**THE EFFECT OF MOONLIGHT ON NEW FALLEN SNOW**

**by Tove Braathen**

The big dog is calm as it lies over there, but it has lifted its head making the neck muscles taut beneath its short, dark grey fur. Its gaze seems firmly fixed on the boy who is walking down the path towards the housing estate. From where Margot is standing in front of the entrance to her apartment block, it’s as though she can feel the acrid dog-breath encircle her and penetrate her nostrils, like the odour of a distant bonfire which someone forgot to extinguish. The boy has almost reached the entrance of the opposite block, he turns his head and looks back. The dog is up on its feet now and stands staring after him. In the backlight of the evening sun you can see the contours of its compact body and pricked up ears. The large, uneven granite boulders that line the forest’s edge, over by the slope down to the river, possess the same angular forms as the dog, so that boulders and dog merge together as one.

Margot sees how the hands of the dark boy fumble with the keys that he has finally pulled from the pocket of his tight jeans. The carrier bag which he put down next to his new, bright white trainers, has tipped over.

The bag is green, no logo, presumably from that dark, vile smelling greengrocers by the underground station. Margot watches as one of those strange, pale coloured vegetables falls out of the bag and rolls its way into the flowerbed that runs along the wall. There it lies like some forgotten ball out of which all the air has gone. It’s easy to spot, because the few plants that must have been in the bed during the summer have finished flowering and gone dry. Some of the stems have snapped in the middle, leaving their wizened petals to lie on the dark earth, as though they’d given up before they even got a chance to reach their prime.

Having unlocked the door, the boy hastily gathers up his bags and walks in sideways. The door slams to. A few rays of the evening sun have squeezed in between the apartment blocks, they touch the conical shaped, strangely foreign vegetable lying in the flower bed, illuminating it. Margot can’t take her eyes off it. "I can’t go on living here," she whispers. The sentence forms on her lips, but remains a mere whistling sound in her mouth. Until Christmas. Until she gets organised. Then she can sell again, the estate agent said that prices in the East of the city were rising fast, it might be a good investment, he said. Housing prices in Oslo are about to break all barriers, according to the papers. "Investment," she says aloud. The word lands on the low step at the entrance and rolls down into the dry, neglected flowerbed against the wall, where it disappears among the brown leaves.

Up in her apartment, she sits down on the unopened cardboard box in front of the window in the dark, empty room, reaches over to the computer on the floor and starts to log on. It’s at moments like this that she ought not to give up, she should gather all her courage now, be strong, get up and unpack, open the cardboard box that she’s sitting on, for example, not tap at her keyboard. “Ignore it!" she whispers resolutely and with some anger, but her fingers have already opened the e-mail program and typed in Olav’s password. The *new one* has sent him another email. *My dear* *Olav* it starts. They are going up to Annorbu. They’re clearly going there tomorrow afternoon straight from work. The *new one* has made a game casserole, she writes, before setting out a rather long list of things Olav could buy beforehand, now that they have so much space in the car. One thing being the camping frying pan they saw on special offer at the Ramblers Association. *Look forward to being together with my love* it says at the end. The sentence shoves its way in front of the others and stands there bashing against the glass screen. A child starts to cry in the next-door apartment, other voices overlap with it in a foreign language, they rise and fall, it’s as though ever more voices were joining in. "Annorbu," says Margot quietly, "Annorbu is *mine*.”

But it isn’t the image of the low log cabin with its dark-stained walls or the stool under the kitchen window where they sat and drank coffee that drifts into Margot's thoughts, blocking her view to all else. It’s the big chandelier from Ikea, that she took up with her last time they were there. It was in the sale, cost next to nothing, and it was a bit of a bother putting all the candles into those thin metal holders, but the minute she’d seen it in the shop Margot had known it would be perfect for Annorbu. And when she’d lit the eight candles above the table in the cabin, she’d looked over at Olav and asked his opinion. Olav was sitting on his haunches in front of the grey slate fireplace, carefully constructing a square stack of firewood, just as he’d read about in the best-selling book about wood, which he’d systematically worked through from cover to cover. He turned his head, looked distractedly at her Ikea-find with its eight candles, and smiled at her vaguely. He’d remained there in front of the fireplace, his head twisted in what seemed an uncomfortable position, looking at her with the same uncertain expression, as though he couldn’t decide what to say. As though there were something more he ought to say.

The thought of the eight, nearly burned-out candles in that airy chandelier over the low table in front of the fireplace there in Annorbu causes a surge of anger to flare up in Margot. She’ll take back the chandelier whatever it takes. And the blue woollen blanket too. And the cafetiere that stands on the old shelf above the kitchen counter. Even if she has to trek all the way up the mountain.

Her heart is racing already, a vibrating heat is spreading through her body, as though she had already rushed up there and proceeded to gather things up hurriedly, unhooking the big chandelier from the ceiling, grabbing the blankets from the armchairs. This new surge of energy prompts her to log off and shut the lid on the computer decisively. The lid claps down like a cellar door flap. She gets up and walks out into the bare kitchen. Her body is burning inside, her hands tremble as she opens the fridge. There’s nothing in it but a bag of apples. On the kitchen counter are a couple of chocolate bars. She opens one and chews on the tough blend of caramel, chocolate and nuts with energetic jaws. Her right hand holds the chocolate steady against her lower lip, while the fingers on her left hand tear back the paper bit by bit as the sweet, dark mass disappears into her mouth.

It is getting dark outside the window. Over by the slope down to the river someone has lit a bonfire. Two figures stand over the flames. She can see that one has a glowing cigarette in their mouth. The big dog is still there, but is walking back and forth restlessly now. Margot stands looking over towards the forest edge, until the contours of the dog’s pointed ears melt into the growing dark. The bonfire glows red.

Next morning the dog is nowhere to be seen. The men who were gathered around the bonfire last night are also gone. Only the granite boulders on the slope are there still, large and shapeless, as though they’d been left behind in the sixties sometime, when the apartment blocks rose from a field nearest the old farmhouse. A touch of smoke still lies on the air. Margot rushes towards the underground station. She has to pass the bus stop, crowded with people. Many are wrapped in thick puffer jackets, despite it only being September. They stand there staring straight ahead, with gloomy expressions. A circle of men are talking quietly among themselves in a foreign language, all smoking. Their cigarette smoke invades Margot’s nostrils as she passes, she tries to hold her breath, but the smell creeps into her nose anyway. Down on the platform she closes her eyes and takes several very deep breaths. On opening her eyes, she finds herself looking straight at a group of young women who are staring at her with serious faces. They have big, dark eyes and scarves around their faces. The scarves are of various patterns and colours, one of them hangs loosely over the back of its owner’s head, so that her thick shiny hair billows around her face. The girls look away immediately Margot opens her eyes.

The platform is full, as are the carriages, even though the train has only driven through a few stations. Margot stands leaning back against the wall in a corner of the carriage. A low, indistinct hum of foreign languages ​​rises and falls. A man dressed in workmen’s clothes stands with his back to her, yelling angrily into his mobile in a foreign language, he flings out his hand several times and repeats the same word over and over again. When the conversation is over, he pulls a cigarette packet from the breast pocket of his jacket, takes out a cigarette angrily and sticks it between his lips. And there it stays, unlit, until he gets out at the next station. Margot gazes after the broad back in the blue workmen’s jacket. She sees the man stop a little way down the platform and light the cigarette under a *no smoking* sign. As soon as it is lit, he walks on with firm, confident steps.

He’s probably on his way to a construction site, thinks Margot. Somewhere they wear safety helmets and breath in the sharp autumn air as they lift materials, shout to each other, unfasten some tool attached to their work trousers, the particular tool they know precisely how to use. Margot thinks what a good feeling it would be to have a heavy tool like that in your hand, lying there just waiting to be used properly. To lift your arm and bring it to the waiting wood or metal, and see it transform to become a vital part of something strong, solid, something totally new that grows increasingly complete over time, until it finds its final shape. The man in the workmen’s jacket, with the lit cigarette, who had such an angry telephone conversation on the train, has probably already arrived at work, perhaps he is fastening his helmet, is in a better mood and laughing at something someone says. And they’re all on their way out, maybe checking over some plans before taking up their work stations, tensing their muscles and setting to.

Margot is getting off at the next stop. She remembers there’s a staff meeting today, and that she’s rather unprepared for her German class which starts in just quarter of an hour. She sits, her back straight, trying to recall the text they read last time, which she would doubtless have given them as homework for today. She has a vague image of a passage about youngsters in Berlin, but that seems very unlikely, it’s probably the one they've finished with. If only she could just go straight in and sit on her office chair with a coffee, instead of dragging herself into the classroom.

She stares at the black tunnel wall outside the window. It looks as though it’s rushing past the train in which she’s siting, not the other way round. When she emerges from the underground into the city centre she draws in the chill air as though she’d forgotten to breath and has suddenly remembered. It rasps at her throat, cold and raw, as she runs across the forecourt.

"Have you changed your address?" asks a voice. It’s Ella – Ella-in-the-office. Margot stops in front of the open door and sees her standing there holding the water tank of the coffee machine in her hands. It is covered with condensation from the fresh, cold water. Ella slips it in place with well practiced hands and smiles at Margot. She doesn’t even have to look down at the coffee maker, and can turn to Margot with that friendly, quizzical smile of hers, that asks if everything is alright. "I'm just asking because I was logging in some staff details yesterday, and then I saw you had a new address." "Yes," says Margot, "I should probably have told you, but I didn’t think it was that important since it’s just temporary. We’re decorating, maybe selling the old apartment, a bit unsure what’s happening. With the apartment and the housing market and things. Might be nice to have somewhere with a garden. Closer to the country. Olav’s such an outdoor sort of person of course."

It just tumbles out of her before she even knows what she’s saying. Ella has opened the lid of the coffee tin and is about to measure out the requisite six spoonfuls, but now she stops and peers at Margot, measuring spoon in one hand and open tin in the other. Margot notices how enormous Ella’s longsighted eyes seem behind her unframed glasses. Eyes like dinner plates, Margot thinks, that just seem to keep growing bigger and bigger behind the lenses. “Well, well, I’m sure things will sort themselves out.” says Ella, giving Margot a sideways glance as she starts to measure out the coffee.

It feels as though those large eyes follow her all the way from the office down the corridor and to the classroom. Margot suddenly thinks of all the things Ella-in-the-office knows, all the information to which she is privy. One of those secretaries who sit quietly arranging all the practicalities, registering doctors’ certificates, individual staff bonuses, complaints, changes of address, DWP issues, and god knows what else. Margot’s arms are weighed down with what she’s carrying. She stops at the nearest window in the corridor, puts down her pc, files and German book on the wide ledge. The corridor is quiet now, the students have disappeared into their classrooms, she can hear laughter and faint music coming from the German group who are waiting for her. From where she is standing she can see a red bus pulling up at the stop near the kiosk on the corner. The bus is crammed with people, all of whom seem to be getting off at this stop. The instant they emerge from the bus doors they spread like a fan and disappear in all directions. Walking with their bodies tilted slightly forward, it’s as though they’d already started on the day’s important tasks, the financial reports, the negotiations, the lectures and stock taking, in their heads. A cloud glides past up in the morning sky, and the low, slanting autumn sun suddenly hits the window ledge and almost seems to point Margot towards the German book before her. She gathers up her things, and goes into the classroom.

"*Paula und Walther wohnen in Berlin,*" she says forcefully, after calling their names. She can hear that her voice is slightly abrasive and far too loud, some pupils seem startled, before exchanging glances. “But we’re done with that text”, the girl with dark hair, closest to where Margot is standing, says sharply. “Wir sind fertig damit!”, shouts a boy at the back, in an exaggerated German accent as he rocks back on his chair nonchalantly, a long blonde fringe covering half his face, through which he is peering at Margot. The others laugh, watching her intently, waiting to see how she’ll react to this challenge. “Ja, das stimmt, wir gehen weiter zu dem nächsten Text” Margot answers in a decisive tone. She opens the textbook with trembling fingers. She can’t actually remember what the next topic is, despite the numerous times she’s been through this book. «*Das politische System in den deutschsprachigen Ländern*» she reads.

The texts and pictures of the flags of the German-speaking nations seem to merge into each other, as though the pages were exuding moisture causing them to blur. Like the mist on the coffee machine belonging to Ella-in-the-office. Margot must be prepared next time, she urgently needs to get herself together. "Can you explain the difference between the systems of government in Liechtenstein and Austria?" The question comes from the back row. It’s the new girl, the girl who started two weeks ago. She’s already been in to see the head teacher once, to complain about not getting a detailed study plan for all her subjects, as she had done on her first day at her other school, the one she didn’t quite like, which was why she switched to this one. But at least at that school they got detailed study plans at the start. Academic expectations had been very high in the classroom there too. But she hadn’t much liked a couple of the teachers. And pupils have freedom of choice, it’s an open market. But it would be great if the head teacher could address the issue of study plans. He had done so the very next day at a hastily convened staff meeting in the lunch break. Study plans had to be put in place ASAP. Full stop.

The head teacher is a man in his early forties, hand picked by the borough’s director of schools. He completed a Masters in educational management at the Oslo business school a few years ago. Once, somewhere in the mists of time, he spent a couple of years as an economics teacher in another town in eastern Norway. He gained some very useful experience in those two years, learned a lot about leadership and communication, which would prove invaluable for what he did later, when he stopped teaching and entered the business world, also very instructive years, during which, among other things, he took part in the *difficult talks* leading up to some heavy rounds of redundancies. He learned a lot from that too. Invaluable experience in a tough industry. Experience to take with him.

Now he is standing against the staff room wall watching everyone as they saunter in. He is wearing his usual uniform, tight blue jeans, white shirt and open black suit jacket. His longish blond hair with a touch of grey, is gathered into a pony tail. He looks like a cool, laid-back TV host on a Friday night talk show. Or a slightly middle aged rock star who is still offered good gigs, and can refuse most. Someone who can be choosy, and who makes tough demands on anyone who shows interest in him.

“I’m a man who makes demands, a leader who wants to see results," he says to a spot on the wall, just above everybody’s heads. There’s a brief, calculated pause before he lowers his gaze and takes eye contact with those at the front. With the row of young, newly appointed colleagues. They nod and smile at the head teacher, already well acquainted with these demands. They were discussed at some length during their job interviews.

"I want a school with high expectations and attainments. And I mean *high*. They should be tangible. In the classroom and in examination achievements. When our students leave this school with their certificates in their hands, they should go out and recommend this school. Each one of them.” He takes a sip from his glass of water while those at the front clap, an applause that trails out in a zigzag back between the low tables. There’s been some feedback from both parents and students about teachers who seem poorly prepared, study plans that haven’t been made available digitally, and a few other things that put the school in a bad light. But he will raise that with those concerned. Not here in this forum. Many staff members are putting in the graft and promoting the school well. Which is good, very good. That’s how it should be. But he *will* return to this issue. With those concerned. He lets this last sentence hover in the air over the notice board behind him as he tucks one side of his black rockstar jacket back, and puts his left hand in his jeans pocket, while with his right he clicks to the Powerpoint he’s about to open.

*Areas of Responsibility on Culture Day* it says in capital letters above a list of points that come gliding in from the right, like machine gun bullets in a slow-motion film.

*Extract translated by Deborah Dawkin*

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