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most accomplished
performance to date."
—NEW YORK TIMES

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WORLD'S FAIR

E. L.

DOCTOROW

AUTHOR OF CITY OF GOD

NATIONAL BESTSELLER

From E. L. Doctorow's World's Fair

In the ending chapters, Edgar re-visits the World's Fair just a month before it closes in 1940 after winning honorable mention in an essay contest.

We see his final take on the fair, as well as exhibits like the Time Capsule.

As you read this final passages, you already be familiar with the layout of the fair as described by Doctorow's narrator.

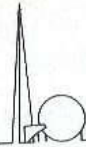
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mother's arm was in his and on the other side I held his hand. They looked very nice. She wore her flowered sundress with a matching jacket and a smart hat with the brim pulled over on one side, and he wore his double-breasted grey suit and his straw boater tilted at a rakish angle. I had put on a clean shirt and tie and had washed my face. "Don't we look swanky!" I said. We were all very happy. Krum's was up near Fordham Road. At their fountain were devised the best ice cream sodas in the Bronx. Perhaps in the world. The evening was balmy, the sun had set but the sky was still blue. The Concourse was alive with cars and people strolling in the early evening. The trees on the road dividers were in full leaf. The streetlamps had come on, and some of the cars drove with their parking lights, but the underside of the passing clouds in the sky were sunlit. My father strode along as he did when he felt good, his shoulders moving from side to side, it was almost a dance. His head bobbed. "Shoulder back," he said to me, "chin up, eyes straight ahead. That's it. Look the world in the eye."

"We should call Philadelphia and tell Donald the good news," my mother said. "We'll do that when we get home," she said after a moment. "He's probably out for the evening anyway. And where did you *get* that stuff," she said to me, leaning forward across my father to catch my eye. "Appreciating all women, indeed. You're a chip off the old block, all right," she said, and when we laughed she laughed with us.

I thought to myself that I was, too, in another way. Perhaps what so pleased my father—beyond my essay, beyond my enterprise—was that I had gotten us into something, in the least likely way I had come up with the tickets.



THIRTY-ONE

The following Friday night Donald came home, and the next day we all went to the Fair. Donald enjoyed very much the way it had happened that the family was finally going. He claimed not to be able to believe it. He hit his forehead with the heel of his hand.

The minute we entered the fairgrounds I felt at home. Everything was there just as I had left it. It was even more amazing to see the second time. We were admitted just as the letter promised, each of us was given a special pass to pin like a badge to our clothes. I was proud, I enjoyed it when people looked at us and then looked again.

We stood in the shadow of the Trylon and Perisphere, and I felt these familiar forms, huge and white, granted some sort of beneficence to my shoulders. It was hard to articulate, but it was as if I were in some invisible field of their guardianship.

I was eager to show my family what I knew. The first thing I wanted them to see was the General Motors Futurama. They all pored over the guidebook. Donald planned the itinerary. Futurama would be on it, of course, yet it made more sense first to see Democracy, the diorama inside the Perisphere. So that is what we did. We rode an escalator up inside the Trylon and walked across a pedestrian bridge into the Perisphere. It was a strange globelike room. We stood on a moving belt that went

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360 degrees around the inside of the shell. We were looking down at a totally planned planetary city of the future. Everything had been designed to eliminate all problems and difficulties. A recorded narration told us about it. "In this brave new world," said H. V. Kaltenborn, my father's not terribly favorite radio news commentator, "brain and brawn, faith and courage, are linked in high endeavor, as men march on toward unity and peace."

"M'God," said my father, "he's here too."

The music of an orchestra and choir directed by André Kostelanetz rose from the background. Everyone stared intently at the display, but I was not terribly impressed because nothing moved except us. It was not quite as exciting as a merry-go-round, which is itself fairly dull. My mother was made slightly dizzy moving sideways in this manner.

We left via the Helicline, a ramp leading from the Perisphere to the ground. From this close both structures could be seen in their texture, the sunlight illuminating the gypsum board of their siding. The rough siding made dimples of shadow on the Perisphere. At one point the whiteness turned silver and I could imagine it as the flank of a great airship. Then I could see where the paint was peeling, which was discouraging. But then as we neared the ground the two structures loomed in their geometry, gradually becoming more and more monumental and revealing more of their familiar form, until everything was all right again.

Even though it was Saturday, the Fair was not as crowded as it had been on my first trip, and with fewer people filling the avenues it wasn't as pretty a place. With fewer people in their dress-up clothes the Fair wasn't as clean-looking or as shiny, I could see everywhere signs of decay. Perhaps this was just in my mind; I knew that in only a month the World's Fair would close forever. But the officials who ran the exhibits seemed less attentive to the visitors, their uniforms not quite crisp. Many empty

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stroller chairs stood about in banks, their operators in their pith helmets talking to one another and smoking cigarettes. Now the tractor-train horn playing "The Sidewalks of New York" seemed plaintive because so few people were aboard. I hoped my family didn't notice any of this. I felt responsible for the Fair. However, it all seemed interesting enough to them, they were intent on the main things.

At the Westinghouse building, before we entered the Hall of Science, where Electro the Robot was the star, we stopped at the Time Capsule—or rather the site of its burial. I had seen it before it was put in the ground, because one Saturday afternoon at the Surrey Theater it was shown in the Movietone newsreel, a polished steel cylinder suspended from a crane, twice as tall as a man and pointed at both ends, like a double-headed bullet. The president of the Westinghouse Company spoke into microphones from all the radio stations that were set up there, and then they sank the Time Capsule into this hole they had dug that was just a bit wider than the capsule itself, and into which a slightly larger casing had been sunk so that the capsule would not be eroded by water in the soil and so on. And down it went into its Immortal Well, as the hole was called, and the audience applauded and then workmen screwed a cap over the whole thing and then they built a sort of concrete observation platform around it and that's where we were now, peering down at the cap and reading the descriptive material they had posted.

The Time Capsule had been devised to show people in the year 6939 what we had accomplished and what about our lives we thought meaningful. So they had put articles of common use in there, like a windup alarm clock, a can opener, and a toothbrush and a can of tooth powder and a Mickey Mouse plastic cup, and a hat by Lilly Daché; and they had put in material like asbestos and coal, and messages from scientists, and a U.S. silver dollar and the alphabet in hand-set type, and an electric wall switch; and they had put in the Lord's Prayer in three hundred languages, and a dictionary and photographs of factories and assembly lines, and assorted comic strips and *Gone with the Wind*, by Margaret Mitchell, which I had not yet read; and

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finally newsreels of President Roosevelt giving a speech, and scenes of the United States Navy on maneuvers and the Japanese bombing of Canton in the war with China, and a fashion show in Miami, Florida.

My father wondered aloud what the people five thousand years from now would derive from these things collected in the Time Capsule. "They will think we were good engineers for a primitive people," he said, "and had in our religion only one prayer, which we spoke in a babble of tongues, and that we wore odd hats and murdered each other and read abominable books."

"Not so loud, Dave," my mother said. Other people were standing there and listening. One man laughed but my mother didn't want my father to offend anyone. Of course her reaction only provoked him into even more embarrassing comments. He asked my brother and me why we thought there was nothing in the capsule about the great immigrations that had brought Jewish and Italian and Irish people to America or nothing to represent the point of view of the workingman. "There is no hint from the stuff they included that America has a serious intellectual life, or Indians on reservations or Negroes who suffer from race prejudice. Why is that?" he said as finally we edged him away from the Immortal Well and into the Hall of Science.

It wasn't as if my father couldn't have a good time. On the contrary, he was enjoying himself tremendously. He could be critical of something and admire it at the same time. He just liked to use his mind. By contrast, my mother lacked any capacity for irreverence. She could be bitter, but never disrespectful. When we went through the Town of Tomorrow, a sample community of modern detached houses, each in its own new yard, she became incensed. "What's the point of showing such houses," she said, "when they cost over ten thousand dollars and no one in the world has the money to buy them?"

I was happy when it was time to eat. We sat in the sun and ate waffles with different kinds of topping, which we shared, and not a voice was raised in criticism.

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I thought when I got them all to the Futurama, even they would be impressed. And as we rode sideways in our speaker chairs, the whole splendid panoply of highways and horizons before us, all lit up and alive with motion, an intricate marvel of miniaturization, they oohed and aahed as anyone else would. I felt better. It was exhausting to use your mind all the time, education was exhausting, particularly when it was administered by one's parents.

My father understood that I had a proprietary interest in the occasion. So afterwards, outside, he was very gentle and said many things to show his appreciation and his delight. "It is a wonderful vision, all those highways and all those radio-driven cars. Of course, highways are built with public money," he said after a moment. "When the time comes, General Motors isn't going to build the highways, the federal government is. With money from us taxpayers." He smiled. "So General Motors is telling us what they expect from us: we must build them the highways so they can sell us the cars."

Even I had to laugh at that. Everyone did, we were having a good time.

"That may be so," my mother said a moment later to me as my father and brother walked on ahead. "But it would be very nice to own a car."

I can't recall much more of that final day at the Fair. My parents, growing tired, decided to concentrate their energies on the foreign pavilions. My mother wanted earnestly to see the Jewish Palestine pavilion. She was proud that Jews had a place among other countries. She had contributed a bit of money to the building of it. "They show how the Jewish farmers have made Palestine fertile again, with irrigation and forestry programs," she said. "They show that Jews can be like everyone else."

My father was interested in the Czechoslovak pavilion because

of what had happened in that country. "Chamberlain betrayed them to Hitler," he said. "I want to go there and pay my respects. Also the Netherlands, now also lost. They have a carillon—those bells we heard a while ago? That's the Netherlands."

Donald and I had no particular interest in these things. We agreed to split in two groups and arranged when and where to meet. My parents rode off in a hand-pushed chair, like children in a stroller. "I'm sorry they tore down the Soviet pavilion," my father said to no one in particular. "I'd like to have seen it." He turned and waved to us the hand that held the cigar.

Donald and I took the bus down Rainbow Avenue, across the bridge and into the amusement section. Here it was more crowded. I didn't let on I knew about the amazing Oscar, but secretly I hoped to see my friend Meg. I imagined her sitting in the back, in a faded deck chair. I strolled along with Donald and just happened to bring him to the place. But there was no more Oscar the Amorous Octopus, the building was occupied by jugglers and fire-eaters. So we rode a Dodgem electric car with rubber bumpers, in a great mad crackling horde of similarly equipped drivers, all murderously intent. We bumped them and they bumped us, and we laughed hysterically. Donald let me drive, his arm over my shoulders, as we spun about crashing and banging into people and being bashed in return, everyone's head threatening to fly off. Donald yelled over the din: "This is the Futurama!" Then we went to a fun house and watched ourselves bend and flatten and elongate in the mirrors, our recognizable selves disappearing into nothing, and looming over us a moment later. We ended up at the Savoy, a place where swing was played and people danced to a band on the bandstand. Donald was entranced, the Jimmy Lunceford band was on the stage and we stayed for two whole shows while Donald shook his head in time to the music and closed his eyes and rapped his fingers on the tables like drumsticks. The dancers jitterbugged and did the Big Apple. It was good music.

Later it rained, and I remember seeing the fireworks go up in the black night and lighting the rain as if some battle were being fought between the earth and the sky.

My winning honorable mention in the essay contest brought me a degree of celebrity for a few days at P.S. 70. The detestable Diane Blumberg, whom I had yet to beat in a spelling bee, looked at me with a new respect, I thought. The principal, Mr. Teitelbaum, saw me in the hall and stopped to shake my hand. "That's the kind of student we turn out at Seventy," he assured me in case I had thought the credit should be mine. Perhaps my sense of accomplishment is what kept the World's Fair in my mind, a kind of dwelling in secret amazement at the boy I was for having boldly done the job; or perhaps it was the recollection of those clean and painted streets, red and yellow and blue, and the flower gardens and the whiteness of the future as it expanded in my mind perispherically and thrust its needle into the sky. One day in October I decided to make up my own time capsule. I think the idea came to me when I found a cardboard mailing tube my father had brought home. I lined the tube inside and out with tinfoil I methodically collected from the insides of cigarette packs and gum wrappers. My friend Arnold found out what I was up to and joined in. And one day after school he accompanied me to Claremont Park, the place I had chosen as the burial site.

I led us fairly deep in the park where there was a little clump of bushes. Here the ground was soft, and also one could dig something and be circumspect about it. Meg and I had played close by here. Arnold helped dig the hole. We measured it with the tube itself until finally it could be slipped down and not show.

Ceremoniously I showed Arnold the items I had chosen to represent to the future my life as I had lived it: my Tom Mix Decoder badge with the spinner shaped like a pistol. My handwritten four-page biography of the life of Franklin Delano Roosevelt, for which I had gotten a grade of 100. This had to

be rolled like a cigar. My M. Hohner Marine Band harmonica in its original box that was Donald's but which he had given me when he got the larger model. Two Tootsy Toy lead rocket ships, from which all the paint had been worn, to show I had foreseen the future. My Little Blue Book, *Ventriloquism Self-Taught*, not because I had succeeded but because I had tried. And finally something I was embarrassed to let Arnold see, a torn silk stocking of my mother's, badly run, and which she had thrown away and I had recovered, as an example of the kind of textiles we used—although it was true I had heard that women no longer wore silk stockings in protest against the Japanese, but now wore cotton or that new nylon stuff made of chemicals.

Arnold had brought something too and he asked if he could drop it in the tube. "It's my old prescription pair of eyeglasses," he said. "The frame is cracked but they might understand something about our technology when they look through the lenses." I said OK. Once, long ago, Arnold had showed me he could start a fire in dry brush with those glasses. He dropped them in and I screwed the cover on the tube and slipped it into the ground.

Then I pulled the tube back up and unscrewed the cap and removed the ventriloquism manual. It seemed to me a waste of a book to bury it like that.

I dropped the tube back down in the hole. Looking around to make sure that we hadn't been seen, we filled in the hole with dirt, and stood up and stamped the ground to make it as hard as it was everywhere else. I think we both felt the importance of what we were doing. We brushed some leaves and crumbs of dirt over everything for camouflage.

I remember the weather that day, blustery, cold, the clouds moving fast. The dead leaves flew in the gusts, and the great trees creaked in Claremont Park. My way home headed me into the wind. I put my hands in my pockets and hunched my shoulders and went on. I practiced the ventriloquial drone. I listened for it as I walked through the park, the wind stinging my cheeks and bringing a film of water to my eyes.