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Opening Extract from...

Mirror, Shoulder, Signal

Written by Dorthe Nors

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"You take the straight way from Earth to Heaven" translated from the Danish "Velkommen, Lærkelil!" ("Welcome, Little Lark!") by Christian Richardt, in *Texter og Toner, Bind I: Blandede Digte*, 1868. Various lines of dialog from the film *Contact*, 1997. "And life is brief, so brief…" translated from the Danish "Heksedansen", 1960, itself a translation by Peter Mynte of the Norwegian song of the same title and same year by Vidar Sandbeck.

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1.

Sonja is sitting in a car, and she's brought her dictionary along. It's heavy, and sits in the bag on the backseat. She's halfway through her translation of Gösta Svensson's latest crime novel, and the quality was already dipping with the previous one. *Now's the time I can afford it*, she thought, and so she looked for driving schools online and signed up with Folke in Frederiksberg. The theory classroom was small and blue and reeked of stale smoke and locker rooms, but the theory itself went well. Besides Folke, there was only one other person Sonja's age in the class, and he was there because of drunk driving, so he kept to himself. Sonja usually sat there and stuck out among all the kids, and for the first aid unit the instructor used her as a model. He pointed to the spot on her throat where they were supposed to imagine her breathing had gotten blocked. He did the Heimlich on her, his fingers up in her face, inside her collar, up and down her arms. At one point he put her into a stranglehold, but that wasn't the worst of it. The worst was when they had to do the exercises themselves. It was humiliating to be placed in the recovery position by a boy of eighteen. It also made her dizzy, and that was something no one was supposed to find out.

"You're such a fighter," her mom always said, and Sonja is a fighter; she doesn't give up. She ought to, but she doesn't. "And then you compress the heart hard thirty times and pay attention to whether they're breathing," the first aid instructor said.

That's all that counts in the end, Sonja had thought, *breathing*, and she passed theory. With her the problem's always practice, which is why she's now sitting in a car. It's great that she's made it this far, even if it's not far enough; she just wishes she were skilled and experienced. Like Sonja's sister Kate and Kate's husband Frank, who got their licenses in the eighties. Back home in Balling, folks were driving souped-up pickups, burning rubber, off-roading. All those accidents the adult Kate fears now are things she'd gloried in as a teen. She'd been a stowaway in rolling wrecks, a barn-dance femme fatale, and the belle of clubs and gym meets. It wouldn't surprise Sonja to learn that Kate used to sneak the car home the back way. In Balling, cars would slink along the road behind the church, and Sonja's car tiptoes around too, but that's because she's a terrible driver. The car as mechanism is hard for her to fathom, and her driving lessons have been plagued with problems. The biggest of them is sitting in the car right now, next to Sonja. Her name is Jytte, and it's her smoke that clings to the theory classroom. Surfaces at the driving school are galvanized with cigarette smoke, and most of it took a trip through Jytte's lungs first. When Sonja arrives at the school, Jytte's sitting in Folke's office, on Facebook or going through other students' medical records. "Melanie with the ponytail wasn't certified by the doctor!" she shouts over to

Sonja in the doorway. "Something wrong with her nerves, did you know that?"

Sonja didn't know, and she hasn't been certified by the medical officer either. She's got an ear disorder. It's an inherited condition from her mother's side; none of them can maintain their balance when their heads are in certain positions. For a long time she thought she'd escaped it, but then it showed up, the positional dizziness. It's called benign paroxysmal positional vertigo, but that's far too much Latin for the place Sonja comes from. And besides, she's got it under control. It's not going to keep her from doing squat, and so now she's sitting in the car. She's got Gösta in the backseat, and Jytte at her side.

Because Jytte's got a lot on her mind, she hasn't had time to teach Sonja to shift for herself. Sonja's been driving with Jytte for six months, and still she fumbles with the gears. Jytte seizes the initiative and deals with it for her, since when Jytte deals with changing gears, there's no need for her to change topics: her son's getting married, her grandkid's going to be called something ghastly, the fiancée's got a cockamamie clothing sense, and the sister of her brother-in-law's mother's new husband just died.

"Thai people just can't drive."

Sonja and Jytte are in Frederiksberg, waiting for a traffic light. Smoke from the last cigarette out the window has been sucked into the passenger compartment, and it mixes with the sweat that Sonja excretes. She signals right, Jytte's hand on the gearstick, and keeps an eye out for cyclists.

"This woman I've got now is called Pakpao. Pakpao!? GREEN LIGHT! SECOND GEAR, SECOND GEAR, BIKE!"

Jytte shifts to second while Sonja swerves to miss the bike.

"And then she's married to this dirty old man who's seventy-five. He's been down in the office, completely bloated and all."

They've gone a fair piece toward the inner city and traffic is light, so Jytte can shift to fourth no problem. She uses the passenger-side clutch and then points at a deli.

"They make a good headcheese in there, and this warm liver pâté with bacon and cocktail wieners. I *love* Christmas, I simply can't get enough of it. Don't you just love Christmas?"

It's early August, and Sonja does not like Christmas. It all revolves around Kate's shopping lists and minimizing damage by winding back time, and yet she nods anyway. She wants to stay on Jytte's good side since in truth, it's Jytte who's driving the car. Actually, Sonja has a soft spot for her, because Jytte's told her that she comes from the Djursland peninsula. From a small village in the direction of Nimtofte. Jytte's father ran the local feed store, right across from school, so Jytte could run home and eat during lunch hour. She moved to Copenhagen when she was twenty. The village constable had a younger brother with an extra room in the suburb of Hvidovre. He was a cop himself, the younger brother, and Jytte's always had a weakness for a man in uniform. Now she lives inland, in Solrød, but back then the thing was to go out dancing till you no longer stank of Danish farmland.

Sonja's told Jytte she has a hard time believing that Jytte's also from Jutland. Sonja can't hear it in her speech, and in general she has a hard time understanding what Jytte's saying. Turn left is *turleff*, turn right *trite*, and it's not really dialect to

speak of. It's just the fastest way for Jytte to bark commands without changing topics.

"There's not much Jutland left in you," Sonja says now.

"You should just hear—trite—when I talk on the phone to my sister. GREEN ARROW, GREEN ARROW, TURN GOD-DAMMIT, BIKE!"

Sonja turns right and thinks about how she herself might sound when she talks on the phone to Kate. But she hardly every talks to Kate anymore, and now they're headed toward the Vesterbro quarter. Ahead of them lies Istedgade, with its traffic quagmire, and Jytte is saying that she likes Swedish stair-step candles to be in the windows. There should also be tinsel on the Christmas tree, but that's not the way her son's fiancée sees it. At *her* place, the tree always has to be trimmed in white, and Jytte just doesn't get it, just like she doesn't get why Folke lets so many foreigners into the driving school.

"They can go to their own driving schools," Jytte says. "They can't understand what I say. I—turleff—take my life in my hands every time I drive with them."

Sonja thinks about the feed store in Djursland. Back home in Balling, they had one of them too. Across the road lay a grocery store, known as Super Aage's on account of the manager's first name. Now there's no grocer, no butcher, no post office in Balling. The farms have swallowed each other up so only two are left, and they've taken out all the dairy cart tracks, the gossip paths, the old sunken roads. Balling lies like an isolated instance of civilization in an oversized cornfield, though out past that, the heath has escaped the drive for efficiency. There are whooper swans

there, and while almost no one farms anymore, farmhouse kitchens are still huge—the size of small cafeterias. A long laminated table at one end for the vanished farmhands, and then the modern cabinets by the window. You always had to scoot over on the bench when they came in to eat, and then there's Jytte, sitting in Djursland, dangling her legs. It's the lunch hour, she's run home to eat, and her feet don't reach the floor. She's wearing red bobby sox and a plaid skirt. Her mother's placed a slice of white bread before her. Her mother bakes the bread herself; it's dry, and Jytte spreads margarine on it. Then she grabs the package of brown sugar. It makes a crunching sound. It's fun pressing the brown sugar into the margarine. She can spend a long time pressing it in. Afterward, she listens to how the brown sugar keeps crunching in her mouth. It dissolves in her spit, which becomes sweet, like syrup. The bell's going to ring soon. When it rings, her mother yells that she's going to be late. Jytte's forced to run across the road, her legs going like drumsticks.

"BRAKE GODDAMMIT! CAN'T YOU FUCKING SEE THE CROSSWALK?"

Jytte's stomped on the brake and clutch. They're stopped at a pedestrian crossing, staring at a frightened man in a windbreaker.

"You have to stop for people!" Jytte says.

"I know that," Sonja says.

"It doesn't fucking look that way!" Jytte says, and she releases the clutch, first, second.

Jytte's phone rings. They pass Vesterbrogade, third gear. Jytte's husband has mornings off, and he can't find the remote.

"IT'S IN THE BASKET. YEAH, THE BASKET BESIDE THE— trite, signal, signal goddammit, turleff, slowly, slowly!— . . . PORK RIB ROAST, I THINK."

They drive up Istedgade amid glistening shoals of bikes. Sonja's vision is a fog and she almost can't breathe, yet at the intersection by Enghavevej she manages a left turn pretty much on her own. Jytte's no longer talking to her husband, but she's discovered a text with a photo from her son's fiancée. It depicts her grandchild in a christening dress and Jytte's voice grows elastic, for Sonja has to see the picture too, but Sonja would prefer to wait if she may, and then Jytte places the phone up on the dashboard.

It's difficult to maintain boundaries in an automobile. When you're a driving student, you have to relinquish free will, and once Jytte forced her to overtake a hot dog cart. They'd been driving around calmly enough, but then they'd come to a place where there was a traffic island on the street. A traffic island and a hot dog cart that was creeping forward. Sonja wasn't supposed to pass, but people in back became impatient and started honking. "Pass, God damn you, pass!" yelled Jytte, whereupon Sonja crossed over into the lane of oncoming traffic, passed, and then turned back into her own lane so quickly that she nearly clipped the hot dog man. He was walking along in front, of course, hauling the cart. "You almost had his blood on your hands there," Jytte said.

That still lingers in her body as shame. Shame, and fear of manslaughter, and now they're approaching Vigerslev Boulevard. The road goes past Western Cemetery, and Jytte decides they're going to turn and drive the entire way around it.

"You know, I really like Western Cemetery," Sonja says, trying to make conversation. "Down in the bottom part is a chapel with plywood over the windows. I think they've stopped using it. There's this avenue of gnarled old poplars there too. And a pond. I love to take a blanket and lie there and read."

To Jytte, reading is for people on holiday, and cemeteries are for the dead. In Jytte's family, the dead are numerous. Some have been killed in traffic accidents, others have died from cancer or workplace accidents. Her mother's still alive, but her sister has lung disease, and then Sonja should turn. She should turn left. Mirror, shoulder, signal, and in with the clutch. Jytte downshifts to second, but Sonja gets to pick the lane herself. She picks the correct one, which isn't so easy when there are so many. The light's red and they're sitting there in first gear, waiting. In the lane to their right is a delivery van, revving its engine.

"Aborigines," Jytte says, pointing at the van.

Sonja looks up at the traffic signal. The light changes. She lets out the clutch and drives forward. So does the van, and then it starts turning in front of Sonja. It's against the law to make a left turn from a right lane. Sonja knows that, and so does Jytte. Jytte's already rolled down her window, and one hand is out the window with middle finger extended, the other hand over by the steering wheel to honk the horn. She gives them horn and finger, and the car stops in the intersection in the middle of a green light. The van has stopped too, and now its driver window rolls down.

"CHINKS!" shouts Jytte.

"FUCKING *HO*!" shouts the driver.

Sonja thinks about the dead prime ministers in the cemetery. It's lovely to take a blanket there. Then she can lie on it, looking at Hans Hedtoft while the ducks quack and the roof of the big chapel gleams in the sun. It's like the New Jerusalem, or a little patch of far-off Denmark. The sound of cars in the distance, the scent of yew and boxwood; almost the middle of nowhere. In theory a stag might drift past, and she's bought a cookie for her coffee, pilfered some ivy from the undergrowth. The dead make no noise, and if she's lucky a bird of prey might soar overhead. Then she'll lie there, and escape.