

where
love
begins

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It's like this – Stella and Jason meet on an airplane. A propeller plane, not a long flight. Stella was coming from Clara's wedding. She caught the bridal bouquet, that's probably why she's so distraught; and she had to say goodbye to Clara, that's why she's feeling so forlorn. It was a beautiful wedding. From now on Stella is on her own. Jason was coming from a construction site. He was laying tiles, that's why he's so dusty. And he worked all night long, driving to the airport at the crack of dawn; that's why he's so tired. The job is finished; he'll be looking for a new job. Fate, or whoever, has seated Stella next to Jason, row 7, seats A and C. Stella will save the boarding pass for many years. For many years. Jason is sitting by the window; the seat next to him is empty. Stella's seat is on the aisle, but in spite of that she sits down next to Jason. She can't help it.

Jason is tall and lean, unshaven; his black hair is grey because of the dust. He's wearing a rough woollen jacket and dirty jeans. He looks at Stella as if she'd taken leave of her senses, looks at her angrily; she startles him. So direct, so unceremonious. Nothing that could have been dragged out. If Stella hadn't caught Clara's bridal bouquet – jasmine and lilacs, a luxuriant abundance tied with a silken ribbon – she wouldn't be so breathless. Glowing cheeks, a shocking lack of detachment.

Stella, my name is Stella.

She says, I'm afraid of flying. I don't do well flying. May I sit next to you; please, could I just stay here sitting next to you.

It's the truth. Jason's expression changes; it doesn't exactly soften, but it changes. He says, You needn't be afraid of flying. Please sit. My name is Jason. Sit down, stay.

*

The plane rolls down the runway, gathers speed, takes off and flies. It flies up into the pale, distant sky, breaking through the clouds. The earth below them, an earlier life, are left behind. Jason's hands are dirty and stained with paint. Turning the right one palm up, he holds it out to Stella. Stella puts her left hand in it; his hand is rough and warm. He pulls her hand towards him and puts it in his lap, closes his eyes. Then he falls asleep. Later this will be like an omen. Stella could have figured it out back then – she is afraid, and Jason sleeps. Sleeps even though she is afraid. But he would say he slept so she could see that being afraid was absurd. Back then she didn't understand this.

*

As the plane lands, he opens his eyes and smiles. Such very dark eyes, almost black, with a faraway look. But he is smiling. He says, See, Stella, you made it. He now takes her hand into both of his, and then he kisses her hand, the back of her hand, hard and sure.

Will we see each other again, Stella says. Shall we see each other again.

Yes, Jason says, he says it without thinking it over – Yes.

Stella writes her phone number on his boarding pass. Then she gets up and flees. She climbs out of the plane, down the metal stairs, back to earth without looking back even once.

It is cool, raining. Impossible to know how it will go on from there.

Jason phones three weeks later. Stella never asks him what he did during those three weeks, what he was thinking about for so long; what conclusion he finally arrived at.

One

The house is in a development in the suburbs. It's a simple house, two floors and a mossy, tiled roof, a picture window next to the front door, and a sunroom out the back. The lot isn't a big one. A jasmine hedge secludes it from the street. A tarpaulin has been stretched over the sandpit, and three chairs have already been set up around a garden table standing under a plum tree still bare of leaves. Fragile, yellow flowers in the short grass, maybe winter aconite. At the edge of the garden begins a rank meadow, a fallow field. It's been like that for who knows how long. At some point they'll build new houses there. But so far the garden just runs into the meadow, and stinging nettle and wind grass grow right through the fence.

Stella and Jason's house. This is Stella's and Jason's house;

it's the house Jason buys when Stella is pregnant with Ava. A house for a family. Not a house for always. We'll move from here someday, Jason says. We'll move on.

*

The sunroom smells of soil and wet gravel. An orange blanket is draped over the sofa. Children's books, crayons and a teapot on the little table in front of it; on the rug, a single shoe of Ava's next to a stack of magazines. From the sofa, the view through the windows goes out into the garden and beyond the fence out to the field. The wintry grass is still a dull green. It looks like a body of water. It's as if the wind were reaching with hands into the grass, into the water. Clouds scud by rapidly.

Sometimes when Stella is sitting on the sofa watching Ava in the sandpit – Ava baking a cake out of sand, decorating the cake with shells and gravel, then, calm and direct, not pleading, offering some of the cake to someone whom Stella can't see – she has to suppress an impulse to jump up, snatch Ava out of the sandpit, and flee with her into the house. As if a whirlwind were approaching across the meadow, something formless, something big. Why such a thought?

It's your subconscious, Jason says when she tries to talk to him about it. Just your subconscious, or that of your people, the subconscious of generations.

Just your subconscious.

I don't know if I can follow you, Stella would like to say.

She'd like to say, Maybe it's also a wish? Maybe it's some wild longing.

But that's not how she talks with Jason. Hardly likely.

*

A screen door swings into the kitchen from the sunroom. The kitchen is bright. A stove and a sink under the window; in the middle, a table with four assorted chairs; and above the table, a lamp with a little paper horse suspended from it, twisting in the breeze. Postcards on the silvery refrigerator. A jumble of dishes in a kitchen cabinet on whose doorknob hangs a bunch of dried lavender tied with packing twine. The far wall is painted blue; in front of the blue wall, on top of the chest for their winter boots lies a sheepskin on which Ava sometimes wants to sleep but so far has never managed to fall asleep on. Empty bottles, more magazines in the corner behind the door that leads to the living room; the other door next to it leads to the hall; you can also go into the living room from the hall, and beyond that, into Jason's room or to the front door and outside.

The picture window is in the living room. There's a low armchair in the living room by the window where Stella reads in the evening, not caring that, after it begins to get dark, it's as if she were sitting on a stage. She reads whatever comes to hand, reads everything; she comes across a book, opens it, and dives in. There's something awful about this too. Sometimes Jason says, You'd die if someone were to take the books away from you. Would you die? Stella doesn't answer him. In the middle of the day, between the things to do, to be dealt with, to get behind her, she'll pick up a book and read a page, two pages; it's like breathing; she finds it hard to say what she's just read, and it's really all about something else. About resistance. Or about opposition. Maybe it's about disappearing. It might be.

Stella's books pile up around the armchair. For some time

now Ava's books have also been piling up around the chair. Children's books of thick cardboard.

*

This is the blue door. Let's see who lives there. We'll just knock. Knock!

*

In the hall there's a stairway going up to the first floor. The mail is lying on the bottom step, on the steps above that are Ava's hat, the bicycle keys, chalk, a little plastic horse, a super ball, a broken kaleidoscope, a dinosaur skeleton, and on the top step there's a child's purse embroidered with coloured beads. Fourteen steps, Stella has known this ever since Ava has been learning to count. Upstairs there are three rooms. The master bedroom, a room in the middle for Stella, and Ava's room. There, the night-light in the globe is still on, and a mobile of stars and moons hanging from the ceiling lamp sways in the draught. The bed stands against the wall. Close to the edge of the bed there's a small depression in the tidily smoothed bedspread – Ava was sitting there in the morning while Stella plaited her hair into two stiff little black braids. The stuffed animals lean neatly and importantly against each other, a tiger and a cat, a dishevelled little hedgehog. Ava's stack of memory cards on the red table is distinctly larger than Stella's. A wrinkled princess dress is draped over the rocking chair. On the bookshelf, a series of framed photos that sometimes seems to Stella like a butterfly collection – time impaled, held fast, the extreme and also crazy beauty of single moments. Ava as a baby. Ava with Jason in a boat among the reeds. Ava with matted hair on a chair downstairs in the

kitchen, sitting ramrod straight in plaid pyjamas. Ava on Stella's lap, and after her midday nap. And a photo of Stella and Jason by the sea; some day that photo may mean something to Ava: her parents by the sea in the one brief year during which there was no Ava yet. Unimaginable, and at the same time simple.

The door to their bedroom isn't quite closed. Inside, the bed isn't made, the blankets lying one on top of the other, the pillows not fluffed up, the sheet has slipped down. The curtain at the window is still closed; sunlight falls on the floor in a narrow stripe next to Jason's shirt, Stella's book.

In Stella's room her desk stands by the window. A postcard from Clara is propped against a glass vase on the desk. There are also books on the desk, stationery, a ballpoint pen lying diagonally across the line: *My dearest Clara, the morning is so still, so quiet, as if a catastrophe had occurred somewhere, and I go downstairs and open the front door because ...* The clock on the windowsill ticks sharply into this stillness. Gift-wrap is spread out on the guest bed, photocopied schedules for Stella's working week, blouses that need to be ironed. The sliding window is open. The wind blows into the stationery, riffling through the sheets of paper.

Three panes of leaded glass are set into the front door, two lilies and one seagull. The panes were a gift from Clara to Stella when she moved in. For Ava's birth. For Stella's wedding, for the move, as a second goodbye. Clara is Stella's best and only friend. Why do you just have only one girlfriend, Ava says. One is quite enough, Jason says then; he says it for Stella, and Stella says, So it would seem.

You can't see either out or in through the leaded glass panes. You can see out only through the little window to the right of the

door, out to the garden gate. A wrought-iron gate in a wrought-iron fence. Jason bought the fence along with the house and wanted to rip it out immediately; luckily he hasn't got around to it yet. Stella is glad about the fence. The fence holds quite a few things together here, the garden, the house, the books, Ava and Jason, her life. It isn't as if it would all fly apart without the fence, but Stella considers boundaries important – distance, space for herself. The little window next to the front door is a frame for the view of the fence, the view to the garden gate. You have to put something there, Clara said, a Madonna or something like that; but Stella hasn't found anything yet that could stand there.

*

This is the house on a day in spring.

There's no one there.

Stella is out; she works as a nurse; her patients live in houses in the new development on the other side of the big street.

Jason is also away; he is building a house by a lake.

Ava is at her kindergarten. She's in the blue group; she has a blue flower sewn on her little coat so that she won't forget, and she wears the blue flower like a medal.

The garden gate is of course locked.

The street is empty, no one in sight; the little birds in the hedge make almost no sound.

Two

Three weeks later Stella is at home. Midday, twelve o'clock.

Stella is often at home at twelve in the middle of the day. She has three patients on her weekly schedule: Esther, Julia and Walter. Usually she takes the early shift at Esther's and the daytime shift at Walter's; her shift at Julia's depends on Julia's husband Dermot, on the state of his health; recently his health has been poor. But that particular day Dermot feels able to take Julia to the doctor by himself. And so Stella stays at home. Is able to be home alone in the middle of the day.

The middle of the day in the development is a calm, quiet time. The houses all stand there deserted; their people don't come back till the end of the working day. Stella likes being alone. She's good at busying herself with the garden, her books,