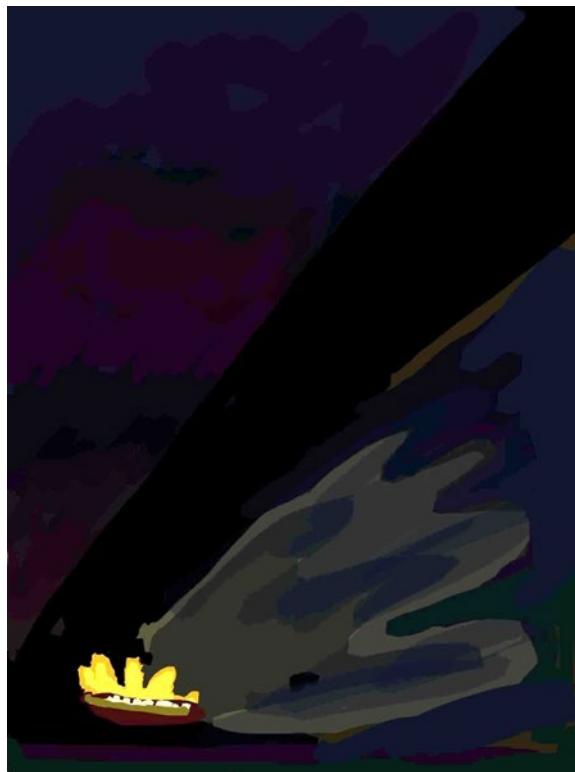


Darkness

Elizabeth and Caroline Shove

Lisa carefully poured the seal oil into the soapstone lamp and lit the rim of arctic grass that ran around the edge. The shadows from the qulliq leapt up the side of the tent. Lisa, Anti and little Mikkal sat in silence on the pile of skins, each deep in thought.

They were something like half way through the seventh season. Everyone knows the cycle, but no one is ever fully prepared for the end of summer and the changing grades of dark across the frozen tundra. It is hard to describe, but the quality of the darkness is a tangible presence in their lives – modified by the snow and the moon, by the hour of blue, and by the lamps and their shadows. Lisa thinks about this. There is never dark on its own, to see real black you need some contrast, some pinprick of light. Is that right, she wonders? Maybe so.



The meaning of dark is not the only thing on her mind. Outside the reindeer are restless. There is always some indication that it is time to move from the lowlands to the woods where the animals forage for the last fragments of food before the new growth of spring.

Every year, Lisa feels the same edge of anticipation and anxiety. Although it is expected, this part of the winter always catches her by surprise. Soon they will have to take the tent down in the icy darkness of the day. They will load the pack animals with all their supplies and follow the herd towards the pitch-black forest. This ever-shifting blend of lightness and darkness, of freezing and thawing and of life and death is part of their annual rhythm: there is no escaping it.

Lisa sits back, still in contemplative mood. The shadows from the qilliq create grotesque figures on the underside of the tent. Mikkal raises his hand and makes shapes that dance around the room.

Lisa smiles at her son. He has so many imaginary friends. One of his favourites is a young reindeer he calls Omppu. Mikkal turns to his mother. 'Omppu will come with us when we go won't she?' 'Yes, of course', she replies, giving Mikkal a reassuring hug.

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The day of the move, if day it is, arrived. They followed the familiar routine despite the howling gale. Lisa and Anti battled with the elements. The knots and ropes were stiff and frozen. Thankfully it was not as cloudy as it was last year but still they had to feel their way in the dark. They worked hard, loading the seal oil, dried meat, fish, berries and fuel they needed to see them through the next few months. Mikkel huddled in the tent until the last moment, whispering to Omppu.

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That evening Mikkel was distraught. It was impossible to know why. 'What's wrong' Lisa asked, 'you can tell me'. But all he would say was 'Omppu', 'Omppu has gone'. He sobbed inconsolably. Lisa and Anti were exhausted from the day's travel, but they had to do something to calm their child.

The tent had been re-erected and the lamps were lit. After supper, Anti took the boy in his arms. 'Now then, Mikkal, do you want me to tell you a story?' The answer was always 'yes'. So Anti began. 'It was a dark and stormy night...' They'd heard that so many times before that they all laughed, even Mikkal.

'OK, not that one. How about the reindeer who lost her way?' Anti spoke in his low, slow voice. 'Once upon a time there was a reindeer calf called Omppu. Although she was only six months old she was already used to the nomadic life. She wasn't bothered by the shortening days, or the freezing over of the bog. She snuffled around contentedly, sometimes gazing up at the dark sky and the moon. Without knowing how, the course of Omppu's life followed the stars, or was it that the stars followed her? She wasn't quite sure. According to the older reindeer, the herd would be off to the forest any time now. Omppu didn't take any notice of these rumours, or of the animals being loaded up near the tent, but it was true it was harder to find food these days.

She wandered off in search of something to eat. The wind was making such a noise that she could barely hear the clicking sounds of the other animals as they moved around. She focused on her foraging – maybe she would find some nourishment just a wee bit further on. After a while the storm abated. Then there was nothing but silence and the night sky. Omppu froze, literally. She'd never been so scared. She listened for the comforting sounds of the other reindeer but there were none.'

Mikkal looked up, astonished. 'None?' 'No', said Anti, 'none. Poor Omppu was all alone. The young reindeer began to cry. As she sniffed she could smell the lichen under the snow but she wasn't hungry now. She turned into the wind with tears streaming down her long face. It was then that she caught the faintest trace of something familiar. She gave a gentle grunt of relief. He might be miles away by now, but if she kept track of the scent she could find her way through the darkness, back to her best friend, Mikkal, and back to the rest of the herd.'

'And that', said Anti, 'was that. If you listen carefully, Mikkal, you'll hear Omppu just outside. So don't you worry, she is here with us'.

Mikkal looked up and smiled. He raised his hands and made the shape of a reindeer dancing around in the shadows of the tent. His father was right. Omppu was safe, the stores would last, spring would arrive and when it did, the winter would be nothing but a distant memory.