

*The Best Day in a Long Time* by Jana Volkmann

Translated by Nick Browne

### *Chapter 1*

Cordelia saw the horse first. It was leaning against the outside wall of an inn, as though it had been drinking, staring blankly into a night sky perforated by thousands of stars. Its front left hoof was raised in a resting position. A white lace bonnet that it wore over its ears was illuminated so brightly by a lamp that a shimmering aura formed around it, whilst the black, dull coat absorbed all the remaining light, only here and there taking on an almost bluish sheen. To stick something like that, such a dainty little thing, on an animal this mangy struck me as malicious, like a cruel children's prank. It wore no bridle, harness or saddle; the horse looked like someone wearing a hat who is otherwise naked, with the hat not distracting from the nakedness but, on the contrary, grotesquely enhancing it. I stopped on the opposite side of the street. Cordelia cautiously stepped into the horse's field of view, her left hand raised in a calming gesture. The black horse's tail thumped alternately against the wall and its own flank; otherwise it was motionless. It didn't look like it had any danger left in it.

The shutters of the inn were closed. No light shone behind them, and it was dark in the other houses too, all along the street. Only the gas lamps glowed gently, and to stop it from looking too much like a scene from a hundred years ago, every so often there were a few illuminated shop windows. *Final days*, a clothing store advertised in handwritten letters. I ventured closer because my niece Cordelia ventured closer and because her judgement, unlike mine, could be relied upon. The horse didn't see me until I, too, stepped directly into its field of view. It didn't startle, so I didn't startle either. It nudged me with its head, which a moment before had been hanging listlessly, and I began to stroke it. My hands were steady

and unafraid. Once I was sure it had no objection to being touched, I took off its bonnet, for animals that wear such things have already endured enough humiliation. I let it fall to the ground and pushed it aside with the tip of my foot until a drain swallowed it up. Silently it fell into the sewers, into the subconscious of our city. The horse's ears twitched in every direction.

Nothing on earth was as soft as the nose of this horse. I imagined that this was true for all horses' noses – no matter how old and scruffy a horse already was, if anything happened to its nose over the years, it was only that it got even softer. I stroked its forehead, combed my fingers through its mane. The horse's eyelids sank to half-mast. I had never seen such a tired animal. I stroked and combed until my arm grew heavy and, without the black horse noticing, pondered what the best thing to do with an unfamiliar horse was, especially in the middle of the night. I wondered whether it had attached itself to me, or whether, if anything, Cordelia and I hadn't in fact attached ourselves to it. At what point do stray animals even count as having attached themselves to one another? When are you allowed to keep one another, when are you even obliged to? After all, ownerless cats and dogs hardly ring the doorbell and ask whether you might have a bowl of water to spare. Then my thoughts dissolved again into the fog of wine, horse and night. I patted the side of the horse facing me and imagined that it stirred up dust. In some places the coat was rubbed raw, revealing rough, grey horse skin. This is what horses look like that are hitched into a harness day after day, without anyone ever thinking to check how it sits. The horse lurched a step forward and leaned even closer to the wall. Even its lower lip hung down; it didn't have enough strength to keep its face together. We were most likely dealing with a carriage horse.

'Cordelia,' I said, 'a carriage nag. And a maimed one at that. Just great.' She looked at me inscrutably. 'So what do we do now?'

My voice sounded a little tipsy. I wasn't slurring my words, but I wasn't exactly speaking clearly, either; it felt as though I had something else besides the words in my mouth. The thing with my voice had only got worse over the years. It gave me away every time, but today it had been at most three white wine spritzers; with a quantity that small, it was hard to declare any one of them superfluous. Other people drink that much before breakfast and can still rattle off the Merseburg incantations from memory or an old poem in dialect, with a theatrical clarity as though speaking before an audience. You run into talents like that in any good tavern; you don't even have to be unlucky.

The horse had obviously laid down its work and done a runner. You don't just let a carriage horse stroll around the streets and lean against inns as it pleases. Really, the best thing would be to let it lean there in peace and determine its own fate. Strikes made me feel sentimental; there wasn't a big step between protest and pathos as far as I was concerned. I congratulated the horse on its wise decision, patted its neck again, and wished it all the best. Again it pushed its head against my chest. Then I said, 'Let's go home, Cordelia.'

When I was sober, I rarely said her name. That took courage, and in normal life I was such a coward that it was almost unbearable. She walked on ahead and turned around at the next bend, waiting for me to catch up. As we turned the corner, I heard the sound of hooves behind us, somewhat uneven, as though the black horse were lame in one leg. This is the poorest horse on earth, I thought, and then it follows us of all people – just our luck. At regular intervals Cordelia waited for me, then we waited together for the horse, then we each continued on at our own pace. Whilst we grew quieter and more exhausted, the horse seemed to gain a new strength with every step, doing honour to the onwards, ever onwards of its trade.