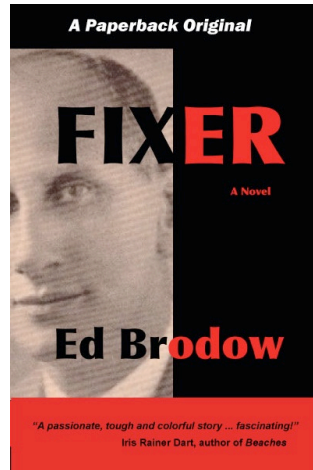


FIXER

A Novel by Ed Brodow



Published by Outskirts Press
ISBN: 9781432717032
www.fixerbook.com
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Chapter One

1961: The Island from Hell

1

The boy shivered from head to toe as he stepped off the bus. At six foot one and 135 pounds, his bony frame was an easy target for the wind. From Brooklyn, the boy had taken three subway lines and was forced to stand for twenty minutes on a dangerous, poorly lit street corner in Long Island City, freezing his ass off, waiting for the

bus ride over to the island. Finally, the old fume bus picked him up, galumphed across the bridge, and, coughing like a smoker with a terminal habit, disgorged its only passenger along with a nasty black cloud of pollution.

In spite of the cold, the boy stopped to look around at the intimidating landscape. The streets were deserted. Ominous shadows from a few solitary streetlamps stood guard in the darkness. As a blustery wind blew in over the East River from Hell's Gate, vicious currents attacked the murky surface of the water. Even the hardy seagulls quivered as they perched on the shore railings. North of Coler Hospital, the Triboro Bridge loomed like a giant freighter that was about to crash into the tip of the long, skinny island. Sandwiched in between the glitter of Manhattan and the gloom of Long Island City, this sandbar in the middle of the East River was a no-man's-land of dilapidated buildings and empty lots, the ruins of previous generations. Some politician with a strong sense of irony came up with the bright idea of naming it Welfare Island.

Breathing heavily from the frosty air, the boy made a beeline for the building that advertised *Bird S. Coler Hospital* in metallic lettering over the entrance. Why, he wondered, doesn't the sign simply say *Nut House*? People should say what they mean. The City of New York ran Coler Hospital as an overflow tank for the crowded psycho ward at Bellevue. Tucked away on the island, merely a stone's throw from Sutton Place and the fashionable Upper East Side, its existence was virtually unknown. If you wanted to bury a building in plain sight, this was the perfect place to do it. You were on an island in the middle of nowhere, a place the rest of the world wanted to forget.

From the outside, it reminded the boy of a schoolhouse, a typical two-story, red brick institutional building. Inside, he knew he was no longer in the same reality. The tiles that covered the walls were yellow, which made sense to the boy considering the overpowering smell of stale urine that hit him smack in the face the minute he walked in. If he closed his eyes, he was in the monkey house at the Prospect Park Zoo.

The boy wasn't sure why he kept coming to this dreadful place. At fourteen years of age, he could think of better ways to spend his evenings, but he was drawn to it, as he was drawn to the man. As far back as he could recall there had always been a special connection between the boy and his grandfather.

No one challenged the boy as he navigated his way through the maze of corridors and up the stairs to the ward where the old man lay still. A barely noticeable typewritten sign at the end of the bed identified its current occupant as "Leonnoff, Harry." The boy kissed the old man on the forehead.

"Hello, Pops."

No answer. No movement.

The boy sat down and waited. He searched the wrinkled face for signs of life. After ten or fifteen minutes of silence, the old man began to stir.

"Help me up, son," the old man ordered as though they had already gone through the formalities of greeting each other. At least he recognized me this time, the boy thought. He let the old man lean on him all the way to the urinal. The old man relieved himself, then they slowly returned to the ward where the boy lovingly guided the fragile bag of bones, the shadow that used to be his grandfather, back into the bed. The old man stared at the ceiling. His eyelids fluttered.

The boy was confused. In front of him was the most remarkable human being he had ever known. If this is what fate had in store for such a vital man, the boy would not be able to face the future. What could he look forward to in his own life? Seeing the old man this way was like watching Pee Wee Reese strike out against the Giants. When the Brooklyn Dodgers failed, the boy felt that he had failed. If you idolized someone, you wanted him to live up to your expectations.

Listen up, the boy wanted to scream. This man is Harry Leonnoff! How did it ever come to this? What in the world was going on inside the workings of his grandfather's brilliant, tortured mind?

The boy's musings were interrupted by a sudden outburst from the old man.

"You're under arrest, you little bastard!"

"What?" The boy inquired.

"You're under arrest, and if one of these gorillas touches me, you're going straight to the morgue."

Chapter Two

1917: The Face of Evil

1

NO KIKES NO NIGGERS

Madison Square Park was a friendly spot even if the sign posted at its entrance was not.

In 1917, Madison Square was surrounded just as it is today by Fifth Avenue on the west, Twenty-Third Street on the south, Madison Avenue on the east, and Twenty-Sixth Street on the north. It was, and is, an oasis of calm in the middle of the storm. You wouldn't have noticed much difference on that particular October day. Not much, that is, as long as you overlooked the goons and their menacing posters.

It felt good to be alive on a day like this. The leaves on the trees were starting to turn their remarkable fall colors. The humidity was nonexistent and the air was crisp. The bright afternoon sun brought to life the dull browns of the earth and the pink skin tones of the 20,000 people who had crowded into the park in anticipation of free entertainment. It was the sort of clear autumn day that normally brings out the best in New Yorkers. This particular day, however, seemed to bring out the worst. As Dorsey Hogan prepared to deliver his speech, the sanctity of a gorgeous afternoon was about to be defiled.

A shout rose up from the multitude as Hogan arrived at the Twenty-Sixth Street entrance, buoyed on the shoulders of his supporters. The cheers went on for several minutes as the would-be fuehrer positioned himself on the bandstand, surrounded by a dozen hooligans. He was a short, barrel-chested man who liked to wear his black hair parted in the middle.

As the commotion died down, Hogan pointed in the direction of Fifth Avenue, where, conveniently, a contingent of soldiers was marching toward Washington Square before departing for France. The martial strains of a military band could be heard in the distance.

"There go the fighting boys!" screamed Hogan. The crowd roared with delight.

“And who is staying behind to get rich?” he asked. “That kind,” he replied to his own question as he grabbed his nose to emphasize his stereotype of a Jew. “The Jews are against the war, and do you know why? Because making money is more important to them than their country. The other reason is, they’re just yellow!”

Americans have always been ambivalent about getting involved in world affairs. When America declared war on Germany in 1917, although the majority actively supported the men who were fighting in France, many people believed it was a big mistake. Others used the war as an excuse to attack those of German descent and anyone else who might not be in a position to fight back. One of the attackers was Dorsey Hogan, an unscrupulous opportunist whose kind we see quite often in American politics. His father had come over from County Cork and his mother was a quiet Norwegian woman who died when Dorsey was five. The father would come home drunk and beat up the boy, until one day he never came home at all. Dorsey was eleven. He grew up sleeping under tarpaulins around the Brooklyn docks, where he learned the ABC’s of crowd control by watching the labor leaders attempting to organize the waterfront.

Along came the war and Hogan saw opportunity knocking. Masquerading as a patriot, he used his oratorical flair to stir up the local wards in Brooklyn. These were the days before television or the microphone. If you were going to speak in public, you had to project to an audience of thousands without the crutch of technology. Hogan was a charismatic speaker whose big voice inflamed the mobs with the help of two convenient scapegoats: socialists and Jews.

In a way, Dorsey Hogan was ahead of his time. He foreshadowed McCarthy by taking aim at the socialists. In his vilification of the Jews, he borrowed a platform that had sufficed for two thousand years and which would soon reach its zenith with a little Austrian fellow by the name of Adolf Hitler, who at this very moment was trying not to get his ass shot off in the muddy trenches of the Western Front.

The socialists and the Jews, according to Hogan, were not only against the war, they were secretly profiting from it. He noticed that he could get applause without taking much of a stand on any real issue if he simply waved the flag and then launched into his anti-Semitic tirade. Wherever he spoke, whether in Park Slope or Flatbush or Bay Ridge, the Jewish shops would be stoned and boycotted. No one dared to stop Hogan, in no small part because of the coterie of thugs who would beat up anyone foolish enough to try to argue with him. The leaders of the Jewish community in Brooklyn

appealed to the police, but they were told that Hogan had not broken any laws. The politicians were afraid to take him on in case it would jeopardize the votes of Hogan's admirers.

So Dorsey Hogan was finally achieving his life's ambition. He was becoming a power to be reckoned with in the city. Today he was speaking in Manhattan. Yesterday Brooklyn, tomorrow the world.

2

Famous for its matzo ball soup and rude waiters, scruffy Ratner's restaurant on Delancey Street was the unofficial headquarters of Jewish politicians, lawyers, and anyone who was anyone on the Lower East Side of Manhattan. "It had no atmosphere whatsoever," said one Ratner's aficionado, "but that in itself was part of its atmosphere." A typical Ratner's joke went like this:

Customer: "Waiter, my soup is cold!"

Waiter: "Let me see." He grabs the customer's spoon and tries the soup. "Tastes all right to me."

On the morning that Dorsey Hogan was preparing to address the crowd at Madison Square, twelve prominent Jewish professionals met at Ratner's to find a way to stop him. The group seated around a long table included several high-profile jurists and attorneys, and the editors of most of New York's Jewish newspapers.

"The police won't go near him," observed the editor of the *Daily Forward*. "Nobody wants to know from nothing. Hogan doesn't even exist, as far as they care. There has to be a way to silence this bastard." The others mumbled their agreement.

"Did anyone get through to Mitchel?" asked Judge Sperling of the Municipal Court.

"I spoke with the Mayor last night," replied Justice Belnick of the New York State Supreme Court. "He's getting a lot of heat to lay off of Hogan. He was very cordial but, in a charming way, he told me to go screw myself."

"Can we print that?" the editor of the *Forward* asked.

"You can print it on a poster and plaster it on the door of City Hall," offered a noted political columnist, "but you may as well piss up a rope for all the good it will do you. Look, if the cops won't get involved, let's sue this schmuck in the civil courts."

“That will take two years,” said one portly defense attorney. “By the time we get a judgment, *if* we can get one, a Jew won’t be able to show his face on the streets of this city.”

“Wait a minute. I think we’re going about this in the wrong way,” said Judge Sperling. “The system is protecting Hogan, right? So what we need here is someone from outside the system. Someone who is willing to thumb his nose at the Mayor, the Police Department, Tammany Hall, the whole lot of them.”

“You want to hire some thugs?” retorted the political columnist. Several men laughed. “That will make us no better than Hogan. You must be dreaming.”

“No he’s not.” All eyes turned to a small, meticulously dressed lawyer seated at the end of the table. “I know just the man for the job.”

“Would you be kind enough to enlighten the rest of us?” Judge Belnick asked.

“Harry Leonnoff,” said the small man.

“Leonnoff?” the political columnist snickered. “Isn’t he the marshal who beat up that pimp in Harlem?”

“Leonnoff is meshugeh,” said the portly lawyer. “He’s nuts.”

“And he was appointed by Mitchel,” added the frowning editor of the *Yiddish Journal*.

“No!” Judge Belnick sat upright. “That’s it. Leonnoff is just the man we need. He may be a little crazy, but he’s fearless.”

Everyone had to agree.

“I’ll say this about Leonnoff,” said the editor of the *Forward*. “There are some things all of us would like to do, but we’re afraid to. That son-of-a-bitch Leonnoff, he’ll go out and do them!”

“If he believes strongly enough in something,” said the small man, “nothing can stop him.”

“But can we convince him?” asked Judge Sperling.

There was a moment of silence.

“Milt,” Belnick said to Sperling, “the city marshals come under the jurisdiction of the Municipal Court. That’s your bailiwick.”

“So?”

“So call Leonnoff. See if he’d like to come over here and join us for some nice hot matzo ball soup.”

Marshal Harry Leonnoff sat with his bum leg resting on the desk. The open jacket of his dark, double-breasted suit revealed a flashy red tie and a pair of lavender suspenders. If you looked hard enough, the grip of a large thirty-eight special peeked out at you lasciviously from the top of his waistband. The oversized foot enjoying the comfort of the desk was encased in a heavy, black orthopedic shoe that resembled a combat boot. His hands were stuffed in his trouser pockets. From the bored expression on his face, he might have been mistaken for your average, balding civil servant. At the opposite side of the desk stood a well-dressed, well-fed, middle-aged white man with a mustache, and a short, stooped, older black man with a crest of snowy white hair.

“He hasn’t paid his rent in two months,” said the white man with the hint of a brogue. “There is no reason why I should have to support this lazy bastard.”

The black man did not reply. His bloodshot eyes were trained on the floor. He nervously fingered an old cap.

“What have you got to say for yourself, Jesse?” the marshal inquired of the black man in a theatrically powerful bass baritone that was used to giving orders. As Harry’s face came to life, intelligent blue eyes sparkled over an aggressive nose and strong Mongol cheekbones.

“Jeez, Mr. Harry,” replied the black man. “I been payin’ ma rent fo’ six years to this here man. But ah done lost ma job down at the Navy Yard when ah got hurt. Ma wife she cain’t work no mo’. He axed me for da rent money, and ah begs him.”

“These niggers all have one excuse or another,” said the landlord. “I’m sick and tired of it.”

“Please, Mr. Harry,” said Jesse. “Ah’s gonna pay him just as soon as ah gets me a job. Don’t let him throw me out in da street.”

“Is that true?” asked Harry. “Has he paid his rent for six years straight?”

“Well, yes, but ... can I talk to you privately for a minute, Mr. Leonnoff?”

“Jesse,” said Harry, “Go wait over there by the window for a minute.” He beckoned to the landlord to come closer. “What’s on your mind?”

“Look, Mr. Leonnoff,” whispered the man. “You and me, we understand each other.” He reached into his pants pocket and produced a twenty-dollar bill. “This is a simple case. He doesn’t pay

his rent. He gets evicted. It's too bad. I don't like it and you don't like it, but it happens every day."

In 1917, it did happen every day. Rent strikes were a common occurrence of the period, and so the marshal's job of executing eviction judgments against tenants could be extremely lucrative. An enterprising marshal could earn a small fortune in fees and payoffs, which made the job a sought-after perk of public life. When Mayor John Purroy Mitchel appointed Harry Leonnoff as city marshal, it was a plum patronage assignment. Harry's take was more than \$20,000 per annum, a king's ransom by the standards of the time. A practice that is now frowned upon, in Harry's day the offer of a twenty-dollar bill for looking the other way was not at all unusual, and this landlord knew it.

As the man expected, Harry palmed the twenty, winked at the landlord, and called for the black man.

"Jesse, how much is your rent?" asked Harry.

"Eight dollars a month," replied Jesse.

Harry leaped up with surprising speed and stuffed the twenty into the dumbstruck landlord's vest pocket.

"Here's for the two months he owes you, and here's for next month."

Harry fished out four singles from his own pocket and jammed them into the vest with the twenty.

"That's twenty-four bucks. You want to count it?"

"Wait a minute," screamed the landlord. "You can't do that!"

Harry grabbed a leather sap that had been resting on top of the desk and, from the intimidating vantage point of his not quite six feet, held it up as if poised to strike. The white man flinched as Harry's disarming blue eyes cut him in half.

"Listen you prick," Harry said in a loud, booming voice that startled everyone in the large room. "You got your goddamn rent, now get the hell out of here before I throw you out on your ass!"

The terrified white man ran out of the room. Harry put one arm around the black man's stooped shoulders and with his free hand slipped a ten-dollar bill into the pocket of the man's shabby coat. Jesse, staring at the floor, began to sob.

"Keep your chin up, brother," said Harry. "The Lord will provide."

The phone rang as Harry escorted the black man to the door.

The twelve Jewish peers were waiting for Harry as he limped into the restaurant. There had been a sense of urgency in Judge Sperling's voice. After the phone call, Harry had bolted the distance from his office on First Street and Second Avenue over to Ratner's in less time than it took to cook a matzo ball. He was more than a little surprised to see the gang that surrounded him. These men were the Jewish intelligentsia, educated and self-important, the cream of the crop. With all their degrees, they needed unlettered Harry Leonnoff to provide the answers. What would the question be this time?

"Harry," said Judge Sperling, "I think you know most of the people in this room. We have a little problem and we think you can help us."

"We'll see," said Harry. "Maybe you can help me. I'm hungry. Waiter!" he bellowed in his distinctive voice. The waiter, a short, rotund man with a huge mustache, came running over to the table. "I'll have a bagel with cream cheese and lox," said Harry. "And make sure it's not stale."

"Harry, have you heard of Dorsey Hogan?" asked Judge Sperling.

"And waiter," Harry added. "A hot cup of coffee and a tall glass of seltzer. What was that, judge?" The waiter poured Harry a cup of coffee.

"Dorsey Hogan. Do you know who he is?"

"Oh yes," replied Harry. "The famous orator from Brooklyn."

"Famous orator?" snapped the editor of the *Daily Forward*. "Poy!"

"Poy?" Harry echoed playfully. "I understand he speaks highly of you."

"Hogan never speaks highly of Jews," Judge Sperling interjected. "He wants the public to believe that Jews are profiting from our nation's involvement in the war in Europe. In particular, he likes to make slanderous remarks about Jewish women."

"He knows my wife?" Harry joked as he added cream and sugar to his coffee.

"Relief from the authorities is out of the question," said Judge Belnick, ignoring Harry's witticism. "The police won't act. The Mayor has stonewalled us."

"Ah!" screamed Harry.

"Ah what?" inquired Judge Belnick.

"Sorry. The damn coffee is hot."

“Dat’s vat you asked for, hah mister?” interrupted the waiter in a thick Yiddish accent. “Hot coffee he says, hot coffee he gets. Now he complains.”

“Will you go with us to Madison Square and listen to Hogan’s speech?” asked Judge Sperling.

“Anybody can listen,” said Harry. “You didn’t ask me here just to listen.”

“A marshal is a peace officer,” said Judge Sperling. “If Hogan incites the crowd against the Jews, will you make an arrest?”

Harry hesitated for a moment before answering. “What time is the speech?”

“Two o’clock,” said the *Forward* editor. Harry looked at his watch.

“Harry,” added Judge Belnick. “You understand that Hogan is always accompanied by a little army of thugs.”

Harry was familiar with Dorsey Hogan and his anti-Semitic mudslinging. The man was a menace, but no one had the guts to do anything about him.

“I don’t care if he has a thousand thugs,” Harry replied with a grim smile. The waiter arrived with Harry’s bagel and lox. “But not on an empty stomach.”

The others watched in amazement as Harry stuffed himself. How can he eat at a time like this?

What does it mean to be fearless?

Fearless is a misnomer. No one is without fear. Fear is one of the primary human emotions. A person who is fearless simply deals with his fear differently than the rest of us. That person says, “I am not going to allow my fear to control me.”

Harry Leonnoff was fearless, but not without having paid his dues. He had been afraid before and he had survived. This would not be the first time he had confronted a more numerous adversary with nothing but his wits and his nerve. Driving over to Madison Square that afternoon, Harry knew he would be walking into the arms of Dorsey Hogan’s goon squad. The metallic taste of fear was in the air. He had no choice but to embrace it.

As he headed uptown, Harry’s mind raced back to the cradle of his fears. To the end of the last century. To the Lower East Side. To Norfolk Street.