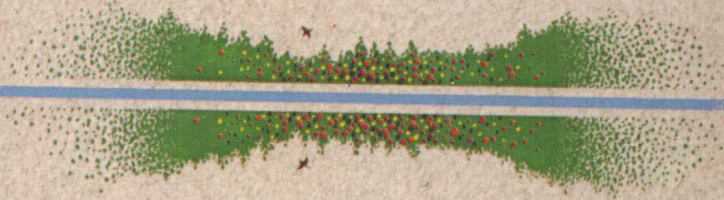


LOON LAKE



A NOVEL BY

E·L

DOCTOROW

AUTHOR OF
RAGTIME

E.L.DOCTOROW

LOON
LAKE

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Random House, Inc., New York, and simultaneously in Canada
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The poem "Loon Lake" originally appeared in the *Kenyon
Review*.

Portions of this work originally appeared in somewhat altered
form in *Playboy* magazine.

A limited first edition of this book has been privately printed.

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Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data
Doctorow, E. L. 1931-
Loon lake.

1. Title.

PZ4.D6413Lo [PS3554.O3] 813'.54 79-5526

ISBN 0-394-50691-X

ISBN 0-394-51176-X (ltd. ed.)

ISBN 0-394-51399-1 (pries. ed.)

Manufactured in the United States of America
Typography and binding design by J. K. Lambert
98765

BY E. L. DOCTOROW

NOVELS

Welcome to Hard Times

Big As Life

The Book of Daniel

Ragtime

Loon Lake

PLAY

Drinks Before Dinner

LOON LAKE



RANDOM HOUSE
NEW YORK

TO HELEN HENSLEE

LOON
LAKE

They were hateful presences in me. Like a little old couple in the woods, all alone for each other, the son only a whim of fate. It was their lousy little house, they never let me forget that. They lived on a linoleum terrain and sat in the evenings by their radio. What were they expecting to hear? If I came in early I distracted them, if I came in late I enraged them, it was my life they resented, the juicy fullness of being they couldn't abide. They were all dried up. They were slightly smoking sticks. They were crumbling into ash. What, after all, was the tragedy in their lives implicit in the profoundly reproachful looks they sent my way? That things hadn't worked out for them? How did that make them different from anyone else on Mechanic Street, even the houses were the same, two by two, the same asphalt palace over and over, streetcars rang the bell on the whole fucking neighborhood. Only the maniacs were alive, the men and women who lived on the street, there was one we called Saint Garbage who went from ash can to ash can collecting what poor people had no use for—can you imagine?—and whatever he found he put on his cart or on his back, he

wore several hats several jackets coats pairs of pants, socks over shoes over slippers, you couldn't look at his face, it was bearded and red and raw and one of his eyes ran with some yellow excrescence oh Saint Garbage. And three blocks away was the mill where everybody in Paterson made the wages to keep up their wonderful life, including my father including my mother they went there together and came home together and ate their meals and went to the same bed together. Where was I in all of this, they only paid attention to me if I got sick. For a while there I got sick all the time, coughing and running fevers and wheezing, threatening them with scarlet fever or whooping cough or diphtheria, my only power was in suggesting to them the terrible consequence of one mindless moment of their lust. They clung to their miserable lives, held to their meager rituals on Sundays going to Mass with the other suckers as if some monumental plan was working out that might be personally painful to them but made Sense because God had to make Sense even if the poor dumb hollow-eyed hunkies didn't know what it was. And I despised that. I grew up in a dervish spin of health and sickness and by the time I was fifteen everything was fine, I knew my life and I made it work, I raced down alleys and jumped fences a few seconds before the cops, I stole what I needed and went after girls like prey, I went looking for trouble and was keen for it, I was keen for life, I ran down the street to follow the airships sailing by, I climbed firescapes and watched old women struggle into their corsets, I joined a gang and carried a penknife I had sharpened like an Arab, like a Dago, I stuck it in the vegetable peddler's horse, I stuck it in a feeb with a watermelon head, I slit awnings with it, I played peg with it, I robbed little kids with it, I took a girl on the roof with it and got her to take off her clothes with it. I only wanted to be famous!

And the coal trucks releasing their fearsome anthracite down the sliding chutes to the dark basements, and Ricco the Sweet Potato man putting into your hand a hot orange potato in a half sheet of the *Daily News* for three cents, the filthy black snow lying banked in the streets, the wind smelling of soot and machine oil blowing down Mechanic Street and you are holding your hands on the sweet heat, cupping it holding it up to your red face. The taking humbly, almost unconsciously of goodness by little

kids who took it all, the rage of parents, the madness of old women in the dank stairwells, murder, robbery, threat in the sky, the unendurable prison of schoolrooms. In the five-and-ten was the cornucopia of small tin cars with wind-up keys made in Japan and rubber cops on motorcycles, and rubber chiefs in sidecars from Japan there were tin autogyros and tin DC-3s! You went for the small things, the molded metal car models that would fit in your palm, you watched the lady in her green smock and the eyeglasses looping from a black string around her neck, and when she turned, out came the white hand like a frog's tongue, like a cobra's, and down the aisles you went, another toy of goodness, bright-painted toy of gladness in your pocket.

But I was alone in this, I was alone in it all, alone at night in the spread of warmth waking to the warm pool of undeniable satisfaction pissed from my infant cock into the flat world of the sheet and only when it turned cold and chafed my thighs did I admit to being awake, mama, oh mama, the sense of real catastrophe, he wet the bed again—alone in that, alone for years in all of that. I don't remember anyone's name, I don't remember who the gang members were, I don't remember the names of my schoolteachers, I was alone in all of it, there was some faculty of being alone I was born with, in the noise of life and clatter of tenement war, my brain was alone in the silence of observation and perception and understanding, that true silence of waiting for conclusions, of waiting for everything to add up to a judgment, a decision, that silence worse than the silence of the deaf and dumb.

And then one day I am caught breaking the lock on the poorbox, the fat priest in his skirts grabbing my neck with a hand like pincers, not the first time slapping my head with his flat hand and giving me the bum's rush back to the sacristy behind the stone Christs and Marys and the votive candles flickering like a distant jungle encampment and I conceive of what a great vaulting stone penitence this is, with its dark light quite deliberate and its hard stone floors and its cathedral carved space intimating the inside of the cross of man the glory of God, the sin of existence, my sin of existence, born with it stuck with it enraging them all with it God the Father the Son and That Other One really pissing them off with

my existence I twist turn kick the Father has balls they don't cut off their own balls they don't go that far the son of a bitch—spungo! I aim truly and he's no priest going down now with eyes about to pop out of his head, red apoplectic face I know the feeling Father but you're no father of mine he is on his hands and knees on the stone he is gasping for breath You want your money I scream take your fucking money and rearing back throw it to heaven run under it as it rains down pennies from heaven on the stone floor ringing like chaos loosed on the good stern Father. I run through the money coming down like slants of rain from the black vaults of heaven.

I lived in New York for a couple of months. It seemed to me at first an incredibly clean place with well-dressed people and washed cars and bright-painted red-and-yellow streetcars and white buildings. It was a stone city then, and in midtown the skyscrapers were white stone and the sanitation men went around pushing big cans on two-wheeled carts and they'd stop here and there and sweep the gutters, that seems incredible to me now, they wore white jackets and white pants and military style caps of khaki. And in Central Park, which I thought of as the country, the park men came along with broomsticks with a nail on the end of them and impaled cigarette wrappers and ice cream wrappers on these sticks and then wiped the sticks off in these burlap bags they carried over their shoulders. The park was glorious and green. The city hummed with enterprise. It was a wonderful city! I thought, a place where things happened and where everyone was important even streetsweepers just from being there not like Paterson where nothing mattered because it was Paterson where nothing important could happen where even death was unimportant. It had size it had magnitude, it gave life magnitude it was

one of the great cities of the world. And it went on, it was colossal, miles of streets of grand famous stores and miles of streetcar tracks, great ships bassoing in the harbor and gulls gliding lazily over the docks. I rode the clattering elevated trains that rocked and careened around the corners and when the weather was cold I stayed aboard making complete circles around the city keeping warm on the rush seats set over the heaters. I got to know the city. It calmed me down. Off on its edges you could always get a place to flop, there were still shanties on the hillsides below Riverside Drive, there were mission houses where you could get a bed down at the Bowery and be fumigated and there was a whole network of welfare places where you could get soup and bread if you weren't proud. But I looked for work, I tried to stay clean and present myself at employment agencies crowds of pushing shoving men staring at jobs described in chalk on blackboards at employment agencies it was very difficult to persuade yourself you and not any of a hundred others were the man for the job.

One day I got wise. I saw a fat kid delivering groceries. He was wearing an apron over his clothes and pushing a cart, one of those wooden carts with giant steel-banded wheels. The name and address of the grocery was painted on the slats. His arms full, he went down the steps to the trade entrance of a brownstone, rang the bell and disappeared inside. The cobra strikes! I raced down the street clattering the cart over the cobblestones, I tore around the corner, I went down a side street made dark by the gridwork shadows of industrial firescapes and dark green iron fronts, I felt like Charlie Chaplin, turning one way, braking, doing an about face, scooting off another way, I think I was laughing, imagining a squad of Keystone Kops piling up behind me, I thought of the fat kid's face, even if he knew where to look he couldn't catch me. I sat down for a while in an alley and caught my breath. Eventually, like the most conscientious grocery boy in the world, I trundled my cart back the way I had come and delivered every last one of the orders. Each bag and box had a bill stuck inside with the name and address of the customer. I took tips and cash receipts. I was polite. I pushed my cart back to Graeber's Groceries Fancy Fruits and Vegetables and found Graeber himself loading up another cart grumbling and saying

things in German and making life hell for his clerks. No fat kid among them. Graeber was angry, suspicious, skeptical. He didn't believe I found the cart abandoned at a tilt in an alley. And then I turned over into his hands the cash receipts. To the penny.

And that's how I came to be a grocery delivery boy in the rich precincts of Murray Hill. I wore the long white apron and pushed the wooden cart and I earned three dollars a week and tips.

At one home in Gramercy Park I made the acquaintance of a maid she had an eye for me she liked my innocent face. She was an older woman, some kind of Scandinavian wore her hair in braids. She was no great shakes but she had her own room and late one night I was admitted and led up all the flights of this mansion and brought to a small bathroom top floor at the back. She sat me in a claw-foot tub and gave me a bath, this hefty hot steaming red-faced woman. I don't remember her name Hilda Bertha something like that, and she knows herself well before we make love she pulls a pillow over her head to muffle the noise she makes and it is really interesting to go at this great chunky energetic big-bellied soft-assed flop-titted but headless woman, teasing it with a touch, watching it quiver, hearing its muffled squeaks, composing a fuck for it, the likes of which I like to imagine she has never known.

Come with me

Compose with me

Coming she is coming is she

She was very decent really and for my love gave me little presents, castoff sweaters and shoes, food sometimes. I tried to save as much of my wages as I could. My luxuries were cigarettes and movies. I liked to go to the movies and sit there you could see two features and a newsreel for a dime. I liked comedies and musicals and pictures with high style. I always went alone. In my mind was the quiet fellow trying to see himself, hear what he sounded like. He fitted himself out in movie stars he discarded them. I was interested in the way I instantly knew who the situation called for and became him. For Graeber, who wore a straw hat and a bow tie, a stubblehead German with an accent you better not laugh at, I was the honest young fellow who wanted to make something of himself. For Hilda the maid I was the boy who thought he was lucky to

have her. When I went along after work with my tips in my pocket I was John D. Rockefeller. I came to make the distinction between the great busy glorious city of civilization on the one hand, and the meagerness or pretense of any one individual I looked at on the other. It was a matter of the distance you took, if you went to the top of the Empire State Building as I liked to do seeing it all was thrilling you had to admire the human race making its encampment like this I could hear the sound of traffic rising like some song to God and love His Genius for shining the sun on it. But down on the docks men slept in the open pulled up like babies on beds of newspapers, hands palm on palm for a pillow. Not their dereliction, that wasn't the point, but their meagerness, for I saw this too as I stood at the piers and watched the ocean liners sail. I watched the well-dressed men and women going up the gangways, turning to wave at their friends, I saw the stevedores taking aboard their steamer trunks and wicker hatboxes, I saw the women wrapping their fur collars tighter against the chill coming up off the water, the men in sporty caps and spats looking self-consciously important, I saw their exhaustion, their pretense, their terror, and in these too, the lucky ones, I understood the meagerness of the adult world. It was an important bit of knowledge and no shock at all for a Paterson mill kid. Adults were in one way or another the ones who were done, finished, living past their hope or their purpose. Even the gulls sitting on the tops of the pilings had more class. The gulls lifting in the wind and spreading their wings over the Hudson.

I distinguished myself from whomever I looked at when I felt the need to, which was often, I felt I could get by make my way whatever the circumstances. I would sell pencils on the sidewalk in front of department stores I would be a newsboy I would steal kill use all my cunning but never would I lose the look in my eye of the living spirit, or give up till that silent secret presence grew out to the edges of me and I was the same as he, imposed upon myself in full completion, the same man with all men, the one man in all events—

I remember this roughneck boy more whole than he knew. Going down the dark stairs of the mansion on Gramercy Park one night trusted to let myself out by the drowsy spent maid, I lifted a silver platter a silver creamer and teapot and a pair of silver candlesticks from the dining room.

Even now I see the curved glass cabinet doors in the streetlight coming through the French windows. I hear my breathing. I catch sight of my own face in the salver. Loot-laden I tiptoed over the thick rug I half walked half ran through the streets clutching my lumpy lumberjacket. I had a room on the West Side in a rooming house fifty cents a night no cooking. In the morning going to work from across the wide cobblestone street the cars going past, the streetcars ringing their bells horns blowing trucks ratcheting along with chain-wheel drive I see in Graeber's Groceries Fancy Fruits and Vegetables an officer of the law in earnest conversation with my employer.

Come with me

Compute with me

Computerized she prints out me

Commingle with me she becomes me

Coming she is coming is she

Coming she is a comrade of mine

Sometimes around those fires by the river a man would talk a war veteran usually who had a vision of things, who could say more than how he felt or what was so unfair or who he was going to get someday. And invariably he was a socialist or a communist or an anarchist and he'd call you brother or comrade this fellow and he was always contemplative and didn't seem to mind if anyone listened to him or not. Not that he was wise or especially decent or kind or even that he was sober but even if none of these in those fitful flashes of lucidity like momentary flares of a dying fire he'd say why things were as they were. I liked that. It was a kind of music, I lingered by the edges of the city with the hobos and at night that grand and glorious civilization now had walls all around it we were on the outside looking up at this immense looming presence, a fortress now it was a kind of music to point to the walls and suggest why they would come down. And if you didn't have a true friend, someone in the world as close to you as you were to yourself, this kind of music was interesting to hear. At night you smelled the river in daylight you didn't, I smelled the river