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When The Snow Fell

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Extract

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Just before the silent snow begins to fall...

Stories have been told about Joel before now. About him growing up in a little town in the north of Sweden. It's the 1950s. Such a long time ago. But it seems very recent even so.

He grows up in a house with walls that creak in the very cold winters. It's on the bank of a river with clean, clear water flowing to the sea he has never seen. He lives with his dad, Samuel, a lumberjack who doesn't say much. Samuel used to be a sailor, and still longs to get away from the gloomy forests and return to the sea, but he can never bring himself to move. They live together in that house, Joel Gustafsson and his father. And both of them dream, in their different ways, about Joel's mum, Jenny, who simply vanished one day. Packed a suitcase and went away. She is out there somewhere, but she's gone, she's left Joel and his dad to look after each other. Nobody knows where she is.

The spruce forests are silent.

One night Joel sees a dog running through the cold winter darkness. Something has woken him up. He sits on a window seat, looks out, and suddenly sees the dog. It's trotting on silent paws, heading for some unknown destination. Joel sees it for a couple of seconds, and then it's gone.

Joel can't forget that dog. Where was it heading for?

Where had it come from? *Where was Joel heading for?* He forms a secret society to look for the dog. Or perhaps it's to find out who he himself really is? A secret society in which he is the only member. But the dog never returns. Joel never finds any tracks in the snow. It dawns on him in the end that the dog is heading for a distant, nameless star.

A dog on its way to somewhere beyond Orion. Heading for a constellation that maybe doesn't even exist? That only exists inside Joel's head.

The Winter of the Dog is a winter Joel will never forget. It's then that he begins to understand that he's himself, and nobody else. But he grows up, he grows older, he becomes thirteen. And he forgets about the dog. One day he's run over by a bus. He experiences a miracle. He falls between the wheels of the bus and is not injured at all. He discovers the hard way that a miracle can be very difficult to understand. But he learns. And everything else has suddenly become much more important than that solitary dog.

Growing up is to wonder about things, being grown up is to slowly forget the things you wondered about as a child. He has realised this. And he doesn't want to become a grown-up like that.

He visits Gertrud, a young woman without a nose, more and more frequently. She lives alone in a strange house on the south side of the river, on the other side of the menacing railway bridge. He shares a lot of secrets with Gertrud. Lots of fun. But also sorrow and disappointment.

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Time refuses to stand still.

It continues to run past.

And Joel runs alongside it. From his panting breath comes day after day, month after month. The snow melts and up sprouts the new spring, when the ice thaws and breaks up on the big, wide river, and logs start to float past once more on their long journey to the sawmills by the sea. Then comes another summer when the mosquitoes whine and the sun never seems to grow tired of shining. Then it's autumn when the lingonberries ripen, when the leaves fall and the frost crackles under the rubber tyres of his bicycle. Joel cycles a lot. He rides non-stop through the streets, searching for the unexpected. Perhaps it will be round the next corner? Or the one after that? Or the one after that?

There comes an autumn when he is looking forward to his fourteenth birthday. Now he is fast asleep in his bed. Somewhere inside the wall, right next to his ear, a mouse is gnawing away. But he doesn't hear it. Nobody knows what he's dreaming about.

Outside, the silent snow starts to fall through the night.

There's a long time to go before dawn.

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Joel let the roller blind run up very fast, so as to make a loud smacking noise.

It was like firing a cannon to salute the new day.

He stared out of the window in surprise. The ground was all white. He had been fooled yet again.

Winter always came creeping up on you when you least expected it. Joel had decided last autumn that he would never allow that to happen again. Before going to bed, he would make up his mind whether or not it would start snowing during the night.

The problem was that you couldn't hear it snowing. It was different with rain. Rain pattered onto the corrugated iron roof over the cycle rack outside the front door. When the sun shone you couldn't hear that either, but the light changed. Wind was easiest of all. Sometimes when it was blowing really hard, it would whip into the walls so fiercely that it felt as if the house was about to take off.

But snow came creeping up on you. Snow was like a Red Indian. It moved silently and came when you least expected it.

Joel continued gazing out of the winter. So winter had arrived now. There was no getting away from it. And he'd been fooled again. Would it be a long, cold winter? The snow that had fallen now would stay the longest.

Because it would be underneath all the snow that came later. The first to come was the last to thaw. And that would be at the end of next April, or even the beginning of May.

By then Joel would be fourteen. He'd have grown another centimetre. And lots of things that he knew nothing about now would have happened.

The snow had arrived.

And so it was New Year's Eve. Even if it was still only November.

That's how it was for Joel. He had decided. New Year's Eve would be when the first snow fell.

His very own New Year's Eve. When the ground was white, that was when he would make his New Year's resolutions. If he had any.

And he did. Lots.

It was cold on the floor. Joel fetched a pillow from his bed and put it under his feet. He could hear his dad clattering about in the kitchen with the coffee pot. Samuel didn't like Joel standing on his pillow, so he would have to be ready to move away smartly from the window if the door suddenly opened behind him. But Samuel rarely came into his bedroom in the morning. There was a risk, but not much of one.

He watched a single snowflake slowly floating down to the ground, to be swallowed up by all the whiteness.

There was a lot to think about when you were thirteen years of age. More than when you were twelve. Not to mention when you were eleven.

He thought he had learnt two things since it started snowing last autumn. Life became more complicated as

time passed by. And winter always came creeping up on you when you least expected it.

Joel thought about the previous evening. It had still been autumn then. After dinner he pulled on his boots, grabbed hold of his jacket and leapt downstairs in three jumps. As it was a Sunday evening, the night train heading south stopped at the local railway station. It was rare for anybody to go aboard. And even rarer for anybody to get off. But you never knew. Besides, Joel used to slip little secret letters into the postbox in the mail coach.

I have my eye on you. Signed *J.*

Always the same text. But he would write different names on the envelope, taken at random from his dad's newspaper. He made up the addresses himself.

9 Miracle Street. Or *12 Blacksmith Lundberg's Avenue.*

Joel thought that there might be an address like that somewhere in the world. But as he also suspected that the Post Office had secret employees who spent all day and night tracing people who sent letters to invented addresses, he didn't dare to use the names of towns that really existed. And so he would study the latest issue of *Where When How* in the school library. That was an annual that listed things that had happened the previous year. Right at the back was a list of all the towns and villages in Sweden. It told you which places had grown bigger and which ones had become smaller. The little town where Joel lived always grew smaller every year. That confirmed Joel's suspicions. Nobody wanted to carry on living there. Nor did anybody want to move

there. If things turned out really badly, he and Samuel would be the last two people in the place. He'd once tried to explain this to Samuel, but his dad only laughed.

'There'll always be people living by the river,' he'd said.

'But does it have to be us?' Joel had asked.

Samuel didn't respond to that. He just laughed again, put on his glasses and started reading his newspaper. But Joel had been able to check in *Where When How* that the towns he had written on his envelopes did not exist in Sweden. Neither *Joelsville* nor *Sprucehampton*.

He never stuck stamps on the envelopes. He drew them on instead. Old men with long noses. As the letters were fakes, he didn't think it was right to use genuine postage stamps. And then he had to be careful when he slipped them into the postbox on the mail coach. Stationmaster Knif had sharp eyes, and was apt to flare up and lose his temper. But Joel had never been found out so far. He'd written in his notebook that he had now sent eleven letters in all with the south-bound express train.

Anyway, he'd posted his latest letter the previous night. When it was still only autumn. The frost had crackled under his bicycle tyres. Steam had billowed out from his mouth as he rode up the hill to the station and became short of breath. It was the middle of November. It had often started snowing by then, but not this year. Winter was late. But now, yet again, the snow had come creeping up during the night.

Joel glanced at the alarm clock on a stool next to his bed. He had better get a move on if he was going to be in time for school. He was behind schedule already, as

usual. He shuffled into the bathroom, got washed as quickly as possible, dressed and went to the kitchen.

Samuel was getting ready to leave for work. His dad, the sailor who had become a lumberjack. Joel had often wished it was the other way round. The lumberjack who'd become a sailor. Then they wouldn't have lived here by the river, as far away from the sea as it was possible to get. Standing on a shelf was a model of an old sailing ship called *Celestine*. If things had been different it would have been hanging on the wall of a cabin, being rocked by the gentle waves of the sea.

Joel sometimes thought about how impossible it was to understand grown-ups. They often had no idea of what was best for them. They were always going on about how they wanted to do whatever they could to ensure that their children had a good life – but how could that be possible if they couldn't even look after themselves properly?

All those years, since Jenny had left, Joel had been his own mother. He'd never had any difficulty in knowing what was best for himself. But Samuel was a hopeless case. He always said that *one day, soon, not just yet, but soon* they would pack up and leave. But it never happened. And Joel had started to despair long ago.

Samuel was just like all other adults. He had no idea what was best for him. And now he was too old. Too old to learn, and too old to allow Joel to make the decisions.

Samuel finished his coffee and rinsed out his cup.

Now he's going to tell me that I must get a move on, Joel thought.

'You'd better get a move on, or you'll be late for school,' Samuel said.

Joel was kneeling down in front of a cupboard that contained everything from shoes to old newspapers. He was looking for his winter boots.

He knew that Samuel would now ask him if he'd heard.

'Did you hear what I said?' Samuel asked.

'Yes,' said Joel. 'But I won't be late. I'll get there in time.'

Joel sat down in order to put his boots on. He gave them a good shaking first: mouse pooh fell out onto the floor. But no dead mice. There had been one in his left boot the previous winter. In the meantime Samuel was packing his haversack. Some sandwiches, a bottle of milk and a thermos flask of coffee. Joel eyed him without making it obvious.

His dad was starting to get old. Even though he was only forty-one. But his back wasn't as straight as it used to be. And his face was thinner.

In addition, he got shaved less often, and more carelessly.

Joel didn't like this. It was as if a cold wind had blown right through him. He didn't want a dad with a hunched back and unshaven cheeks.

But he also thought about the New Year's resolutions he would make that evening. His own secret New Year's Eve that nobody else knew about.

It was something he'd been thinking about for ages. Evening after evening he'd gone cycling round the little town, without thinking of anything else.

He'd made up his mind that he was going to live until he was at least a hundred years old. That would mean that he'd live until the year 2045. It was such an incredibly long way away that it really meant he would live for ever.

But Joel knew that if he was going to achieve that aim, he would have to start preparing himself even now. If he didn't, he would end up with a back just as hunched as Samuel's.

That was really the most important thing. More important than living to be a hundred. He didn't want to have a hunched back.

He knew what he was going to do in order to ensure that. It was one of the New Year's resolutions he would make that evening.

From tomorrow onwards, he would start toughening himself up. He had a plan, and he would carry it out once winter had established itself.

He was quite sure about it.

If you wanted to become really old, you had to toughen yourself up.

His train of thought was broken because Samuel was ready to leave for work. He put on his thick woolly hat, then turned round in the doorway and looked at Joel. Samuel often looked sad when he set off for work. That was something Joel didn't like either. It could give him a stomachache. It was at moments like that when he found it impossible to understand what Samuel was thinking.

He might be thinking about Mummy Jenny, who had simply vanished all those years ago. That could make Samuel just as sad as Joel could be.

Or was he thinking about the sea, which he wasn't going to get to see today either? Among all those pines and firs that he chopped down and trimmed?

'Don't just sit there dreaming,' he said. 'That will make you late for school.'

'I'm setting off as soon as I've got my boots on,' Joel said.

'It's winter again now,' said Samuel with a sigh. 'And you can bet your life that winter's going to be long, and dark, and cold.'

'We could move away from here,' said Joel. 'Tomorrow.'

'If only it was as easy as that,' said Samuel. 'But it isn't.'

Then he left. Joel could hear his footsteps on the stairs. The front door closed with a bang.

Joel fastened his boots. Put on his jacket, woolly hat and scarf. He couldn't find his mittens. He would have to choose between looking for them, and arriving in time for school.

He chose to forget about his mittens. It wasn't all that cold yet. Winter had only just begun.

He also decided not to take his bike. It could be good to test his boots. Kick up a bit of thin, powdery snow. But even as he started walking downstairs he could feel that they were starting to be too small. He needed a new pair. But how would he be able to convince Samuel of that? Boots were expensive.

'Being poor is expensive,' Samuel used to say. Joel thought he almost understood what his dad meant.

He went out into the street. It was still dark. Only a

narrow sliver of light oozed out over the spruce forests standing to attention around the little town.

School beckoned. Miss Nederström was bound to be there already. If he got a move on, he would arrive in time.

He kicked up a flurry of snow.

He was already thinking about the coming evening, when he would make his solemn New Year's resolutions.

Winter had fooled him this year yet again.

But that didn't really matter.

The important thing was that a new year had begun.