



WINTERS

— MARK HELPRIN —

TALE



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WINTER'S TALE

Momentarily suspended over the bay, Peter Lake expected to fall, and would have been satisfied with what he expected. But there was no fall. Athansor rose, and sped outward, stretching his wounded forelegs before him as the air whistled past. The horse and rider were headed for the white wall. Peter Lake looked back and saw that the city was small and silent, and seemed no larger than a beetle. As they broke into the cloud wall the world became a storm of rushing white mist that screamed and shrieked like a choir of shrill and tormented voices.

They flew for hours; it got harder and harder to breathe and more and more difficult for Peter Lake to hold on. As Athansor's speed increased, the clouds rushing by whited out in a blur. Peter Lake thought of the city. A shelter from the absolute and the lordly, it now seemed like such a loving place, even though it had been so hard. Bright images came before his eyes now that he was snowblind, and he ached for the color, the softness, and the sheen of the city that was an island in time.

Finally Athansor tore through the roof of the clouds. They found themselves in a black and airless ether. . .



ALSO BY MARK HELPRIN

A Dove of the East, and Other Stories
Refiner's Fire
Ellis Island, and Other Stories

Mark Helprin

WINTER'S TALE



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FOR MY FATHER
No One Knows the City Better

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

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 road. 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