

EGGTIME

à la E. L. Doctorow's *Billy Bathgate*

He had to have planned it, because all the other eggs were either deviled or chopped, julienned or pickled, whipped or painted with likenesses of Queen Isabella, King Ferdinand, and their dog, Katy, only this one was left untouched. Only this one was to go down in the history of famous foods alongside Adam's apple, Persephone's pomegranate, and Prometheus' liver.

Cristóbal Colón was not the most handsome man, with white hair uncombed and a ruddy face whose cheekbones seemed lost in flesh, all set on shoulders that held no neck. Even in the fine clothes he had to wear for this festival in his honor, hosted by the second most powerful man in the kingdom—the Archbishop of Toledo and Grand Cardinal of Spain, Pedro Gonzales de Mendoza—he suffered a sartorial inadequacy as some people have leprosy or the plague.

Yet he was the greatest man I have ever come near, greater than any pope, soldier, or even toreador. Not that I came very near the Admiral at the festival, I was only a freelance servant boy, but gifted with extraordinary peripheral vision as well as a sense of judgment keener than the judges of the Inquisition and almost superhuman speed for a boy of an undetermined age somewhere in his early teens, I saw what I saw and even in motion I saw it clearly.

I immediately granted Cristóbal Colón all the powers of his reputation because of the way he walked clear cross the room to discover the only caviar of the feast. Five hidalgos, three ladies, and one questionable individual had asked me where it might be, and I had been absolutely unable to earn a doubloon letting them in on the secret. The great Colón's discovery that the caviar was sitting in a tiny bowl behind the grand head of a Pyrenees boar enabled me to earn five pieces of eight before the Admiral's extraordinary appetite had cleaned out the bowl.

The magnificent Admiral had recently returned from discovering islands across the Ocean Sea and, because the King and Queen had been usurping all of his time and hogging all of his stories, this was the first chance the nobility had had to rub shoulders with the first Governor of the Indies. He had waltzed into the hall, tangoed through the crowds, and was now sitting this one out and telling some of the tallest tales I've ever heard, about ten-foot natives who grilled human flesh on kebabs; about a violent hurricane on the way home and the message he placed in a bottle, thinking he'd never see Spain again; about his unjust imprisonment in the Azores and another brush with death in Lisbon; about the way his mistress Beatriz and his queen Isabella greeted the homecoming king. The Archbishop sat right in

among the nobles, who hung on every one of his marvelous words, who were completely enchanted by the honeyed voice of the Admiral who could spin a tale tighter than his father the weaver, more wild than his mentor Odysseus, and softer than his mistress Beatriz' inner thigh. He had the nobles believing that the meek would inherit the Other World (and that Colón himself was meek, despite all evidence to the contrary), that righteousness was righter than might, and that the Cubs would win the pennant. The Admiral's honeyed baritone seemed to become sweeter and stickier, and the nobles seemed to cling to it as if he were the Archbishop revealing that Christ was about to return to earth and bring salvation to them and only them, leaving the poor and righteous to fend for themselves, the scum, and not only that, the great hall hushed and even the silverware ceased to ring out, the women swallowed their giggles, the men held back their belches, and the children fell asleep. The Admiral had an incredible technique, his technique was to have technique alone.

Then suddenly one of the grandest of the grand nobles made a late great entrance, tossing his hat and cloak into my hands, and then he tripped down three stairs and slid fifty feet or more on the freshly waxed marble floor, and his slide ended at the feet of none other than Cristóbal Colón, who stopped his tale and helped the man to his feet with a single, stupendous tug. The noble made a show of brushing off his clothes, but he was clearly thinking of what to say to the discoverer of a whole new world across the sea, and he finally thought of something and he even said it.

"Are you Cristóbal Cohen?" he asked.

"I am Cristóbal Colón."

"Aren't you the kike who says he was the first to discover a western route to the Indies?"

"No, I'm the wop who did discover a western route to the Indies."

"Ya know, if you hadn't happened to have a lucky break or three and get better weather than has ever been recorded on the Ocean Sea and have inside information from a sailor who ya killed after he stepped off a ship at Porto Santo and told the first guy he saw, who happened to be you, all about what was over there across the Ocean Sea and how to get there and that he was the sole survivor of the only ship that ever came upon it (and he was Spanish and the youngest although illegitimate son of a nobleman to boot), then some man, some real man, some Spanish man of a good, old family who didn't make such a big deal about Providence and destiny and all that kind of New Age crap, one of our many, many great geniuses would have made an expedition there as soon as credit loosened up. In other words, big fucking deal!"

Admiral Colón didn't say a word to the drunken bum of a noble, he walked across the room and reached under the table near where the caviar bowl had stood and pulled out an egg, a regular old hard-boiled egg, pure and white and ovoid, and he walked over to where most of the nobility of Spain had congregated around their challenging peer.

"Big fucking deal?" the Admiral said. "Well, if being from such good old Spanish families makes you such geniuses, then one of you can surely balance this here egg end up on that there table in about two seconds flat, give or take. But don't go cheating by using salt or crumbs or that sort of crutch. It's gotta stand on its own lack of feet." And he laughed a hearty laugh at his joke, which was not shared by any of the nobles who had been bewitched by him only moments before. For with the age of chivalry nearly over in Spain, there were few real challenges anymore, and this one was a doozie, more original than a dragon or a giant or a damsel in distress.

For a thin minute it seemed that Colón had them licked. But then one of them grabbed the egg and delicately placed it on the table, and he tried this and he tried that, he prayed and he cursed, he whispered and he roared, but everything he did was worthless, and everything the others tried was no less worthless, and everything their wives suggested was every bit as worthless, too, and the children were still asleep, and oh around three in the morning the challenger, now sober as a man on the stake, finally groaned out, Uncle! and the Admiral of the Ocean Sea and Governor of the Indies, calm and patient Cristóbal Colón, took the egg from him, walked to the table, and gave it a nice easy squash, so that one end went flat and the egg stood there bolt upright, as if in the embrace of an egg cup or chalice.

No one had to say what the moral was and no one did, not even the Admiral (but I will): once something is done, everyone knows it can be done and how to do it, so if there be any justice in the world all the credit ought to go to the one who does it first.

I walked out into the street, where beggars slept in miserable piles of rags and children snuck back into orphanages and peddlers came out of holes in the wall to walk cross town to where they picked up their overripe wormy fruit to sell to people no better situated than themselves. And I thought about what I'd heard of the Admiral's tales and what the noble had said to him and what a great con artist the Admiral was, and I decided that I would go on his second voyage and learn the tricks of several trades, even if I had to row the whole way across.

COLUMBUS DINGS A DONG

à la Dr. Seuss's *Horton Hears a Who*

One night in the year of the Lord ninety-two
With Columbus the sole one awake of the crew,
He thought that he saw land at last up ahead
And went and got everyone up out of bed.

They laughed when they'd gotten the sleepers all out
And couldn't see anything, squid, swordfish, or trout,
But when they got up late and came onto deck
Columbus was calling them things worse than Heck.

The crew got the sails down in time for the reef,
But the captain kept pouring on buckets of grief:
"You moronic morons, you ignorant igs,
You wouldn't know diamonds or gold dust from figs,
You're clods, ignoramuses, imbeciles, fools,
Half-witted harebrains who grew up on gruels,
Blockheads and fatheads and muttonhead dunces,
Dingbats and mooncalves who talk only in gruntses."

Just when Columbus had finished his spiel
The crew saw a sight that was really unreal:
Apparently humans apparently naked
Whose skin was apparently very well baked,
Males with large pendants, females with nought
Covering everything covering ought,
Children were ditto no matter their sex
And the sailors were torn between lust and perplex.

"What are those creatures?" said Sailor Indeed.
"Whatever they are, they do certainly breed.
There's hundreds, there's thousands, all ages and heights,
But they can't be humans, they can't have no rights.
They'll do all our dirty work, darn all our socks,
Clean out our outhouses, have our hard knocks,
Mine mines and plant plants and trade us some trades
Or we'll show them our pistols and cannons and blades."
Columbus was shocked when he heard the men cheer,

The creatures' humanity seemed to him clear.
He looked at his sailors and said they were rude:
"A person's a person. No matter how nude."

"Griffins and chimeras and dodos are nude,
Unicorns, duocorns, that sort of food,
But," said Sailor Say, "they're surely not human,
Note the size of their ding-dongs and their lack of groomin'."

Columbus admitted the males were colossal,
But he'd seen something similar on a Genoese fossil.
"Just look at those women, don't they give you a thrill?
And when you have had them, there won't be a bill.
But the real proof will come when they're 'not in the mood.'
A person's a person. No matter how nude."

They landed and greeted and shook hand to hand
And they named the new nation Ding-Dong-Dingy Land.
The natives, or Ding-Dongs, in too many words
Announced that Columbus was a son of the birds:
He talked like a parrot and ate like a hawk,
And the wings on his seaship were like the Great Grawk.

Columbus announced that to him they were people,
And he ordered a church with a good Christian steeple,
He baptized them all, only ten of them drowned,
And he took all their gold, paying ten beads a pound.

The sailors decided it weren't bestiality
If they accepted female hospitality.
But the natives were restless and the sailors were beat,
So they told Old Columbus, "These are females in heat.
No woman has ever demanded so much.
These have to be animals, you can tell by the touch."
Columbus decided he'd set an example
And entered a hut to have a quick sample.
Two hours later, he staggerwaggered out
And to all of his men he gave a great shout:
"They're humans, I'm certain, and I'm very shrewd:
A person's a person. No matter how nude."