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A New York Winter's Tale

Written by Mark Helprin

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MARK HELPRIN

A New York Winter's Tale

PICADOR



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FOR MY FATHER

No One Knows the City Better

CONTENTS

PROLOGUE *xiii*

I. THE CITY

A White Horse Escapes 3

The Ferry Burns in Morning Cold 10

Pearly Soames 20

Peter Lake Hangs from a Star 40

Beverly 95

A Goddess in the Bath 110

On the Marsh 130

Lake of the Coheeries 143

The Hospital in Printing House Square 173

Aceldama 191

II. FOUR GATES TO THE CITY

Four Gates to the City 219

Lake of the Coheeries 221

In the Drifts 264

A New Life 347

Hell Gate 370

III. *THE SUN . . .* AND *THE GHOST*

Nothing Is Random 401

Peter Lake Returns 403

The Sun . . . 418

. . . and *The Ghost* 438

An Early Summer Dinner at Petipas 445

The Machine Age 456

IV. A GOLDEN AGE

A Very Short History of the Clouds 505

Battery Bridge 507

White Horse and Dark Horse 544

The White Dog of Afghanistan 579

Abysmillard Redux 591

Ex Machina 606

For the Soldiers and Sailors of Chelsea 641

The City Alight 666

A Golden Age 697

EPILOGUE 747

"I have been to another world, and come back. Listen to me."

A New York Winter's Tale

PROLOGUE

A great city is nothing more than a portrait of itself, and yet when all is said and done, its arsenals of scenes and images are part of a deeply moving plan. As a book in which to read this plan, New York is unsurpassed. For the whole world has poured its heart into the city by the Palisades, and made it far better than it ever had any right to be.

But the city is now obscured, as it often is, by the whitened mass in which it rests—rushing by us at unfathomable speed, crackling like wind in the mist, cold to the touch, glistening and unfolding, tumbling over itself like the steam of an engine or cotton spilling from a bale. Though the blinding white web of ceaseless sounds flows past mercilessly, the curtain is breaking . . . it reveals amid the clouds a lake of air as smooth and clear as a mirror, the deep round eye of a white hurricane.

At the bottom of this lake lies the city. From our great height it seems small and distant, but the activity within it is apparent, for even when the city appears to be no bigger than a beetle, it is alive. We are falling now, and our swift unobserved descent will bring us to life that is blooming in the quiet of another time. As we float down in utter silence, into a frame again unfreezing, we are confronted by a tableau of winter colors. These are very strong, and they call us in.

I

THE CITY

A WHITE HORSE ESCAPES



THERE WAS a white horse, on a quiet winter morning when snow covered the streets gently and was not deep, and the sky was swept with vibrant stars, except in the east, where dawn was beginning in a light blue flood. The air was motionless, but would soon start to move as the sun came up and winds from Canada came charging down the Hudson.

The horse had escaped from his master's small clapboard stable in Brooklyn. He trotted alone over the carriage road of the Williamsburg Bridge, before the light, while the toll keeper was sleeping by his stove and many stars were still blazing above the city. Fresh snow on the bridge muffled his hoofbeats, and he sometimes turned his head and looked behind him to see if he was being followed. He was warm from his own effort and he breathed steadily, having loped four or five miles through the dead of Brooklyn past silent churches and shuttered stores. Far to the south, in the black, ice-choked waters of the Narrows, a sparkling light marked the ferry on its way to Manhattan, where only market men were up, waiting for the fishing boats to glide down through Hell Gate and the night.

The horse was crazy, but, still, he was able to worry about what he had done. He knew that shortly his master and mistress would arise and light the fire. Utterly humiliated, the cat would be tossed out the kitchen door, to fly backward into a snow-covered sawdust pile. The scent of blueberries and hot batter would mix with the

sweet smell of a pine fire, and not too long afterward his master would stride across the yard to the stable to feed him and hitch him up to the milk wagon. But he would not be there.

This was a good joke, this defiance which made his heart beat in terror, for he was sure his master would soon be after him. Though he realized that he might be subject to a painful beating, he sensed that the master was amused, pleased, and touched by rebellion as often as not—if it were in the proper form and done well, courageously. A shapeless, coarse revolt (such as kicking down the stable door) would occasion the whip. But not even then would the master always use it, because he prized a spirited animal, and he knew of and was grateful for the mysterious intelligence of this white horse, an intelligence that even he could not ignore except at his peril and to his sadness. Besides, he loved the horse and did not really mind the chase through Manhattan (where the horse always went), since it afforded him the chance to enlist old friends in the search, and the opportunity of visiting a great number of saloons where he would inquire, over a beer or two, if anyone had seen his enormous and beautiful white stallion rambling about in the nude, without bit, bridle, or blanket.

The horse could not do without Manhattan. It drew him like a magnet, like a vacuum, like oats, or a mare, or an open, never-ending, tree-lined toad. He came off the bridge ramp and stopped short. A thousand streets lay before him, silent but for the sound of the gemlike wind. Driven with snow, white, and empty, they were a maze for his delight as the newly arisen wind whistled across still untouched drifts and rills. He passed empty theaters, counting-houses, and forested wharves where the snow-lined spars looked like long black groves of pine. He passed dark factories and deserted parks, and rows of little houses where wood just fired filled the air with sweet reassurance. He passed the frightening common cellars full of ragpickers and men without limbs. The door of a market bar was flung open momentarily for a torrent of boiling water that splashed all over the street in a cloud of steam. He

passed (and shied from) dead men lying in the round ragged coffins of their own frozen bodies. Sleds and wagons began to radiate from the markets, alive with the pull of their stocky dray horses, racing up the main streets, ringing bells. But he kept away from the markets, because there it was noontime even at dawn, and he followed the silent tributaries of the main streets, passing the exposed steelwork of buildings in the intermission of feverish construction. And he was seldom out of sight of the new bridges, which had married beautiful womanly Brooklyn to her rich uncle, Manhattan; had put the city's hand out to the country; and were the end of the past because they spanned not only distance and deep water but dreams and time.

The tail of the white horse swished back and forth as he trotted briskly down empty avenues and boulevards. He moved like a dancer, which is not surprising: a horse is a beautiful animal, but it is perhaps most remarkable because it moves as if it always hears music. With a certainty that perplexed him, the white horse moved south toward the Battery, which was visible down a long narrow street as a whitened field that was crossed by the long shadows of tall trees. By the Battery itself, the harbor took color with the new light, rocking in layers of green, silver, and blue. At the end of this polar rainbow, on the horizon, was a mass of white—the foil into which the entire city had been set—that was beginning to turn gold with the rising sun. The pale gold agitated in ascending waves of heat and refraction until it seemed to be a place of a thousand cities, or the border of heaven. The horse stopped to stare, his eyes filled with golden light. Steam issued from his nostrils as he stood in contemplation of the impossible and alluring distance. He stayed in the street as if he were a statue, while the gold strengthened and boiled before him in a bed of blue. It seemed to be a perfect place, and he determined to go there.

He started forward but soon found that the street was blocked by a massy iron gate that closed off the Battery. He doubled back and went another way, only to find another gate of exactly the

same design. Trying many streets, he came to many heavy gates, none of which was open. While he was stuck in this labyrinth, the gold grew in intensity and seemed to cover half the world. The empty white field was surely a way to that other, perfect world, and, though he had no idea of how he would cross the water, the horse wanted the Battery as if he had been born for it. He galloped desperately along the approachways, through the alleys, and over the snow-covered greens, always with an eye to the deepening gold.

At the end of what seemed to be the last street leading to the open, he found yet another gate, locked with a simple latch. He was breathing hard, and the condensed breath rose around his face as he stared through the bars. That was it: he would never step onto the Battery, there somehow to launch himself over the blue and green ribbons of water, toward the golden clouds. He was just about to turn and retrace his steps through the city, perhaps to find the bridge again and the way back to Brooklyn, when, in the silence that made his own breathing seem like the breaking of distant surf, he heard a great many footsteps.

At first they were faint, but they continued until they began to pound harder and harder and he could feel a slight trembling in the ground, as if another horse were going by. But this was no horse, these were men, who suddenly exploded into view. Through the black iron gate, he saw them running across the Battery. They took long high steps, because the wind had drifted the snow almost up to their knees. Though they ran with all their strength, they ran in slow motion. It took them a long time to get to the center of the field, and when they did the horse could see that one man was in front and that the others, perhaps a dozen, chased him. The man being chased breathed heavily, and would sometimes drive ahead in deliberate bursts of speed. Sometimes he fell and bolted right back up, casting himself forward. They, too, fell at times, and got up more slowly. Soon this spread them out in a ragged line. They waved their arms and shouted. He, on the other hand, was perfectly

silent, and he seemed almost stiff in his running, except when he leapt snowbanks or low rails and spread his arms like wings.

As the man got closer, the horse took a liking to him. He moved well, though not like a horse or a dancer or someone who always hears music, but with spirit. What was happening appeared to be, solely because of the way that this man moved, more profound than a simple chase across the snow. Nonetheless, they gained on him. It was difficult to understand how, since they were dressed in heavy coats and bowler hats, and he was hatless in a scarf and winter jacket. He had winter boots, and they had low street shoes which had undoubtedly filled with numbing snow. But they were just as fast or faster than he was, they were good at it, and they seemed to have had much practice.

One of them stopped, spread his feet in the snow, raised a pistol in both hands, and fired at the fleeing man. The pistol crack echoed among the buildings facing the park and sent pigeons hurtling upward from the icy walks. The man in the lead looked back for a moment and then changed direction to cut in toward the streets, where the horse was standing mesmerized. They too changed course, and gained on him even more as they ran the hypotenuse of a triangle and he ran its second leg. They were not more than two hundred feet from him when another dropped behind to fire. The sound was so close that the horse came alive and jumped back.

The man who was trying to escape approached the gate. The horse backed up behind a woodshed. He wanted no part of this. But, being too curious, he was unable to keep himself hidden for long, and he soon stuck his head around the corner of the shed to see what would happen. The fleeing man opened the gate with a violent uppercut, moved to the other side of it, and slammed it shut. He took a heavy steel dirk from his belt and breathlessly pounded the latch into an unmovable position. Then, with an agonized look, he turned and started up the street.

His pursuers were already at the fence when he slipped on a pool of ice. He went down hard, striking his head on the ground and tumbling over himself until he came to rest. The horse's heart was thundering as he saw the dozen men throw themselves at the fence, like a squad of soldiers. They were perfectly criminal in appearance, with strange bent faces, clifflike brows, tiny chins, noses and ears that looked sewn-back-on, and hairlines that descended preposterously far (no glacier had ever ventured farther south). Their cruelty projected from them like sparks jumping a gap. One raised his pistol, but another—obviously their leader—said, "No! Not that way. We have him now. We'll do it slowly, with a knife." They started up the fence.

Had it not been for the horse peering at him from behind the woodshed, the downed man might have stayed down. His name was Peter Lake, and he said to himself out loud, "You're in bad shape when a horse takes pity on you, you stupid bastard," which got him moving. He rose to his feet and addressed the horse. The twelve men, who couldn't see the horse standing behind the shed, thought that Peter Lake had gone mad or was playing a trick.

"Horse!" he called. The horse pulled back his head. "Horse!" shouted Peter Lake. "Please!" and he opened his arms. The other men began to drop to the near side of the fence. They were taking their time because they were only a few feet away, the street was deserted, he was not moving, and they were sure that they had him.

Peter Lake's heart beat so hard that it made his body jerk. He felt ridiculous and out of control, like an engine breaking itself apart. "Oh Jesus," he said, vibrating like a mechanical toy, "Oh Jesus, Mary, and Joseph, send me an armored steamroller." Everything depended on the horse.

The horse bolted over the pool of ice toward Peter Lake, and lowered his wide white neck. Peter Lake took possession of himself and, throwing his arms around what seemed like a swan, sprang to the horse's back. He was up again, exulting even as the pistol shots

rang out in the cold air. Having become his accomplice in one graceful motion, the horse turned and skittered, leaning back slightly on his haunches to get breath and power for an explosive start. In that moment, Peter Lake faced his stunned pursuers, and laughed at them. His entire being was one light perfect laugh. He felt the horse pitch forward, and then they raced up the street, leaving Pearly Soames and some of the Short Tail Gang backed against the iron rails, firing their pistols and cursing—all twelve of them save Pearly himself, who bit his lower lip, squinted, and began to think of new ways to trap his quarry. The noise from their many pistols was deafening.

Already out of range, Peter Lake rode at a gallop. Pounding the soft snow, passing the shuttered stores, they headed north through the awakening city in a cloud of speed.