THE SPECTACULAR *NEW YORK TIMES* BESTSELLER

SMILLA'S SENSE OF SNOW

NAMED "BEST BOOK OF THE YEAR" by *Time*, *Entertainment Weekly*, and *People*

"ASTONISHING." — *Los Angeles Times*

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Smilla's Sense of Snow

Peter Høeg

(Translated by Tina Nunnally)

Part One
The City

1

It's freezing-an extraordinary 0° Fahrenheit -and it's snowing, and in the language that is no longer mine, the snow is qanik-big, almost weightless crystals falling in clumps and covering the ground with a layer of pulverized white frost.

December darkness rises up from the grave, seeming as limitless as the sky above us. In this darkness our faces are merely pale, shining orbs, but even so I can sense the disapproval of the pastor and the verger directed at my black net stockings and at Juliane's whimpering, made worse by the fact that she took disulfiram this morning and is now confronting her grief almost sober. They think that she and I have no respect for either the weather or the tragic circumstances. But the truth is that both the stockings and the pills are each in their own way a tribute to the cold and to Isaiah.

The pastor and the verger and the women surrounding Juliane are all Greenlanders, and when we sing "Guutiga, illimi," "Thou, My Lord," and when Juliane's legs buckle under her and she starts to sob, the volume slowly increasing, and when the pastor speaks in West Greenlandic, taking his point of departure in the Moravians' favorite passage from Ephesians about redemption through His blood, then with only a tiny lapse of concentration you might feel yourself transported to Upernavik or Holsteinsborg or Qaanaaq in Greenland.

But out in the darkness, like the bow of a ship, the walls of Vestre Prison loom; we are in Copenhagen.

The Greenlanders' cemetery is part of Vestre Cemetery. A procession follows Isaiah in his coffin Juliane's friends, who are now holding her upright, the pastor and the verger, the mechanic, and a small group of Danes, among whom I recognize only the social worker and the investigator.

The pastor is now saying something that makes me think he must have actually met Isaiah, even though, as far as I know, Juliane has never gone to church.

Then his voice disappears, because now the other women are weeping along with Juliane.

Many have come, perhaps twenty, and now they let their sorrow wash over them like a black flood, into which they dive and let themselves be carried along in a way that no outsider could understand, no one who has not grown up in Greenland. And even that might not be enough. Because I can't follow them, either.

For the first time I look closely at the coffin. It's hexagonal. At a certain point ice crystals take the same form. Now they are lowering him into the ground. The coffin is made of dark wood, it looks so small, and there is already a layer of snow on it. The flakes are the size of tiny feathers, and that's the way snow is; it's not necessarily cold. What is happening at this moment is that the heavens are weeping for Isaiah, and the tears are turning into frosty down that is covering him up. In this way the universe is pulling a comforter over him, so that he will never be cold again.

The moment the pastor throws earth on the coffin and we are supposed to turn around and leave, a silence falls that seems to last for a long time. The women are quiet; no one moves, it's the sort of silence that is waiting for some thing to burst. From where I'm standing, two things happen.

First, Juliane falls to her knees and puts her face to the ground, and the other women leave her alone.

The second event is internal, inside of me, and what bursts through is an insight.

All along I must have had a comprehensive pact with Isaiah not to leave him in the lurch, never, not even now.

2

We live in the White Palace.

On a piece of donated land the Housing Authority has put up a row of prefabricated white concrete boxes, for which it received an award from the Association for the Beautification of the Capital.

The whole thing, including the prize, makes a cheap and flimsy impression, but there's nothing trivial about the rent, which is so high that the only ones who can afford to live here are people like Juliane, whom the state is supporting; the mechanic, who had to take what he could get; and those living on the edge, like myself.

So the nickname, the White Palace, is something of an insult to those of us who live here, but still basically appropriate.

There are reasons for moving in and reasons for staying here. With time, the water has become important to me. The White Palace is located right on Copenhagen Harbor. This winter I have been able to watch the ice forming.

In November the frost set in. I have respect for the Danish winter. The cold-not what is measured on a thermometer, but what you can actually feel-depends more on the strength of the wind and the relative humidity than on the actual temperature. I have been colder in Denmark than I ever was in Thule in Greenland. When the first clammy rain showers of November slap me in the face with a wet towel, I meet them with fur-lined capucines, black alpaca leggings, a long Scottish skirt, a sweater, and a cape of black Gore-Tex.

Then the temperature starts to drop. At a certain point the surface of the sea reaches 29°F, and the first ice crystals form, a temporary membrane that the wind and waves break up into frazil ice. This is kneaded together into a soapy mash called grease ice and gradually forms free-floating plates, pancake ice, which, on a cold day at noon, on a Sunday, freezes into one solid sheet.

And it gets colder, and I'm happy because I know that now the frost has gained momentum; now the ice will stay, now the crystals have formed bridges and enclosed the salt water in pockets that have a structure like the veins of a tree through which the liquid slowly seeps; not many who look over toward Holmen think about this, but it's one reason for believing that ice and life are related in many ways.

The ice is normally what I look for first when I come up onto Knippels Bridge. But on this December day I see something else. I see a light.

It's yellow, the way most lights are in a city in the winter; and it has been snowing, so even though it's a faint light, it produces a strong reflection. It's shining at the base of one of the warehouses, which in a moment of weakness they decided to let stand when they built our apartment blocks. At the end of the building, toward Strand Street and Christianshavn the blue light of a patrol car is revolving. I can see a police officer. An area temporarily cordoned off with red-and-white tape. Up against the building I can make out what has been blocked off: a small, dark shadow in the snow.

Because I'm running and because it's just barely five o'clock and the evening traffic hasn't tapered off, I get there several minutes ahead of the ambulance.

Isaiah is lying with his legs tucked up under him, with his face in the snow and his hands a'round his head, as if he were shielding himself from the little spotlight shining on him, as if the snow were a window through which he has caught sight of something deep inside the earth.

Surely the police officer ought to ask me who I am and take down my name and address, and in general prepare things for those of his colleagues who will shortly have to start ringing doorbells. But he's a young man with a queasy expression on his face. He avoids looking directly at Isaiah. After assuring himself that I won't step inside his tape, he lets me stand there.

He could have cordoned off a larger area. But it wouldn't have made any difference. The warehouses are in the process of being partially renovated. People and machines have packed down the snow as hard as a terrazzo floor.

Even in death Isaiah seems to have turned his face away, as if he wants no part of anyone's sympathy. High overhead, outside the spotlight, a rooftop is barely discernable. The warehouse is tall, probably just as tall as a seven- or eight-story apartment complex. The adjoining building is under renovation. It has scaffolding along the end facing Strand Street. I head over there as the ambulance works its way across the bridge, and then moves in between the buildings.

The scaffolding covers the wall all the way up to the roof. The last ladder is down. The structure seems shakier the higher you go.

They're in the process of putting on a new roof. Above me loom the triangular rafters, covered with tarpaulins. They stretch for half the length of the building. The other half of the roof, facing the harbor, is a snow-covered flat surface. That's where Isaiah's tracks are.

At the edge of the snow a man is huddled with his arms around his knees, rocking back and forth.

Even hunched up, the mechanic gives the impression of being big. And even in this position of complete surrender he seems to be holding back.

It's so bright. Some years ago they measured the light at Siorapaluk in Greenland. From December to February, when the sun is gone. People imagine eternal night. But there are stars and the moon, and now and then the northern lights. And the snow. They registered the same amount of lumens as outside a medium-sized provincial town in Denmark. That's how I remember my childhood, too-that we always played outside, and that it was always light. In those days we took the light for granted. A child takes so many things for granted. With time, you start to ask questions.

In any case, it strikes me how bright the roof is in front of me. As if it has always been the snow, in a layer maybe four inches thick, which has created the light on this winter day, and which still shines with a diffuse glitter like brilliant little gray beads.

On the ground the snow melts slightly, even in hard frost, because of the heat of the city. But up here it lies loosely, the way it fell. Only Isaiah has walked on it.

Even when there's no heat, no new snow, no wind, even then the snow changes. As if it were breathing, as if it condenses and rises and sinks and disintegrates.

He wore sneakers, even in winter, and those are his footprints, the worn-down sole of his basketball shoes with the barely visible outline of concentric circles in front of the arch on which the player is supposed to pivot.

He stepped out into the snow from where we're standing. The footprints head diagonally toward the edge and continue along the roof for maybe thirty feet. There they stop. And then continue toward the corner and end of the building. They follow the edge at a distance of about two and a half feet, up to the corner facing the other warehouse. From there he turned approximately nine feet in toward the center to get a running start. Then the tracks go straight for the edge where he jumped off.

The other roof consists of glazed black tiles that come to such a steep angle at the gutter that the snow has slid off. There wasn't anything to hold on to. He might just as well have jumped straight out into thin air:

There are no other footprints besides Isaiah's. No one has been across the surface of the snow except him.

"I found him," says the mechanic.

It will never be easy for me to watch men cry. Maybe because I know how fatal crying is to their selfrespect. Maybe because it's so unusual for them that it always carries them back to their childhood. The mechanic has reached the stage where he has given up wiping his eyes; his face is a mask of mucus.

"Strangers are coming," I say.

The two men who approach along the roof are not happy to see us.

One of them is lugging photographic equipment and is out of breath. The other reminds me a little of an ingrown toenail. Flat and hard and full of impatient irritation. "Who are you?"

"I live upstairs from the boy," I say. "And this gentleman lives on the same floor as he does."

"Would you please leave."

Then he notices the footprints and forgets about us. The photographer takes the first pictures with a flash and a big Polaroid camera.

"Only the deceased's footprints," says the Toenail. He talks as if he were filling out his report in his mind. "The mother is a drunk. So he was playing up here."

He catches sight of us again. "Time to go downstairs."

At that moment I am clear about nothing, only confused. But I have so much confusion to spare that I could give some of it away. So I don't budge.

"Strange way to play, don't you think?" I ask him. Some people might say that I'm vain. And I wouldn't exactly contradict them. I may have my reasons for it. At any rate, my clothes are what makes him listen to me now. The cashmere sweater, the fur hat, the gloves. He certainly would like to send me downstairs. But he can see that I look like an elegant lady. And he doesn't meet very many elegant ladies on the rooftops of Copenhagen. So he hesitates for a moment.

"What do you mean?"

"When you were that age," I say, "and your father and mother hadn't come home from the salt mines yet, and you were playing alone up on the

roof of the barracks for the homeless, did you run in a straight line along the edge?"

He chews on that.

"I grew up in Jutland," he says. But he doesn't take his eyes off me as he speaks.

Then he turns to his colleague. "Let's get some lights up here. And would you mind accompanying the lady and the gentleman downstairs."

I feel the same way about solitude as some people feel about the blessing of the church. It's the light of grace for me. I never close my door behind me without the awareness that I am carrying out an act of mercy toward myself. Cantor illustrated the concept of infinity for his students by telling them that there was once a man who had a hotel with an infinite number of rooms, and the hotel was fully occupied. Then one more guest arrived. So the owner moved the guest in room number 1 into room number 2; the guest in room number 2 into number 3; the guest in 3 into room 4, and so on. In that way room number 1 became vacant for the new guest.

What delights me about this story is that everyone involved, the guests and the owner, accept it as perfectly natural to carry out an infinite number of operations so that one guest can have peace and quiet in a room of his own. That is a great tribute to solitude.

I realize, as well, that I have furnished my apartment like a hotel room-without overcoming the impression that the person living here is in transit. Whenever I feel a need to explain it to myself, I think about the fact that my mother's family, and she herself, were more or less nomads. In terms of an excuse it's a weak explanation. But I have two big windows facing the water. I can see Holmens Church and the Marine Insurance building and the National Bank, whose marble faqade is the same color tonight as the ice in the harbor.

I thought that I would grieve. I spoke to the police officers and offered Juliane a shoulder to lean on and took her over to a friend's place and came back, and the whole time I held my grief at bay with my left hand. Now it should be my turn to give in to sorrow.

But it's not yet time. Grief is a gift, something you have to earn. I make myself a cup of peppermint tea and go over to stand by the window. But nothing happens. Maybe because there's still one little thing I have to do, a single thing unfinished, the kind that can block a flood of emotions.

So I drink my tea while the traffic on Knippels Bridge thins out, becoming separate red stripes of light in the night. Gradually a kind of peace comes over me. Finally it's enough that I can fall asleep.