five years of their association in the beer business, so it was all planned, even the menu, but the only thing was Bo had misunderstood the sentiment of the occasion and brought along his latest pretty girl, and I had felt, without even knowing what was going on when the two of them were hustled into the big Packard, that she was not part of the plan. Now she was here on the tugboat and it was entirely dark from the outside, they had curtains over the portholes

and I couldn't see what was going on but I could hear the sound of Mr. Schultz's voice and although I couldn't make out the words I could tell he was not happy, and I supposed they would rather not have her witness what was going to happen to a man she might possibly have come to be fond of, and then I heard or felt the sounds of steps on a steel ladder, and I turned my back to the cabin and leaned over the railing just in time to see a lighted pucker of green angry water and then a curtain must have been drawn across a port-hole because the water disappeared. A few moments later I heard one returning set of footsteps.

Under these circumstances I could not hold to the conviction that I had done the smart thing by coming aboard without his telling me to. I lived, as we all did, by his moods, I was forever trying to think of ways to elicit the good ones, the impulse to placate was something he brought out in people, and when I was engaged in doing something at his instruction I pressed hard to do my urgent best while at the same time preparing in my mind the things I would say in my defense in any unforeseen event of his displeasure. Not that I believed there was an appeals process. So I rode as a secret rider there at the cold railing through several minutes of my irresolution, and the strings of lights on the bridges behind me made me sentimental for my past. But by then we were coming downriver into the heavier swells of the open

water, and the boat began to pitch and roll and I found I had to widen my stance to keep my balance. The wind was picking up too, and spray was flying up from the prow and wetting my face, I was holding the rail and pressing my back against the side of the cabin and beginning to feel the light head that comes with the realization that water is a beast of another planet, and with each passing moment it was drawing in my imagination a portrait of its mysterious powerful and endlessly vast animacy right there under the boat I was riding, and all the other boats of the world as well, which if they lashed themselves together wouldn't cover an inch of its undulant and heaving hide.

So I went in, opening the door a crack and slipping through shoulder first, on the theory that if I was going to die I had rather die indoors.

Here is what I saw in the first instant of my blinking in the harsh light of a work lamp hooked to the deckhouse ceiling: the elegant Bo Weinberg standing beside his pointed patent-leather shoes, with the black silk socks and attached garters lying twisted like dead eels beside them, and his white feet looking very much longer and very much wider than the shoes he had just stepped from. He was staring at his feet, perhaps because feet are intimate body parts rarely seen with black tie, and following his gaze, I felt I had to commiserate with what I was sure he was thinking, that

for all our civilization we go around on these things that are slit at the front end into five unequal lengths each partially covered with shell.

Kneeling in front of him was the brisk and impassive Irving methodically rolling Bo's pant legs with their black satin side-stripe to the knees. Irving had seen me but chose not to notice me, which was characteristic. He was Mr. Schultz's utility man and did what he was told to do and gave no appearance of thought for anything else. He was rolling up pant legs. A hollow-chested man, with thinning hair, he had the pallor of an alcoholic, that dry paper skin they have, and I knew about drunks on the wagon what they paid for their sobriety, the concentration it demanded, the state of constant mourning it produced. I liked to watch Irving whatever he was doing, even when it was not as it was now something extraordinary. Each fold-up of the pant leg exactly matched the one before. He did everything meticulously and without wasted movement. He was a professional, but since he had no profession other than dealing with the contingencies of his chosen life, he carried himself as if life was a profession, just as, I suppose, in a more conventional employment, a butler would.

And partially obscured by Bo Weinberg and standing as far from him as I was but at the opposite side of the cabin, in his open coat and unevenly draped white scarf and his soft gray

homburg tilted back on his head, and one hand in his jacket pocket and the other casually holding a gun at his side that was pointed with no particular emphasis at the deck, was Mr. Schultz.

This scene was so amazing to me I gave it the deference one gives to the event perceived as historical. Everything was moving up and down in unison but the three men didn't seem to notice and even the wind was a distant and chastened sound in here, and the air was close with the smell of tar and diesel oil and there were coils of thick rope stacked like rubber tires, and pulleys and chain tackle, and racks filled with tools and kerosene lamps and cleats and numerous items whose names or purposes I did not know but whose importance to the nautical life I willingly conceded. And the tug's engine vibrations were comfortably powerful in here and I could feel them running into my hand, which I had put against the door in order to close it.

I caught Mr. Schultz's eye and he suddenly displayed a mouth of large evenly aligned white teeth, and his face of rude features creased itself into a smile of generous appreciation. "It's the Invisible Man," he said. I was as startled by his utterance as I would have been if someone in a church painting had started to talk. Then I found myself smiling back. Joy flooded my boyish breast, or perhaps gratitude to God for granting me at least this moment in which my fate wasn't in the balance.

"Look at that, Irving, the kid came along for the ride. You like boats, kid?" he said.

"I don't know yet," I said truthfully and without understanding why this honest answer was so funny. For he was laughing now loudly and in his hornlike voice, which I thought was terribly careless of the solemn nature of the occasion; the mien of the other two men seemed preferable to me. And I will say something more about Mr. Schultz's voice because it was so much an aspect of his power of domination. It was not that it was always loud but that it had a substantial body to it, it came out of his throat with harmonic buzz, and it was very instrumental actually, so that you understood the throat as a sound box, and that maybe the chest cavity and the nose bones, too, were all involved in producing it, and it was a baritone voice that automatically made you pay attention in the way of wanting a horn voice like that yourself, except when he raised it in anger or laughed as he was doing now, and then it grated on your ears and made you dislike it, as I did now—or maybe it was what I'd said that I disliked because I was joining in some cleverness at a dying man's expense.

There was a narrow green slat bench or shelf hung from the cabin wall and I sat down on it. What could Bo Weinberg possibly have done? I had had little acquaintance with him, he was something of a knight errant, rarely in the office on 149th Street, never in the cars, certainly not on

the trucks, but always intimated to be central to the operation, like Mr. Dixie Davis the lawyer, or Abbadabba Berman the accounting genius—at that level of executive importance. He was reputed to do Mr. Schultz's diplomatic work, negotiating with other gangs and performing necessary business murders. He was one of the giants, and perhaps, in fearsomeness, second only to Mr. Schultz himself. Now not just his feet but his legs to the knees were exposed. Irving rose from his kneeling position and offered his arm, and Bo Weinberg took it, like some princess at a ball, and delicately, gingerly, placed one foot at a time in the laundry tub in front of him that was filled with wet cement. I had of course seen from the moment I had come through the door how the tubbed cement made a slow-witted diagram of the sea outside, the slab of it shifting to and fro as the boat rose and fell on the waves.

I could handle the sudden events, getting baptized as by a thunderstorm, but this was more than I was ready for to tell the truth, I found I was not a self-confident witness here in contemplation of the journey about to be taken by the man sitting before me with his feet being cast in stone. I was working to understand this mysterious evening and the unhappy tolling of a life in its prime that was like the buoys I heard clanking their lonely warnings as we passed out to sea. I felt my witness

was my own personal ordeal as Bo Weinberg was invited to sit now in a wooden kitchen chair that had been shoved into place behind him and then to present his hands for their tying. They were crisscrossed to each other at the wrist with fresh and slightly stiff clothesline still showing the loops it came in from the hardware store, and with Irving's perfect knots between the wrists like a section of vertebrae. The joined hands were placed between Bo's thighs and tied to them cat's cradle, over and under, over and under, and then everything together was roped in three or four giant turns to the chair so that he could not lift his knees, and then the chair was twice looped to the laundry tub through the handles and the final knot was pulled tight around a chair leg just as the rope ran out. Quite possibly Bo had at some time in the past seen this scoutcraft displayed on someone else for he looked upon it with a sort of distracted admiration, as if now, too, someone not himself was sitting hunched over in a chair there with his feet entubbed in hardening cement in the deckhouse of a boat running without lights past Coenties Slip across New York Harbor and into the Atlantic.

The deckhouse was shaped like an oval. A railed hatch where the girl had been put below was in the center of the deck at the rear. Toward the front was a bolted metal ladder leading straight up through a hatch to the wheelhouse where I assumed the captain or whatever he was