

LOVE

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When I grow old, we'll go away on the train. As far away as we can. We'll look out through the windows, at fells and towns and lakes, and talk to people from foreign lands. We'll be together all the time. And forever be on our way.

She gets through three books a week, often four or five. She wishes she could read all the time, sitting in bed with the duvet pulled up, with coffee, lots of cigarettes, and a warm nightdress on. She could have done without the TV too, I never watch it, she tells herself, but Jon would have minded.

She gives a wide berth to an old woman waddling along pulling a gray trolley behind her on the icy road. It's dark, the snow banked up at the roadsides blocking out the light, Vibeke thinks to herself. Then she realizes she's forgotten to turn the headlights on and has driven nearly all the way home in an unlit car.

She turns them on.

Jon tries not to blink. It's hard for him not to. It's the muscles around his eyes that go into spasm. He kneels on his bed and peers through the window. Everything is still. He's waiting for Vibeke to come home. He tries to keep his eyes open and calm, fixed on the same spot outside the window. There must be at least a meter of snow. Under

the snow live the mice. They have pathways and tunnels. They visit each other, Jon imagines, maybe they bring each other food.

The sound of the car. When he's waiting he can never quite recall it. I've forgotten, he tells himself. But then it comes back to him, often in pauses between the waiting, after he's stopped thinking about it. And then she comes, and he recognizes the sound in an instant; he hears it with his tummy, it's my tummy that remembers the sound, not me, he thinks to himself. And no sooner has he heard the car than he sees it too, from the corner of the window, her blue car coming around the bend behind the banks of snow, and she turns in at the house and drives up the little slope to the front door.

The engine is loud, its sound fills the room, and then she switches it off. He hears her slam the car door shut before the front door opens, and he counts the seconds until it closes again.

The same sounds every day.

Vibeke shoves the shopping into the hall and bends down to undo her boots. Her hands are swollen from the cold, the heater in the car is broken. A co-worker she gave a lift home from the supermarket last week said she knew someone who repaired things like that on the cheap. Vibeke smiles thinking back. She hasn't much money, and what little she has isn't for cars. As long as it gets her from A to B, that's all that matters.

She picks up the mail from the table under the mirror. She feels stiff, though no more than normal after a busy day, and stands for a moment, rolling her

shoulders and stretching her neck, arching back and releasing a sigh.

Now she's taking her coat off, he thinks to himself, and pictures her in the hall, in front of the mirror, hanging her coat on the peg and looking at herself. She'll be tired, he thinks. He opens a box of matches and takes out two, snapping them in the middle and wedging them cautiously in his sockets to keep his eyelids from blinking. You'll grow out of it, Vibeke tells him when she's in a good mood. The matches are like logs, it's hard to see out. He thinks about his train set; he can't help it, it doesn't matter what he thinks about, a train always comes running into his mind, tilting into the bend with its whistle blowing, hurtling by. Maybe he could give her a face massage, he thinks, rub her cheeks and forehead the way they've learned in gym class, it's supposed to be good for you.

She carries the bags into the kitchen, dropping the mail down on the table before filling up the fridge and putting some tins away in the cupboard. The engineer in the building department, the dark-haired man with the brown eyes, sat opposite her at the Culture Plan presentation. Her first project as new arts and culture officer. The cover was in full color, she'd insisted on it, an inspirational painting by a local artist.

She lingers at the table, drinking water from a glass.

It went off well, people came up afterwards and said how glad they were to have her aboard. Her presence spurred new visions, they said, opened their eyes to new potentials. The brown-eyed engineer had smiled at

her at several points during the presentation. In the Q&A session he made a comment about being interested in extending interdepartmental collaborations.

She sweeps her hair away from her face, gathering it in front of her shoulder and smoothing it with her hand, pleased at how long it's grown at last.

He hears her footsteps on the floor above. Her shoes. Vibeke always wears shoes indoors. Sandals with a low heel. He removes the matches. He strikes one against the box without blowing it out, wanting to hold it as long as it burns. Skirt and lipstick for work. At home she changes into a gray jogging suit with a zip neck. Maybe she's changing now. *It's so soft inside, come and feel.* She gave him slippers when they moved in. Brought them home with her after work, one of her first days on the job, wrapped in flowery paper. She tossed them to him, he had to catch them in midair. Woollen slippers, ankle-length, with leather soles. A metal clip to keep them closed. If the clips aren't done up, they rattle when he walks.

Vibeke puts the glass down on the table. She looks out the window, at the darkness outside. The street-lamps are on, lighting up the road between the houses. To the north, the road through the village joins the highway again. It's a kind of circle, she thinks to herself, you can drive in to the village, past the council offices and the shops, through the housing area, then pick up the highway again further up, follow it south, and turn off toward the village again. Most of the houses have their living-room windows facing the road. We need to

address architecture, she thinks, the way it can bring things together. The whole village backs onto forest. She jots down some keywords on a sheet of paper: Identity. Pride. Aesthetics. Information.

She goes into the front room. On the sofa is a gray woollen throw with white circles on it, the reverse is white with gray circles. She gathers it up and pulls her armchair over to the panel heater under the window. She takes a book, nonfiction, from the small, round table.

The book has a waxed cover, it feels pleasant to the touch. She smooths her left hand over its surface before opening the pages. She reads a few lines, then puts it down in her lap, leans back, closes her eyes. She sees faces from work, people stopping by her office, how nice it's looking now. She goes through situations in her mind, repeating her facial expressions and gestures.

Jon stands in the doorway looking at her. He tries not to blink. He wants to ask her something about his birthday, tomorrow he'll be nine. He tells himself it can wait, she's asleep now. A book in her lap. He's used to seeing her like that. A book, the bright light of the floor lamp. Often, she'll have lit a cigarette and his eyes will follow the smoke as it curls toward the ceiling. Her long, dark hair fans out over the back of the chair, trembling almost imperceptibly. *Stroke my hair, Jon.*

He turns and goes out into the kitchen, and takes some biscuits from the cupboard. He puts a whole one in his mouth and tries to suck it soft without breaking it.

He goes down the stairs into his room again and kneels on the bed. He lines the biscuits up on the windowsill.

He looks at the snow outside and thinks of all the snowflakes that go to make a pile. He tries to count how many, in his head. They talked about it at school today. Ice crystals, they're called. No two are ever the same. How many can there be in a snowball? Or on the windowpane, in a small speck of snow?