

W H I T E C I T Y

B Y L E W I S S H I N E R

TESLA LIFTS the piece of sirloin to his lips. Its volume is approximately .25 cubic inches, or .02777 of the entire steak. As he chews, he notices a water spot on the back of his fork. He takes a fresh napkin from the stack at his left elbow and scrubs the fork vigorously.

He is sitting at a private table in the refreshment stand at the west end of the Court of Honor. He looks out onto the Chicago World's Fair and Columbian Exposition. It is October of 1893. The sun is long gone and the reflections of Tesla's electric lights sparkle on the surface of the Main Basin, turning the spray from the fountain into glittering jewels. At the far end of the Basin stands the olive-wreathed Statue of the Republic in flowing robes. On all sides the White City lies in pristine elegance, testimony to the glorious architecture of ancient Greece and Rome. Its chilly streets are populated by mustached men in topcoats and sturdy women in woollen shawls.

The time is 9:45. At midnight Nikola Tesla will produce his greatest miracle. The number twelve seems auspicious. It is important to him, for reasons he cannot understand, that it is divisible by three.

Anne Morgan, daughter of financier J. Pierpoint Morgan, stands at a little distance from his table. Though still in finishing school she is tall, self-possessed, strikingly attractive. She is reluctant to disturb Tesla, knowing he prefers to dine alone. Still she is drawn to him irresistibly. He is rake thin and handsome as the devil himself, with steel gray eyes that pierce through to her soul.

"Mr. Tesla," she says, "I pray I am not disturbing you."

Tesla looks up, smiles gently. "Miss Morgan." He begins to rise.

"Please, do not get up. I was merely afraid I would miss you. I had hoped we might walk together after you finished here."

"I would be delighted."

"I shall await you there, by the Basin."

She withdraws. Trailing a gloved hand along the balustrade, she tries to avoid the drunken crowds which swarm the Exposition Grounds. Tomorrow the Fair will close and pass into history. Already there are arguments as to what is to become of these splendid buildings. There is neither money to maintain them nor desire to demolish them. Chicago's Mayor, Carter Harrison, worries that they will end up filthy and vandalized, providing shelter for the hundreds of poor who will no longer have jobs when the Fair ends.

Her thoughts turn back to Tesla. She finds herself inordinately taken with him. At least part of the attraction is the mystery of his personal life. At age 37 he has never married nor been engaged. She has heard rumors that his tastes might be, to put it delicately, Greek in nature. There is no evidence to support this gossip and she does not credit it. Rather it seems likely that no one has yet been willing to indulge the inventor's many idiosyncrasies.

She absently touches her bare left ear lobe. She no longer wears the pearl earrings that so offended him on their first meeting. She flushes at the memory, and at that point Tesla appears.

“Shall we walk?” he asks.

She nods and matches his stride, careful not to take his arm. Tesla is not comfortable with personal contact.

To their left is the Hall of Agriculture. She has heard that its most popular attraction is an 11-ton cheese from Ontario. Like so many other visitors to the Fair, she has not actually visited any of the exhibits. They seem dull and pedestrian compared to the purity and classical lines of the buildings which house them. The fragrance of fresh roses drifts out through the open doors, and for a moment she is lost in a reverie of New York in the spring.

As they pass the end of the hall they are in darkness for a few moments. Tesla seems to shudder. He has been silent and intent, as if compulsively counting his steps. It would not surprise her if this were actually the case.

“Is anything wrong?” she asks.

“No,” Tesla says. “It’s nothing.”

In fact the darkness is full of lurking nightmares for Tesla. Just now he was five years old again, watching his older brother Daniel fall to his death. Years of guilty self-examination have not made the scene clearer. They stood together at the top of the cellar stairs, and then Daniel fell into the darkness. Did he fall? Did Nikola, in a moment of childish rage, push him?

All his life he has feared the dark. His father took his candles away, so little Nikola made his own. Now the full-grown Tesla has brought electric light to the White City, carried by safe, inexpensive alternating current. It is only the beginning.

They round the East end of the Court of Honor. At the Music Hall, the Imperial Band of Austria plays melodies from Wagner. Anne Morgan shivers in the evening chill. “Look at the moon,” she says. “Isn’t it romantic?”

Tesla’s smile seems condescending. “I have never understood the romantic impulse. We humans are meat machines, and nothing more.”

“That is hardly a pleasant image.”

“I do not mean to be offensive, only accurate. That is the aim of science, after all.”

“Yes, of course,” Anne Morgan says. “Science.” There seems no way to reach him, no chink in his cool exterior. This is where the others gave up, she thinks. I will prove stronger than all of them. In her short, privileged existence, she has always obtained what she wants. “I wish I knew more about it.”

“Science is a pure, white light,” Tesla says. “It shines evenly on all things, and reveals their particular truths. It banishes uncertainty, and opinion, and contradiction. Through it we master the world.”

They have circled back to the west, and to their right is the Liberal Arts Building. She has heard that it contains so much painting and sculpture that one can only wander helplessly among it. To attempt to seek out a single artist, or to look for the French Impressionists, of whom she has been hearing so much, would be sheer futility.

Under Tesla's electric lights, the polished facade of the building sparkles. For a moment, looking down the impossibly long line of perfect Corinthian columns, she feels what Tesla feels: the triumph of man over nature, the will to conquer and shape and control. Then the night breeze brings her the scent of roses from across the Basin and the feeling passes.

THEY ENTER the Electricity Building together and stand in the center, underneath the great dome. This is the site of the Westinghouse exhibit, a huge curtained archway resting upon a metal platform. Beyond the arch are two huge Tesla coils, the largest ever built. At the peak of the arch is a tablet inscribed with the words: WESTINGHOUSE ELECTRIC & MANUFACTURING CO./TESLA POLYPHASE SYSTEM.

Tesla's mood is triumphant. Edison, his chief rival, has been proven wrong. Alternating current will be the choice of the future. The Westinghouse company has this week been awarded the contract to build the first two generators at Niagara Falls. Tesla cannot forgive Edison's hiring of Menlo Park street urchins to kidnap pets, which he then electrocuted with alternating current--"Westinghoused" them, as he called it. But Edison's petty, lunatic attempts to discredit the polyphase system have failed, and he stands revealed as an old, bitter, and unimaginative man.

Edison has lost, and history will soon forget him.

George Westinghouse himself, Tesla's patron, is here tonight. So are J.P. Morgan, Anne's father, and William K. Vanderbilt and Mayor Harrison. Here also are Tesla's friends Robert and Katharine Johnson, and Samuel Clemens, who insists everyone call him by his pen name.

It is nearly midnight.

Tesla steps lightly onto the platform. He snaps his fingers and gas-filled tubes burst into pure white light. Tesla has fashioned them to spell out the names of several of the celebrities present, as well as the names of his favorite Serbian poets. He holds up his hands to the awed and expectant crowd. "Gentlemen and Ladies. I have no wish to bore you with speeches. I have asked you here to witness a demonstration of the power of electricity."

He continues to talk, his voice rising to a high pitch in his excitement. He produces several wireless lamps and places them around the stage. He points out that their illumination is undiminished, despite their distance from the broadcast power source. "Note how the gas at low pressure exhibits extremely high conductivity. This gas is little different from that in the upper reaches of our atmosphere."

He concludes with a few fireballs and pinwheels of light. As the applause gradually subsides he holds up his hands once again. "These are little more than parlor tricks. Tonight I wish to say thank you, in a dramatic and visible way, to all of you who have supported me through your patronage, through your kindness, through your friendship. This is my gift to you, and to all of mankind."

He opens a panel in the front of the arch. A massive knife switch is revealed. Tesla makes a short bow and then throws the switch.

The air crackles with ozone. Electricity roars through Tesla's body. His hair stands on end and flames dance at the tips of his fingers. Electricity is his God, his best friend, his only lover. It is clean, pure, absolute. It arcs through him and invisibly into the sky. Tesla alone can see it. To him it is blinding white, the color he sees when inspiration, fear, or elation strikes him.

The coils draw colossal amounts of power. All across the great hall, all over the White City, lights flicker and dim. Anne Morgan cries out in shock and fear.

Through the vaulted windows overhead the sky itself begins to glow.

Something sparks and hisses and the machine winds down. The air reeks of melted copper and glass and rubber. It makes no difference. The miracle is complete.

Tesla steps down from the platform. His friends edge away from him, involuntarily. Tesla smiles like a wise father. "If you will follow me, I will show you what man has wrought."

Already there are screams from outside. Tesla walks quickly to the doors and throws them open.

Anne Morgan is one of the first to follow him out. She cannot help but fear him, despite her attraction, despite all her best intentions. All around her she sees fairgoers with their necks craned upward, or their eyes hidden in fear. She turns her own gaze to the heavens and lets out a short, startled cry.

The sky is on fire. Or rather, it burns the way the filaments burn in one of Tesla's electric lamps. It has become a sheet of glowing white. After a few seconds the glare hurts her eyes and she must look away.

It is midnight, and the Court of Honor is lit as if by the noonday sun. She is close enough to hear Tesla speak a single, whispered word: "Magnificent."

Westinghouse comes forward nervously. "This is quite spectacular," he says, "but hadn't you best, er, turn it off?"

Tesla shakes his head. Pride shines from his face. "You do not seem to understand. The atmosphere itself, some 35,000 feet up, has become an electrical conductor. I call it my 'terrestrial night light.' The charge is permanent. I have banished night from the world for all time."

"For all time?" Westinghouse stammers.

Anne Morgan slumps against a column, feels the cold marble against her back. Night, banished? The stars, gone forever? "You're mad," she says to Tesla. "What have you done?"

Tesla turns away. The reaction is not what he expected. Where is their gratitude? He has turned their entire world into a White City, a city in which crime and fear and nightmares are no longer possible. Yet men point at him, shouting curses, and women weep openly.

He pushes past them, toward the train station. Meat machines, he thinks. They are so used to their inefficient cycles of night and day. But they will learn.

He boards a train for New York and secures a private compartment. As he drives on into the white night, his window remains brilliantly lighted.

In the light there is truth. In the light there is peace. In the light he will be able, at last, to sleep.

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