

BACK IN THE HERD

by

Karl Meade

I never realized, or wanted to admit, how much we need to be part of the human carnival—to see and be seen, to hear and be heard. My wife, Celia, for instance, has always dreamed of Carnegie Hall. I don't mean being on stage; I mean being in a seat. Any seat. I'm more of a Madison Square Gardens guy, but I'm still not over our last event there—Rangers versus Capitals, March 5, 2020, the edge of the first wave: four days after New York's first confirmed case, one week before the NHL shut down. That night left a fissure through our hearts. Somehow we'd been spared, but how many of the 20,000 others in the Gardens didn't see the end of the year? Hundreds? *Thousands*? And who were they? The mother in front of us with two small children? The elderly man working the beer concession?

Three days later we flew back to Canada for Celia's spring break from Sarah Lawrence College, not knowing that COVID would keep us from returning to New York for over a year. So now, it is no small letting-go when we decide to "risk" Carnegie Hall. Celia finds what must be the last two seats: second-tier balcony, last row, perched on two high stools jammed against the back wall on either side of the door, like aisle seats on a plane. Every time someone enters the door, I stand and squeeze out of the way, while Celia braces herself from being crushed

behind the door. But to us they are the best seats in the house. Even before Angelique Kidjo takes the stage, we've fulfilled Celia's dream. We gaze around the red velvet balconies and balustrades, squint smiles at each other over our masks, reach across the aisle, and squeeze hands until the door opens again.

When Angelique finally brings her electrifying magic to the stage, a thunderous wave of elation rises through the Hall. I—rugged man of Madison Square—literally weep. I'm enraptured, not just by her staggering voice and infectious energy and radical poetry of inclusion, but by my fellow humans. We are given the gift of speech, but it is not speech we use when our souls need to speak. We sing, we dance, we become one with these miraculous beings on stage: Angelique in her flowing robes, her chorus of dancers and drummers and guitarists, the gangly trumpeter in black tux and white runners bellowing what could be his last breath through this shining golden tube—hunched over, mourning the dead, arched skyward, summoning the gods. Together they heal our hearts, and in the crescendo-ed finale we all gasp, *my god*, what a stupefying, terrifying, wondrous life we share. We stumble down the back stairs, teary-eyed, strangers nodding at strangers, and en masse, our renewed selves flow out the doors and spread into the streets.

The next morning, still giddy with release, I wander up Fifth Avenue toward Central Park and round the corner at The Plaza Hotel into a swarm of police cars and flashing lights and barricades. I see four men running for their lives toward me, and I freeze: “Oh *please*, not again.” Then I see they're wearing shorts and sleeveless shirts and I realize, it's a race. They shoot past me so fast they cannot be human. I walk along the edge of Central Park, and three lone stragglers whip past, looking anxiously over their shoulders. I round the next block onto the Avenue of the

Americas into a vast river of bobbing heads and T-shirts and spandex roiling toward me. My brain briefly conjures 9/11—running from the Towers—but this is a scene of rapture.

Crowds have gathered along the sidewalks to applaud and shout. A man beside me says to a young boy, “You say: *you’re looking strong*,” and then the boy shouts at the top of his lungs, “You’re looking strong, Mom!” The woman waves—pure joy on her face—and then her smile tightens with the struggle of her next strides, and my God there are hundreds, *thousands*, of runners. As I stand in a long line at Starbucks, they just keep coming: all shapes and sizes and outfits. A woman in a parka and tights, a man in a Yogi Bear costume, a woman shuffling in a dress—no, it’s an elderly man in a silk robe—and now the woman beside me, *inside* Starbucks, hoots: “You go, boy!”

Back outside, coffee in hand, I let the river flow past me for a few more minutes, drink it in. I feel my lungs opening to take a deep breath, as if I too am running. But it’s not the running. It’s more like easing barefoot into the ocean, or climbing to a mountain vista. Being alive on a planet. I turn down 56th Street toward our hotel, through the cacophony of jackhammers, around the strewn garbage. I pass six construction workers standing in a circle, all talking at once, when the largest one suddenly shouts “*Yo!*”

Fear shoots through me, but he’s not talking to me. It’s his declamation: “*Listen*, I have a story.” The others grant him two sentences about driving his mother to the dentist before he’s cut off. I step into the quiet oasis of our hotel, where a film crew and actors are staying, and all eyes turn toward me—hoping to spot a celebrity—but it’s just this wide-eyed Canuck taking in the world.

I shrug and get on the elevator with a woman coming up from the basement gym,

sweating in tights and T-shirt. “Wow,” I say, “the marathon is *incredible*.” After a moment, she gives me her New York look—*why are you talking to me*—removes her earbuds, and says, flatly, “The marathon’s tomorrow.”

The elevator dings, she gets off, and I ride up the last floors, alone again, thinking: whoever they were, I saw them, I heard them.