

milt montague

Horseback In Canarsie

Milt heard from some friends that there was a riding stable in Canarsie where you could rent a horse and saddle for horseback riding by the hour in the deserted south end of Brooklyn. There was only beach sand and marsh grass and Canarsie Bay. The stable was located near the terminus of the Rockaway Avenue trolley car line. The area was completely desolate. It looked like the primeval world. There were miles and miles of nothing but sand and beach grass and lots of marshes, and then endless water as far as the eye can see. It was where Brooklyn ended and the Atlantic Ocean began.

Milt and his friend Sonny decided that though they were both over eighteen, they had never been horseback riding and that it was time to correct that oversight. On the next Sunday they drove down to the stable and each rented a horse. As this was their first experience in the saddle, they were given very gentle animals [old ones] and one of the stable hands walked with them for about twenty minutes explaining the basic rules of horseback riding or the equivalent of "how to stay in the saddle 101" before releasing them on their own. His final word was if they got lost not to worry as the horses were well trained and should that unlikely event occur, all they had to do was to let the reins go and nudge the horse gently and he will return to the stable on his own.

For Milt, it was an exhilarating experience sitting astride this 1500 pound beast and completely controlling him via two thin half inch wide leather strings held in his left hand, the reins. As he sat in the saddle, almost six feet above the ground, Milt visualized bands of horses, galloping free, their manes flying in the wind, across the grassy steppes of Asia, as they had for millions of years until Early Man arrived on the evolutionary scene.

We were in a part of the city that was completely deserted, except for the stable. This wasteland had a notorious reputation as an occasional dump or repository for unwanted victims of the mafia or anyone seeking to dispose of a corpse. Sonny and Milt kept their eyes peeled for anything untoward, but except for one or two bald tires and an occasional empty coca cola can or bottle, the vista was just sand, beach grass, marsh, and salt water as far as the eye can see.

As Milt's horse was passing through a particularly sandy patch, he suddenly dropped his front knees and started to roll over. Milt's reflexes were sharp, and he leaped from the saddle in time to avoid any injury as the animal frantically tried to roll over. After a few minutes of thrashing about wildly his horse became quiet and then rose and waited quietly for Milt to remount. Everything seemed to revert to the Status Quo Ante as Milt got back on his horse, and he and Sonny headed back to the stable.

The stable hand explained that, every once in a while, the lice that live in the horse's fur bite so hard that the horse tries to get rid of them by rolling in the sand.

Wilderness House Literary Review 10/4

The Iceman

Today few people remember the man who was so important in the everyday life of an earlier era of city dwellers. The iceman was a prominent fixture of the 1920's and early 1930's, before the advent of household refrigeration.

In those bygone days, people relied on "iceboxes" to keep food from spoiling and milk and other beverages cool. This was a large wooden box that was lined with sheets of tin to insulate the interior. The inside area was divided into several compartments for perishable food storage and one for a large block of ice. For easy access, each section had it's own outside door. The ice was replenished every two or three days by a local "iceman" that delivered pieces of ice to fit the ice cubicle.

While the ice was doing it's job the melted ice water drained into a large basin under the "ice box". The man of the house's job was to empty this heavy basin of water every night before retiring. If for any reason he was derelict in his duty, he would have to confront a flood the next morning.

The iceman would buy ice in blocks of 200 pounds each and cut it into chunks just big enough to fill the ice compartment of the "ice box". It was sold in two sizes, 10 or 15 cent pieces, delivered from the back of his horse and wagon. On the wagon the ice blocks were covered by old potato sacks and scraps of carpets to impede melting. His only tools were a pair of tongs to manipulate the pieces and an ice pick to crack the large blocks into salable pieces to fit the iceboxes.

Each iceman had his own route and his own customers developed over a period of years of back breaking labor to eke out a meager livelihood. On occasion a newcomer would try to muscle into an established route. This led to shouting abusive insults at each other but rarely to violence [ice picks can be dangerous weapons. They have been used by many mobsters as a simple method of disposing of their competitors or adversaries.]

The iceman would slowly wend his way through his route, jingling his cow bells and shouting, "Ice Man" "Ice Man....". His customers would bellow, through their open windows, the size they wanted [10 cents or 15 cents] and their apartment number. He would then chip it out from a large block of ice, with his ice pick, hoist it onto one shoulder with a pair of ice tongs and deliver it to his customer. He would often carry a fifty pound piece of ice on his shoulder up three flights of stairs and then position it into the ice box. All for 10 or 15 cents.

In the summer he was much more popular as demand for his product sky rocketed. Youngsters would always hang around the wagon, especially during the summer when schools were closed, to watch as he chipped into the ice blocks to make his orders. They would beg for a few slivers or chips to suck on to counter the heat, humidity, and boredom.

The scraps of ice that would have quickly turned into waste water, were thus converted into gifts that this poor man could graciously bestow upon his band of followers.