

Fiction

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The Guardian

Grace, by Linn Ullmann, translated by Barbara Haveland (Picador, £7.99)

Johan Sletten was once almost Norway's "third most important arts editor", until he submitted a review under someone else's name and got fired. Now, having made a career out of avoidance and procrastination, he is dying, and in denial. Interspersed with the frighteningly rapid clinical process of his death are the major and minor incidents of his life: Johan's father's own shocking early demise; a first, prickly, noisy marriage, to Alice; a tranquil second marriage to Mai. Then there's his estrangement from his only son, the eccentricities of his colleagues, the peace of his lakeside cottage, the way his wife's hair lights up a room. At the end, Johan persuades the deeply reluctant Mai to ease him towards departure; when she finally agrees, it is he who wavers: "He wasn't ready! He could still say yes. It grows light in the morning and dark in the evening." **Ullmann's mesmerising, spare novel is a robust yet delicate account of that most prosaic, mysterious event of all. Comparable to Philip Roth's magisterial Everyman, the humour is drier, the poignancy more overt, yet it is equally, quietly impressive.**

-Catherine Taylor