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The Boy Who Got Stuck under the Warren Avenue Bridge

The only thing between me in Charlestown and Eddie Shore and the Bruins and the Boston Garden back there in 1935 was the Warren Avenue Bridge. It was a squat, short chunk of iron that stood in my way every time I snuck my way out of the borough to see No. 2 play in the Garden. When it came to hockey there was nobody like the rambunctious hitter who years later had his number cast up in those high and glorious fields of iron, the heavens of the old Garden. Later, per chance, there was Bill Russell of the Celtics and Bobby himself and a handful of others who made my time and their times so memorable. Along with the Depression, low wages, long hours, hunger extending the long hours, the secret ways in and out of places, and crowded places where a lone boy could lose himself.

But in the beginning, for a seven year older playing hooky from the family, from the borough, from all the kids on Bunker Hill Ave. backed up by Ferrin Street, on any evening from October on, there was nobody, just nobody, like that opulent firecracker who was as good as he was mean. I thought life and all its vicissitudes in that tough environ I was growing up in was conquered in the very same way he played his game, nose and chin first and your eyes wide open for whatever might come back at you.

My ticket to that grand palace of hits and its swiftest of excitements was a drain pipe, a plain, old fashioned tin drain pipe some builder's laborer had mounted so close to my bedroom window hanging over Ferrin Street that its invitation could not be refused. I was seven, agile and sublime, and thought I'd be seven always, shod in sneakers from the Converse Rubber Company in Malden at a buck a pair, legged in hand-me down corduroys most of the year, and knew that I would never be eight, would never grow up.

I was in no hurry. I was going to be a kid forever and wear sneakers all the time.

Being monkey was part of my being a survivor in those times, a survivor who could climb up and down a slim drain pipe, who could negotiate narrow sills, who feared no height (including all the upper floor entries of the Bond Bread factory where tasty pleasantries awaited the daring). Fire escapes, in comparison, were a breeze no matter how they were constructed, no matter how high or how frail they were, or how rust would eventually and seriously eat into them. But they were too noisy. They passed by windows. They were too well known as routes of passage---for whatever reason. The drain pipe, though, was secret, and under cover of any article of darkness, any bit of shadow or any trace of evening shade, it could provide the easiest and most illicit way out of an apartment. Any kid could slip past unsuspecting parents working both ends of the clock. It was also the way back in. There were five of us at that time, but I was the only climber.

I sneaked out of the house and sneaked into the Boston Garden in a variety of ways, all dangerous, but all memorable. My mother would

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have had a bird if she had known what I was up to, the routes I dared, the climbs I made. My father, stationed at the Marine Barracks right across Chelsea Street in the Navy Yard, three up and three down on his sleeve, molded out of a harsher clay, would have silently nodded, would have somehow hidden the smile tempting the corner of his lips. It was part of the times, part of the eternal scratch in growing up then in the uproarious and hounding Thirties, and a veritable hell loose on the other end of the world!

City Square, generally cluttered with sailors and yard workers in their comings and goings from the Navy Yard. It was my first stop on the way, and its moving color often caught up my breath as I watched the total scene from a stoop or a piazza hung on the side of a building, and sometimes from the edge of a roof I had gained. I knew lots of roofs in Charlestown. Few of them were entry-proof, few had to be, so there were many side shows and rarees on my route, many small adventures, many points of view to see what made up the borough I lived in, smack against the river and the harbor. The small adventures were continual, a sort of tourist at work getting his money's worth. I wanted to see it all. And that's what took me underneath the Warren Avenue bridge one Saturday evening in late October.

And I had the life scared right out of me!

Curiosity had piqued me, and the little jolt hit home, a pellet or a Bee-Bee right on the mark. On a number of occasions I had seen the barricades come out, the bridge swing itself open, and heard the deep mechanical groans underneath as if freight cars, those massed on the other side of the square in the rail yard, were in agony. Then a rugged little boat would pass by, neat in its maneuvers, topside clean, heading out, a guy at the wheel, a girl in white shorts sitting beside him with a drink in her hands.

I was then, and still am, a rail hugger, a sidewalk supervisor; watching a new or on-going activity was so very gratifying to the curiosity not just lurking in my genes, but fighting for satisfaction, scratching its way to the surface. Men's jobs, like the senses themselves, were so different, made such varied demands, called for such special skills, allowed so much to happen. So it was not only the boats passing through or the mechanical groans rising up from that void that pulled me under the structure, but who does what to which where and when that drew me down under that dark mass. A set of steel stairs, hung alongside the rail like a stiff appendage, took me down under. The near-feeble reach of a catwalk out over the dark water took me from one side of the bridge to the other. A handrail held onto my hand the whole length of the catwalk. Sea gull droppings were everywhere, like buckets of overripe whitewash tossed from above, a sodden and almost liquid mass appearing to move even as I looked at it, a thickness at times doubling the surface it lay on.

And all there was *was* a revelation! In one way it was similar to the high iron fields of the Boston Garden itself, a massive display of braces and spans and purlings and girders. But here there were wheels, all connected to one another. And rust here, rust there, stained green here, stained green there, an ache of brown more felt than seen, a quiet but living monstrosity. Rivet eyes lurked everywhere, spotted with rust so they

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were red at times and closing on evil, some looking like old half dollars nailed in place, some like the eyes of the just dead. Darkness and light seemed to fight each other at both ends of the bridge and in the overhead roadway span where lamplight splashed on silver. Water practically touched everything with its salty tongue. I thought of Beowulf, and the monster Grendel loose in Charlestown and I was the only one to know who was at hand.

All the pieces of iron I tried to fix in a pattern that would match the noises I had heard so many times when the bridge opened. Like the whumps of humping boxcars, moans of pain deep in iron throats, sounds of anger, sounds of the dead rising out of the troubled earth. Steel sounds coming from the darkness of Pittsburgh or Bethlehem. Light and dark, persistent enemies to the death of one or the other, continued to fight above me and at the far ends of the bridge. Their silence was grim and eerie. Some of the geared wheels were, I swore without hesitation, as big as houses. Ugly toothed things that had to fit one another at some opportune time, *or else!* Ugly toothed mandibles that could mush things so hard between them nothing would be left but skin or traces of skin. But bodiless. They threatened with their ugly massiveness.

Below me the water seemed blacker, even though a soft scum road on the surface the way debris makes itself known. Oil slicks, catching early evening lights, traced their brilliant ways across the lapping undulations of tidal change, greens and blues charging out first, taking command. At any moment, I thought, Grendel could be on the way up from the depths. A kick or a punch would buy me enough time.

What was not penetrating my senses, however, was the dim whistle trying to cross the air. It seemed far away, probably from the traffic. It came again, a high burble of a sound, saliva mixed with it, a cop in blue, his hand up and palm out, a car stopping, a Reo or Graham or Pierce Arrow strangely at idle.

What you want to hear you often hear.

But if an earthquake is ever to come beneath me, I will know its first shudder, its tell-tale shudder, for there suddenly came through the skin of all that massed iron, through all those crazy angles and all those bulky joints, up through the souls of my feet and through the grip of my hands on steel, the first threat of movement.

I froze in place. Catwalk bound. Stricken. Alone. A screech I had not heard before said metal was parting. I thought the rivet heads would pop off like Bee-Bees. I'd be shot! A groan my grandfather could have owned came right along beside the screech. And I didn't believe my feet. I didn't believe my hands. I didn't believe my eyes, as the first solid shrug of all Mother Earth went passing beneath me. A wheel, laboriously, was nudged from its sleep. *CHUNG!* Another responded, *CHUNG!*, their aching tones in unison, their teeth chugging against one another. Another shrug. Another cry. The whistle again, only louder, demanding attention, harsh as chains rattling against my ears.

Grendel wasn't coming! It was just iron and steel at movement. The catwalk I was on began to swing. The wheels turned on themselves. They

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bit. They chewed, one cog at a time, one tooth at a time. They ground away. Silence leaped off to find a safer place. I'd be better off on the ice with No. 2 after me, into the corner, behind the net, diving for the bench. Would I ever see him again? Would I ever get to move back down Chelsea Street and get home again? The wheels turned noisily, the unseen throats of them disgorging awful noises. I thought of Peter Barry who lived directly over me in the block. Would he enjoy my fear now? I'd punch the smile off his face.

A picture of Eddie slamming a Canadian against the boards leaped into my head. I even heard the smash of it, saw the boards bend, hold, bend. He was what it was all about. I loved his anger and his hard play. A sea gull leaped from an unseen roost. Its wings slapped at the air. *Free as a bird* hit me. If the whole Garden moved, especially all that conglomeration of stuff in the high iron fields, wouldn't it sound just like this, the Warren Avenue bridge swinging open and me, seven, seven forever, never to be eight, me, stock still, caught on the middle of a catwalk moving out over the water, and the wheels, the houses of wheels, bearing ferociously down on me.

It was time to pay the piper.

I'd heard my father say those words and never fully understood.

Now I knew.

To say my heart was in my throat was accurate. I didn't like the feeling, but the wheels

were huge, malevolent, hungry. To move would be an error. The catwalk was still here and it had obviously moved a thousand times. So I stayed frozen, my hands still gripped by the rail. The iron monster inched in its swing, it groaned, it *CHUNG'D* and *CHUNG'D*, it slipped sideways, the whole earth of it! Courage and smarts, I heard myself convince myself, means standing still. So I made that perilous under-arc journey out over the water, promising that I'd skip the game and skip No. 2 if only I'd be able to get back to City Square. I settled on City Square rather than home because I knew, like I had always known, that I had taken too many chances and didn't deserve much more than City Square. Anyway, that was a short run to Bunker Hill Ave. Almost no further than the Boston Garden if you want to look at it that way.

A boat passed, a man on deck waved to me, and turned away as if I had been there every trip for him, a regular in his regular seat. The boat turned and channeled away, the groans of the bridge started anew, started on their comeback, and I moved slowly back to where I had been. I had been swept away in slow motion. I was swept back, time having no real rivals. And too so came the hard tack, the survivor's ruse, the return of confidence that said a mere storm had been weathered.

So City Square came and went, sailors passing by in their parade, bell bottoms slapping their semaphores, the noise and laughter riding over the hard surfaces, touching stone and steel and all things iron. And all things iron rang with their noise and laughter. Nothing had apparently changed. Nothing at all.

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When I walked back over the bridge, once more self reliant, nose and chin out where they belonged, eyes wide open, the water was darker, the oil slicks had disappeared, the silence had resumed its stay.

No. 2 suddenly loomed on the horizon as if he had been shot down Causeway Street, paused, tempted me, skated off into the unsettling darkness where all this began.

I could hear the puck drop at the face-off.