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Grace by Linn Ullmann

By Paul Binding

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'Johan wasn't a popular man. He wasn't a man people looked up to. And he wasn't a controversial man. He doubted whether he was a man others would miss. But he was loved.' And the person who loves him - though he can't, given his general lack of distinction, fathom why - is Maia, his second wife, with whom he has experienced 23 years of happiness, satisfying both body and spirit.

At 70, Johan Sletten is dying: "this thing was spreading ... a word he had been waiting all his adult life to hear - waiting, fearing and foreseeing." Certainly he's unable now to look back over his life and discover those occasions pointing to reserves of the kind of strength needed for facing up to this, the hardest situation of all. The retrospection that periodically overwhelms him can only provide the gravest misgivings. His first marriage, to the horse-like Alice, was a disaster; once, knowing that she couldn't swim and was afraid of the water, he pushed her into a pool, surprising himself as he did so. He quickly pulled her out, of course, but when, some time later, a fatal road-accident removed her from his life, he felt little sorrow.

His relationship to their son, Andreas, has been, by mutual agreement, unsuccessful. Andreas, spindlier even than himself, has always exasperated him with his unappealing combination of feebleness and boastful vanity, attributes that have intensified over time. As for his working life, Johan was for years an arts journalist on Norway's "third biggest-selling newspaper", but he himself knows how he was passed over for significant promotion - and besides, his career there ended ignominiously: he was caught out in a trivial but deliberate and thorough-going plagiarism. He has only a few friends, and the archaeology of memory during his worsening illness uncovers an earlier family history that can only rebuke him in his term of trial. Didn't he pray to Death to take his father before his mother, and didn't, distressingly, Death duly oblige him?

There remains the woman he married two years after Alice's demise, Maia, who once wanted to be a concert pianist but became a paediatrician instead. Just as he can't make out why she loves him, so he finds it hard to explain quite why he so deeply and wholly loves her. She tells lies - not serious ones to disguise infidelities, but pointless and puzzling ones - and she is not beautiful, except for her hair which she brushes "a hundred times every morning and every night", affording him perpetual pleasure. Yet he adores her, and trusts her with every part of his being, an entity that illness and concomitant medication are now fracturing. She will stand by him through all his pain and dissolution, and will also surely "help" him. By this he means that, before the worst ravages incapacitate him, she will assist him to die.

But will she? In this extraordinarily fearless novel Linn Ullmann invites us inside fear itself - even though the novel is presented, as by a good friend, at a short narrative distance from Johan and Maia. There's the fear (Johan's) of being disintegrated by illness (the passive voice is the only appropriate one here), and there's the fear (Maia's) of actually ending the existence of a person intimately known, intimately loved. Yet some adjudication between these has to be made in their demanding double face. And Linn Ullmann gives us such an adjudication, the more moving and convincing for the intensity with which the predicament is presented. This is a work of the most intricate and impressive artistry, with past and present, fantasy and stark actuality, emotion and the clinically physical, not so much juxtaposed as flowing in and out of each other, like themes in a piano work by Maia's admired Schumann. There is also, paradoxically, much humour: Johan and Maia are not abstracted from life into some argument about contemporary attitudes to death, but are apprehended, and fully, in all the quotidian ordinariness of the years they've lived together. So that Maia's silly fibs about her stay in Göteborg, the absurd misunderstanding between Johan and his son over the country cottage, and his daughter-in-law's gaucherie in the hospital ward, have parts of inestimable importance to play in this exemplary account of an unremarkable but unique man's journey to the moment of death and beyond.